

Geoffrey James: PAST / present /future

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Past, Present, Future, Toronto, 1998.

UGLY BEAUTY: AN INTERVIEW WITH GEOFFREY JAMES

By Peter O'Brien

This interview took place over two Sunday afternoons in January and February 2003, at the home of Geoffrey James in downtown Toronto. On the walls surrounding us are photographs from his various friends and colleagues, including Andre Kertesz, Lee Friedlander and Robert Frank. There are books and magazines stacked randomly on the coffee table, and various CDs scattered about, most notably Thelonius Monk, for whom Geoffrey has particular affection.

To me there is a definite Geoffrey James photographic gesture or statement, whether you are taking photographs of the Italian countryside, eighteenth-century French gardens, Parisian street scenes, the Running Fence between the US and Mexico, the "905" region of Toronto, or as in your most recent book on Lethbridge, *Place*, that you and the writer Rudy Wiebe published. A sense of melancholy or disjuncture or even regret. Am I reading too much into the images?

Geoffrey: Perhaps. I am a fairly sanguine character. I am not prone to melancholia. Let's put it this way: I see the work more as a form of historical research. I read history at Oxford and would be one of the last people to propose that the past is a better time and therefore something to be nostalgic about. Nostalgia is an incredibly unfashionable emotion. I don't think I am in the slightest bit nostalgic.

There is a sense of remembering, of recalling, an age that has come before.

Absolutely. I agree. I'm interested in the persistence of things. Things that have survived. At the beginning of my work this was dramatically obvious, photographing ideal spaces.

Your first book-length collection, *Morbid Symptoms*, begins by intoning the Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appears." I'm wondering how this quotation relates to your entire body of work. Is there something morbidly symptomatic about your Lethbridge book?

I think it does relate. The book on Lethbridge is organized in four chapters. It's not always obvious from the pictures but the developers have eradicated so much. There are so many great buildings that they've just torn down. And then there is an extraordinary adult community built in a beautiful canyon. There are no children, no mosquitoes, no annoyances. There's only this golf course. It's like living without a history.

The book certainly is not a marketing vehicle for Lethbridge.

What's interesting about Lethbridge, what tickled my antennae, is that so much has completely disappeared. The railway station has been engulfed. It's so willful. It is sublime country, but developers seem to ignore that.

Lethbridge's arguably best known piece of architecture, Arthur Erickson's university campus, has no presence in the book. Why?

It didn't interest me as a photographic subject. I didn't have a justification for taking a picture there. I was with Erickson there in 1971, and I took a photograph of him there that terrified him. It's a portrait in which he's standing in a corridor that disappears to a vanishing point, to infinity, and he was extremely nervous that this photograph would be published.

Was it?

No. It wasn't actually. I may have the photograph somewhere. The early archives are not in great shape. It's somewhere in a big brown cardboard box.

W. H. Auden said "poetry changes nothing," that it does not have the ability to change our world. Of course, there are people who disagree with him. Can photography be spoken of in the same way? Or do you think photography does have the ability to change the world? Does it have a practical role? These days, photography is everywhere around us. We are inundated by photography, and disposable and digital cameras have now made everyone a photographer.

I'm not sure I agree with Auden. Poetry has certainly changed my life. It's very important to me. My feeling is that photography, as a tool for social persuasion, is very inefficient. It's much more effective to make a film. The argument can be much more coherent in a film. The interesting thing is that people don't look

at photographs until they are ready to. As a journalist, if you took a photograph of something that was truly atrocious, in the hope that it would awaken peoples' consciousness, the normal reaction from people would be: "How dare you show such bad taste? This is a horrible subject. How can you push this thing in front of me?"

The photograph that seems to be particularly controversial these days is the one of the person, presumably a cook who worked at the restaurant at the top of the World Trade Centre, leaping to his death. He's shown upside down, his leg crooked, falling through space. When it was shown recently in Toronto as part of a series of award-winning photographs, there were many people calling for it to be taken off the walls. It was just too evocative of the pain that many people felt and still feel. What do you say to people like that?

I have a certain sympathy for them. There was footage from that event that was never shown. It was so horrible. It has not been shown out of a basic sense of decency. I haven't really thought this through but I think the ultimate pornography is probably the pornography of death. It's the ultimate *frisson*. I saw an extraordinary show a couple of years ago in Paris, at the Hotel Sully, on the Holocaust images, but the images had different uses and purposes. I wept the first time I saw the show. It was deeply moving precisely because it was not trying to move you.

Is your photography mimetic? Do your photographs set up a mirror to the landscape or the cityscape, or are they perhaps a mirror of your specific, idiosyncratic vision?

