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## **URBAN AND INNER LANDSCAPES**

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When the photographic process was invented and patented in France in the 1830's, the new medium was greeted by the art world with at least as much consternation as excitement. Some artists were immediately entranced by the possibilities of the camera, but many more saw it merely as a grave threat to their livelihood. As one Paris newspaper of the time reported: "There is a muffled rumor going around that thanks to this instrument one will see vanishing at the same stroke landscapists, portraitists, ornamental painters and all other artists."

Nothing of the sort happened, of course. In fact, such major painters of the period as Ingres and Manet were quick to make use of photographic compositions in their canvases. At the same time, even the earliest professional photographers were preoccupied with how closely they could approximate "painterly" qualities in their shots. For the rest of their parallel histories, painting and photography have at times been allies, more often outright competitors — but always two distinct and separate arts.

Not today, however. The clear distinction between the two media was just one of the many definitions that fell victim to the blurring, multi-disciplinary sensibility of the 1970's. Now the two forms appear to be irrevocably wedded. Charles Gagnon, one of Canada's most celebrated abstract painters, is also one of our important photographers, and neither critics nor Gagnon himself would ever attempt to separate the two activities or pretend that one was more important than the other as a vehicle for "major" statements by the artist.

And in Raymonde April's case the traditional distinction becomes even more meaningless: This young Quebec City artist makes use of the photographic image to produce a conceptual art which discusses such notions as the subjectivity of autobiography and the subjective vision of the camera itself.

Charles Gagnon's photos are distinguished by their preference for clean-edged planes, clearly delineated geometric shapes, shallow space and an even light that is pure, unembodied light — not atmosphere. If we substituted the word "pictures" for "photos" in the above sentence, the

description would serve for both his paintings and his photographs. Given all they have in common, it would be tempting to see in Gagnon's work with the camera the photographic equivalent of his canvases.

Yet, apart from the same sensibility — spare, understated and elegant — which informs all the artist's work (Gagnon is also a designer), it is the differences which fascinate. The paintings are based on a perfect balance between reason and disorder: the lyrical drive of the loose brushstrokes is always held in check by the formal discipline of a grid-like composition. The result is always a sense of harmony, an equilibrium that hints at some spiritual state.

Gagnon's photographs of the urban landscape seem, in spite of their often rigorous geometry, to be full of tension. Their classical compositions — the center is usually identified, the spatial organization always orderly — set up expectations of a neat, peaceful universe. But these expectations are always frustrated by the neutrality of the photographer's vision. One is hard put to locate the subject matter of these pictures; whatever information they contain seems to have been selected at random.

In *Building, Ottawa*, we see only part of the building — how large a part we don't know. The camera presents us with a not-toosignificant fragment, an arbitrary slice of reality. We are shown a haphazard meeting of roofline and sky — a haphazardness that is certainly faithful to the quality of urban experience around us and to the indiscriminate appetites of the camera, but which is frustrating to the viewer whose need (especially when a photo is involved) is to know and to understand. Instead of "information," we are afforded glimpses of forms whose relationship to their contexts — the urban environment that is the pictures' overt content — is at best ambiguous.

What is the meaning of the white door in *Exit, Montreal*? Its perfect form and the importance of its central location in the picture raises it to the position of emblem or icon. Yet, the picture is obviously of an obscure corner of some undistinguished building, and if the viewer insists on symbols, the photographer is just as adamant in denying them. As the critic Geoffrey James has observed: "Gagnon has managed — and it is one of the most difficult balancing tricks of photography — to maintain the tension between content (in this instance, revelations about the nature of the landscape we have put up around us) and form."

Raymonde April's pictures are inner landscapes: She photographs her own domestic interiors and acts as her own model. The images are composed of dramatic passages from light to dark and of alternating passages of sharp detail and moody, shadowy insinuation. These splendidly theatrical photos — they could be movie stills — are slices of psychodrama: troubling hybrids of autobiography recorded *by* the camera and of fictional lives created for the camera. The tension here, too, is between information and misinformation: We expect photographs to be “slice of life” documentaries, while April's theatrical gestures and stagy poses hint at rehearsal and role playing.

To compound the confusion, April prints her titles on the photos so they serve as comments on the visual content. The title lines are little phrases, banal and laconic, and their slightness is often in mocking counterpoint to the sumptuous imagery. The title, *But who could do me harm?*, casts a sinister light on a scene which, without the words, would seem to be of domestic tranquility. Such is the power of insinuation possessed by the little phrase that it can color our “reading” of the picture: We notice that the hands are not just resting on the table but *gripping* it. This sensibly-dressed woman is obviously in trouble — real or imagined we do not know — and the Hitchcockian menace is hardly lessened for our knowing that the picture is rehearsed artifice.

Phrase and image are in perfect tandem in *I passed entire days in doubting everything*. The result is a kind of photo-novel; hilarious and stagy and very moving. The high sophistication of April's imagery and the banality of her titles and gestures are at once in harmony — art can redeem even the most banal emotion — and in dissonance. The tension is irony: it is the gap that separates the truth as recorded by the camera from the multiple “truths” an artist can imply with a single shot and one random little phrase.