

Alan Kaufman

On Clayton Patterson

Today's American art culture thrives on a concept of perpetual obsolescence. Like a stomachless butterfly, today's artist flutters about the gallery floor for a single day and falls dead. The span of a career continues to shorten to the point where a reputation can be won and lost (only once) based on a single show, which, by tomorrow, is old news.

America hates nothing more than old news.

It hates yesterday's fashions.

It hates that artist who insists upon the integrity of the individual vision, who valorizes memory, who demands respect for the marginalized, who does not gloat at the trampling underfoot of the oppressed, who praises long-standing commitment to vision, ideals, effort. America regards such an outlook as profitless, and America despises that which yields no profit.

America hates Clayton Patterson.

Since 1979 he has performed the unparalleled feat of documenting through photograph and video, anthologies and art shows, the families, businesses, outlaws, artists, dreamers, losers and visionaries of New York City's fast-disappearing Lower East Side. He has defied the authorities to defend the rights of free speech, for which he has been jailed 13 times. He has railed against the ruthless displacement of that which makes his neighborhood the emblematic melting pot of America's ethnicities and lifestyles—a legacy which America is now doing all it can to erase.

America hates Clayton Patterson because he refuses to let her forget the immigrants who landed on Ellis Island, the Jewish tailor who plied his trade behind smudged glass in a small Orchard Street storefront, the Puerto Rican grocer who hustled behind a counter dispensing goods wrapped in wax paper to customers who bought on credit, the Chinese man who sat on Elizabeth Street on a stool repairing the neighborhood's shoes, the Vietnam veteran who made it his life's work to cement beautiful mosaics to lampposts and walls, the Holocaust survivor who led a quixotic charge against the ramparts of devouring art-world greed, the

gang leader who turned his life around to become an artist, author and activist on behalf of youth.

To this day—although he is in his mid-sixties and has attained legendary status among Lower East Side locals—Clayton Patterson has not enjoyed a single retrospective or even a show in a major American museum, and his life's work—one of the most comprehensive archives in existence today: a sociological treasure trove of documentation, a golden lode of photographs and artworks, an amazing contribution to human culture and education—remains without an institution to house and catalog it.

Patterson did it all with only his camera and the will to defy time itself in order to show the world what he knew to be true: that his Lower East Side was not only the birthplace of labor unions and communities, music clubs and synagogues, but the launching pad of successive waves of avant-garde art and political change. He has captured it gorgeously, in endless photographs: the transvestites, punk rockers, painters, writers, rabbis, poets, firemen, thinkers, gangsters, bikers, shopkeepers, priests and politicians who created, killed, raised families, lost love, betrayed, ascended, stole, built monuments, risked their lives and sometimes perished, all on this crazy magnificent stage of the Lower East Side. He showed that despite everything the Lower East Side would thrive, so long as there was one who loved and believed in it.

Clayton Patterson loves and believes in an America that has forgotten that it could ever be deserving of love. But proof of that love, of deserving love, is there in the photos he has taken, the art he has made, the shows he has organized at his Outlaw Art Museum and in the thousands of local people of every age and persuasion who have posed smiling before his door at 161 Essex Street on the Lower East Side of New York City.