

THE
DAUNTING
BEAUTY
of

PARIS

Award-winning photography book presents unusual views of the city

Paris

By Geoffrey James
and Hubert Damisch
*Services culturels de l'Ambassade
du Canada, Paris, 108 pages, \$40*

PETER O'BRIEN

Special to The Gazette

This book presents a Paris that most of us will never see. Geoffrey James has somehow removed people from most of his

photographs of one of the world's most intensely human spaces, a city that is often defined by the passionate and extravagant personalities that articulate it.

Of course, the shadows of human industry, our impositions, are everywhere evident in the 42 photographs of Paris, from the omnipresent automobile, to warring graffiti tags, to architectural idiosyncrasies that adorn edifices grand and humble. But the lack of faces allows James to render

both the memory and the anticipation of humanity onto that most fascinating of all cities.

This book opens up the heart of a place that seems at once to lament and to forgive its inhabitants and its visitors. The result is a daunting beauty waiting within these streets and within these black and white and silver photographs.

James took most of these images in 2000, when he was artist-in-residence at the Canadian government's Paris studio. He used an 8-by-10-inch

view camera, a tripod and a black draped cloth, which allowed him to produce negatives almost as large as the photographs reproduced here.

From the gentle twists of Rue Charlemagne in the 4th arrondissement, to the banal modernity of Passage des Récollets in the 10th, to the crumbling walls of Impasse Satan in the 20th, James walked many of the streets of Paris as though on a "military campaign."

*Please see **PARIS**, Page i3*

Big year for James

PARIS

Continued from Page i1

He systematically processed and documented the pedestrian lifeblood of the city on these intuitive wanderings.

Any photographer who chooses Paris as a subject must first navigate the overwhelming influence of the great French photographer Eugène Atget (1856-1927), known for his obsessive cataloguing of a disappearing Paris. This book, says James, is "part duel, part homage" to Atget. There is perhaps more sadness, more longing, in the photographs of James than is found in those of Atget, but the intimation and the influence of Atget's masterful simplicity cannot be overlooked.

It has been quite a year for Geoffrey James. Earlier this year, he won the \$25,000 Gershon Iskowitz Prize for sustained artistic achievement. Most recently, he won the \$30,000 Roloff Beny Award for this book, deemed the best work of photography published by a Canadian between January 2000 and December 2001. His publisher, the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris, also won \$20,000 as part of the prize.

Although he now resides in Toronto, it was in Montreal that James first started to take photography seriously. He lived in Montreal from 1966 to 1975 and again from 1987 to 1995. Among his employers were the old Montreal Star

and Time Canada.

