

The New York Times

City Room

Blogging From the Five Boroughs

September 4, 2009

Predawn Images of an Eerily Empty City

By SEWELL CHAN



In "New York Sleeps," a new book of black-and-white photographs, familiar sites in New York City appear ghostly and spectral, devoid of the people who give the metropolis its movement and life. The book is not a fantastic depiction of how the city would look without humans, but rather the product of a photographer's patient, unusual technique.

The photographer, Christopher Thomas, a native of Munich, Germany, who lives and works there, used a custom-made large-format field camera and Polaroid film to make the nearly 80 images that appear in the book. Many of the images were shot in the predawn hours, with few people milling about and with landmarks looking strangely unfamiliar. The long exposure times meant that if, say, a single person walked into the frame briefly, she or he was unlikely to show up in the final image.

Mr. Thomas, 48, said in a phone interview from South Africa that he did a similar project in Munich, and then took similar images in 2001 for himself.

When Petra Giloy-Hirtz, a freelance curator, author and editor, and Ira Stehmann, a photography curator, saw the images, they urged him to return to the project and make a book of it. He did so, capturing an additional series of images last year and this year.

"His photographs seem classical, from another time," Ms. Giloy-Hirtz and Mr. Stehmann write in the foreword to the book, published by Prestel. They add: "It is as if he were taking himself outside of

time. As if, at this moment when night borders day, he could uncover the essence of the city, erasing the profane and quotidian in favor of the 'eternal' or timeless."

In one of two essays accompanying the images, Ulrich Pohlmann, director of the Fotomuseum München, which has exhibited Mr. Thomas's work, writes: "Unlike the 'street photographer,' who is equipped with a 35mm camera and is highly mobile, always searching for spontaneous scenes amid the dynamic activity on the street, a large-format camera requires long exposure times and careful selection of a viewpoint."

And Bob Shamis, a photographer and former curator at the Museum of the City of New York, notes, "One of the fortunate consequences of shooting with little light and long exposures is the subtle luminosity that radiates from these images."

The images will be on view at the [Steven Kasher Gallery](#) in Chelsea from Dec. 3 until Jan. 9, 2010.





December 2, 2009

New York Sleeps

By Jen Carlson



These may all be familiar sights, but you've probably never seen them like this before. Christopher Thomas's [New York Sleeps exhibit](#) opens tomorrow (running through January 9th) at the Steven Kasher Gallery. Thomas takes the distractions away from the city, removing those pesky crowds, giving everything an "I Am Legend" spin. Or as [the foreword in his book](#) reads: "This is New York! Or are they dream worlds, chimeras, inventions, or perhaps testimony to a past era? Viewers are astonished, recognizing the places and getting lost in memories. A city of silence, beyond the turbulence of everyday life, a metropolis with no people, as if a spell had been cast on it: Grand Central Station, Fifth Avenue, the Flatiron Building, Katz's Restaurant, the Brooklyn Bridge—familiar, but never seen this way before."



December 3–9, 2009

Your perfect weekend

For a more classic urban-art experience, head to the Steven Kasher Gallery to take in its new **"New York Sleeps" exhibit** (521 W 23rd St between Tenth and Eleventh Aves; 212-966-3978, stevenkasher.com; through Jan 9, free). Christopher Thomas shoots black-and-white images of cities in a state of repose, and these nighttime cityscapes are startling in their beautiful loneliness. When was the last time you saw Grand Central Terminal without a sole human being inside it?

The New York Times

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 20, 2009

The City in Pictures, and in Lists

By SAM ROBERTS

Two collections of New York photographs, one a selection from a magazine's vast archives and the other a study of the city in the wee hours, might make great holiday gifts for fans of New York and its past.

"Only in New York: Photographs From Look Magazine" (Monacelli Press, \$50), by Donald Albrecht and Thomas Mellins, coincides with an exhibition at the Museum of the City of New York. Culled from 200,000 images of the city taken from 1938 to 1961, the book's evocative black-and-white photographs recall a nearly forgotten era.

"Look magazine had a long love affair with New York City," the authors write, and its photographs consistently delivered this message: "New York was both a big city, unlike any other in the nation, and a small town, where everyday life progressed much as it did elsewhere."

Those two visions are vividly conveyed in photographs from the city's neighborhoods, night-spots and waterfront. Individual portraits of a wide range of New Yorkers are also included.

By contrast, Christopher Thomas's mystical "New York Sleeps" (Prestel, \$49.95) captures the city eerily devoid of people and invites viewers to conduct their own version of "Where's Waldo?" and search for even one New Yorker. His glorious photographs of abandoned piers, deserted subway stations, diners awaiting their first customers and Union Square freshly dusted by snow were taken in morning's first gleaming before most of the city awakened. They, too, are on exhibition this month at the Steven Kasher Gallery in Manhattan.

