A Canadian witness to New Orleans' demise

Polidori's post-Katrina photos take over the Met

September 23, 2006

PETER GODDARD

NEW YORK—With tonnes of art representing the world's great cities already in its halls and vaults, the Metropolitan Museum of Art is now dealing with work from an ex-Montrealer.

Make that two ex-Montrealers. One is Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville, the eighth son of a French Canadian pioneer who founded New Orleans in 1718. The other is Robert Polidori, the *New Yorker* staff photographer born in Montreal in 1951, who rushed to the city a year ago this month after Hurricane Katrina forced half a million people to flee their homes. Le Moyne made plans for a great city. Polidori gives witness to its demise.

A third Canadian makes a rather indirect appearance in the Met's "New Orleans after the Flood: Photographs by Robert Polidori": Neil Young.

Interior views of ravished rooms illuminate much of the Met show, which is the nucleus of a larger collection found in the large-format photography book, *Robert Polidori: After the Flood* (Steidl Verlag, around $120). One image in particular, *1923 Lamanche Street New Orleans, Louisiana, March 2006,* shows a tattered American flag propped up against a great pile of debris in a mound in a wrecked living room. Polidori calls the image his "Neil Young cover."

Polidori doesn't do album cover work although a Berlin band — he can't remember its name — plans to use one of his images. So it's extremely unlikely that this meticulously photographed melee on Lamanche Street, with its hint of stars-and-stripes Yankee pride, will end up wrapped around a collection of Young tunes. Yet Polidori is right about this stagy image. It is Neil Young-like, gloriously pumped up, cranky and jaggedly engaging with just enough Surrealism in the mix — the rifle just laying there, the hanging lights — to pump up the volume.

"What we're dealing with here," says Polidori who sounds like an old-time baseball manager when he speaks, "is the image of extreme unction or last rights for the stuff itself, for the emblems of things, for mementos left by people, for the chosen moments of individual lives. It's about the people who say, `I lost all my stuff. And I ain't buyin' new stuff.'"

"New Orleans after the Flood" is emotional, not analytical, proactive, not reflective. Responding to New Orleans' show-business sensibility, Polidori frames each chosen image of the Katrina disaster as if all the wrecked stuff is

having one last turn in the spotlight.

Polidori doesn't "show" anything, though. The photographer illuminates what is already there. For instance, he noticed how the storm posed the battered white car in *2732 Orleans Avenue, New Orleans, Louisiana, Sept. 2005* exactly in front of the battered wood frame "Creole" home, so named for its double identity due to the two different families living next to one another.

"I picked the houses (to photograph) that were somehow more telling than the others, houses that are just a little bit more damaged than the others although you don't see the damage. I framed the (large-scale images) in an emotionally evocative way. Remember, I lived in New Orleans for two years. I moved there after (the Beatles') *Rubber Soul* came out (in 1965). I left just before *Sgt. Peppers* came out (in 1967). It was a formative time for me."

For its part, the Met — hardly the centre of dissidence — is remarkably direct about "what went wrong in New Orleans," according to an introductory essay for "After the Flood," written by museum curator Jeff Rosenheim, who notes the "cronyism, gross fraud and corruption" that distinguishes both the federal and local responses to the Katrina disaster.

"The Met is dedicated to following artists wherever they may take us," Rosenheim tells me as we tour the Polidori show. "We don't define a subject for an artist, or a series for an artist. We respond."

Polidori's earlier suite of Chernobyl photographs, taken over the three-day period in 2001 he spent on the site of the April 26, 1986 Ukraine nuclear disaster, is overtly politicized. "In Chernobyl, the places I sought out were public spaces," he says, "the kindergarten, the high school and the hospital, places where the superego was involved, places where the government was involved.

"But not in New Orleans. I didn't go to hospitals. I didn't concentrate on those kinds of places because New Orleans was not a company town, like Pripyat (the Chernobyl site). New Orleans was not just about Dixieland music. It's so much more.

"Is this being political? I hate Bush. But is this his fault? I don't think so. Most of the people are not dead in New Orleans. But for 60 per cent of the residents of the city, the course of their chosen life has been altered and they've been de-rooted, not just from their habit, but also from the rest of their lives."