

Gabor Szilasi Photographs Charlevoix County

Geoffrey James et Denise Courtois

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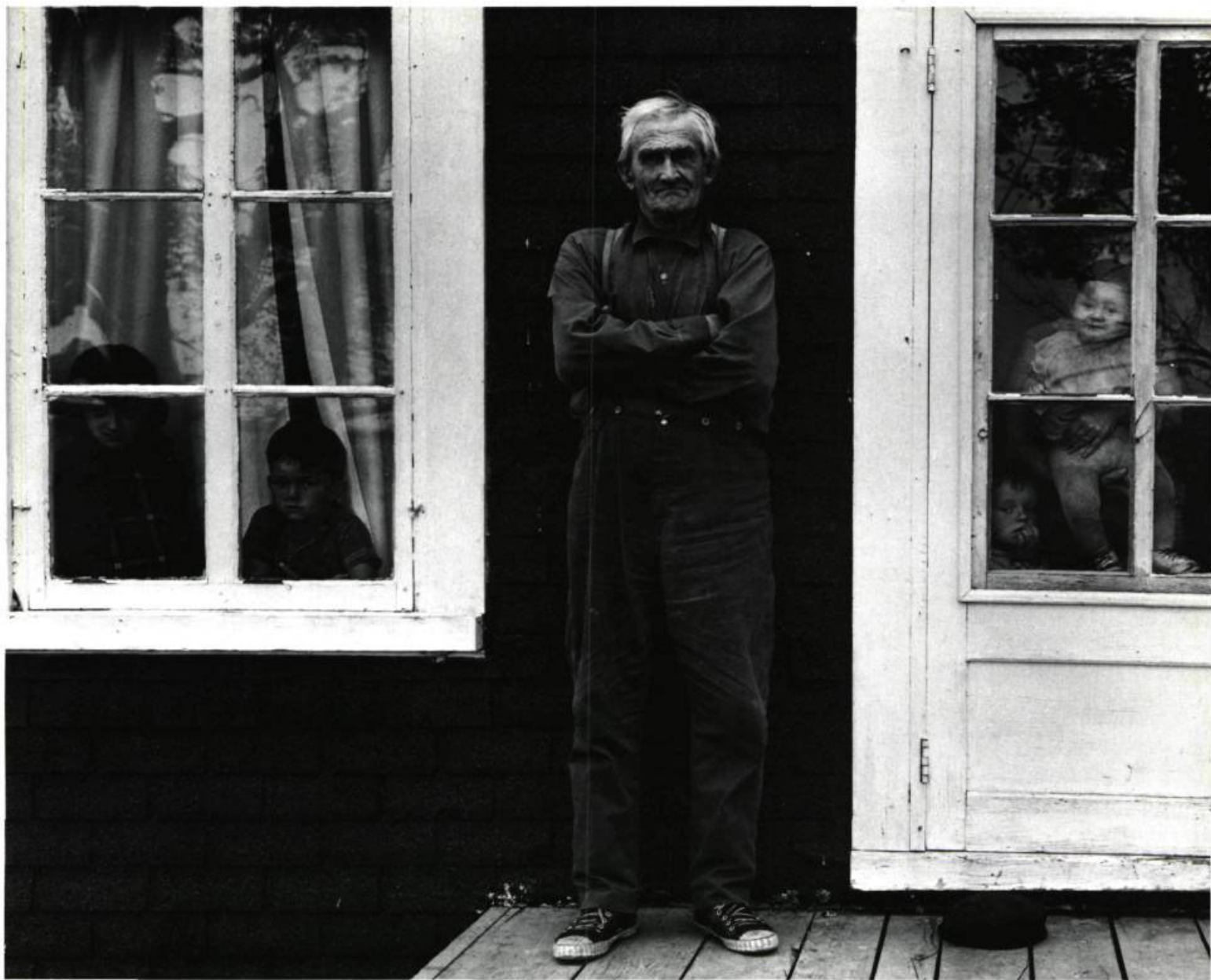
GABOR SZILASI PHOTOGRAPHS CHARLEVOIX COUNTY

by Geoffrey JAMES

Marcel Duchamp once put forward the idea that paintings do not usually have a long life. Works of art, he suggested, have an aesthetic smell or "emanation" that evaporates in a matter of decades. Hence *Nude Descending A Staircase*, exciting in 1913, is now dead or odorless. Vita Brevis, Ars Brevis.

