

ARTIST  
PROFILE  
Summer 2013

# INSIDE THE ORDINARY

*Gabor Szilasi's lens turns everyday life into art*

BY JULIE BARLOW



## Frites Dorées



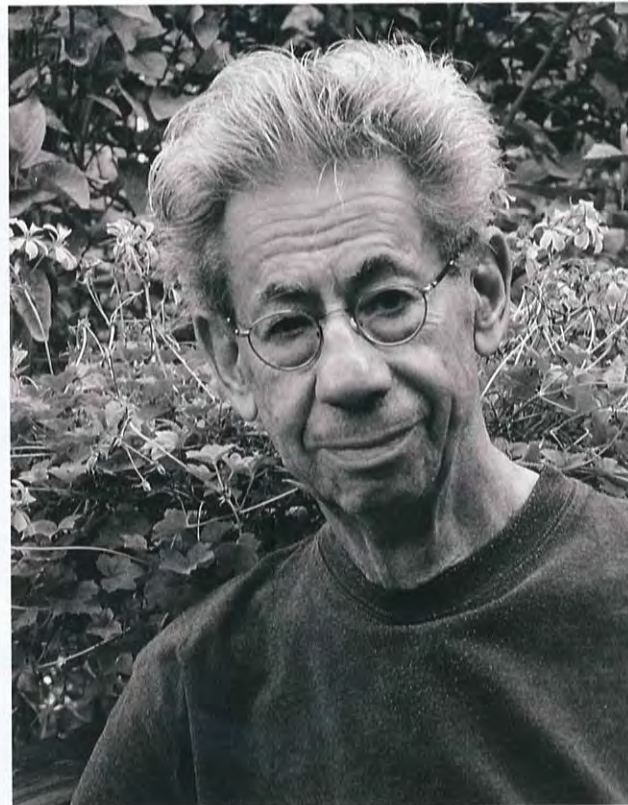
4 PHOTOS 25¢  
**SILVER**  
AMUSEMENTS  
MACHINES DE LUXE  
1212 AUTOMATIQUES

**IF THERE'S ONE THING THAT COMES NATURALLY** to Gabor Szilasi – besides photography – it's talking to strangers. Unassuming, curious and generous in conversation, the renowned portrait photographer has an uncanny ability to convince people to trust him.

That knack is certainly one of the secrets of Szilasi's success. A Hungarian refugee who landed in Quebec City in 1958, Szilasi established his reputation as a photographer of “ordinary

people” by the 1970s. He went on to photograph rural life in the regions of Quebec and urban life in Montreal, and he also documented his travels, particularly in Hungary and Italy.

Winner of the Prix Paul-Émile Borduas in 2009 and a Governor General's Award in 2010, Szilasi has had his photographs appear in dozens of solo and group exhibits in Canada and the U.S., and throughout Europe from Rome to Budapest and from Bordeaux to Braga. ☞



*“When you have mutual trust with your subject, it shows.”*

*(Opposite) Frites Dorées, photographed in 1984, was part of a series about electric signs called Lux. Gabor Szilasi self-portrait is from 2011.*

Critics have called Szilasi's style sympathetic yet unsentimental. His subjects are focused on the camera, but don't exactly look like they are posing.

"I ask people to look in the camera, to make eye contact with me," said Szilasi. "When you have mutual trust with your subject, it shows."

Born in Hungary in 1928, Szilasi was initially steeped in the art of realism. While it was the only genre that Communist Hungary authorized, it did offer a rich palette. "I watched Italian Neorealist and French New Wave films—Visconti, Rossellini, Truffaut and Godard. I read the novels of Chekhov, Camus and Dostoyevsky. I have always been interested in realism."

Szilasi began shooting pictures in Hungary—the scene of his iconic 1954 photo Couple on Motorcycle in Lake Balaton—before he fled the Hungarian Revolution in 1956. After landing in Quebec City in 1958 and recovering from tuberculosis, he moved to Montreal where he honed his photography techniques, working as a darkroom technician for the Office du film du Québec.

When the Office sent him out to take documentary photographs of rural Quebec, Szilasi discovered his passion for everyday life. "I am fascinated by change; it's so important for future generations," he said. But the artistic aspect of photography is just as important, he stressed. "Photos have to be well composed and photographed in an interesting way or people won't look at them."

Szilasi insists on photographing his subjects in their natural surroundings. "Photos need to transmit more than personality. I want them to contain as much information as possible about my subjects: their culture, their environment, their education." *ESP*

*"I am fascinated by change;  
it's so important for future generations."*




*Table de cuisine du moulin à eau chez Mme. Étienne Bouchard, Saint-Louis-de-l'Isle-aux-Coudres. This photograph and the ones on the next two pages were part of a series Szilasi photographed in the Charlevoix in 1970.*



*Salle à manger, Hôtel des Laurentides,  
Saint-Joseph-de-la-Rive.*

One of his favourite shoots involved a group of psychiatric patients, members of an art therapy group called Les Impatients, taken in 2003. "I like to photograph people with dignity, with integrity and with something to say. You can discover something interesting anywhere."

The key to the art of documentary photography, according to Szilasi, is language. "If you can't speak the local language where you are shooting, the photography becomes superficial. You just photograph the obvious." Szilasi speaks English, French and Hungarian, as well as Italian, which he learned when spending a sabbatical year in Italy.

Remarkably active and agile at 85, Szilasi still develops black-and-white prints in his darkroom in the Westmount house where he and his wife Doreen have lived for 45 years. He stores thousands of prints and negatives of the people and places he has photographed throughout his 60-year career, whether in Chibougamau or in Rouyn-Noranda; over the entire length of Ste. Catherine Street; in Montreal neighbourhoods such as Westmount, St. Michel and Côte des Neiges; or in his native Hungary. 



*Sam the Record Man, from a St. Catherine Street series, photographed in 1979.*