

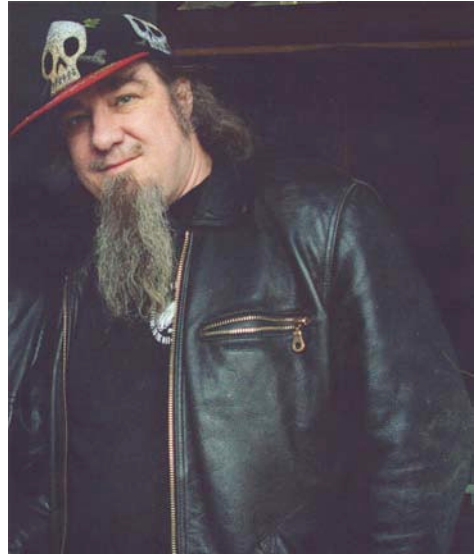
KINZ,TILLOU+FEIGEN

CLAYTON PATTERSON, a Canadian born artist (Calgary, Alberta, 1948) and long-term resident of the Lower East Side of Manhattan, is publicly identified as the visual chronicler of the neighborhood and a permanent point of reference. By observing him both at close range and from a distance you notice that he operates with parameters all of his own. The neighborhood is not and has never been split between rich and poor, powerful and powerless. It is made up mostly of a middle working class and a low working class with an intense progressive self-consciousness. The real divide lay between the highly educated and highly self-educated, the culturally deprived and culturally uninvolved. Patterson traverses both sides of the rails with ease and hourly regularity.

But even in the most diversified, inclusive, pluralistic and opinionated neighborhood in America, our character strikes a swath of his own. He has developed a lifework that runs counter to colleague culture-types: his output and method of intervention are not a calculated series of stepping-stones towards uptown audiences and eventual relocation. He does not use the bubbling, incandescent local scene to build some ulterior platform, but as an end in itself. And finally, his “values” seem to rotate around a Manichean center, remote and removed from the standard mythology of the “permanently new”, the “incrementally progressive” and the “obsessively fresh”. His core could well circle around the arcane, the Sartrean and the eternally contrarian.

Patterson’s storefront headquarters are located on Essex Street right in the heart of the Lower East Side. It houses his fabled collection of photographs and video tapes on police actions, fires, politics, art and artists, poets and poetry, synagogues, religious services, Santeria, Krishna, buildings, doorways, graffiti, drugs, tattoos, drag queens, social events, street actions, community board meetings, funerals and most other aspects of public life. And, since 1986, it has also served as the Clayton Gallery & Outlaw Art Museum showing artists outside the mainstream. However, for years Patterson has been promoting interests that are now more and more within the mainstream. He has been actively involved in the culture of tattoos and body art. He and his companion, Elsa Rensaa, also created a legendary series of custom-made baseball caps embroidered with personalized motifs such as skulls and serpents that were sought after by celebrities. Now Patterson is assembling all of his experiences, reminiscences, suspicions, contacts, sources, witnesses, informants and experts to be part of a series of anthologies on the Lower East Side. With two already published, they will establish the contours of this most remarkable neighborhood from 1900 until now.

However, Patterson is first and foremost an artist documentarian and he has built a massive photo-archive of the Lower East Side. Based on circumstantial evidence, his photography defines a genre of its own. His are images of immediate situations, unplanned and unscripted: split second takes that are public and available to anybody. Various characters in these urban scenes look as if they are in the wrong place at the wrong time. Only the lens endows them with meaning and purpose. They often seem to be part of some crime in progress, or a local epic. There is a look of dark truth in their faces: their gestures are compromising, or, worse, ambivalent, off guard and questionable. There are street facades, specific groups and individuals: moments in the life of a rally, of a police intervention, of a public dispute, of an accident. Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine and Weegee captured iconic moments in the life of the struggling proletarians—a Neorealist texture like that of Roberto Rossellini or Pietro Germi. Likewise, Patterson’s images are more “cinema verite” and film noir, and his pictures are often more activist than journalistic. They are forensic, but they are also dramatic and emblematic. He documents through multiplicity not through transcendence, yet his pictures transcend their multiplicity nonetheless.



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