When I've done a body of work and then go back to revisit the

site of the photographs, I am struck by the extent to which the photographs are fictive, constructed, and not just little pieces of the universe. To make a picture, you are either including a subject or you are excluding a vast amount of human experience. You really are excluding more than you're including. Good photographs are a sign of intelligence, visual intelligence.

What do you mean by that?

This intelligence is visible in certain types of photography. It's a fairly predictable list. Walker Evans dealt with American culture in a way that was exemplary. There's a wonderful kind of rigour there. I don't think that the subject makes the photograph. I think if the subject makes the photograph, it's a weak photograph. People think you only get good pictures if you go somewhere really exotic. "There's got to be a million pictures there!" a person might say. Not so. My friend Lee Friedlander, who travels a lot to India, has taken many photographs there, but when he gets back they look to him like bad anthropology. His vision depends much more on America.

When we talk about photographers such as Walker Evans or Atget, we see a sense of the document, of the documentary power of photography. Obviously, there is framing there, but there is no sense of contrivance or props, as one sees in the work of, for example, Jeff Wall or Cindy Sherman. In their photographs, there is often nothing *but* contrivance.

The contrived has a long history in photography going back to Henry Peach Robinson in the middle of the 19th century. Jeff Wall now has such force that he has become a kind of one-man

academy. What's interesting to me is how with all the planning and ratiocination, uncontrolled elements creep in. This was especially evident in some of the earlier work. For me, the world is enough. It's a very interesting question. In her book on Dutch painting, Svetlana Alpers makes some telling points about Dutch painting, which has always seemed to suffer in comparison to Italian painting. Italian painting, goes the argument, is based on ideas, where Dutch painting is dumb, mimetic doubling of the world. Of course, that is not the case. There is an enormous amount of complexity in that so-called documentary Dutch tradition. I would also say that the word documentary is a totally unsatisfactory term, although no one has come up with a better term.

Is there a term that you use?

I once came up with a term, but I've forgotten what it was ... it couldn't have been that satisfactory! The labels are funny. I was introduced the other day as a fine art photographer, and that also makes me cringe. It is sufficient to be a photographer.

For you the terms "art photographer" or "documentary photographer" are superfluous?

Totally.

Perhaps in that vein, I'd like to ask you about the book *Toronto Places*, which came out in 1992, and in which you and photographer Steven Evans document many Toronto sites.

I took on that project because I was in Montreal and I was start-

ing to photograph the city there and was interested in taking more urban pictures in another environment. Having said that, it was not easy, because the choice of subjects was totally prescribed. A jury had set prizes for specific categories in the city. On that project I found some subjects more congenial than others. The Gooderham & Worts site for example, and Riverdale Court on Bain Avenue. I may be showing one of those Riverdale pictures from that project in this show. It seems to me a morally good picture. I can't tell you why. It's a winter picture. It's about an old Arts and Crafts idea of community. Very idealistic. When you go photograph there, everybody talks to you and they're all interesting people with strong opinions.

When you say "morally good" do you mean "esthetically good"?

No. It's a very sweet place. I tried to convey that without being sweet. There's something funny when you take pictures. There are some pictures that nobody in the audience bothers with, but that other photographers get. So there may be some secret language of form, whatever it is. The merit of such photographs is almost impossible to discuss. I know it's good but a lot of other people don't.

A propos of the monumental work of Jeff Wall, I'd like to ask you about the size of your images, which are often much smaller.

I do all sizes. I'm showing contact prints in this show. I don't do real Dusseldorf-sized prints, yet. The pictures taken of the "90s" region of Toronto that I'm showing at the Faculty of

Architecture are in colour and are quite large. When you work with a very large negative, the way I do, an 8 x 10, there's a kind of fetishizing of the contact print, which goes back to Edward Weston, which I totally reject. A good contact print is a wonderful thing to look at. But there's so much information trapped in those negatives to see when enlarged. I'm not doctrinaire about scale. It depends on the image and the exhibition space.

There are many photographers these days who seem to say that bigger is better. Often when looking at such work, I think: That photograph would be so much better if it was one-tenth that size.

I agree. At the moment we're in a stage of terrible inflation regarding the scale of photography. Large size is traditionally a sign of academic art, which a lot of this stuff is.

There's a lot of shouting out there.

Sometimes you get more attention by whispering.

You had quite an itinerant childhood. Is there a sense of geographical or biological restlessness that you are articulating in your photographs?

I don't honestly know. I don't think of myself as restless and I don't think of myself as rooted anywhere.

Have you taken photographs in Wales, the country of your birth?



Bain Coop laundry and the central heating plant, Rivendale Courts, Toronto, 1991.

No.

Not one?

No. I've only been there on holiday, and I generally don't take a camera on holiday. I just don't wander around hoping there'll be a picture. If I photographed in Wales, I'd probably just take pictures of ordinary streets and the seaside towns, which are working-class holiday places.