"We sense Thomas searching the streets and architecture of New York for some evidence or code to help him decipher what this civilization is about," Bob Shamis, a photographer and curator, writes in an accompanying essay.

Mr. Shamis adds, "The result



AT REST A 2001 photograph of Katz's Delicatessen in Manhattan, by Christopher Thomas.

is the depiction of a city with the appearance of the present and the feel of a city from a past that has not yet occurred."

If the 2009 mayoral election was, in part, a referendum on Michael R. Bloomberg's stewardship of the city's public school system, the evidence available to New York voters was ambiguous. Beth Fertig, a reporter for WNYC public radio, weighs in with more grist in "Why cant U teach me 2 read? Three Students and a Mayor Put Our Schools to the Test" (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, \$27).

Ms. Fertig focuses on three students who managed to get through high school without learning to read. They are extreme examples, but if, as some experts estimate, even 5 percent of youngsters have learning problems this severe, they could represent tens of thousands of students in New York's

public school system alone.

Her book is most compelling when she explores the wrenching personal impact of illiteracy on the three former students, for whom Advocates for Children, a nonprofit group, won private "compensatory" tutoring at government expense after they had been the victims of educational neglect.

While these cases are among the most problematic, they help illustrate the challenges of deciding which standards to impose, how best to teach, how to get more good teachers and how to relevantly measure success individually and systemically.

Ms. Fertig's overall verdict on the mayor and his schools chancellor, Joel I. Klein (whose father, we learn, was a high school dropout who became a postman): "Based on statistics, 2009 was a good year for the New York City public schools."

But this conclusion comes

with caveats. The real benchmark, Ms. Fertig writes, will be when fewer students drop out and more graduate.

Who can resist a book that's promoted by its publisher as good bathroom reading? You can't help but be diverted by "The Ultimate Book of New York Lists: Everything You Need to Know About the Greatest City on Earth" (Skyhorse, \$12.95), by Bert Randolph Sugar with C. N. Richardson.

The cover borrows The New Yorker's typeface, but the contents are less profound and probably more fun, if occasionally frustrating. The highly subjective Top 10 compilations include greatest New York jazz songs ("Take the A Train" is No. 1), basketball players (Michael Jordan), mayors (Fiorello H. La Guardia) and mob hits (arranged chronologically, perhaps so as not to offend any gangsters).

NEW YORK Amsterdam News

January 7-January 13, 2010

Photographer captures New York as it sleeps

By DAMASO REYES

Special to the AmNews

What is it about New York that attracts photographers? Our cityscape is always shifting, changing even our relationship to our monuments. Perhaps it is this lack of permanence that compels photographers to try to freeze the city through their cameras?

German photographer Christopher Thomas has done just that in his new book "New York Sleeps" (Prestel USA). His images are also the subject of an exhibition at Steven Kasher Gallery.

Thomas captures New York through his large format camera. This produces an exceptionally large and sharp negative. Additionally, the photographer used Polaroid type 55 instant film, one that also produces a

very unique negative. Thomas combines these two elements to create haunting images of New York devoid of its inhabitants. Dark and almost surreal, Thomas takes this perspective as far as he can and, while doing so, creates some lovely images.

This reporter has a philosophical problem with "empty room" photography. Seemingly the style *du jour*, this type of photography divorces rooms, buildings and, in this case, an entire city from the very people they were built to serve. Capturing the city as it is, full of people, is a lot harder than photographing it empty. Sure, this approach transforms how we think of our surroundings, but at the cost of stripping it of much of its value. It is an interesting artistic exercise that can produce amazing results, as we



see in Thomas' photographs of Coney Island or of the Rockaways or one particularly haunting image of an abandoned pier as seen from Riverside Park. But there is a danger in approaching any subject, especially one as monumental as New York, from a monolithic perspective. What works in Rockaway is far less interesting in Times Square or Chinatown. His images of the Brooklyn Bridge do little to help us see this icon in a new way; rather, these images simply reinforce what we already know.

printing truly captures the look that this type of photography can produce and helps bring the images to life. "New York Sleeps" is an interesting project worthy of our attention if for no other reason than it captures a great city at rest.

"New York Sleeps" (Prestel USA) is available in stores now. An exhibition of photographs found in the book is on display at Steven Kasher Gallery, located at 521 West 23rd Street. For more information, call (212) 966-2978 or visit www.stevengkasher.com.

