

## Rebel with a Lens:

Neighborhood Preservation in the Darkroom of Clayton Patterson *by Jericho Parns*

The grated entrance to the Clayton Gallery and Outlaw Museum, once scrawled with a bold graffiti mural, now appears plain black, inconspicuous, with "161 Essex" and an arrow pointing to the "bell" hand written in white.



Clayton Patterson capturing a neighborhood demonstration. Photo by Elsa Rensaa

Inside, Clayton Patterson sits among boxes. Artwork rests propped against the walls or hangs in the darkened eaves of the room. His grey hair curls at the ends past his shoulders, a frizzy goatee reaches the middle of his chest. He is a bear of a man, dressed like a biker, wearing an embroidered cap, and is one of the best-kept secrets of the Lower East Side.

An old friend, activist Osha Neumann, sits nearby, paging through the index of Patterson's book *Captured: A Film/Video History of the Lower East Side*, throwing out names from the past.

"You gonna talk about your bust?" Neumann asks.

"Yeah, I had a few busts," Patterson says. "Wouldn't have this glorious gold smile if I didn't." He flashes a rim of gold teeth then breaks into an infectious laugh.

Clayton Patterson, a self-proclaimed "artist and documentarian," best known for his footage of the Tompkins Square Riots of 1988, has been a ubiquitous presence in the Lower East Side since the early 1980s. He has since meticulously documented the characters and events of this legendary neighborhood, recently classified as "endangered" by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Endangered, in this case meaning at risk for "destruction or irreparable damage," is an honor the NTHP also awarded to Brooklyn's industrial waterfront just last year.

"I was always gathering, gathering, gathering," he said of what has amassed into an archive of more than 100,000 photographs and over 10,000 hours of video that reveals an honest fascination with a world on the fringe. "It's a bit of an obsession." Yet Patterson's work is a rare

form of grassroots preservation amidst rapid gentrification, and may be the closest thing to resistance any New York borough has seen.

Since the early 1980s, profit-driven investors in the housing market have sought to put a fresh face on New York through urban restructuring, yet the social fabric of longstanding neighborhoods have suffered the cost. Tenants are battling landlords; locals who for years have relied on affordable rent are vetted against wealthier newcomers; fancy boutiques bully long-held mom-and-pop establishments. Given the economic thrust of gentrification, little can be done aside from picketing building sites or neighborhood petitions to stem the tide. Yet there is a pictorial argument to Patterson's work. Not just a bystander chronicling the changes, Patterson has documented to such an extent that his images serve as a key witness in the people's case against gentrification.

Interspersing Patterson's video and photographs with original footage and interviews, a new film "Captured," created by BENvsDAN Productions, provides testimony to the lawlessness and creativity of the urban subculture of the Lower East Side in the 1980s and Patterson's entrenchment within it all. Set to premiere on June 13 at The Rooftop Film Festival, the film is as much a biopic of the neighborhood as it is a portrait of Patterson himself.

**B**orn in western Canada in 1948, Patterson was raised in a working class family. He attended art school in Nova Scotia, and in 1979, he and his partner Elsa Rensaa, who he is still with after 37 years,

came to New York City. By 1983, as rents were on the rise, they managed to secure a mortgage and set up shop at 161 Essex Street.

After a brief stint in the nearby Soho art scene, Patterson abandoned the world of "glamorous social decadence" that nurtured the likes of Keith Haring, Andy Warhol, and Basquiat. Instead, in 1986, he opened the storefront of 161 Essex as the Clayton Gallery and Outlaw Museum to showcase artists—Nico Dios, Dash Snow and graffiti artist Joey Semz among them—whose work Patterson regards as "outside the mainstream."

Meanwhile, he photographed everything he saw. He took portraits of people outside the graffiti-tagged door of his storefront and displayed them in the window as what the local kids called a revolving "Wall of Fame."

"The Lower East Side was filled with people, from the idiot up to the genius," Patterson said. "And if you could come make a statement, then you could be part of it." The diverse day-to-day portraits—from the hardcore punks and heroine junkies to rabbis and drag queens—reeled into his image collection became a visual history of the Lower East Side. Patterson's photographs portray a raw form of humanity through a neighborhood where an American underground was born and raised.

