

CANADIANART

Bertrand Carrière: Crossing the Strand

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by Bryne McLaughlin



Bertrand Carrière *Croix, Rivière-*

au-Renard (from the series *Après Strand*) 2010 Courtesy Stephen Bulger Gallery

The dramatic ocean vistas and timeless rural landscapes of Canada's eastern provinces have long been a standard of the summer tourist season. Perhaps lesser known is the fact that in recent years the region has also offered creative refuge to some of the world's most highly regarded contemporary artists—[Michael Snow](#), [Robert Frank](#), [Richard Serra](#) and [Philip Glass](#), to name just a few. Montreal artist [Bertrand Carrière](#) delves further back into this local artistic legacy in *Après Strand*, a new suite of photographs inspired by iconic American photographer [Paul Strand](#)'s visits to Gaspé region in the early 20th century. With the photos on exhibit in the Rimouski region, managing editor Bryne McLaughlin caught up with Carrière by telephone to discuss Strand, the new work and the enduring appeal of the Gaspé.



Bertrand Carrière *Hilaire Cotton, Rivière-au-Renard* (from the series *Après Strand*) 2010 Courtesy Stephen Bulger Gallery

Byrne McLaughlin: When I read the press material for *Après Strand*, it was a surprise to find a historical connection between the Gaspé and Paul Strand. How did you discover this project at first?

Bertrand Carrière: Actually, my brother-in-law bought a house in Gaspé. Not very far from where he lives there is a turn in the road and the first time I saw it I thought, I've seen this road before. That's when it dawned on me—hey, that's from a Strand photograph. So I asked around and did some research with the [Aperture Foundation](#) in New York. Most of the places Strand photographed weren't very well identified; they were just, like, "Gaspé, 1936," not even noting Quebec or Canada. It was as if he went to another world. There are a few sites in the town of Percé that are well identified, and also in Rivière-au-Renard. But Percé is sort of like the Disneyland of Gaspésie. It's been so transformed by tourism that very little is left of the original character when Strand visited. Outside of that, though, most of what he saw is pretty well there. It's pretty wild; you're by the sea with high cliffs and open spaces. So I tried to find what was remaining and fading away of what Strand probably saw.

The work I've done recently is [mainly landscape photography based on specific sites in France](#) that were involved in the First or Second World Wars. When the idea came to do the Strand project, it seemed clear that I wanted to do portraits. He did a few, but there is this one remarkable photo that made me want to go back to portraiture, to leave the landscape aside for the moment and do something closer to the people. When we hung the show, it was important that there was an interweaving of the portraits and the landscapes. And that's the way Strand actually worked when he was sequencing projects; he would photograph objects, faces, architecture, landscapes and portraits and would intertwine these to make it something more organic.

BM: So it's meant to be a complete study of a place, then?

BC: Yes, it's what Strand called the "essential character" of a place. So my project is trying to broaden the view of what the Gaspé is about. It just so happens that I did meet the grandson of a man he photographed. He knew about

[the photograph](#), but he didn't know about Strand. So we spent some time together and I photographed him. This is one of three shots in the show that are smaller than the rest and are directly related to spots or places that Strand photographed; two of them are landscapes and one of them is a portrait of this man, Hilaire Cotton, a fisherman who lives in Rivière-au-Renard.



Bertrand Carrière *Coin-du-banc* (from the series *Après Strand*) 2010 Courtesy Stephen Bulger Gallery

BM: Did Strand ever show these Gaspé photos in a series?

BC: Yes, there are a number of them at the [National Gallery](#) in Ottawa and we have reproduced a few in the catalogue that will be out in a couple of weeks. There has never been a book specifically on that part of his work, but they are always included in his older monographs with pictures of Nova Scotia and the north of Maine. In some books, there is a specific chapter, and every time I was researching I would find a new photograph that I hadn't seen before. So I just keep looking and photographing.

BM: What do you think drew Strand to the Gaspé?

BC: That's an interesting question and I asked around about it a lot. I think he was looking for something untouched by modern life. There were a few artists travelling to the Gaspé in those years. He did two trips, in 1929 and in 1936, and in between [Georgia O'Keeffe](#) came and she drew crosses and a Canadian barn series. [André Breton](#) also came to the Gaspé in 1944. The fact that it was very remote and untouched... It was something wild that was drawing them to it. The purity of the light is also fascinating.

BM: So you probably found plenty of dramatic contrasts?

BC: Yes. A funny story to this: Strand came in 1929 and did these photographs of landscapes and then in the spring of 1936 he was in Moscow trying to meet up with [Eisenstein](#). He showed the Gaspé photographs to a theatre director there, who, in keeping with a true Marxist point of view, said, "Those are nice landscapes, but where are the working men?" So Strand went back that summer and did the portraits and photographed the men fishing on the beaches. These two separate trips were technically different too. He did the first one with a hand-held camera, the second with a camera on a tripod. So things had evolved and I think in his mind he had found what he was looking for.



Bertrand Carrière *David Bond, Point-Saint-Pierre* (from the series *Après Strand*) 2010 Courtesy Stephen Bulger Gallery

BM: Considering that you are responding to an iconic body of photographs and working in a region that is in a sense resistant to the speed of modern life, is there a danger of too much nostalgia creeping into the photos? How did you approach that in the way you looked at the Gaspé?

BC: The first danger is the beauty of the place, trying to avoid too many beautiful landscapes. The second problem I had was the light; I'm used to working either in the spring or in the fall and now I was working in the summer when

the light is a little harder. As far as nostalgia goes, there was a line that I didn't want to cross when I was searching for the specific or similar sites. Some of them I wanted to keep a little more modern. But there is no easy answer to this. I did a lot of work in editing the photos with the exhibition's curator, Franck Michel, in trying to hold back some of these things. There was also a leitmotif of crosses that I was photographing. There's something symbolic about the cross, because in 1534 Jacques Cartier planted a cross on the top of Gaspé. It's a symbol of the French coming to the Gaspé, and that history was definitely in the back of my mind while I was doing this.

BM: I was thinking about the timeless quality of the landscape and light you're mentioning and then there's a photo in the series showing four young people and one of them is listening to an iPod...

BC: That's a late picture in the series. I saw that photograph and left it aside, but brought it back in later in the editing. I thought it was a cool thing to show the young people, the next generation, sitting in front of the convenience store. Still, your eyes are drawn to the vast sea behind them. There's a bit of a car there and the St. Lawrence at that height is really like the sea—you can't see across.

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Bertrand Carrière *Devant le dépanneur, Gros Morne* (from the series *Après Strand*) 2010 Courtesy Stephen Bulger Gallery

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