I imagine you surrounded by photographs as a kid. Lots of pictures of you and your family in various spots around the world.

No. Hardly any. My mother was a war widow and she raised my brother and me. In fact, I didn't have a visual education and I had no connection to photography. When I was at Oxford, I was the editor of *Isis*, and we ran photo essays, but it wasn't until I got to Philadelphia that I started really taking photographs. It is such a strange city. It was such a mess. It looked as if it had been bombed. I thought it might possibly be interesting to photograph.

Has winning the Gershon Iskowitz Prize and the Roloff Beny Award, which you did last year, changed your opportunities?

No, I don't think so. The nice thing about the Beny Award is that the book for which I won, *Paris*, became more visible. It was a great pleasure. I had never won so much as a door prize before. But in fact, nothing really changes.

You've said that Lethbridge is a much richer subject for photography than Paris is. What do you mean by that?

I'm not sure I would necessarily say richer. It was a lot easier, in that the city revealed itself more quickly, or what I thought it was about was much more apparent.

Is that because there is not such a weight of history to Lethbridge?

The city is not such a complex organism. It's wide open, lots of light. It's very transparent. And Paris is very complex and layered. It's hard to figure out how to make pictures of Paris that make any sense at all.

Because others have done it before?

That's part of it. As they say, every tree has been pissed on in Europe. It's probably true of every wall in Paris. It's the visual equivalent of accordion music.

You've photographed many utopian spaces. Or places perhaps past their utopian prime. Do you see Lethbridge or the "905" region of Toronto as utopian spaces?

No, I think they're largely places of expediency. It's very fashionable to sneer at the "905" region, but that is where many people choose to live. There are strange things that happen in "905," which I am just now beginning to investigate. There's an incredible Muslim community built around a mosque, there are

Italian communities. Somewhere in that somewhat tawdry environment there are a lot of people with aspirations, but I wouldn't go so far as to call them utopian spaces. Utopia is where it's planned for certain ends. I was just in Ireland and I came across a 19th-century village built by Quakers around a linen mill: granite cottages, pristine squares. The Quaker idea was no pub, no pawn shop, no police station. It was supposed to be this wonderful, self-regulating community, and for a time really was. Now it is a militarized space.

And yet you have in the Lethbridge book sections called "A Better Way of Life" and "Paradise Canyon and Beyond."

I find it very hard to think of the developers who built those places as having utopian earnings ... yearnings, I mean.

Perhaps they did have utopian earnings...

I think those places are built for the profit motive. Capitalism at its purest.

I'd like to ask you about the relationship between beauty, and whatever the opposite is: perhaps ugliness or insignificance. You take a lot of photographs of the ugly, or the non-beautiful. The Running Fence between the US and Mexico, for example, is not only ugly, but is a symbol of something ugly. Is there a difference between the beautiful and the ugly, or is it only a question of interpretation or presentation?

It's a very good question. There's a Thelonius Monk tune called "Ugly Beauty," a waltz, that I'm learning to play on the trumpet.

Many people think that a photograph depends upon a beautiful subject to be beautiful. That's very naïve. In a funny way, I think the history of photography has been a constant extension of the notion of what is considered to be a proper subject for the medium. I go into rich people's houses and I see huge colour photographs of Vancouver's abject street corners. It's now considered something that you can put on in the drawing room. Max Kozlov quoted a wonderful bit of Gauguin: "the ugly can sometimes be beautiful, the pretty never." It's very complicated. The state of the art world right now is that photographing the abject can confer merit on the photographer. The basic point is that photography aestheticizes the world. It renders everything safe and manageable. It's a way of putting parts of the universe into these little frames. When the subject is beautiful it's very hard to take any photographs that people will take notice of at all. Thus, Italian gardens are very hard to photograph, to make them your own. One reason I did them was because I didn't think anyone had made a decent picture of an Italian garden. In the art world you get no points for doing that, but you get a lot of points for being politically correct. If I do asbestos tailings or the Running Fence I get points for that. My questions really are: Is it interesting; Is it interesting to look at?

There's a marvelous few lines in Michael Ondaatje's poem "The gate in his head" about writing being "The beautiful formed things caught at the wrong moment / so they are shapeless, awkward / moving to the clear."

Taking photographs of beauty is the hardest thing. But I've stopped worrying about all this stuff. Things move me and seem to beckon to me, and so I do it.

You seem to photograph with your body. You spend a lot of time walking through and around spaces that you photograph. Yet in any day you see thousands of things. How do you decide on the things you want to photograph?

