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Complicating the Picture of Urban Life

By Maurice Berger Feb. 23, 2015

The 1980 image of Paul Newman, taken in the South Bronx during the filming of “Fort Apache, the Bronx,” could be a production still or a publicity photo. But the photograph was taken on location for more consequential reasons: Its photographer, Joe Conzo Jr., the teenage son of activists, was there to document a film that many in the community believed would hurt and embarrass it.

Perhaps Mr. Newman sensed that. The famously liberal actor – an outsider slumming on Mr. Conzo’s turf – glared at the camera while a production assistant tried futilely to wave off the photographer.

This image appears in a provocative new exhibition at the Bronx Museum of Art, “Three Photographers From the Bronx: Jules Aarons, Morton Broffman and Joe Conzo,” which opens Feb. 26. The disparate subjects of its three Bronx-born, socially conscious photographers – the civil rights movement, life outside Manhattan and community advocacy – would at first seem to have little in common.

According to the exhibition’s curator, Antonio Sergio Bessa, what ties their work together is a shared interest in “photography as a form of activism that informs our awareness of community.” But these photographs do more than make us aware of the role and power of community. They also illuminate the transitions, displacements and complexity of urban life as well as the conventions or biases that color our understanding of it.

Mr. Broffman’s images may at first appear irrelevant to city life. Taken during the height of the civil rights movement, they document some of its most historic events, including the Selma to Montgomery march in 1965, the last Sunday sermon of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and

the Poor People's Campaign in Washington.

Mr. Broffman engaged the movement during a time when most white people regarded it with anxiety, indifference or outright hostility. Like many activist photographers, he embraced a strain of progressive urban politics that argued for the interrelated interests and destinies of Americans North and South, black and white.

“While his perspective is undeniably that of a documentarian looking into the epic struggle of African Americans for social justice,” Mr. Bessa wrote about Mr. Broffman, “his images exude the sense of kinship and camaraderie that was a hallmark of the civil rights movement.” This kinship drove activists of all races to temporarily leave the relative safety and comfort of Northern cities to work in the noxious environment of the Jim Crow South.

The images of Mr. Aarons, who was both an astrophysicist and a photographer, suggest another kind of displacement. Taken between the 1940s and 1970s, the photographs relocated street photography from the hustle and bustle of the central city to quieter outer precincts, including Rockaway Beach, the Bronx and the ethnic enclaves of Boston's West and North Ends. Rather than showing romanticized meditations on life in the big metropolis, Mr. Aarons depicted prosaic but consequential moments, in ways befitting a scientist in his precise, though humanistic, appraisal of urban life.

Significantly, Mr. Aarons's photographs of the Bronx testify to the migration of upwardly mobile Jewish families from the tenements of the Lower East Side and East Harlem to the desirable Art Deco buildings along the Grand Concourse. In so doing, they remind us of the shifting fortunes and transformations of neighborhoods as well as the ways they enter into our collective imagination, as wells of possibilities or as symbols of urban decay.

Over the past 40 years, our collective view of the Bronx has all too often embraced the media-driven myth of its inexorable decline. For many, the blight, addiction and poverty that plagued parts of the South Bronx in the 1970s have come to symbolize the whole borough. But as Mr. Conzo's photographs suggest, the reality of the Bronx has been far more complicated. They demonstrate the power of courage, cultural expression and political advocacy to sustain even the most endangered neighborhoods.

Mr. Conzo, who is best known for his pioneering documentation of hip-hop's early years, is represented in the exhibition by his photographs of the Committee Against Fort Apache, a grass-roots coalition that challenged the distortions and ethnic stereotypes of the 1981 movie. In it, Mr. Newman starred as a conflicted police officer assigned to South Bronx's 41st Precinct

– Fort Apache – depicted in the film as teeming with murderers, prostitutes and drug addicts.

The committee was spearheaded by the activist Richie Perez and Mr. Conzo's grandmother, Dr. Evelina López Antonetty, a legendarily outspoken advocate for Puerto Rican families. The young photographer, still in high school, tagged along to demonstrations as well as shooting locations, becoming the principal chronicler of committee activities.

Mr. Conzo's prodigious images testify to a focused and media-savvy movement, from committee representatives meeting with studio executives to a news conference by the activist and writer Gerson Borrero at Lincoln Hospital. By concentrating on sophisticated political activism — in the service of ethnic and community pride — Mr. Conzo's photographs tell a different story about the Bronx, one as meticulous as Mr. Aarons's and as socially conscious as Mr. Broffman's. In so doing, they brighten our collective imagination of a place often left for dead by the media.

“Community is predicated on a narrative, and consequently susceptible to control,” Mr. Bessa wrote in the catalog. “Indeed, as one starts to ponder the shape and boundaries of community, the delicate balance between inclusion and exclusion, between belonging and otherness, becomes apparent and complicate the picture.”

In the end, three talented Bronx-born photographers managed to complicate the picture, creating a more textured and less static view of urban life, the ever-changing metropolis rich with activism, self-possession and hope.

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