

Review of Boystown

by Peter Brown

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Book Info:

Boystown: La Zona de Tolerancia

Photographs by anonymous photographers

Essays by Cristina Pacheco, Dave Hickey, Keith Carter

Afterword by Bill Wittliff

Aperture, New York, In Association with The Wittliff Gallery of Southwestern and Mexican Photography at Southwest Texas State, 2000

110 pages, \$40.

Bill Wittliff, the writer, photographer, publisher, collector, and archivist, showed me a stack of prints he had made for Boystown about a year and a half ago, a pile of photographs seemingly without end. They were fascinating, but disconcerting to the extent that I thought I might want to write about them just to deal with the questions they provoked. Since that time they've come to mind often. Now, sequenced in this book, and with explanatory essays by a good number of people, they are just as moving, just as homely, just as strange and just about as confusing. They describe Boystown, but it takes nothing away from their documentary power to say that they are about photography as well.

Boystown is derived from souvenir photographs of the most primitive sort, pictures taken in and around a cinderblock clutch of brothels strung along the Mexican border in an area outside Nuevo Laredo called *La Zona de Tolerancia*. They are, for the most part, posed portraits of prostitutes and their customers, although the book traces more: individual shots of women, couples, music and dancing, drinking, street scenes, children, older women, cops, sleeping drunks... I think they function in a variety of ways, but the baldest and most utilitarian is generated by the same impulse that moves a tourist to stand in front of the Eiffel Tower, or to have a tattoo made in Singapore that says "Singapore" - the photographs are a kind of proof.

Boystown was at its seedy height in the early to mid seventies, when these pictures were made, and the story of their journey to this book is notable in itself. The negatives were taken by six or seven anonymous commercial photographers who roamed Boystown from bar to bar looking for business. Likely patrons were sized up, the offer of a photograph was made, a deal was struck and a quick process ensued which began with short strips of 35mm film slapped into the backs of cameras. The photograph was then taken, the film and camera rushed to a grungy darkroom, the negative developed, a print exposed and run through chemicals, the image then dried and stapled into a cardboard frame (a nice touch) and the photograph finally delivered to the waiting customer. The negative was then tossed, still wet, onto a growing pile.

Wittliff had tried to photograph Boystown himself (scouting it for a potential movie) and had been wildly unsuccessful. After running into these

photographers, he was invited to their darkroom, and there discovered this odd and dripping archive. He pulled off a couple of pieces of film and recognized an access to Boystown that he would never be granted. And he was riveted by what he saw. He quickly, and presciently cut a deal to purchase all the film that these men shot, and on a bi-weekly basis, and for over a year, installments arrived by bus in Austin where Wittliff picked them up, washed, refixed and washed the negatives again. The printing then began. And the printing and spotting has gone on now for over twenty-five years. There are thousands of images. This huge number has been honed down to the hundred or so in this book, and a remarkable, eye-popping, hellish but weirdly humane portrait of Boystown, an insider's view of an enterprise that many imagine but few know, now exists. As documentary photographs go, these are about as pure as the genre gets.

My father, a protestant theologian, (the church needs to be called into this discussion) and at one time in the early sixties, an observer at the Second Vatican Council in Rome, was approached by a street vendor there, a man who wanted to sell him a pocketful of stolen watches - all sweet enough given the ecclesiastical context, but when my dad said no thanks, the man pulled open his coat. There they were, "Filthy pictures Padre?" It's that kind of slap, shock (and pull) that these photographs produce. I felt like a rubbernecker at an accident, yanked out of my meandering thoughts and dropped into this profane, funny, sad, titillating and maddening place,. Boystown is a world I'd known about, a place that I'd been curious about since moving to Texas, and a place that once I was photographically transported to, felt claustrophobic, dangerous and very compelling.

These are guileless photographs, innocent in the same ways that they are pure documentary - and innocent in the most damning ways because of what they describe. The photographers are making a buck, selling pictures that will memorialize a happy drunk's proud and boisterous moment. Their interpretation of the scene, apart from getting in the needed information, is generally not a part of that deal. Yet amazing images have been framed up here in the same way that amazing home snapshots exist in almost all family albums. Garry Winogrand, I would bet, would have loved this book. And loved it because of what the camera plucks out of that beer soaked air - detailing a line of vision with the fidelity of a kind and nonjudgmental dog. These details: the carefully chosen purses, the howling drunks in the corners, the out of whack lights, the spilled tequila, the reflective furniture, the toothless oddballs, the white scuffly shoes, the torn shirts, the ratted and wigged hair, the musician in the formal portrait adjusting his crotch - the things you don't look at, at first, but the things that are so humanly cobbled together that they make you both laugh and inwardly weep - these are the details that drive home the point that the players here are fallible, struggling people.

It's a sad and wild idea based around lust, fun, anger, drink, motion, power and the need to stretch out in all possible ways, that Boystown was built to accommodate - a blowout of the senses and all conventional sensibility. And

for reasons as various as life, people have ended up here and have been voluntarily photographed.

Many of the women in these pictures are very young and often quite beautiful and the men are just as likely to be old, drunk and unattractive. The complicity that all have signed onto is cold and depressing despite the seeming high spirits and the rowdiness of the night. There's a "boys will be boys" ethos that glosses over the morning to come and the private moments that will take place in those back rooms. Rankness hangs over these photographs like the remnants of a bad dream. There are children in a number of pictures - and it's a jolt to see the same woman's face on different pages, differently attired, with different men. I think of the exterior players who prop up the drama: the musicians trying to keep a beat, the bartenders and the cooks, the people who sweep the floors, the taxi drivers who deliver the men, the hired kids who run the errands and then all the women who center all these deals. All these women. These are not the romantic brothel photographs of a Bellocq or Brassai - they're more like inadvertent Lewis Hines.

