

The enduring quality of **Harvey Stein's** pictures of Coney Island, taken over four decades, have created an intimate portrait of the region. Susan Burnstine reports

All pictures © Harvey Stein



Perhaps no one has captured Coney Island more intimately than acclaimed photographer Harvey Stein who recently released his fifth book, *Coney Island 40 Years*, published by Schiffer Publishing (schifferbooks.com). The book is an enchanting love letter of sorts, which explores the people, atmosphere, events and landscape that form the distinctive culture and personality that defines Coney Island.

Stein is a professional photographer, teacher, lecturer, author and curator based in New York City. He is largely self-taught and has been photographing Coney Island since 1970 at the suggestion of his then teacher, Ben Fernandez. In retrospect, Stein never imagined the suggestion would result in 400 visits over the course of 40 years. Nowadays, he admiringly characterises Coney Island as: 'A fantasy land of the past with a seedy present and an irrepressible optimism about its future. It is a democratic entertainment where people of all walks of life and places are brought together in peace and harmony, despite the newly growing crowds. There isn't anywhere else like it and that is much of its attraction.'

Stein refers to Coney Island as one of his 'offices' since it's where he does much of his work. He is especially inspired 'by the craziness and variety of people who populate this very small landscape'. And he is interested in 'the intersections and collisions and commonalities of these various spaces and how the people behave, adjust, connect and avoid each other'.

He explains that when you first visit Coney Island it may not seem like much since it's a mere shell of what it was between 1900-1950. 'But it grows on you, gets into your blood, and you want to return again and again. The variety of people, and their activities are very visual and usually quite fascinating, at least for me,' he says. Stein is an exceptional

documentary and street photographer and his portraits truly shine. In discussing his technique he explains, 'With portraits on the street, I like to approach my subjects, talk to them, sometimes isolate them, and photograph with a wideangle lens. I want to be close, involved, emotional and yet provide a context that the environment offers. I am not really interested in candid shooting, I want my subject to be aware of me, to acknowledge me as I acknowledge them so that we have a dialogue, a give and take, an ebb and flow.'

Another notable attribute within this 40-year exploration is that Stein maintains a timelessness, making it difficult to determine the date of each image. He clarifies, 'Certainly there are some changes in fashions, and accessories such as a radio or the presence of a cellphone that can indicate a certain time, but largely, the place hasn't changed all that much over the years.'

Frequently, there are discussions in the news as to the future of Coney Island yet Stein feels the current status is vital and busier than it's been in 45 years. This he attributes to the new amusement park and amenities added in recent years. At face value, the future may seem upbeat and the city is committed to revitalisation, but Stein is concerned there's a risk Coney Island will 'lose its funkiness, its edge, its rich and long history and become gentrified with inappropriate amusements, hotels



and condominiums.' He continues, 'Old time amusements and small family boardwalk businesses are being threatened, one has been closed down and at least seven others are threatened with lease closures after the 2011 season. So the future looks good, but at what cost?'

Since the 1970s Stein has been photographing Coney Island with two Leica M4s; one with a 21mm lens and the other a 35mm lens. And since 2006, he has also been shooting with a Canon 5D about 40% of the time.

He continues to photograph Coney Island and has completed four-fifths of the images for the next book he hopes to publish, *Coney Island 50 Years*. Concurrently, he is working on several other book projects, including: *Mexico: Between Life and Death*, another about the citizens of Harlem photographed over the past 20 years – and a third book that focuses on New York City street life and portraits. He has a number of book signings and exhibitions in North America for *Coney Island 40 Years* right up to February 2012 and he is teaching three upcoming workshops this winter in Ecuador, Argentina and Peru. Details can be found on his website.

■ susanburnstine.com

■ harvesteinphoto.com
■ coneyisland40years.com



EXHIBITIONS
USA

NEW YORK CITY

Hous Projects
Scott B. Davis
October 27 to December 27
■ housprojects.com

International Center of Photography
Harper's Bazaar:
A Decade of Style
Featuring Nan Goldin, Ralph Gibson, Chuck Close, Hiro and Melvin Sokolsky
Until January 2012
■ icp.org

LOS ANGELES

The Getty Museum
Lyonel Feininger:
Photographs 1928-1939
October 25 to March 11, 2012
■ getty.edu

PORTLAND

Blue Sky Gallery
Takeshi Shikama: Silent
Respiration of Forests
November 2011
■ blueskygallery.org

SAN DIEGO

Museum of Photographic Arts
Infinite Balance: Artists
and the Environment
Featuring Sammy Baloji, Edward Burtynsky, Thomas Joshua Cooper, Susan Derges, Naoya Hatkeyama, Chris Jordan and Michael Wolf
Until February 5, 2012
■ mopa.org

DAYTONA

Southeast Museum of Photography
Kate Brooks: In the
Light Of Darkness:
A Photographer's Journey
after 9-11
Until December 16, 2011
■ smponline.org B+W