Thomas excels when he gets away from the tourist traps and the famous buildings. His images of New York's shoreline are vastly more interesting, not to mention more artistically exciting, than his photographs of our famous buildings. The book itself is a sumptuous expression of what is possible in the world of fine art book publishing and is a pleasure to touch as well as look through. The high quality

the eye

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Still Life



an artist's attempt to capture a city in motion

By Nora Hirshman

*Most New Yorkers are caught up in the city's constant buzz, but Christopher Thomas is obsessed with capturing its hidden tranquility. Thomas' photo collection *New York Sleeps* was released last fall and his exhibit was recently shown at the Steven Kasher Gallery. In an e-mail interview, Thomas describes his creative process.*

How did you become interested in photography? Do you remember the first camera you used?

I have always been interested in photography since I won a little plastic camera as a child at a fair in our village. The first camera I really used was a Zeiss Ikon Contessamat. I studied photography at Berkshire High School ... I moved to Germany and had to support myself. That was when I started working for a father of a friend who was a photographer. He then inspired me to apply at a very good photography school in Germany and I immediately got accepted ... photography definitely is my way of expressing myself—I used to be sad that I wasn't a better musician but now I'm very happy that my media turned out to be photography.

You've worked in both the USA and Germany. Which country is more nurturing to artists?

These comparisons I cannot make because there are advantages in both countries, each different. Which country you prefer living in is a very personal taste and depends on many aspects such as individual wealth (when you don't have money you, for sure, are better off in Germany), political climate (I know Americans who were not very happy in the US during the Bush administration), profession, mentality and so on. In Europe you have a very dense cultural variety in a comparable small area, in the States you have, for example, fantastic landscapes. I personally am very happy to have the change, love both continents.

How did you come to photograph New York? Do you have an affinity for, or memories of New York?

I love New York: its energy, denseness, variety. I had an apartment for several years in New York. I had finished a book about my hometown, Munich, and it became an exhibition in a museum when gallerists asked me about my next city portrait. I said I only had a couple of New York images and they wanted to see them ... I had no idea that there would be interest in a New

York book since there are thousands existing already. As it seems, there is an interest since the book has sold out within the first months and won awards, too. My main interest was to present a view onto this lively city ... to have a quiet eye onto the city structure itself. This you can do either very early, at night, at very bad weather, or you take long exposures.

Why do you use the specific large-format camera which produces such seemingly worn or dated images? Does this camera only allow you to shoot in black and white, or is this by choice? Why did you shoot your photos during twilight, when the light is effectually changing?

I used this Linhof large format camera because it forces me to take my time. It is a slow working process, and I love the Polaroid black and white film. You can, of course, use other film like slide or color negative too or even attach digital backs. The main reason why I shot in twilight is the fact that there are least people. But I also love the light. Of course it changes fast and you have to adapt, but that makes it interesting, and with some experience you can cope with it.

How do you decide exactly how to execute a photo?

First of all you don't want the same image that has been taken a million times, so you look for another angle. And then very important to me is that you have some depth in the image, lines that draw you in. A graphic composition and clearness is important, too. Last but not least, you want it to be unusual, special, different so the person who looks at the image says something like, "I have passed this spot a million times but I have never seen it this way."

Do you work differently on assigned, commercial projects—such as those you've done for BMW—versus projects of your own choosing?

Yes, very differently—as if it were two different professions. At assigned jobs like car shoots, you have a big team and little time, and you are, as a photographer, only giving directions to everyone except the client and the agency who try to tell you what to do. At the free projects you have no team, no one who brings you coffee, you have to carry everything yourself, but you have all the time in the world and no one tells you what to do.

What advice do you have for students who want to be professional photographers?

There is extremely strong competition like in every interesting profession. So if you decide to choose this profession, be extremely passionate about it, focussed and enduring. Remember that success is 10% inspiration and 90% transpiration. Stay focused at your goal. Stay flexible. Techniques are changing fast, ways of vision underlie fashions which are important to know when working for clients. For assigned work, provide good service when working for other people. Try to understand your client, put yourself into his position. You have to love what you do from your deepest heart. Be true to yourself. Keep asking yourself from time to time if you are still on the track you want to be on.

spectrum

THE SOUND OF SILENCE

Christopher Thomas captures New York City with not one of its 8m residents in sight. Setting out each morning before dawn, with a large-format camera and black-and-white Polaroid film, Thomas photographed the city's most iconic buildings and landscapes. The eerily beautiful results include a rare glimpse of the Brooklyn Bridge without pedestrians and Grand Central Station without commuters. This page: Grace Church, on Broadway, founded in 1846, soon became the city's most fashionable church. Opposite page: the Flatiron building, one of the first skyscrapers, which was completed in 1902. Images from *New York Sleeps*, published by Prestel, September 1

