STEVEN KASHER GALLERY

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Documenting Selma, From the Inside

By Maurice Berger Mar. 2, 2015

A timely new show at the Steven Kasher Gallery in New York, “Selma March 1965,” reminds us that not all civil rights photographs were created equal. Commemorating the 50th anniversary this month of the historic Selma-to-Montgomery marches, the exhibition features the work of three documentarians of the protests: James Barker, Spider Martin and Charles Moore.

While the photographs of Mr. Martin and Mr. Moore are well known, those of Mr. Barker are far less so. The most famous images of Mr. Martin and Mr. Moore — usually depicting civil rights leaders or dramatic milestones — are also more typical of the pictures we have come to associate with the movement.

On the other hand, Mr. Barker's images are more intimate, focusing on volunteers and their everyday activities. The gallery believes his photographs are the only ones known of the Selma demonstrations that were taken from the viewpoint of a participant observer rather than a journalist.

Working as a technical photographer at Washington State University, where he studied as an undergraduate, Mr. Barker was selected by an ad hoc committee at the university to travel to Selma, Ala., to support marchers and document their activities. In March 1965, activists would make three attempts to complete a five-day, 54-mile march to Montgomery. The first was thwarted by state troopers, who mercilessly attacked protesters with clubs and tear gas as they attempted to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The second was voluntarily suspended by demonstrators to avoid another "Bloody Sunday," as the first clash was called.

Mr. Barker's photographs depict the strategy sessions, meetings among activist groups, and the efforts to support and sustain hundreds of protesters.

The Alabama National Guard near the house of people watching the marchers pass by. Credit James H. Barker/Steven Kasher Gallery

“I was not trying to create a narrative of events, but rather to reveal the nature of the people, their emotions and developing relationships as they experienced the march,” Mr. Barker said. “My intent was that their expressions and body language exhibit the context of the event.”

His images reveal the resourcefulness, cooperation and skill that allowed activists to pull off a historic event of this magnitude: organizers sitting around a table, engrossed in conversation; media-savvy demonstrators reading newspaper accounts of the march; a teenager stacking boxes in a chapel basement, the site of a makeshift kitchen, infirmary and meeting hall; and a news conference with the Rev. Andrew Young, shown not from the perspective of its subject but from the behind-the-scenes scrum of cameramen.

Underscoring his insider status, Mr. Barker photographed the memos and directives that lined the walls of the office of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a key organizer of the march. One note, attempting to locate the owner of an Oldsmobile, was particularly chilling. As Mr. Barker later discovered, the car belonged to Viola Liuzzo, the Michigan housewife and activist murdered by the Ku Klux Klan the night after the march concluded.

But mainstream publications rarely ran understated civil rights imagery. The relationship between the news media and political activists was symbiotic: Intentionally or otherwise, photojournalists provided dramatic images that demonstrated the gravity of the problem and appealed to a sense of fairness and justice, helping to sway public opinion. The activities of the movement offered those publications a continuing and dramatic story told through enthralling images that helped sell magazines and newspapers. The more dramatic the photograph, the more desirable it was to editors and publishers.

Free of these constraints — and the need to sell pictures — Mr. Barker focused on the movement’s back story rather than its edgier public face. “When photographing an event, I only do so when I can wander about and shoot what interests me, and not be burdened with any thoughts about how the photos will be used or fitted to a page,” observed Mr. Barker, who has lived in Alaska since the 1970s, where he documents native communities.

Singing “We Shall Overcome” in front of Brown Chapel in Selma, Ala.
Credit James H. Barker/Steven Kasher Gallery

Mr. Barker’s insider access, and the trust it engendered, allowed him to represent his subjects as complex beings rather than as nameless icons of the struggle. Many of the most famous civil rights photographs depicted events impassively and from afar — lines of demonstrators marching across barren fields, a sea of humanity on the Washington Mall, jets of water knocking children to the ground in Birmingham. Mr. Barker’s photographs portrayed something considerably more nuanced and allusive: the intensity, fear, weariness, tedium and determination that registered on the faces and in the body language of Selma’s brave foot soldiers.

When marchers finally reached the steps of the Capitol building in Montgomery on March 25, 1965, they had not just made history, they had also changed it. Photographs and television footage of “Bloody Sunday” would convince a skeptical nation of the justness of the civil rights struggle. These disquieting images were instrumental in the passage of the Voting Rights Acts later that year.

But as demonstrators changed the world, helped by photojournalists committed to providing the news media with what they believed were the most potent and effective images, Mr. Barker remained steadfast in his personal mission to document the prosaic,

but no less important, actions and events that empowered a movement. In doing so, he believed he could most effectively gain the viewer's trust and empathy.

"In comparison with other images of the march, mine would be thought of as the adjectives and the adverbs of the story," Mr. Barker said. "I would like people to put the historical narrative in the background and identify with the people in the images. If I am successful, I'd hope the viewer feels a direct connection with the march participants."