

The New York Photographs of Beat Streuli

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Into a world in disarray, with its propensity to wide-scale war increasing daily, come Beat Streuli's photographs of people on the streets of New York City, taken over the last few years, people wandering aimlessly or pressing ahead, all seemingly oblivious to the disaster that surrounds them. Of course, as individuals they are not at all oblivious. They are the intelligent, normal people who make up the populace of any urban center, exhibiting the variety of cultural background and dress that defines their particular moment in time. Nor are the pictures entirely oblivious. We have been trained to take artists at their image, and Streuli's images make use of an impassioned play of light and darkness that seems capable of taking in the diversity of life's moments.

The urban critic Lewis Mumford believed that the American promenade evolved from the quasi-pastoral embrace of the park to confront the razzle-dazzle glamour of the avenue. This particularly American version, although it has commonality with the Mediterranean, differs in the commercial nature of its effects. Mumford traced the impact of New York's archetypal Broad Way on the myriad mini-replicas in cities and towns across the country: "Up and down these secondhand Broadways, from one in the afternoon until past ten at night, drifts a more or less aimless mass of human beings, bent upon extracting such joy as is possible from the sights in the windows, the contacts with other human beings, the occasional or systematic flirtations, and the risks and adventures of purchase."¹ This pattern exists in New York until today, with perhaps the change that people today incorporate leisure into their daily activities, so that the two become, minute to minute, almost indistinguishable.

Some photographers' work, evolving out of a daily practice—whether through observation or contrivance—takes its place at the head of the ageless line of graphic depiction, stretching beyond history into murky distances. Others, on the contrary, find their shots based only on recent, and what is worse, commercial productions.

It is informative to note the preponderance throughout history of imagery depicting the human form. This is not surprising, given the human propensity to self-obsession, or at least self-concern. Some artists in the 20th century based their avowed rejection of this obsession (a rejection they expressed through a commitment to nonrepresentational imagery) on a program for social change, pointing out that portraiture had long been used as a propaganda tool for the powerful. Not only portraiture, it could be argued, but all art made for patrons was and is an expression of dominant belief systems.

Representational painting often took on topics of social change, while nonrepresentational art was often cultivated by an intellectual elite. Photography could be fatally weighed down by a desire to contribute to reform. In rare cases, such as that of Lewis Hine, aesthetic brilliance and social program went hand in hand. The end

results then are works of art that penetrate existence, while retaining mystery. The defining factor would seem to be the photographer's humanity, his ability to see his fellow human being without prejudice, lucidly observing what is on the surface, molding that, making slight use of previous patterns of seeing.

This is what Beat Streuli achieves in his remarkable series of New York photographs. His mastery of photographic art allows him to balance formal and perceptual concerns. He underlines his dedication to the formal when planes in shallow space, literally sides of motor vehicles, are allowed to predominate. On surfaces of idealized patterns born of concern for efficiency, human prevarication and the traces of time's vagaries are permitted to intrude.

Formal concerns, adroitly addressed in all his photographs, provide only the merest backdrop for Streuli's work. In front, audaciously stressed in the foreground, are Streuli's depictions of his fellow human beings. One says "fellow" as, wherever he chooses to shoot (he has photographed people in Sydney, Birmingham, and Bangkok, to name a few), Streuli engages in empathetic response to his subjects. He achieves this, paradoxically, as a voyeur, using a telephoto lens, sometimes ensconced inside a cafe, while photographing people passing outside. By not entering into a personal relationship with his subjects, he captures them in their natural, unguarded state. From this "omniscient" position, he makes significant choices. He chooses not to highlight people's awkward failures of composure but rather their graceful normality. He comes close to seeing the animal in people, that part of them that is incapable of wrongdoing.

Streuli grants his subjects their native grace partially by the way he frames them. Streuli's gestures show an awareness of Renaissance techniques for depicting movement, and his compositions are classical. Look at the first image of this book. The way this man is gracefully turning his body, left hand at his hip, the slight inclination of the head, the focus in his expression, all combine to render an image of a man confronting reality with a calm readiness, while in movement through the city. If we choose to press the animal analogy, with its concomitant vision of the city as a forest or jungle, then again we see these figures as necessarily prepared for the unpredictable. Because Streuli sees without being seen, it is almost as if we are given access to the interior mental workings of his walkers. They inhabit the moment in which awareness and absorption are seamlessly blended.

Streuli's ability to keep background and foreground elements in sync is uncanny, and he is equally at home with single or multiple subjects. He perceives interactions between people with the same delicacy he lavishes on solo subjects. In the fourth image of the first series, the action of taking a chip from a bag proffered by a friend is rendered with a grace and subtlety normally reserved for moments of the great-