

Thaddeus Holownia's poetic sensibility



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the curator

Large green metal doors in a century-old industrial complex in the Distillery District of Toronto open onto the Corkin Gallery and a suite of visually poetic photographs that adorn the brick walls as if they were elegant punctuation marks. The galleries are very spacious. The openness testifies to a once busy warehouse that now threatens to swallow the pictures.

The sense of past times that echoes in this space is subtly amplified in the works of art. The proportions of the walls to the floors, although quite grand, have a human scale to them. Caverns give way to tightly enclosed hallways, one of which is capped with a barrel vault and a miniature bridge that seems to span a trough or open drain.

What is sure about this funky contemporary art gallery is the ever-present theme that space and architecture appear to have their own memories. By walking through the rooms, one has the uncanny feeling that the past and present are conversing in a silent visual language that has its own nouns and verbs, sentence structures and narrative arcs. The architecture and its building materials form phrases that prompt you to think deeply about how malleable time is, how fluid is the flow back and forth across the decades, and how very pleasant is the confrontation between what came before and where you are now in this animated, dynamic art gallery.

The exhibition that I have come to see is a new series of photographs by New Brunswick artist and Mount Allison professor, Thaddeus Holownia. The gallery setting is the perfect frame to view and read his intelligent meditations on place, history and culture. His very fine eye tells me much about the idea of witnessing a city so deeply that its stories blend so seamlessly with your own that you become what you see and imagine.

This is a rare magic, and Holownia is an expert choreographer of the experience. His career has been defined by work that explores very deep and intensely personal connections to place. He works in a tradition that dates to Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, 19th-century American poets, philosophers and naturalist who advocated for simple living and individualism as ways to live thoughtfully and in the moment.

By their examples and by their own creative work, they explored how intense examinations of nature can reveal truths about oneself and one's community. The idea of transcending place and time by

probing the essence of place, especially the fragment of earth on which you are standing, is at the core of their teaching.

Their work contributed to a rich tradition of artistic expression that explored in many different media how meditating on the particular can unlock universal truths. Place-specific subject matter can have the potential to be emblematic of immutable truth, this simple equation opened a rich theme in artistic expression, especially in the work of photographers.

Holownia has developed this tradition whose lineage goes back a century and a half. The exhibition, titled *Paris After Atget, 2007-2015*, is his meditation on the work of the late 19th- and early 20th-century French photographer, Eugène Atget. Atget's audacious pictorial project was to document all Paris, a city he loved deeply, before the inexorable juggernaut of modernism made the past disappear. The charm and enduring power of Atget's views of boulevards and small alleyways, parks, shop windows and gardens, lies in the way he was able both to define a living, vital city and to show the traces of the past grafted on to the present.

Holownia set himself a similarly bold creative task. *Paris After Atget* bears many of the familiar hallmarks we see in the French master – superb composition, wonderful tonal ranges in the printing, allusive reflections, and open-ended stories that are told in the visual conversations between what is shown in the photographic prints, and between the work of art and the associations the viewer brings to them.

The unique element of Holownia's prints is the poetic sensibility that he honed in the intensely perceptive work that distinguishes his portfolio of New Brunswick landscape scenes, notably those taken in and around Sackville and the Tantramar Marshes. He overlays this esthetic formed from the New Brunswick woods and wilderness onto an urban environment to great effect.

The result is photographic prints that have many layers and dimensions. The walk around the gallery space resonates in the images that purposefully suggest walks and pauses, movement and moments of contemplation. Dynamism is balanced with orderly arrangements of subjects in the viewfinder. Our expectations are dashed too in the unexpected collisions of jarring, disjointed messages often seen as graffiti, posters or chalked messages on walls.

Holownia has avoided retreating to the safety of nostalgia or mining veins of loss and anxiety that might underpin an Atget image. Rather, his images hold the eye by virtue of way he apparently so easily finds poetic metaphor and near musical rhythms in the material that presents itself as he walks attentively in the urban environment.

Holownia's lesson is that the impact we have on the environment may be simpler and larger than we know. By paying attention to and being mindful of where we are in space and time can open the windows of perception allow us to surpass the ordinary.

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