In the introductory essays, quite a bit is made of the way that those who have been photographed have posed themselves. Dave Hickey's piece points out the types emulated: frat boys become banditos, Mexican ranchers are patrons of the Stork Club, prostitutes are Hollywood goddesses, young *chucos* try to be gangsters. And all of this seems quite true despite the fact that the eyes of the women often have little to do with these poses. Their eyes, it seems to me, go not to the camera, but right through it, with warmth and often sly humor, to the photographer, a man they obviously know. And there is beauty in these expressions. It is collusive, no doubt, but also sweet. And it rests up against, in the most contrary ways, the pawing, slobbering men draped around them. It may be a prostitute's ploy; they may be remarkable actresses, but the openness of some of these looks - not the blank model stares mentioned by Hickey, are heartbreaking, and to me the most disconcerting elements in the book. And if this were not strange enough, there are a few photographs that describe for all the world, young couples in love - perhaps drunk and perhaps in an unfortunate place, but genuinely affectionate. These are no doubt, the reasons that places like Boystown flourish - but there are certainly other photographs in which the woman is uncomfortable or hamming it up, playing the guy for a fool, just there for the game. And these guys are whacked, paying for the woman, paying for the drink, paying for the photograph... The book is about many things, but one sidelight certainly is the unavoidable idiocy of male licentiousness. There's no getting around it, the goofy power of lust can turn the hymn-singingest smart guy into Tony Soprano - or Gary Hart, or Austin Powers. And this is what the owners of Boystown take to the bank. (I'd pay good money for a video of a few of these Johns showing their little souvenir pictures to their buddies back in Beeville or Houston).

The book is well designed and laid out - from its garish serape cover, to its tabloid black pages, to the series of essays dropped like interpretive alms throughout the book. The progression of images from page to page is often brilliant - the use of hands, the use of symmetry and visual coincidence, and

the sizing of the plates are all inspired. The printing is beautiful, and the salvage job that Wittliff did on the negatives and prints should go down in regional photographic history. It's the south Texas equivalent of Bernice Abbott's rescue of Atget's negatives from his front stoop after his death.

There are many essays, and the names of Cristina Pacheco, Dave Hickey, Keith Carter and Bill Wittliff are blasted off the marquee-like title page as though they were members of a roadhouse band. Lengthy blurbs appear on the back from big name Hollywood - Tommy Lee Jones and Jessica Lange - and while there is little redundancy to this, I'm not sure the photos need all the verbal firepower - they stand tipsily on their own.

That said: Cristina Pacheco's piece is a generic description of a city of pleasure - and told mostly from the point of view of a prostitute, with apt quotes from customers about to be photographed. Hickey's essay both describes Boystown and puts the photographs into art historical context, comparing them to the *vanitas* paintings of Caravaggio and Velazquez. As pointed out he describes the lengths we all go to, to pose, trying to escape one geographical reality by imaginatively configuring ourselves into another.

"Through... redemptive memory, we might somehow rescue our foolish fantasies of dignity, power, and nobility from their obvious incongruity, and occasionally tease a spark of courage and generosity from our perpetual self-delusion.¹" The photographs in Boystown, he writes "tell us what Velasquez might tell us; that life is hard, and human beings foolish or corrupt, but, even so, there remains some spark of heart and generosity in the rituals of respite, some comfort in having a place to go and people to be with, even at the cruel, exploitive edge of human civilization."² Keith Carter's essay is on Boystown itself, an outward description of the place, a tour of sorts from the seventies, and a look into the life of one of its photographers. And Bill Wittliff's short afterword simply describes how the book came to be, a story which would make a funny short film in itself.

Despite the atmosphere of drunken high spirits in Boystown, an almost Catholic chastity reigns in the final edit. There is nothing hard core here, breasts are exposed (in a few cases pretty horribly), and there are nudes at the end, but nothing truly explicit. Beyond a couple of photographs, we are not led to the back. There are no photos of beds and people in them. There is a blank left to the imagination where the true business of Boystown occurs. I don't know if this was the photographers' decision, the prostitutes', the Boystown "authorities'", Aperture's or Wittliff's, but their omission keeps the book in bounds in a way it would not be, if such photos had been included. The decision also leaves more to the imagination than your imagination may want to hold.

This is a remarkable and troubling book. The photographs are self-incriminating, but they are also funny and human and stupid in such obvious ways that they almost self-beg for forgiveness. To one degree or another,

¹ Dave Hickey, *Boystown: La Zona de Tolerancia*, (New York, Aperture, 2000), "Dirty Pictures", p. 27.

² *ibid*, p. 27.

we've all been to Boystown. All of us, in one screwy metaphoric way or another could have appeared in these pictures. Not our best selves, certainly, but from time to time, each of us has been as wild-eyed and nuts as the cowboys, *patrons*, shitkickers, lawyers and cons that populate these photographs, and as cool and as desperate, as sad and as manipulative as the whores.

In Boystown, Bill Wittliff stumbled onto a cache of history. I can't imagine saying no to these negatives. And I finally can't say no to the photographs. The same set of emotions that might drive someone to Boystown, pops open our eyes and keeps us turning those pages. We feel vaguely guilty about it - but Jesus, we think, isn't this something? Isn't this just something?