The first thing I do is create a framework within which to work. I never walk aimlessly with a camera, hoping I'll find something to photograph. I work on projects, areas of investigation, and so I'm always working on a subject that is of interest to me. But the actual taking of the photograph is a whole other set of actions, and they are extremely hard to analyze. The main thing is the condition of light. Sometimes, when I'm feeling dogmatic, I'll say that there is no such thing as a photographic subject, there are only conditions of light, which is true to the extent that something that is wonderful one day will not exist the next day. It's not that I'm trying to photograph a particular subject, it's about being in the world in a particular set of conditions of light, given that I already have an interest in being there.

And then adjusting your body to the space...

The funny thing with the camera that I use is that I walk around with it on my shoulder, with a tripod and this big box and there's a black cloth over it, so that when I stop to take the photograph I can't just sneak a camera to my eye and check it out. I have to set it up and take the picture. I'm not photographing with a viewfinder. I find the spot by moving through space, and stopping, and rarely do I make an adjustment, even by a foot or two.

Are there times when you purposefully insert yourself into

the photograph: your shadow or your reflection? At times your shadow does exist in the photograph, or, in one of the Lethbridge photographs, in the section entitled "In the City," your reflection is quite clearly seen in a storefront window.

It happens. I don't make a thing of it. I don't do it self-consciously. Lee Friedlander did a whole series of his shadow, sort of self-portraits.

It's almost impossible not to think of Michael Snow's handheld series of self-portraits.

Michael's are much more conceptual than Lee's. In a way, Lee's work is conceptual, but it's not as codified as Snow's. Sometimes, just to avoid my shadow, I've put my camera in the shadow of a tree, so that my body form won't be there. Other times, the shadow is just there.

Sometimes a shadow is just a shadow?

Yes, not a self-portrait.

Are you taking the same photograph over and over again?

It's a good question, and it's probably true of any artist. Do novelists write the same novel over and over again? My answer is: I probably do, and I don't want to know about it. And I don't analyze, on that level, whatever I'm doing. You asked me earlier about a Geoffrey James gesture, and it occurs to me that one thing you don't have in photography is gesture. The camera does

not care about me at all. It is an indifferent machine. It is not as if you are Matisse, with a distinctive line. Whatever you have that distinguishes your work is a way of moving through the world that is distinctly yours. I don't go around looking to take the same pictures. In fact, a lot of the time I'm trying to come up with new constructions, and it doesn't happen very often. A new way of making a photograph. I hate the word composition. You don't really compose a photograph. You only compose if you have a studio set-up. You're only really framing. Occasionally you come up with a picture that is truly original. It's hard.

It is a slippery question because do you really want to try so hard to make something that new, that unique?

You can't and you don't. The glorious thing about working with this huge camera that I have is that it allows you to make really dumb pictures, and succeed, because it describes the world so beautifully.

You're giving a lot of credit to the technology.

It's important to. I used to think it wasn't. I don't think of myself as being a techie. I'm sort of anti-techie. But I realize when I have an assistant who's trying to print for me ... well, if it's not right, it's not right. Photographers are notorious for getting together and talking about technical things. But in fact, the technical is the aesthetic. It's all we have. We have this machine that we have to use and coax something out of.

I wonder if there's something that connects the many photographs that you've taken over the years: Lethbridge, Paris, the

Running Fence, New York, Italian gardens, the English countryside ... Maybe there is no answer to the question. Part of me thinks that these various photographs are so dissimilar, and part of me thinks they are very similar. Maybe the connecting entity is your camera, your technology, you walking through these spaces. Do you see a thematic connection?

I certainly had no programmatic notion when I started out. I started very innocently photographing gardens, which might have had to do with my first childhood memories, when I was five and we went to Hadrian's Villa, in 1947.

That was with your mother and brother?

Yes. So I started with the gardens. And that led from Italy to France. And then I did the book *Morbid Symptoms*, about the French Revolution. It's really about Enlightenment spaces. And they were truly utopian. And then I did some work in England. So I did these European spaces quite thoroughly. And then I read Robert Smithson's essay on Frederick Law Olmsted, and I proposed a project to Phyllis Lambert at the Canadian Centre for Architecture. I then worked for seven years all over America, observing the sadness and decay of most American cities. Their non-functioning. Here's something that exactly illustrates your question. I showed the asbestos work at the Power Plant with Anish Kapoor. His work was organized by the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art. And I met the director at the opening, who said: Come down and do a residency in San Diego. I was initially non-committal. I had no interest in doing it. Then completely by chance, our family went down there for

March break one year. And I thought there was nothing in San Diego that I thought was the slightest bit interesting to photograph. Then one day we went down to Mexico to eat lobster and I saw the fence. It took me about three minutes to say: That's for me. So I rushed up to the Museum and they said: Oh yes, we have you down for a residency, what do you want to do? So that was the Running Fence series of photographs. It's all existential. One thing leads to another.



Aqueduct Claudio, 1989.