

Feature

# Olmsted: Photography and the Democratic Pastoral

A FEATURE FROM THE WINTER 1996 ISSUE OF *CANADIAN ART*

by MAX KOZLOFF



Opening spread for "Olmsted: Photography and the Democratic Pastoral," *Canadian Art*, Winter 1996, pp 50–8 / photo Robert Burley

In October, the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal opened "Viewing Olmsted: Photographs by Robert Burley, Lee Friedlander, and Geoffrey James." The photographers were commissioned to build an image archive of Olmsted's parks meant to evoke "a range of late twentieth-century feelings and attitudes towards America's nineteenth-century efforts at self-creation." They worked five years, in all seasons. For this essay, I went to Montreal to preview the more than 900 images that the centre collected.

I realized afterward that my memory of parks designed by Frederick Law Olmsted was formed in advance of any thought of how the parks might actually look in photographs. The European background of our parks had been something to associate with palaces and chateaux, as I knew from art history slides. An Olmstedian place, in contrast, was a nearby leafy locale, agreeable yet nondescript. Now, the impression made by all those photographs in Montreal interceded with my miscellaneous and inattentive recall. Like one who reads the book to see if it was faithful to the movie, I revisited Olmsted's Prospect Park in Brooklyn to see if it was in accord with the images I had just seen.

But seeing Prospect Park in the original was not like looking at good descriptive pictures of it. After all, my experience of the park was in the round, with breezes, and I didn't go to every site like the photographers had. I realized then, too, that they faced a problem no visitor would think problematic: Olmsted's park was *pretty*. You amble along and take in its loveliness as something intended by a planner to resemble a natural experience. Olmsted abetted that impression considerably, not that we know much about the terrain before his coming. As I had brought a camera on my visit, I was upset by the likelihood of taking a dull picture of a beautiful place: bosky masses fringing knolls and berms. But the fact that the park was already a "picturesque" pleasure anticipated by Olmsted could make pictures—photographs—redundant.

Gauguin once said: "The ugly can sometimes be beautiful, the pretty, never." If the painter had nature in mind, it was certainly a different nature from that upheld by the planner. So many of us have grown up with an abused notion of the natural order that a picturesque view of it, like Olmsted's, must seem quaint. Nineteenth-century people had a far more elaborate set of proprieties than we have. But Gauguin had rebelled against the bourgeois protocols of his time with such vehemence that he foresaw a reversal of their moral and aesthetic categories, a reversal we view as modern.



Second spread for "Olmsted: Photography and the Democratic Pastoral," *Canadian Art*, Winter 1996, pp 50–8 / photo Geoffrey James

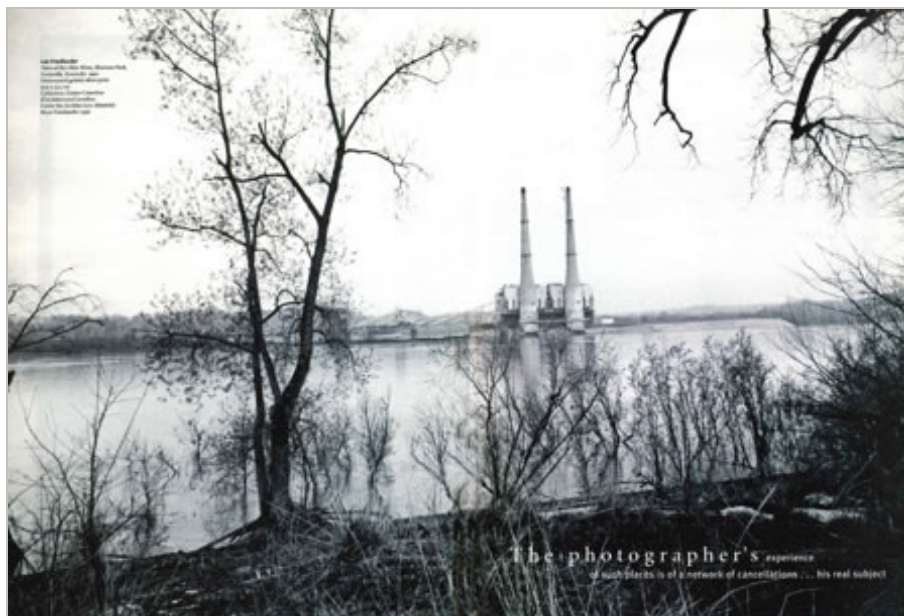
For all that, we are still, many of us, obliged to live in an urban world, and we readily confess our need of amenities as gentle as parks. We require them, in fact, just as much as people did during the heyday of the industrial revolution, with their shantytowns and smokestacks. A park is a cultural artifact that is perishable, not because it might return to nature, but because it could subside into an ugly "nature" that we have trashed. In Prospect Park, they're reclaiming an eroded hill of hidden glades by letting the grass grow. I don't know exactly in what time frame one should put such an enlightened idea. Since everyone tells us we live in a postindustrial moment, it may follow that this is a postmodernist epoch. Of the three photographers commissioned to look at the Olmsted parks across our hemisphere, I do know that one of them, Friedlander, is a modernist, while James and Burley are, in effect, premodernists.