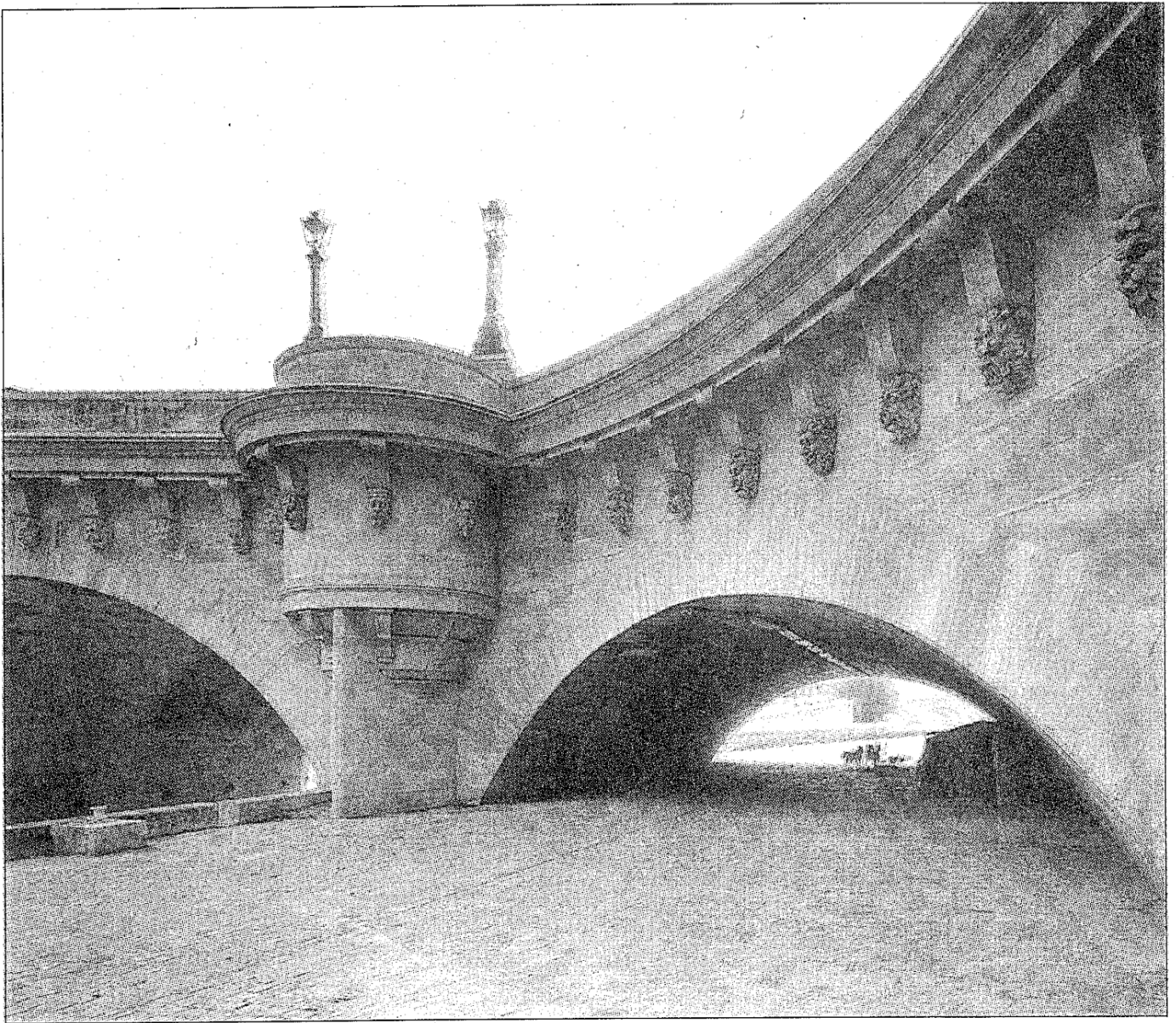
Since 1985, he has published eight books, including *Morbid Symptoms: Arcadia and the French Revolution* and a book on the otherworldly landscapes created by asbestos tailings in the Thetford Mines area of Quebec.

He has also contributed to a host of other photographic projects, including a book on Frederick Law Olmsted, the landscape architect responsible for New York's Central Park and Montreal's Mount Royal Park.

This book includes an elliptical and very personal text by the distinguished French cultural theoretician Hubert Damisch as a form of preface. The only weak point is the rather flat and word-for-word English translation of the sweeping French text: "A charge pour le lecteur d'entrevoir à son tour quelque chose de la topologie ainsi définie sur l'ensemble des fils que croise et recroise, de façon encore hypothétique, ce livre non pas tant d'images que de photographie – comme on dirait de poésie, ou de philosophie."

But the exquisite photographs are what truly carry and transport this book. For anyone who has ever lived in or visited Paris, this book is the perfect complement, both for what it invokes and, perhaps more important, for what it imagines.

❖ *Peter O'Brien has lived in New York, Dublin, Montreal and now lives in Toronto, but has only visited Paris as a tourist.*



COURTESY OF SERVICES CULTURELS DE L'AMBASSADE DU CANADA, PARIS

One of Paris's best known bridges, Pont Neuf, as seen by photographer Geoffrey James.



COURTESY OF SERVICES CULTURELS DE L'AMBASSADE DU CANADA, PARIS

Photographer Geoffrey James's view of Porte St. Denis in Paris's 10th arrondissement.