

Utopia/Dystopia: The Photographs of Geoffrey James at The National Gallery of Art in Canada



Geoffrey James, Pont-Neuf, Paris, 2000. Collection of Jim des Rivières and Kathryn Finter.

OTTAWA. - Recognized as one of Canada's most eloquent interpreters of landscape, Geoffrey James has been making photographs since the early 1970s. His first photographs, images of gardens, express classical notions of beauty as they reveal the geometry and underlying structures of the formal garden. These small panoramic photographs evoke a quiet passion for the great landscape schemes and natural sanctuaries of the past. In his most recent work, James pays particular attention to the way in which nature and culture intersect. While not concerned with "Romantic" notions of "the ruin," his photographs do suggest a fall from grace.

Utopia/Dystopia: The Photographs of Geoffrey James explores all facets of the artist's landscapes, from Europe's most famous gardens to the largest open-pit asbestos mine in the Western hemisphere. Witness his discovery of poetry and irony in both the planned landscapes from the past and in the unintentional landscapes of our contemporary urban environments.

Utopia/Dystopia: The Photographs of Geoffrey James is a retrospective of one of Canada's most eloquent landscape photographers. Organized by Lori Pauli, Associate Curator of Photographs at the National Gallery of Canada, this exhibition presents Geoffrey James's work in a way that clearly demonstrates his artistic evolution.

The exhibition title Utopia/Dystopia signals the two opposing themes that recur in much of his work: at one extreme, an ideal society, and at the other, a world gone completely awry. Some of James's photographs present beauty and decay in one place, while others waver between the magnificent and the grim.

For over 30 years, Geoffrey James has used photography to investigate Western society through its landscapes. From the ideal spaces of formal gardens to the mining wastelands, his photographs explore both the planned landscapes from the past and the more unintentional landscapes of the present.

Although his photographs are almost devoid of human figures, James is profoundly interested in humanity, and in the urges and intentions of societies. His ability to locate human aspirations through the built environment has allowed him to find poetry and irony in the contemporary landscapes in which we live, work, and play.

From his small panoramas of the Roman Campagna to his large-format images of the U.S./ Mexican border, this exhibition reveals the wide range of James's investigations with 87 of his photographs.

Themes

Utopia/Dystopia: The Photographs of Geoffrey James presents 87 of James' photographs created between 1982 and 2007. Varying in size from small contact prints to works measuring a metre in length, the photographs are exquisite for their fine detail, subtle tones and arresting forms. They are grouped according to series: the panoramic images of European gardens, photographs of American parks designed by F.L. Olmsted, the Paris, Asbestos, Lethbridge and Toronto series, and Running Fence, a project that examines the U.S./Mexico border fence. There are also recurring visual themes: bridges, roads and pathways, trees and ponds, the façades of houses and stores.

Panoramas

The early panoramas of Geoffrey James are melancholic images of some of Europe's most famous gardens as well as its almost forgotten ones. Italy's wealth of aging, formal gardens seems to have provided the photographer with the richest source of subject matter for his panoramic work. Other landscapes, notably in France, Britain, and later, the United States, also served as inspirations.

Olmsted

In 1988, James developed an ambitious proposal to create a comprehensive series of photographs based on the work of the renowned landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted. The goal of this seven-year project was the creation of a visual catalogue of Olmsted's landscapes, including public parks, private gardens, and cemeteries.

Lethbridge

On assignment for Time magazine, James travelled to Lethbridge, Alberta, for the first time in the early 1970s to research an article on the architect Arthur Erickson. Nearly 30 years later, in 1998, at the invitation of Joan Stebbins, the director of the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, he returns to produce a series of photographs of the city that would be exhibited at the SAAG in 1999 as The Lethbridge Project.

Paris

Although he had always resisted Paris as a subject, he was encouraged by the results of his first photograph taken in the city, in front of the Saint-Lazare train station, and resolved to continue his explorations. Several images in this series reveal James's continuing interest in the surfaces of buildings, as well as in the superimposition of newer elements onto older structures, such as the industrial-looking metal shutters seen at ground level.

Trees

This series is dedicated to the many photographs of trees taken by James, as he portrayed them in different seasons and in a variety of locales. In a certain sense, James has been making images of trees throughout his career. They appear in most of the panoramic images as well as in many of the Olmsted, Paris, Toronto, and Running Fence photographs.

905 and Toronto

In these series, both ongoing projects, James deals with the rapid growth of Toronto's suburbs, addressing what he saw as the transition from "fertile farmland to sterile exurbia." The 905 series, named for the area code in suburban Toronto, is the first to be done in colour and focuses on the sprawl of housing developments in the city's outlying areas. In the Toronto series, James takes an interest in the streets and alleyways, houses and public spaces, and new mixed-use developments.

Asbestos

In October 1992, on his way home from photographing Francis Cabot's spectacular garden in the Charlevoix region in Quebec, James stops in Thetford Mines to see the largest open-pit asbestos mine in the Western hemisphere. Inspired by its scale and suggestion of an unsettling past, this trip marked the beginning of the Asbestos series.

Running Fence

James was instantly fascinated by his first glimpse of a barrier on the U.S./Mexico border that separates San Diego from the adjacent metropolis of Tijuana. This series focuses on the "San Diego wall," which extends approximately 23 kilometres from the shore of the Pacific Ocean eastward past the San Ysidro Border Crossing and ends abruptly at the Otay Mesa mountain range.

This retrospective exhibition presents over 80 photographs including all of his major series.

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