None of this, as I thought about it, made it easier to figure out how to take my own pictures of the park. Prospect's vistas in time and space seem to have been envisioned by a kind of appetite we all share. If we like graceful unevenness and surprise of terrain, parks—the city dweller's idea of the pastoral—put such vegetative turns of phrase far

more conveniently within walking distance of each other and from us than does wild nature. Nothing is more predictable, and satisfying for that reason, than the unexpected land rhythms like Olmsted's. A contemporary photo of Prospect Park should somehow, I imagined, oppose itself to the scene's preset views—stand clear with its own personal vision. But for its part, the CCA mounted a program which in sheer compass suggests a 19th-century objective, an inventory.

The photographer in this context may have a style or point of view as long as it offers a constant provision of data and maintains the stability of the archive. The principle of landscape architecture, as applied with endless variations by the pioneer Olmsted, is a first order of business; a regard for the caprices of photographic perception, a second. As for anecdotal comment, it doesn't rate. That's why all the things that people do in parks, and the people themselves, are for the most part left out. Baseball, picnicking, kit-flying, row-boating: I saw many of these activities in Prospect, but not in the photographs taken for the CCA commission.

The parks are, therefore, seen straightforwardly, yet...only in potential, not in action. An *idea* of the Olmstedian park is manifested in the overall CCA collection, an idea that wants to remain valid across time, even though every one of a photograph's pictorial details is bound by time past. I understand the project's aim more clearly now, but I still do not agree that topical vignettes would have distracted from this conceptual approach. Viewed in its entirety, the collection is both diffuse and repetitious. There's little drama. It's easy *not* to give the pictures the minute attention they need, but fail to invite. The spectacle has the recession of landscape, a state that obviously endures regardless of whether individual pictures are passionately conceived or noncommittal. Though they traipsed far and wide, sometimes under hard conditions, these picture makers adopted a laid-back attitude.



Third spread for "Olmsted: Photography and the Democratic Pastoral," *Canadian Art*, Winter 1996, pp 50–8 / photo Lee Friedlander

And there is a further paradox. The luminous particulars of “Viewing Olmsted” are all transitory, emphasized by some almost unrecognizable views of the same subject—a certain tree, for example—taken from different positions or seasons. We have a relentless flow of dabble around a few immobile landmarks—pavilions, bridges, etc. The CCA, I think, intended for us to grasp the typical ambulatory views that Olmsted designed as they gradually accrue through multiple, concrete descriptions of the place. Many constraints are placed on photographic practice—editorial, commercial, official; this implicit one is scholarly. The method of it may be familiar, but CCA’s choice of overqualified photographers gives pause and is notable.

