Gabor Szilasi: An Appreciation
Pour prendre la mesure de Gabor Szilasi

Martha Langford
A constellation of events has shone light on the photographic oeuvre and life in photography of Gabor Szilasi. Its first manifestation was in 2008, a thematic exhibition, Famille, originally organized for the McClure Gallery by Hedwidge Asselin. This show is now on a two-year tour of Montreal, under the aegis of the Conseil des arts de Montréal. In the summer of 2009, Szilasi’s sense of place was explored in Le Québec par cœur, presented at the Galerie Mérien Versailles. Anticipation was growing for a full retrospective, Gabor Szilasi: L’éloquence du quotidien/The Eloquence of the Everyday, organized by David Harris for the Musée d’art de Joliette and the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography. No one who experienced these exhibitions, and the outpouring of admiration that accompanied them, could have been surprised when Gabor Szilasi won the Prix Paul-Émile-Borduas 2009, one of the prestigious lifetime achievement awards grouped under the Prix du Québec.

To celebrate this moment in Szilasi’s life and his community’s history — and we should — means something more than raising a glass. Or rather, that is precisely what we should do, following the example of Harris, who recently spoke about the exhilarating, sometimes bewildering experience of staring through the loupe at Szilasi’s contact sheets. This process, which can be sampled in the catalogue, no doubt surprised when Gabor Szilasi won the Prix Paul-Émile-Borduas 2009, one of the prestigious lifetime achievement awards grouped under the Prix du Québec.

To celebrate this moment in Szilasi’s life and his community’s history — and we should — means something more than raising a glass. Or rather, that is precisely what we should do, following the example of Harris, who recently spoke about the exhilarating, sometimes bewildering experience of staring through the loupe at Szilasi’s contact sheets. This process, which can be sampled in the catalogue, no doubt surprised when Gabor Szilasi won the Prix Paul-Émile-Borduas 2009, one of the prestigious lifetime achievement awards grouped under the Prix du Québec.

To celebrate this moment in Szilasi’s life and his community’s history — and we should — means something more than raising a glass. Or rather, that is precisely what we should do, following the example of Harris, who recently spoke about the exhilarating, sometimes bewildering experience of staring through the loupe at Szilasi’s contact sheets. This process, which can be sampled in the catalogue, no doubt surprised when Gabor Szilasi won the Prix Paul-Émile-Borduas 2009, one of the prestigious lifetime achievement awards grouped under the Prix du Québec.

To celebrate this moment in Szilasi’s life and his community’s history — and we should — means something more than raising a glass. Or rather, that is precisely what we should do, following the example of Harris, who recently spoke about the exhilarating, sometimes bewildering experience of staring through the loupe at Szilasi’s contact sheets. This process, which can be sampled in the catalogue, no doubt surprised when Gabor Szilasi won the Prix Paul-Émile-Borduas 2009, one of the prestigious lifetime achievement awards grouped under the Prix du Québec.
exactl what he is doing, thereby readying the subject to do his or her part. The whole thing feels very down-to-earth and absolutely devoid of any kind of grandstanding, on either side of the camera. To speculate on how Szilasi achieves this, one might venture “practice,” in the broad sense of having made all kinds of studies of the human face and body, both candid and posed, so that his presence before the subject is both impressive (a portrait is an occasion) and natural (“be yourself”). For the sitters, such encounters were nevertheless unforgettable, as came through at the opening of Szilasi’s retrospective, where one could observe some of the subjects easing up on their younger selves. So it was with sculptor Robert Murray, pictured in his Westmount home in April, 1969, fully absorbed in playing the bass, while his cat relates flirtatiously to the photographer. “What happened to the cat?” I asked Murray, as we stood before the portrait. “He ran away.”

So many of the people pictured in Szilasi’s portraits seem to have run away. How else could the irrepressible Guido Molinari no longer be on the scene, preening for Judith Terry? Where are Yves Gaucher and Sam Tata – they should have been at Gabor’s opening, for he was always at theirs, building his enormous, still largely untapped, archive of the Montreal art scene. His family came to Joliette, of course: his nuclear Famille and his extended family of photographers, curators, and citizens. Szilasi’s production touches people who know nothing of the art world, and comforts those who know too much. The sweep of this extraordinary photographer’s panoramic vision is almost overwhelming: from his views of Hungary in turmoil to the streetscapes, interiors, and portraits of its endurance, from country to city in Quebec, places bound up in their opposite’s rites and ambitions; from the heritage sites that photography preserves to the homes and galleries where photographic souvenirs, clippings, posters, and vintage prints are displayed; from the rigour of black and white photography to the kitschy explosion of colour; from the plucked-from-the-crowd beauty of a girl with a flower to the penetrating gaze (well known to the photographer) of Doreen Lindsay. Almost overwhelming, for this great life in photography is now coming clear to us in explanation and celebration, a telling that leaves room for the pictures yet to be discovered, yet to be made, by Gabor Szilasi.

Par Martha Langford

Pour prendre la mesure de Gabor Szilasi

(...) depuis les images de la Hongrie en ébullition jusqu’aux portraits, scènes de rues et vues d’intérieurs illustrant sa résistance quotidienne; depuis la campagne québécoise jusqu’à la ville

Né à Budapest, en Hongrie, en 1928, Gabor Szilasi a commencé à faire de la photo vers le milieu de la vingtième : ses premières images se nourrissent entre autres de sa fuite de la Hongrie communiste et de son immigration au Canada en 1957. Il emportait avec lui un goût pour le style européen du reportage photographique, conjugué à une immense curiosité pour son pays d’accueil, notamment la culture francophone, dans laquelle il s’immmerge dès son arrivée. Sans récapituler chaque étape de sa carrière, il faut souligner que ce professeur respecté a d’abord été photographe pour l’Office du film du Québec, ce qui lui donnait à la fois un motif et une occasion de découvrir la province. Il en a ainsi exploré tous les aspects, tant les vestiges de ses fondations catholiques et rurales que l’assurance raffinée, voire amorse, de Montréal, moteur de la modernité au Canada. Szilasi ne compartimente pas ces contradictions dans son travail : il les réunit. C’est particulièrement vrai dans ses portraits d’intérieurs, dont la séduction même provient de l’élé-
ment incongru, la temporalité décalée, qui portent en même temps la marque de l’authenticité. Deux photographies de la maison Yergeau, à Rollet, au Témiscamingue, prises en juillet 1977, illustrent parfaitement ce phénomène. Le salon y célèbre un Noël perpétuel, non avec nostalgie comme un idéal terni, mais comme une réalité chère et entretenue, dans un éternel présent. La chambre est tout aussi animée. À vrai dire, sa cacophonie visuelle défie toute description, les murs et le plafond étant recouverts de pornographie et d’art religieux, dont le portrait d’un prêtre, refleté dans un miroir. Le Québec des années 1970 selon Szilasi, c’est une valse nuptiale dansée sous un plafondisonorisé; on y voit des télévisions illuminant des autels domestiques, ou des cowboys de rodéo domptant des chevaux et d’autres cow-boys.

De retour en ville – et cette ville est incontestablement Montréal – Szilasi, patiemment, attentif aux tricots, ou des cowboys de rodéo domptant des chevaux...