In photography, the opposite is frequently true. Photographs that must have appeared unexcep-

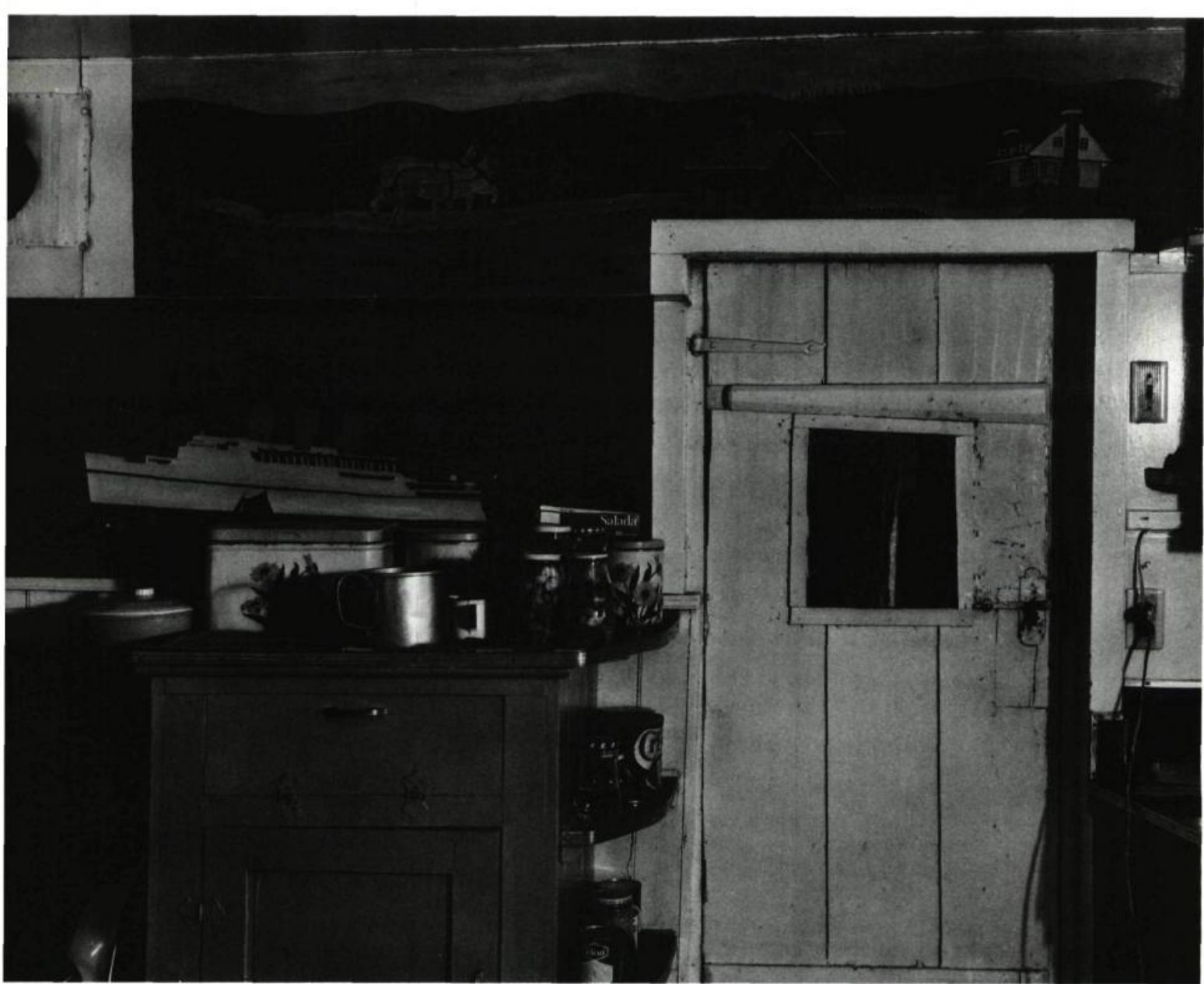
tional to contemporaries can acquire an aura of mystery and excitement to later generations. One reason for this may have something to do with James Laver's law of fashion: parents' clothes are hideous, grandparents' charming or amusing, great-grandparents' beautiful. But the real attraction of the old photograph usually lies in its having preserved something that has disappeared. In everyday life, we rarely notice things that are disappearing; we do not miss them until they



have gone; we do not know they have gone until we see them in old photographs. The perceptive photographer has one eye on the present, the other on posterity. A difficult feat.

Such thoughts are prompted by the group of 50 or so photographs made in Charlevoix County last summer by Gabor Szilasi, and exhibited at Studio 23 in Montreal and the Baldwin Street Gallery in Toronto. Working in the remarkably short space of

three weeks, Szilasi has produced a memorable document. He employed a 4 x 5 view camera and approached Charlevoix County in the classic manner of Paul Strand, photographing the people and their possessions, the interiors and exteriors of their houses, the landscape in which they live. In recent years, the large camera had produced a new academicism, in which the technical beauty of the print becomes everything and in which the real world becomes static and stylized. Szilasi



has entirely avoided such faults. His images, though beautiful, are self-effacing. What we have here is a record, visually satisfying, humanistic, kind but not sentimental, of a society that is rapidly disappearing. Crisp white linen in a motel dining-room, bread that is baked not steamed, the beleaguered piety of old women — how long will each last? Perhaps the answer can be seen in one of Szilasi's interiors. Where, in the corner shrine, there now stands a television set.

There are many strong single photographs in Szilasi's essay — especially the interiors and the portraits. But Charlevoix County really stands as a unitary group of photographs. It is a good record of a way of life, and in 30 years it will be an even better one. It deserves some kind of permanence.

(Traduction française, p. 83)