

AT THE CORE OF THE BIG APPLE

By Charlene Rooke [2003]

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Scientists have been known to worry about whether the act of merely observing an experiment changes its outcome. But in the case of Clayton Patterson, '76 BEd, the catalytic effect his observations have had on society is a matter of certainty, not speculation.

The artist and documentarian has, for the last 20 years, been compiling an extensive visual archive of New York City's Lower East Side. The stocky, pony-tailed and bearded Patterson is an habitu  of the mean streets of the Bowery district where his home studio hides behind a heavily graffitied black metal door. Wearing his trademark black baseball cap embroidered with skull symbols, this observer is as much a fixture of the neighborhood as the subjects he chronicles: from building demolitions to drag shows, from children growing up to police busts going down. Patterson comes across as one of those quintessential New York originals—but, ironically, he hails from Alberta, and credits his Western Canadian background for developing his trademark outsider's, iconoclastic views.

Like a black-leather-clad Forrest Gump, Patterson has been present—and through his very presence, instrumental—at an astounding array of cultural milestones. The underground New York art scene of the 1980s? Patterson was there, showing then-unknown artists in his small Essex Street gallery. The arcane New York health regulation banning tattooing? He was instrumental in having it repealed in 1985. The Tompkins Square Park uprising in Greenwich Village in 1988? Patterson's videotape later became a key court exhibit. And those distinctive black baseball caps, featured on the pages of GQ magazine and sported by hipsters like Mick Jagger and Jack Nicholson? Until Patterson and his partner, Elsa Rensaa, got their hands on baseball caps in the early 1990s, that headgear rarely sported anything more sophisticated than tractor logos.

Patterson's video footage has been broadcast on CNN, ABC, NBC, CBS, and PBS. His photographs have been published in The New York Times, New York Newsday, and several local weekly newspapers. His involvements have led him into court, into danger, into controversy, and into the company of criminals, spiritual leaders, and the police: into the very core of urban culture.

Actor Matt Dillon sports a Patterson hat for an artist who has spent much of his life documenting the

fringes of society, Patterson will receive relatively mainstream exposure for his work next year with the publication of a book of his photographs, 1985-2000: The Lower East Side, New York City (Foto Folio). Some of Patterson's work—of streetscapes and buildings, of people aging over the decades—is purely documentary. But many of his portraits of the colorful characters of the East Side—from wide-eyed children to strung-out junkies—possess an unflinching, uncompromising beauty. Blown up to the size of art prints, they would make a compelling statement in any gallery.

Clayton Patterson grew up in Calgary absorbing a deep streak of old-fashioned prairie practicality. Because "artist" wasn't considered a viable career in the day, he completed an education degree at the U of A and taught high school art in Stony Plain. However, compelled to follow his interests in sculpture and printmaking, he returned to Calgary's Alberta College of Art (where he met Rensaa in 1972) and later attended the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax. He and Rensaa taught art in Calgary before making the jump to New York in the late 1970s. Initially he concentrated on his sculptural work, enjoying some success with a solo gallery show and sales to prestigious collectors.

In 1983 the couple bought their current East Side abode, "dropped the whole SoHo thing, and began to participate in life over here," says Patterson. Coming from Calgary—as Patterson sees it, far outside the established, European art tradition—he held a different aesthetic and began to pursue his interest in "fringe" art forms, such as tattooing. "I used to look at these books and slides in art history classes, and I felt so far removed from the actual piece ... tattooing deals with art and imagery, and it's right around you. It has the intimacy and closeness that's missing from much of fine art."

Patterson was involved in the movement to legalize tattooing in New York. "Some said it was about hepatitis, but it wasn't," says Patterson, of an obscure 1961 health regulation preventing tattoo parlors from operating legally and forcing them into an unregulated, outlaw existence. "Getting everyone to come together wasn't easy, but we did it," Patterson recalls. When tattooing was legalized in 1985, Patterson's Essex Street storefront became the headquarters of the New York Tattoo Society.

Clayton Patterson's work and interests have

morphed over the years, much like the evolution of his Essex Street space. The converted warehouse—with its high, pressed-tin ceiling, hardwood floors, and large windows—has been a home, an art gallery, a hat shop, an archive, and remains a neighborhood meeting place. Bypassers stop to look in the window at photographs of neighborhood kids (who refer to it as the "hall of fame"). In the storefront, work painted by the renowned tattoo artist Spider Webb and signed by author Quentin Crisp decorates the walls. Just behind, paint and polish are readying a gallery space that will house an Outlaw Museum of items like tattoo art, drug paraphernalia, and other unusual artifacts. Upstairs, Patterson and Rensaa live among stacks of books, boxes and binders of documents, four dogs, and several of Patterson's striking, colorful sculptural works made from found objects.

The somewhat ramshackle building could also be described as a firetrap, with some 750,000 photographs and 4,000 hours of videotape taking up filing cabinet, floor and shelf space. Several years ago, the Smithsonian Institution contacted Patterson about obtaining part of his collection. He declined. "It is important to me that one day the whole archive is preserved in the right place," he says. Given Patterson's frequent court appearances—his videotapes have been used for legal defence more than any other private photo collection in the history of America—there's an argument to be made for keeping the material close at hand.

Patterson's observation coalesced into action in 1988. He had already been photographing the neighborhood for a few years and had recently acquired a video camera. While on his way to document elements of the club scene, he heard the ruckus at a park, where neighborhood denizens and police were violently clashing over a curfew meant to rid the square of illegal after-dark activity. Because hand-held video cameras were then relatively uncommon, he was able to unobtrusively film—literally from the hip—for the duration of the conflict. The fallout from the exposure provided by Patterson's

video was a decade of reform for the police force, reshaping the way the force covered the streets of New York, including the rough-and-tumble Lower East Side. "I'm not saying [reform] wouldn't have happened without my tape, but that brought the problems into very clear definition," Patterson says.

For Patterson, the incident was a turning point that led him into a decade of activism over neighborhood issues: crusading for buildings slated for demolition, playing watchdog on political hypocrisy, protesting unnecessary police violence. Most of all, his own photos and his Essex Street space became touchstones for members of various urban tribes: from drag queens to Hasidic rabbis, from Catholic priests to practitioners of Santeria (a Cuban religion sometimes classified as voodoo).

New York City has changed drastically in recent years, with a booming economy making life in Manhattan nearly inaccessible to all but the most affluent. The creeping gentrification, which has altered Greenwich Village, SoHo, and TriBeCa each in turn, is now spreading East to Patterson's stomping grounds. It's a movement that's guaranteed to drive out many of the colorful characters that have populated Patterson's work, and perhaps the eclecticism and freedom that have characterized his way of life there.

"New York is like an anthill that gets kicked over every 20 years ... so there's no real attachment to Manhattan, you know?" Patterson laments. He jokes that while he's "somewhat famous" in New York, he feels like "less than nobody" in Canada, and so will likely stay put for the time being. His reputation as a voice in the art world is growing, through showings of emerging artists such as Charles Greenwood and involvement in exhibitions such as the travelling European Wild Style performance art show.

He compares himself to the guy who wears a loud shirt to a party. In most places, he'd stand out. But on the eclectic Lower East Side? "Here, it's no big deal." Clayton Patterson, like a real-life Zelig, just blends into the scenery.

