

Utopia/Dystopia: The Photographs of Geoffrey James

The National Gallery of Canada, www.gallery.ca, May 30 - October 19, 2008

Dorota Kozinska

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OTTAWA

UTOPIA/DYSTOPIA: THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF GEOFFREY JAMES

Dorota Kozinska

The National Gallery of Canada
380, Sussex Drive
Ottawa
Tel.: (613) 990-1985
www.gallery.ca
May 30 – October 19, 2008



Willow, Ward's Island, Toronto, 2005
Private collection

Geoffrey James is one of Canada's best-known contemporary landscape photographers, with a career spanning over three decades. His panoramic images have achieved iconic status, yet his photographs go beyond formal representation, and into the realm of discussion on human intervention. This is the National Gallery's first major retrospective of James's lengthy production, comprising 91 works created between 1987 and 2002.

Unlike another celebrated Canadian landscape photographer, Edward Burtynsky, whose spectacular pictures of industrial wastelands transform them into vistas of terrible beauty, James takes a more subtle approach in transmitting his message. Enamoured of nature rather than junkyards, he's been taking photographs since the early 1970, and his first images were, indeed, of gardens.

These were photographs focused on the underlying structure of formal gardens, evoking notions of classical beauty, and the idea of sanctuary. This romantic vision has in later years been subverted by the notion of a garden in ruin, of, in the words of the Gallery's director, Pierre Théberge, a falling from grace.

Thus the title of this vast exhibition, suggesting the two diverse visions, the idyllic past versus the landscape of the present day; photographs exploring both the structured planned landscape of the past and the more "unintentional" green spaces of our contemporary environment.

The photographs are grouped according to series, from the panoramic images of European gardens, through photographs of American parks designed by F.L. Olmstead, the Paris and Toronto series, to the Running Fence, a project examining the Mexico/U.S. border fence.

James's thematic production lends itself easily to a gallery showing, as he often worked in a sequence of images, communicating his message in stages. Much of his photography appeared in book form, and this exhibition is also accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue with essays by art historian Stephen Bann, the exhibition organizer, Lori Pauli, and curator Britt Salvesen. But as with any artist, words can only offer so much; a glimpse into the artist's workshop, his technique (particularly in the case of photographers), his preoccupations, his place among his peers. It is the

images that ultimately draw us in, and James's elegant black and white photographs seduce in myriad ways.

His seminal panoramas are an invitation to a visual voyage of unexpected emotional proportions. Whether it's their sweeping format, or the striking subject matter – and in James's photographs even a dry tangle of branches takes one's breath away – they are a constant invitation to reflection, meditation, and the occasional awe.

From the formal, majestic beauty of *The Aqueduct Claudio*, where umbrella pines run like a lacy frieze behind a row of heavy, textured stone pillars, to a chaotic pantheon of antique statuary in *Villa Medici, Rome*, they lead the viewer on a journey into the past via images of astounding purity, both in their composition as in their presentation.

The choice of black and white photography lends a note of mystery to these pictures while at the same time creating a subtly rich tapestry of tones.

From the Olmstead series, to photographs of Toronto and Paris, James focuses his lens on spaces devoid of human presence, yet indisputably marked by it. The architecture, although in



Vimy-Ridge, 1993
National Gallery of Canada Ottawa
Purchased 1995
© Geoffrey James

the guise of art, is nevertheless, a human construct, no matter how lofty. It intervenes in the landscape, altering it, whether subtly or contentiously, but always irrevocably.

His lens moves imperceptibly from the sensuous curves of *Pont-Neuf, Paris* to the littered, dilapidated grounds of a rundown neighbourhood of that same metropolis in *Impasse Satan*.

The message is clear but not aggressive, we are shown, not told, we are asked to draw our own conclusions, not pointed at the problem.

Defly altering the direction, the exhibition continues with a series of trees photographed in orchards and parks of North America. James tends to focus on one tree, excising it from its surroundings as it were, thrusting upon it the role of a model, an unwitting sitter, suddenly vulnerable in the eye of the camera.

Whether it's a giant *Linden Tree, New York State*, or an anthropomorphic looking *Willow, Ward's Island, Toronto*, each stands for nature as it does for the talent of the photographer, and each is a messenger, if we care to listen.

For once we move to the series titled *Asbestos*, the whispered

message of the limbed flora becomes a scream of a disappearing landscape. There are not trees in these images. There is dugout earth and metal structures, barren hills with ridges that look like veins, and the sky is but a flat backdrop.

Running Fence is James's foray into a more political arena, although his images are staunchly focused on the landscape, which he allows to invoke its own tale.

In one of his statements, the artist offers a hint as to what inspires him: "I am really interested in the poetics of space. I like to work in places that are very complex and that have many entrances and exits, because the visual game is more fun as it gets more complicated."

And it is that complex simplicity that makes James's photographs such enduring works of art; for even while in the process of documenting, the artist-photographer is always in the throes of creation. □

QUÉBEC

JOHN HEWARD UN PARCOURS / UNE COLLECTION

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March 13 - August 24, 2008

Galerie de l'Université du Québec à Montréal
1400, rue Berri
October 24 - November 24, 2008



John Heward dans son atelier

This mini-retrospective of Montreal multiform artist John Heward resonates with an open tone of experimentation. Almost nothing is titled. With a certain primitivist directness worthy of Alechinsky and the Cobra group, Heward the artist cannot ultimately be nailed down. His multiform artworks are a phenomenon, capturing a spirit on solipsistic kinship with the ancient and the modern, and do so without pretense and certainly with a sense of abandon.