

**The Power Institute - Paris Atelier Exhibition 2013**  
**The University of Sydney Art Gallery**  
**Curated by Ann Stephen**  
**February 2 - April 26 2013**

Nowhere Land – The Atget Project 2005/2013

The basis of 'Nowhere Land – The Atget Project' came out of a reconsideration of the urban photography of Eugene Atget (1857-1927). Atget was an obsessive archivist of the urban geography of Paris as a city poised on the brink, and later at the heart, of modernity. Regardless of their sepia-tonality, those expecting from Atget's street photographs a nostalgic and conventionally picturesque tour of the sights of Paris, although they feature, would be sorely disappointed. In fact, it could be argued that the most interesting feature of Atget's larger project was its quotidian aspect: Atget often repeatedly photographed locations that no commercial photographer would have deemed worthy of representation.

Alongside the curiously 'un-photographic' quality of Atget's pictures however, came a sense of strangeness: the very banality of some of the street scenes Atget photographed, was offset by an undeniable feel for the uncanny. Part of this sense of strangeness emerged from the fact that Atget often preferred to take street pictures as devoid of humans as possible. Thus, the ever expanding, modernising metropolis was rendered aversely like a ghost town where only the traces of human activity were left. At the same time, streets began to function like stage sets, betraying Atget's training in the theatre, where even the voracity of what was real was questioned. Paris started to look almost like a backdrop for action either about to occur or most commonly, that had already occurred. Naturally, these latter characteristics are what made Atget's urban scenographies so attractive to the Surrealists who had already staged among themselves nocturnal walking parties through some of the least spectacular and most seedy Paris *arrondissements*.

While at the Cité I undertook the process of revisiting some of the specific sites Atget had photographed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries. Using a moderately comprehensive book of his photographs as a (anti-) tourist map, I aimed to confront exactly how much had changed in locations Atget had captured. The point of this was not to comment stupidly on the inevitable vicissitudes of 'progress' but to attempt to indicate the altered mood of these sites. Likewise, I was particularly curious to note how some of the more prosaic locations would re-photograph: how 'uninteresting' and therefore camouflaged from their original sources in Atget's work, would the results be? In these instances, the photographs fulfilled part of a conceptual brief questioning how images eventually preserved by history as indicative of a significant time and place, become when remade – even though the originals have been imitated as accurately as possible with contemporary technology – seemingly lost and insignificant. In this way, it is only the haunting spectre of Atget's compositions when recognised by the viewer that grants the photographs an additional significance beyond their functioning as fairly inconspicuous representations of the urban climate of Paris today.

A complimentary aspect of the work I undertook at the Cite involved photographing the Power Studio at various stages of my inhabitation of it. These similarly unspectacular images rendered strange, I collectively titled 'Studio Portraits'.

Alex Gawronski 2013