

# CULT MTL

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may 1, 2023

# The art of observation shines in this exhibition by Montreal legend Phyllis Lambert

by Connor Harrison

*Observations is on at Pierre-Ouellette Art Contemporain until May 20.*

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On stepping off the street and into the Pierre-François Ouellette art gallery, the first thing you see is four photographs of a woman's face in a sequence of blur. The photographs, facing the gallery's windowfront, are (or at least were on my recent visit) lit by the generous spring sun glancing in from the street, so as you look at these images in their domestic setting, there is reflected over them the colour and the movement of Rachel Est. The effect becomes one of a figure, blurred in progress, looking to leave the street and wander through Montreal.

The figure is Phyllis Lambert, whose photography exhibition *Observations* opened to the public on April 15 and continues through May 20. The photographs on display have all been curated from her recent book, *observation is a constant that underlies all approaches*, a personal record of the previous 60 years. Lambert, who was born in 1927 to the Bronfman family and made her name for the work she did with the Seagram Building in New York, has become a certifiable patron saint of Montreal. Since the 1970s, she has established Heritage Montreal, purchased Shaughnessy House before it could be demolished and transformed it into the Canadian Centre for Architecture.

Just as importantly here of course, and running parallel to the philanthropy and city planning, is Lambert's career as an artist. She acknowledges how inseparable these sides of her life are in her new book: "My own use of the camera dates back to 1954, as I started to think about what a new building in New York — the Seagram Building — could be. While in Rome during Easter that year, I began to look more closely at buildings through the lens of a camera I had barely used, observing their qualities, how they sat on the land."

What is on display here is a curation of a curation, a selection of 69 photographs picked from the 300 printed in the book, which were themselves chosen from a collection numbering 80,000. Lambert, due to the enviable length of her career and time taking photographs, has progressed with the technology, moving through "camera and film, analogue and digital," from the 35mm to the iPhone.

What is consistent across the decades is Lambert's deep fascination with colour and for symmetry; for space, and how light and shadow share in it. The photographs in the book, and now in the exhibit, are often paired for their aesthetic parallels, demonstrating the themes and images Lambert has been attracted to. Her photo from 2016 of steps at the Grand Canal in Venice — a swatch of stepped texture and shade — is presented beside "Chiswick Burial Ground," a close-up of a damp

bouquet of pale flowers. Each has been cut by Lambert's camera from the context and history of their locale, because what was important instead was the purely visual, the immediate and momentary effect it caused.

While some of the photographs on display depend on their parallel to become memorable, many are of course incredible standalone images. Passing these in the gallery, there is often an almost audible *click*; a feeling that, of all the photos that could have been taken of a scene, Lambert caught the perfect shot. The best example of this included in the exhibition is her photograph of the Egyptian Antiquities Organization, pausing for a drink in the Al Giza Desert in 1988. An essentially domestic scene, the figures and their car are arranged against the blue horizon to feel cinematic, narrated by Lambert's eye for scale and colour. Or a beautifully textured detail of a man's tattooed arm, and the line of dirt beneath his fingernails.

The career that has been distilled down to 69 photographs in *Observations* is not a private one. Given the nature of the project and its timespan, you would be forgiven for expecting a wealthy Montrealer's diary told through a camera lens. Of course, Lambert's friends, home and holidays do appear regularly, but a certain separation is always maintained. The political is not present here. She is, as the title suggests, observing, rather than participating, collecting surfaces, faces, impressions. This is because Lambert the photographer is not a tourist, but an artist, and as such, understands that her work has never been private. Seen in this way, it is only natural that she is leaving the gallery for the street. For as long as she remains in the gallery, with observations already made, think what she might miss passing in that constant and sunlit city. ■



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[English follows] La curiosité est une constante dans le travail de Phyllis Lambert, qui a consacré s des décennies, cette architecte, auteure, militante de la conservation et critique de l'architecture collection de photographies prises sur plusieurs décennies au cours de ses activités quotidiennes révéler ce qui pourrait autrement rester ignoré. [source: @larsmullerpublishers]

Curiosity is a constant in the work of Phyllis Lambert, who has devoted her career to studying and conservation activist and critic of architecture and urbanism has observed the built environment t her daily routines, her travels or at work, observation turns into a quest to understand and reveal v

- 1. Pierre-François Ouellette, Phyllis Lambert, Adad Hannah (commissaire | curator)
- 2. Autoportrait and fern, at home, Montréal, Québec, 2016
- 3. "Lorenzo Ottone, The Nile, Jardin des Tuileries, Paris, France, 1976" | "Edifice Brunet, Montréal, "Temple of Apollo, Didyma, Turkey, 1969" | "Marcus Aurelius, Campidoglio, Rome, Italy, 1972"
- 4. Vue de l'exposition | Exhibition view
- 5. "Spring, Indiana Dunes National Park, Porter, Indiana, 1970" | "Walter de Maria, The Lightning F