

Thursday, Oct 30 | Volume 98, Issue

[About us](#) :: [Délit Français](#) :: [Advertising](#) :: [Classifieds](#) :: [DPS](#)

17

[Archives](#)

THE  
**McGill  
DAILY**  
Coming undone since 1911

News	Commentary	Culture	Features	Sci+Tech	Mind&Body
Compendium	Blogs				

## New takes on urban dystopia

### Three photographers' nostalgia for Montreal's red-light district

Nicolas Boisvert-Novak  
The McGill Daily

Common sense dictates that one not dole out disclaimers in lieu of hooks, but – six-credit class midterms being what they are – I don't feel I have a choice here. Consider yourself warned: the following article contains no interviews, and was written by a man whose whole understanding of photography was afforded by a Wikisearch for “camera” that slid into snuff pornography within five short minutes.

My apologies.

But please, don't stop reading – to our mutual benefit, my cluelessness isn't an obstacle here. The fact is that “Le Coin” – an understated photo exposition of Montreal's red-light district, on display at Le Monument National until mid-December – is less an art gallery than an exercise in public consciousness. Meaning: your appreciation of it won't benefit from erudition as much as from a lifetime spent in the city. Really, all that these photos demand of us is a shared, unconditional love for Montreal and its dingy, fragmented ghetto: the Faubourg St-Laurent.

It's a part of town that the three artists whose work is displayed here (Gabor Szilasi, Guy Glorieux, and Mia Donovan) are in an apt position to expose. As longtime residents of Montreal, they witnessed the city evolve, its once prominent street corners slowly resigning themselves to the effacing motions of gentrification. And while each artist uses this history to make sense of the decay, their vastly different approaches – one impressionistic, another documentarian, and the last, defiantly feminine – afford us three nuanced views of this shithole we often dismiss.

Not that you could tell that from Glorieux's powerfully abstract landscape photography. Rather than simply scraping the dirt off the street, “St-Laurent, Ste-Catherine” washes it out in a sea of photonegative blacks and whites, transforming this sullied neighbourhood into a sprawling piece of post-apocalyptic geometry.

It's a wonderfully simple piece, one that exhumes desolation with unusual grace. Accidental by nature, this sténopé – a long-exposure photograph taken with a pinhole camera – subtly captures the essence of the locale, as fortunate details such as the spectres of cop cars fill the monochromatic void. And as gimmicky as these pinhole cameras sound, one can't deny Glorieux's adept use of the technique as he pushes the idea of urban dystopia to an uncomfortable extreme.

No surprises, then, that his collaborators' contributions are comparatively underwhelming. First glances at Szilasi's slice-of-life photography, for instance, won't yield much more than recollection of familiar sights.

But impressionism isn't the point here. Comprised of two colour photographs flanked by three black and whites, his take on the corner is one held together by juxtaposition – the latter photos' unending blandness

contrasting the formers' serene beauty. It's a trick Szilasi makes able use of, revealing how our beloved Montreal re-appropriates depravity, turning it into another colourful, jagged piece of its sprawl.

Still, as far as takes on urban dilapidation go, perhaps Szilasi's comes across as a bit too optimistic. How fortunate, then, that all excesses in that direction find themselves brutally offset by Donovan's ribald point-of-view shots of a strip-club's interiors.

Both uncomfortably subversive and sexual, Donovan's voyeuristic depiction of a depraved peep-show paints women as both delicate beings and commoditized toys. Taking the point of view of a customer making his way through those aseptic stairways and halls, these photos afford us a look into an environment few of us dare step into sober, let alone get off in.

Yet bleak as the scenery may be, Donovan nevertheless manages to capture these women in an oddly empowered, dignified state. And considering the things they're sharing space with – blood-red walls, plasticized caricatures of themselves, and intricate sex toys – that's quite the achievement.

But all that said, "Le Coin" probably won't make me visit the Faubourg any more often than I ever have – that is, rarely. But if my general aversion to decrepitude lingered after the exposition, at least there to complement it was a newfound appreciation for Montreal's more notorious shitholes.

[Printer Friendly Version](#)

## Comments

### Post a Comment

Name: (required)

Email: (required)

Website:

Comment:

Preview