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THE MAGAZINE OF GLOBAL DOCUMENTARY



Rally, Benghazi, April 8, 2011.
By Michael Christopher Brown

JEROME AVE

By The Bronx Photo League

With Introduction by Michael Kamber

BDC Editions, 2016

136 pp./\$40.00

www.jeromeaveworkers.com



Angelica Camacho, originally from Mexico, works as an ice vendor on 170th Street and Jerome Avenue during the summer. She's been in the Bronx for 25 years.

Last fall, the Bronx Documentary Center (BDC) released *Jerome Ave*, the first photo book published under its new label, BDC Editions. The book explores New York City's working-class community of Jerome Avenue, a South Bronx corridor under consideration for rezoning, an endeavor that would likely spell the demise of its "proud culture of industry and work." In 2015, the 18 photographers of the Bronx Photo League, a project of BDC, took to the avenue to document the experiences of workers and residents grappling with the looming threat of rezoning and displacement.

The Bronx Photo League, which takes inspiration from the similarly activist-minded Photo League of the 1930s and '40s, is a diverse group of Bronx-based artists and journalists whose common goal is to archive and expose the "realities and changes in our own community."

For a year, the League traveled the two-mile stretch of Jerome Avenue, using old Hasselblad cameras with just 12 photos per roll, to shed light on the growing concerns of this blue-collar community. The Leaguers listened carefully and photographed intentionally, capturing the stories of Jerome Avenue with an attention to detail and

nanced approach true to the League's commitment to social justice and mission of striving for "balance, not sensation."

Jerome Ave is a stunning collection of black-and-white portraits of the people who make Jerome what it is. They come from near and far — some are third generation shop owners, while others have only been in the United States for two months. The place itself is equally worldly — storefront messaging calls out to passers-by in several different languages. The vibrant cultures and personalities that intersect on the avenue bring every page of *Jerome Ave* to life.

Though the future of Jerome is uncertain, each story in *Jerome Ave* is a testament to the ability of its people and their collective values to endure in the face of hardship. Their myriad differences — nationalities, native tongues, religions, and the like — pale in comparison to the unity forged through shared values of hard work and a desire for a better life. There is a sense that its people will continue to persevere, even as Jerome is eyed for redevelopment and the subsequent wholesale disruption of life and livelihood.

Jerome Ave is a product of the Bronx Photo League's honest approach and a reflection of the integrity that characterizes its community. The photographers honor the complexity of the human experience by portraying the people of Jerome as a dignified community of individuals stitched together by a desire to preserve its culture of industry and the opportunities that accompany it. Concern regarding the possible changes to come is a main theme of *Jerome Ave*, but so, too, is resilience. And while fears of gentrification and the further displacement of a predominantly immigrant, working-class community inevitably alarm their readers, the Bronx Photo Leaguers succeed in rejecting a sensational narrative that would depict the workers of Jerome Avenue as passive or powerless. Instead, they do justice to the proud people who live and work there by exposing the problematic, while still honoring the humans affected — their strength in the face of hardship, and their resistance against ongoing attempts to reduce their life chances.

—Emma Brown



LIBYAN SUGAR

By Michael Christopher Brown

Twin Palms

412 pp./\$85.00

www.twinpalms.com

Gaining a greater understanding of the Arab Spring and the Libyan revolution will not follow from reading *Libyan Sugar* by Magnum photographer Michael Christopher Brown. But you will gain terrific photography taken with a camera phone, very personal and thoughtful reflections by a photographer finding himself through war, and a compelling and intelligent book weaving a narrative between the two.

This is not Robert Capa or Eddie Adams, whose reporting was first and always about the historical events unfolding before their cameras. "Fallen Soldier" by the former or "Execution in Saigon" by the latter are only great photographs because of their meaning in the historical context. Rather, this is Michael Christopher Brown using a cell phone camera because he broke his SLR shortly after arriving in the war zone. (A Leica probably would have withstood the shock.) Not to be deterred, Brown continued to fight with his newfound tool to produce the remarkably beautiful and sometimes powerful photos reproduced small in *Libyan Sugar* — small because the resolution from a 2011 cell phone camera does not allow them to be reproduced any larger.

