

INHERENT REALITY

BY CHARLES STAINBACK

THE “REALITY” AFFORDED BY THE CAMERA, AND THE MISCONCEPTION THAT THE FUNDAMENTAL ROLE OF THE PHOTOGRAPHER IS TO TO DOCUMENT THE WORLD AND BRING BACK A TWO DIMENSIONAL VERSION OF REALITY, HAS SHIFTED DRAMATICALLY IN RECENT TIMES . IN MANY WAYS THIS SHIFT IN THE UNDERSTANDING AND EVEN THE ”LOOK” OF MANY DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHERS APPEARS TO HAVE TAKEN PLACE PARALLEL TO THE GROWING ACCEPTANCE OF PHOTOGRAPHY WITHIN THE ART WORLD OVER THE PAST SEVERAL DECADES.

IN A WORLD OF TABLOIDS, COMPUTER MANIPULATION AND HARD-HITTING PHOTOJOURNALISM, THE FUNDAMENTAL ROLE OF THE DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHER –TO CAPTURE REALITY AND RECORD THE TRUTH-HAS TAKEN ON A NEW MEANING.

IN HER MOST RECENT WORK, PHOTOGRAPHER BASTIENNE SCHMIDT SHOWS US THAT THE DOCUMENTARY TRADITION HAS ASSUMED A SOMEWHAT ALTERED FORM IN LATIN AMERICA.

FACING A POLITICAL CULTURE OF INCREASING BRUTALITY, A SOCIETY WHERE POVERTY AND DEPRIVATION ARE THE NORM,SCHMIDT PRESENTS THE VIEWER WITH FRAGMENTS OF BOGOTA. THEY ARE FRAGMENTS THAT ARE AS MACABRE AS ANY NIGHTMARE, YET HONEST AND COMPASSIONATE IN THE STORY THEY TELL.

FOR MANY OF US, COLOMBIA IS SIMPLY A COUNTRY IN SOUTH AMERICA WHERE COFFEE IS THE MAIN EXPORT,AND A PLACE WHER VIOLENCE,DRUGS AND CORRUPTION EXISTIN ABUNDANCE. IT IS BORDERED BY PANAMA, BRAZIL AND AND VENEZULA,AND BOGOTA IS IT’S CAPITAL. IN COLOMBIA,THE

ANDES ,THE AMAZON ,AND THE EQUATOR ARE ALL IN CLOSE PROXIMITY. THE POPULATION AT LAST COUNT WAS CLOSE TO 34 MILLION. THE BOGOTA PICTURED BY BASTIENNE SCHMIDT HOWEVER IS ORGANIZED AROUND IMAGES OF CHILDREN, STREET LIFE AND DEATH. IT WAS NEVER HER INTENTION TO MAKE A PORTRAIT OF THE CITY; THE CITY IS SIMPLY PART OF HER ONGOING PROJECT.

THE LARGER PROJECT OF WHICH THE BOGOTA PICTURES ARE A PART EXPLORES DEATH RITUALS IN LATIN AMERICA-COLOMBIA, MEXICO ,CUBA ,PERU AND GUATEMALA. PART VOYEUR, PART PHOTOJOURNALIST, SCHMIDT DEFIES CATEGORIZATION. HER WORK IS A HYBRID OF INTUITION AND AESTHETIC SENSIBILITY. SHE HAS SUCCESSFULLY COMBINED HER FORMAL ART TRAINING WITH SOMETHING OF THE COLDER MORE FORMULAIC LOOK OF THE TABLOID PHOTOGRAPHER AND DEVELOPED A WAY OF SEEING THAT ARTICULATES THE RITUAL AND SADNESS OF DEATH. SHE TRAVELS LATIN AMERICA LOOKING THE GRIM REALITIES OF DAILY LIFE IN THE FACE. IN DESCRIBING HERSELF, SHE SAYS, SIMPLY , THAT SHE IS AN “OBSERVER OF SOCIETY”, AND A “MODERN ANTHROPOLOGIST WHO USES THE CAMERA AS A TOOL.” BUT THE WORLD THAT SHE ENCOUNTERS- INDEED, SEEKS OUT, AS PART OF HER ONGOING PROJECT – IN BOGOTA IS MUCH DIFFERENT THAN THE COUNTRY DEPICTED ON THE VACATION PICTURE POSTCARD.

FOR ONCE AGAIN IN THE LAMENTABLE HISTORY OF SOUTH AMERICA, WE HAVE A NEW ANTHROPOLOGY OF LIFE AS WELL AS DEATH. SCHMIDT IS A STUDENT OF THESE RITUALS OF DEATH, AND IN HER WORK SHE AMASSES THE DATA, COMPILES THE EVIDENCE, AND EXAMINES THE CUSTOMS AND BELIEFS OF THE DISENFRANCHISED AND AND UNDERPRIVILEGED. IN TANDEM WITH TEXT FROM HER JOURNALS, SHE INTRODUCES US NOT ONLY TO STREET SCENES OF GLIMPSES OF EVERYDAY LIFE-BULLFIGHTS, COCKFIGHTS, CHILDREN, AMBIGUOUS OBSERVATIONS-BUT ALSO OF THE GRIM BUT STRANGELY TOUCHING REALITIES OF THE MORGUE, THE CEMETERY, AND THE GRAVE.

LOOK CLOSELY AT BASTIENNE SCHMIDT'S PHOTOGRAPHS. WHILE THE INFLUENCES OF ART TRAINING ARE EVIDENT IN HER EMPHASIS ON FRAMING, JUXTAPOSITION, AND SUBJECT MATTER, LESSONS OF THE DOCUMENTARY TRADITION ARE CLEARLY EVIDENT. THE RAWNESS AND BRUTAL HONESTY OF HER IMAGES RECALL WEEGEE'S CHILLING YET SUPERB PHOTOGRAPHS OF DAILY LIFE, THE MAN IN THE STREET, VIOLENT CRIMES AND DISASTERS AND THEIR SURVIVORS IN THE 1930S AND 40S. UNCENSORED AND HARSH, SCHMIDT'S PHOTOGRAPHS ARE NOT EASY. YET WHAT ELSE SHOULD WE EXPECT. SHE HAS CHOSEN TO BRING US ONE OF LIFE'S HARSHEST REALITIES-DEATH.

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