Photography

Paris, je t’aime

Seeing the City of Light in a new way  By DAVID JAGER

Eugène Atget was best known for his near-obsessive photographic record of Parisian architecture that was fast disappearing around the turn of the 20th century. His glass-plate large-format images, with their stark romanticism and wispy light, inspired the next generation of great photographers.

In his show Paris After Atget, Canada’s Thaddeus Holownia pays tribute to the Frenchman in his own new series of Parisian scenes. Adapting Atget’s preference for architectural detail above human drama, he gives a sense of Paris’s enormous architectural richness.

As Atget knew, architecture is inextricably of its time, and Holownia toys with this notion by noticing the intrusions of contemporary culture on historical subjects. Thus, a classic 19th century storefront is brightened by a large photo ad of Janelle Monáe, and the Tom of Finland mascot of queer sex boutique I.M. appears in another print.

Some of Holownia’s photos address continuity as much as change. Famed Parisian bookstore Shakespeare and Co. looks much the way it did in 1951, while his stunningly handsome image of an old-growth oriental plane tree in Parc Monceau shows what a couple of centuries of judicious urban tree husbandry can do.

His studies of the Paris Opera and the Winter Circus, occupying the centre of each frame in all their burnished, ornamental weight, are nearly as solid and monumental as the original buildings themselves.

Unlike Atget’s, these photos were taken in a period of renewed reverence for historic architecture. While Atget restlessly captured a vanishing Paris in transition, Holownia shows us a city in the process of cosmetically enhancing its choicest real estate.

His Paris, like much of Europe, is rapidly becoming a prettified copy of itself.

Thaddeus Holownia’s Terrasse Lautréamont pays tribute to the great Eugène Atget.

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