Maybe it's because the oeuvre was created with the quintessential social media device that *Libyan Sugar* reads like a Facebook feed. All that is missing is a selfie or two — but instead, peppered throughout are email and Skype

Denora in Noon Shadows, Obrapia.
1999. By Susan S. Bank from *Piercing the Darkness*

exchanges with his family in the Skagit Valley in Washington state and an occasional friend or colleague elsewhere.

But once you can get over the fact that you aren't going to learn much about the soldiers, civilians, corpses and ruins that are the subject of his photography, sit back and enjoy reading this extraordinary book. Rarely do photobooks so effectively create such an interesting tension between the words and images. As any good photobook will attest, Brown doesn't attempt to tell you everything with either the images or the words — only a reading of the careful interplay between the two will provide the narrative glue holding the book together.

The seminal event in the book (spoiler alert), and Brown's life up until then, is that he was wounded in the same attack on April 20, 2011 in Misrata that killed his colleagues Chris Hondros and Tim Hetherington. Prior to this, Brown was high on the adrenaline of being a war photographer. Following his hospitalization and recovery, he has now matured with understanding: "The pain of four pieces of shrapnel that I get to keep reminds me I am not pure anymore." He goes on to lament, "Never again do you take stupid risks for pictures." And finally the words to him by a sage friend: "All true knowledge comes from direct experience and now you are amongst those who have come too close to death. You will never be the same but perhaps a lot wiser than most." His newfound wisdom is what has given him the fortitude and patience to expose himself in this book.

But 90 percent of the 400 pages are extraordinary photographs, carefully composed, saturated with deep rich colors or expanses of desert sands. There are expressive faces of the living and death masks of the dead. There is an enigmatic lion that makes it to the cover and a handful of photos from home in the Skagit Valley, Washington. Sequentially, the photos tell the story of one year in the life of Michael Christopher Brown and one year of the war of Libyan liberation — desert scenes, street fighting, carnage, the death of Gaddafi, liberation, celebration and the love affairs between Brown and his family



at home, his closest of colleagues in the trenches of photojournalism and his fallen comrades Tim and Chris.

Since the book ends in the year it was retelling — 2011 — there can be no mention of the catastrophic events in Benghazi a year later that killed the U.S. ambassador and three other embassy employees, and became a continuing nightmare for Hillary Clinton in her campaign for U.S. president. Nor mention of the chaos and failed state that Libya has fallen into. That is another book by another author.

Libyan Sugar is a must-read for anyone who breathes the life of a photojournalist, and great reading for anyone else wanting to experience the artfully told coming-to-awareness story of the author. Along the way, you get just a taste of Libyan sugar — enough to make you want more.

—Glenn Ruga

PIERCING THE DARKNESS

Susan S. Bank

Brilliant Press

128 pp./\$65.00

www.brilliant-press.com

A photo book is such a precious object in this age of picture-saturated cyberspace. At its best, the photo book stands as an artist's statement in dialogue with history. In the case of Susan S. Bank's *Piercing the Darkness*, not only is the book a beautifully designed and sequenced telling of the first ten years of the 21st century in Cuba, it is a highly personalized view created with 20th century intent, style and processes. Bank's Leica camera, her black and white film

and her choice of lenses create a world apart from her contemporaries' colorful Cuba travelogues. I have never seen Havana with so few old cars. Bank also skirts the seductive pleasure of the elegant, decayed architecture. The Malecón, Havana's boulevard along the bay, is in only a few compositions. Her camera prefers to look down at the pavement and into the buildings. Fortunately, Bank does acknowledge the thousands of dogs to whom Cuba has granted the freedom to roam.

Piercing the Darkness begins in shadow. We see slumped workers with backs turned in chiaroscuro. Faces are hidden or masked. Bank masterfully photographs arms and hands, letting them direct the viewer's eye across the frame. Many pictures are about Cubans in contact, sizzling with gesticulation and assertion. Bank is present when they argue or embrace — and often, these vignettes reveal the scars of Cuba's crimes committed in the name of ideology.

I found myself viewing each page like a detective at a crime scene. The details unfold slowly, and the most telling evidence lies in the shadows. She certainly named her collection wisely. Like Robert Frank's Americans, Bank's Cubans are people with a shared mythology best expressed through their sense of solitude. We are viewing the work of an artist who knows her subject well and refuses to make simple pictures about complex lives. Bank is not telling the story of Cuba; she is telling the story of humanity through Cuba.

—Frank Ward