In 1986, Patterson met video artist Nelson Sullivan, who introduced him to the cheap handheld video cameras, then new to the market. Realizing the unlimited potential of video he quickly rode a new wave into a world of politics and activism, employing documentation as a tool to combat corrupt authority, corporate takeover, and eventually gentrification.



In August of 1988, Patterson and Rensaa were among the crowd at Tompkins Square Park when the city dispatched police to enforce a 1 a.m. curfew, clearing the park of the homeless and street folk. An ad hoc coalition of activists, punks, Yuppies, and squatters formed in resistance and the brutal exchange that ensued marked a low point in the history of the NYPD.

Patterson caught the brutal images on videotape. His video flooded mainstream TV with images of uniformed officers beating demonstrators. In the years that followed, Patterson was involved in a string of court cases exposing police brutality and was arrested several times for refusing to turn over his tapes. Among the archives is video shot by Rensaa, who was often left to film unharmed, as Patterson, shouting "Little Brother is watching Big Brother!" was dragged away in custody.

Through the lens, Patterson found a "revolutionary tool" that took him from voyeur to rebel activist, recording evidence of the neighborhood's decades of change, footage ripe with vitality and contradiction: building demolitions and constructions, drug busts and evictions, performance art shows and city council meetings. From underground drag queen shows in the 1980s to the Bad Brains closing show at CBGBs in 2007, Patterson continues to record.

**O**n a warm evening in April, a line forms outside the Cantor Theater on East 8th Street, where an informal screening of "Captured," by filmmakers Ben Solomon, Dan Levin and Jenner Furst, is about to begin.

Patterson steps outside to mingle with the crowd, as

Rensaa floats somewhere nearby. There are old bearded men in leather vests, young kids, hats askew, wielding skateboards and sketchpads, NYU students, Williamsburg hipsters, and a couple dressed in muted drag. Clearly Patterson's work has bridged time and community as old-timers and young strangers alike regard him with a certain infamy.

"Clayton's archives have a story to tell," Levin said. "These are the streets and images that we grew up inspired by." But the images have changed as the Lower East Side, like its Brooklyn counterparts of Prospect Heights, Williamsburg, and Greenpoint, battles to preserve its original streetscapes and affordable housing now threatened by towering condominiums and skyrocketing rents. These building trends show little sign of abating, and while the collective memory of generations lay in the balance, a raw underbelly of the past few decades has been preserved.

Patterson's work is neither honed nor nuanced. It

(clockwise from bottom) Local kids posing for the Wall of Fame. Photo by Clayton Patterson; Clayton Patterson. Photo by Elsa Rensaa; Focusing in on the Lower East Side. Photo by Clayton Patterson. Patterson; Images from Clayton Patterson's Archive. Photo by Clayton Patterson.

is a sprawling mass of imagery suspended somewhere between the past and any refined future analysis. But "Captured" aims to prime audiences for the future. "His negatives should be locked up in a climate-controlled vault in a museum somewhere," said Furst, who edited the film. "Not end up on the sidewalk." Perhaps in the future, Patterson's archive will be preserved, made accessible as the resource that it is. "New York was a bohemian dream, a thinker's paradise," said Solomon. "And this man, he was a pioneer."

When the Lower East Side took hold of Clayton Patterson, it never let go. He speaks of it as "a magic crucible that everything else would come out of." In the last decade, he believes, he's seen the end of that era as soaring real estate prices have begun to empty the village of its artists, bohemians, radicals and immigrants.

"When I go out my door now, I don't see anyone I know. I see the loss of a community," Patterson notes the changes—the cranky old tailor is gone, a trendy café bar bought out the Latino grocery on the corner. Still, there is a good chance that any person that walked the streets or attended an event in "the deep pool that is the Lower East Side" in the past two decades can be found somewhere in the Clayton Patterson archives. And, in that sense, they will live on forever.

"It's about the forgotten ones," Patterson says. "What Vollard did for the rock-breakers, Van Gogh for the potato-eaters. This is for those on the fringes. Those who have been pushed aside." □

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