Patricia McDonnell AND Emily Stamey

With contributions by
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and Robert Silberman

Photo-essay by Larry Schwarm

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Atget observes like a novelist, and the extended form of his 10,000 photographs, like long nineteenth-century novels, mirrors the world’s abundance and variety. . . . Atget builds his epic like a novelist, but photographs each scene like a poet.

Ben Lifson

The acclaimed photographer Eugène Atget began his working life as a seaman, later becoming an actor in the French provinces. Not until the 1890s, when looking for an occupation that might provide a reliable livelihood, did he turn to commercial photography—just as the technology had developed to a point where that was becoming a credible business venture. His adoption of the medium coincided with an interest in documenting disappearing Parisian architecture and capturing the fading traditional culture of the French capital. Around 1898, he launched a singular enterprise, supplying documentary photographs to historically minded organizations, such as the archive of the national registry and local museums. He also served a clientele of history painters, architects, set designers, magazine illustrators, and publishers who purchased his images of Paris as source material.

Atget made more than ten thousand photographs of the myriad faces of the city as it transitioned from one century to the next. In his time, he was virtually unknown in the French art world. Today, his reputation rests on the comprehensiveness of his project to record and reflect Paris as it once was as well as on the ardor and dedication that labor entailed. Given the refinement of his images and the wisdom inherent in his aesthetic choices, Atget’s work far surpasses simple documentation. In a period when pictorialism—characterized by softly focused, often manipulated images—dominated photography, he took a more straightforward approach. Instead of depicting the progress and bustle of the metropolis, he favored less obvious, more idiosyncratic subjects—a ragpicker’s shack, for example, or the calm of a Versailles fountain, or the curious grimace of a sculpted satyr on a church facade. “Atget’s best work,” noted the scholar Maria Morris Hambourg, “is a poetic transformation of the ordinary by a subtle and knowing eye well served by photography’s reportorial fidelity.”

Marchand de vin, 15 rue Boyer vividly demonstrates Atget’s ability to elevate a seemingly mundane setting to the level of art. Because the interior of the wine bar is dimly lit, sharp contrasts of dark and light animate the composition. To build drama in the image and focus more light on the murky room, Atget positioned his lens to capture reflections cast from the front window onto the bar mirror. The formal interplay of lines from the open front doors and stair railing, seen in the mirror, resonate with other patterns in the image. Another hallmark of Atget’s exceptional style is evident here: the long exposure required to achieve a precise quality of light. What might have been a drab image of a commonplace locale becomes, in his hands, an eloquent work, one among many in his landmark portrait of a now-vanished Paris.

Patricia McDonnell

About the Contributors

Toby Kamps is senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He has organized exhibitions on the work of Vanessa Beecroft, Ellsworth Kelly, and Claes Oldenburg as well as such themed exhibitions as Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art (2000), Lateral Thinking: The Art of the 1950s (2002), and The Old, Weird America (2008).

Patricia McDonnell is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include Marsden Hartley: American Modern (1997), On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art (2002), and Painting Berlin Stories (2003).

Laura Moriarty is the author of three novels and the recipient of several literary awards. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a social worker. Moriarty lives in Lawrence, Kansas, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Kansas.

Antonya Nelson has written three novels and published six short-story collections. She contributes often to the New Yorker and the New York Times Book Review. Nelson holds the Cullen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her award-winning novel, Living to Tell (2000), takes place in her hometown of Wichita, and her forthcoming novel, Bound, is set there as well.

Timothy R. Rodgers is director of the Scottsdale (Arizona) Museum of Contemporary Art. Formerly chief curator at the New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe, he is involved in a range of writing and curatorial projects. His scholarly concentration is on American early modernism.

Robert Silberman is an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities campus. His chief scholarly interests have been photography, film, and contemporary art. Silberman collaborated with former New York Times photography critic Vicki Goldberg on the companion volume for the 1999 PBS series American Photography: A Century of Images.

Larry Schwartz is a professor of art at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, and a nationally regarded photographer whose work has been shown at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. His 2003 book, On Fire: Larry Schwartz, won the Hensickman Book Award and Prize.


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