Artist: PORTER, Tim (b. Washington, D.C., 1946)

Tim Porter is an established Canadian photographer, painter and filmmaker who has lived in Japan since the late seventies. He was born in Washington, D.C. to Canadian parents, studied modern literature and philosophy at the University of Virginia (1964-66) and moved to Montreal a year later when he took up photography. He then became established in the Vancouver art scene, participating in the seminal exhibition *B.C. Almanac(h) C.B* produced by the NFB Still Photography Division in 1970. Porter first travelled to Japan in 1978 under the auspices of the Canada Council. He joined Camera Press (London) as the Tokyo Bureau Chief in 1980, and co-founded the Tokyo Photographic Workshops in 1992.

The twelve gelatin silver prints under consideration were originally part of a larger exhibition, titled *Nightwaves*, jointly organized by the Still Photography Division and the Embassy of Canada (Tokyo) in 1979. The show was presented in four Canon Salons located in Tokyo, Nagoya, Hiroshima and Osaka. In addition to the body of work called *Nightwaves*, the show also included another series, *D.M.Z.* This latter series was the title of an exhibition first shown in Ottawa (29 June to 5 September 1978). It was assembled from two projects, “A Certain Slant of Light 1969-1976” and “Isy’s Cabaret and Nitobe Gardens 1977.” “A Certain Slant of Light” is a phrase taken from an Emily Dickinson poem. Isy’s Cabaret, or Isy’s Strip City, was an infamous Vancouver establishment run by Isadore Waltuck. The Nitobe Gardens is a traditional Japanese garden located on the University of British Columbia grounds. The *Nightwaves* series draws solely from subject matter taken in Isy’s Cabaret.

For Porter, all these images, which privilege the abstract over the recognizable, are descriptive of a dream in which potentially destructive desires fluctuate between repression and expression. The artist favors source material that articulates tense dichotomies: form/formlessness, creation/destruction, serenity/violence. He understands the abstract image as a prime means of expressing such concerns, noting that his interest in this respect began while spending time in the Rothko Room at the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. The founder of the collection, Duncan Phillips, appreciated Rothko’s capacity to depict surface as subtly infused with heightened tensions, stating that how, beneath their patches of colour, the paintings also express deeper concerns: “What we recall are not memories but old emotions disturbed or resolved—some sense of well being suddenly shadowed by a cloud—yellow ochres strangely

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1 Waltuck anglicized his name to Walters. Walters also owned the strip club’s previous incarnation, Isy’s Supper Club (opened in 1957), a high end establishment that brought in entertainers such as Lenny Bruce, Duke Ellington and Richard Pryor. Strip City, established in 1971, was much less glamorous. For more on Vancouver’s colourful nightclub past see Becki Ross, *Burlesque West: Showgirls, Sex, and Sin in Postwar Vancouver* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

2 Email correspondence with the artist, 18 January 2016. In his email, Porter specifically referenced this site [http://www.phillipscollection.org/collection/rothko-room](http://www.phillipscollection.org/collection/rothko-room) that includes the quote by Duncan Phillips.
suffused with a drift of gray prevailing over an ambience of rose or the fire diminishing into a
glow of embers, or the light when the night descends." Porter’s other influences give voice to
these deeper forces as well. Emily Dickinson describes how a “slant of light” in winter reveals
the vulnerability of the known, visible world which, with the passing of the day, soon dissolves
into darkness and death. Her poem, constructed through a terse staccato use of phrase, conveys
meaning through allusion and association, a declarative style that preserves mystery for its
subject matter. The Nitobe Gardens represent the Japanese vision of the garden as an intense
fashioning of nature to human will. The strip club is a site of suppressed sexuality and barely
repressed anger and violence.

The works are of interest to the collection for their exploration of photographic
abstraction at a time where such approaches were uncommon, especially in Canada. Porter plays
down the descriptive character of the medium to present a variety of visual effects that
nonetheless convey elements of their original subject matter. Indeed, for the artist, the abstract
image is another aspect of the document and truer to reality as he says, “I'd view much of my
work as documentary, often using abstraction in trying to get under the skin of things.” To
achieve these results in D.M.Z. and Nightwaves, he approached the medium in a “painterly”
manner; he jimmied the camera, and moved lights and changed focus during exposure. As one
writer notes, the results “are luminous, lyrical, evocative. Although each photograph retains an
initial feeling of familiarity, the juxtaposition of the images creates a new visual syntax which
transcends the subject matter.”

Please cite in the following manner:

Andrea Kunard, Acquisition Proposal for Tim Porter’s series Nightwaves (12 Untitled prints),
acquisition #46864.1-12, Curatorial File, National Gallery of Canada.

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3 Ibid.