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Jerome Liebling: Brooklyn and Other Boroughs,
1946 – 1996



Steven Kasher Gallery presents its new show *Jerome Liebling: Brooklyn and Other Boroughs, 1946 – 1996*. This is the second exhibition of Liebling's work at the gallery. The show features 50 black and white and color photographs taken in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and the Bronx over a five decade span. The exhibition highlights Liebling's roots , love for, and inspired representations of his home city.

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"There was nothing as exciting as wandering the streets of Brooklyn with my father. He found mystery and intrigue around every corner. The people on the streets – with their indefatigable energy and their human foibles – became larger-than-life through his lens. Human struggle took on mythical proportions; the perseverance and ingenuity of everyday people was heroic in his eyes."

Liebling's daughter, filmmaker Rachel Liebling

Jerome Liebling (1924-2011) was born in Harlem and grew up poor in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. In 1942, Liebling quit his first semester at Brooklyn College to enlist in World War II, serving in the notoriously deadly glider infantry. The carnage he witnessed fueled his creative impulse to "figure out where the pain was..." Liebling returned to Brooklyn College in 1946 to study art under the G.I. Bill. Ad Reinhardt's Bauhaus-influenced design classes honed his formal sensibility; documentary photographer Walter Rosenblum opened his eyes to the power of the photographic image.

In 1947, Liebling joined the Photo League, a socially minded collective of photographers who fanned across New York to document hidden corners of the city. For Liebling, children surviving the rough-and-tumble city streets became a symbol of fortitude. "Their faces could inform all that they felt, from grace, to reflective questioning, to supreme prescience," he said. "Sometimes there was a hint of defeat, but more often there was improvisation and brilliance." One Easter morning in Harlem, Liebling encountered a young child dressed in his Sunday best: broken shoe-laces, tattered trousers, a threadbare tweed coat and cap. Hands buried in his pockets, the boy spread his coat open wide, and the click of Liebling's shutter transformed him into *Butterfly Boy*. This image of a winged superhero who could soar away from his impoverished world has become a beloved icon, appearing on public posters and billboards in New York, Paris, Amsterdam, Japan and elsewhere.

In 1949 Liebling accepted a position teaching photography and filmmaking at the University of Minnesota. Twenty years later, he returned to New York to discover that the city of his childhood had vanished. "I came back, and it was a disaster," he said. Liebling's 1970s photographs of the crumbling South Bronx depict a bleak realization: the *Butterfly Boy* may not have escaped to a better place after all. The young man in the picture *Charlotte Street* is trapped amidst ruins, in devastation as harrowing as Liebling's wartime experiences. Despite their imagery of senseless destruction, his photographs reveal the ever renewing spirit of humanity pushing up through the cracks.

In the late 1970s, Liebling rediscovered the long-lost Brooklyn of his childhood in the oceanside neighborhood known as "Little Odessa" in Brighton Beach. He spent three decades photographing there in brilliant chromogenic color as the old wave of Jewish

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denizens gave way to the new wave of Russian immigrants.

EXHIBITION

Brooklyn and Other Boroughs, 1946 – 1996

Jerome Liebling

From April 24th to June 6th, 2015

Steven Kasher Gallery

515 West 26th Street, Floor 2

New York, NY 10001

USA

Tel 212 966 3978

<http://www.stevenkasher.com>