Lee Friedlander, a long-time observer of outdoor nature, needs no introduction as a classic street photographer. His anarchic descriptions of Olmsted territory are for the most part at odds with the sylvan idealism that informs it. Deliberately, he exhibits no sense of occasion. He can open the shutter at any old place, the more unremarkable, the better. He’s certainly insubordinate to a park’s rhetoric, and he doesn’t encourage any legible pattern for the eye, either. But this itchy, just-the-facts, indiscriminate way of seeing leads to discoveries.

Viewed from afar, off-centre, or as it just peeks over a rise, an equestrian general in stone has a certain tonic puniness.

Heroic monuments of the 19th century were once for Friedlander prominent features of small-town America and are now at best lesser fixtures within an interesting chaff. And why not confess that you can lose your balance with all this roughage, particularly when the vantage is bent by a wide-angle lens? Friedlander looks down upon staircases in Morningside Park, through a sea of bare branches on a sunny day, and makes you feel that the ground is about to capsize. Elsewhere, graceless shadows run every which way, confusing contours, like the dazzle camouflage of World War I navies. The integrity of objects and living things, visually speaking, is a bad word. In Chicago's Jackson Park, one shot shows the beaux-arts Museum of Science and Industry lacerated by intervening foreground twiggery; another bars the sight of the edifice with a trunk. The photographer's experience of such places is of a network of cancellations...his real subject. Yet, for this very reason, when the thicket clears in a Kentucky view of the Ohio River, and one catches sight only of twin smokestacks across a glassy river, a real loneliness comes through.

His subject is busy cancellations and his approach is programmatically inadvertent, but Friedlander's *mood* is most often of unconsoling solitude. At Sceaux and St. Cloud, the loner Eugene Atget reflected on the ruins of dynasty in royal parks. The photographs of this American working in our parks has, in contrast, a feeling of tense, disappointed intimacy, of going nowhere with endless momentum. The conflict between flatness and depth in his imagery is recurrent because it reflects a psychological irresolution. It is possible to spin your wheels emotionally, even in Olmsted's relaxing places, but you can imagine how he himself might have been put off by its portrayal.

Geoffrey James and Robert Burley, however, are far more at home in 19th-century spaces and make pictures congruent with Olmsted's point(s) of view. These photographs take you in through a series of clarified planes that are locked together by infinite modulations. Evidently, their effort to depict the hospitable aspects of the parks parallels the designer's intent to offer popular recreation to the urban masses.



Cemetery in Oakland (Olmsted did get around!), where the Victorian mausolea and the backlit Pacific palms are set off in a glow that traces back to Claude. James practices in a nostalgic vein but nevertheless with a full-blooded materialism of style. No matter how humble his motif, his possessive, savoring gaze contrives to make it a worthy site. The silence of Friedlander's entanglements suggest a certain abandonment; the quietude of James' vistas imply the self-confidence of the one who looks. Yet, for the scene to be understood as welcome in a communal sense—a goal of Olmsted's not to be forgotten—we have to turn to the more diffident Robert Burley.



No doubt this photograph serves a use, for purposes of a file.  
But it goes further, giving evidence... that shows how a dream endures

grounds of Biltmore, the huge Vanderbilt chateau in Asheville, North Carolina. From a rampart overlooked by a well preserved statue of Diana the huntress, we take in the horizon with a sweep that is definitely seigneurial. It is not just that the photograph asks you to examine the natural bounty of the view, but to behold it. I refer to this invitation as an optical phenomenon and also as a perspective that speaks of property and class. This sense of privilege is echoed even at Mountain View Cemetery in Oakland (Olmsted did get around!), where the Victorian mausolea and the backlit Pacific palms are set off in a glow that traces back to Claude. James practices in a nostalgic vein but nevertheless with a full-blooded materialism of style. No matter how humble his motif, his possessive, savoring gaze contrives to make it a worthy sight. The silence of Friedlander's entanglements suggest a certain abandonment; the quietude of James's vistas imply the self-confidence of the one who looks. Yet, for the scene to be understood as welcome in a communal sense—a goal of Olmsted's not to be forgotten—we have to turn to the more diffident Robert Burley.

Let me schematize: Friedlander is a modernist; James, a romantic; as for Burley, he's a professional. With the first two we're in the presence of definite personalities; with the latter, someone whose job requires him to be self-effacing. Maybe it's fitting that he works in colour, an everyman pictorial language. You have to hold your breath a little with the black and white seriousness of the others; the atmosphere in Burley's pictures is more plebeian, various and breathable. With their complexion restored in these large, opulent, unassuming prints, Olmsted's parks take on far more of the guise we know. Despite the routine absence of people, that's why we can speak in this context of their civil environment. Banal, when it drinks in the hyper-greens of summer or the dense red-yellows of fall, his work freshens in half-light. He likes seedlings or leaves on wet ground. A mint-green golf course in mist has a spectral presence. And there are other marks of social life that tell of our time without forcing an issue: for example, a bag man or woman's loaded cart on a field. What stays with me most, though, is a sight Burley found on a grey day in Lake Park, Milwaukee. Amidst the dishevelments of late autumn reposes a sulky stone lion with baby blue daubed cheeks. In view of its guardian place on a balustrade over an embankment, the statue has certainly suffered an indignity that is ridiculous... and yet has also a poetic quality worthy of Corot.

The survival of a Virgilian aesthetic as a recognizable presence as late as the last century is a cultural fact. But if nature could still be the subject of fantasies about a golden age, it was also the object of accelerated scientific curiosity. The era, whose physical terrain was mutating as fast as its traditional cultures, developed a retrospective consciousness we call historicism.

Olmsted was just one of many creators who transmitted that Virgilian aesthetic and that historical recall into our own time. It was a tradition that could be evoked in altered forms; his was parks. As creations, their virtue consists in having a living share in the existence of the natural world they celebrated. At the same time, they pertain to the social values which drove him and are everywhere infused into his design.

English gardeners and engineers provided his immediate models. Of one of them, Joseph Paxton's Birkenhead Park at Liverpool (1847), Olmsted wrote: "Five minutes of admiration, and a few spent in studying the manner in which art had been employed to obtain from nature so much beauty, and I was ready to admit that in democratic America there was nothing to be thought of as comparable with this people's garden." He goes on to speak of a shower just then that caused everyone to seek refuge under the roof of a Chinese pagoda and of his satisfaction that the "privileges of the garden were enjoyed about equally by all classes." To make that enjoyment a rule in America, where it was still an exception in England, Olmsted was to move earth in the unclaimed public land of our cities, to provide discreet, winding circulation for traffic through them, and to shift the vocabulary of parks from such European things as parterres to palisades.

Looking back, we view that progressive enterprise as a great conservative gesture, not only because of the historical memory that it embodied but because of its environmental implications. So it's not surprising that picturing Olmsted's territories now is also a conservative undertaking. To do justice to them, the photographer cannot escape—must even embrace—conventions that date from the beginning of the medium. In turn, these depended on long-standing artistic prototypes in landscape tradition. Actually, there were two kinds of pastoralism, one that is primitivist (involved with primacy of sensation), the other sophisticated, even literary... and we see something of both at the CCA.

A prime use of photography is to ascertain and recall for later viewers what was there. Aside from the information that confirms or adds to knowledge, we may often look to the photo with a further need, to satisfy the imagination. I return to an image that does precisely that for me: the one that frames the disfigured stone lion in the Milwaukee park. Robert Burley may only have thought to provide a continuing physical account, but here he saw something unique. For he reveals the vernacular hand of one epoch on the cultivated artifact of another, in tender light within a melancholy setting. No doubt this photograph serves a use, for purposes of a file. But it goes further, giving evidence of a dissonance of cultures that shows how a dream endures—and suffers misadventures—within a field that is itself a product of imagination. ■

Closing page for "Olmsted: Photography and the Democratic Pastoral," *Canadian Art*, Winter 1996, pp 50–8

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