

A Place Where Time Stands Still

By Stephanie Boozer

Tony Gonzales Captures Life on the Jersey Shores



“With the summer season of fairs, carnivals, and bazaars in full swing, the work of Tony Gonzalez—set among the boardwalks and amusement parks of his native Jersey Shore—provides some interesting lessons to those looking to record the goings-on in their own hometowns.”

A posh playground for America’s wealthy families in the early 1900s, the Jersey Shore today conjures up images of flashy Atlantic City and dirty beaches littered with medical waste. Not a very flattering picture of an area that boasted the nation’s first boardwalk (1870) and the first color postcards (1893).

From about 1878 to 1909, the Jersey Shore basked in its golden years. Point Pleasant, Asbury Park, Keansburg, and other towns built grand hotels and summer retreats

for the well-to-do industrial tycoons. Now, with its Victorian charms faded and its neighborhoods run-down, a healthy crowd of scantily clad summer tourists continues to seek amusement at this quirky watering hole. In the midst of it all, photographer Tony Gonzalez records the human dramas as they play out in the stage-like setting of the Shore.

“The Shore really has its own aesthetic,” said Gonzalez. “There’s a kind of timelessness about the place, with all the games of chance and the carni-fair archi-



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ecture, it really drew my attention.”
For several years, Gonzalez photographed the towns along the Shore, examining the subtle duality of the landscape and the people who frequented it. Drawing inspiration from local musical legend Bruce Springsteen, immortalizer of the glory days of Asbury Park, Gonzalez sought to capture the undying spirit of the Shore in his documentary photographs.

“There’s this phoenix-like quality about these places,” he explained. “They live through their glory days, die, and then rise up again from their own ashes. Unfortunately, Asbury Park has seen better days and is suffering from economic and physical neglect. But towns like Point Pleasant, Seaside Heights, and Wildwood are currently enjoying their heyday.”

These quaint seaside towns swarm



each season with families and tourists from nearby New York and the Mid-Atlantic States. The Shore's eclectic, nostalgic vibes draw nearly every age group, from the very young to the elderly. "When I started photographing the Shore," said

bikini-clad female posing in the distance, while another boy catches water in his mouth and two others seem completely self-absorbed. In the distance, the fifth and smallest boy looks on, silently observing the inescapable rites of passage.



Gonzalez, "I was interested in who these people were, why they came here, and what they were doing."

Most of Gonzalez's Jersey Shore images deal with the primal struggles of adolescence as they play out in the sensual environment of the boardwalk. "The kids were so innocent but so adult," said Gonzalez. "I was really interested in the paradox, the potential. The adolescents have these bodies that are changing so fast and they don't know what to do with them. It's a universal experience that we can all relate to."

One of Gonzalez's best illustrations of the adolescent dilemma is "Boys at Shower." In this image, five boys of different ages stand at a beachside shower in Point Pleasant. There's the older boy staring at a

An essential philosophy behind Gonzalez's work is the idea of relating people to their environments. Though a technique traditionally associated with documentary photography, this methodology—or at least its premise—has been increasingly applied to other fields of professional photography, most notably fashion and portrait. What the Madison Avenue crowd calls "lifestyle photography" is becoming increasingly prevalent in fashion photography (see "The Black Book Looks at Life," page XX) and the increasingly popular environmental portrait offers a more natural alternative to the traditional posed studio shot.

The Jersey Shore Project also deals with the abstractions and shapes of the land itself. The skeletal structures

of the water parks defining the coastline and towns, and the bawdy, carnival-like statues and buildings, all tell a story of a unique coexistence between the structures, the people, and the towns. It's a story that's fascinated Gonzalez since he was a youth.

Born in Manhattan, Gonzales grew up in the small town of Hazlet, New Jersey. His interest in drawing and painting led him to The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, in New York City, where he completed his undergraduate education. After an introductory photography class, Gonzalez quickly discerned that photography was the next natural step for him as an artist.

Since most of his paintings had been based on photographic sources, Gonzalez was already familiar with the remarkable storytelling quality of photography. In his senior year at The Cooper Union, he began to photograph the nearly empty arcades of the New Jersey Shore during the off season. It wasn't until he had completed graduate school at Yale University's School of Arts and Sciences that he would return to continue his quest.

The impeccable reputation of Yale University attracted the most notable photographers of the time—Robert Frank, Helen Levitt and Lee Freidlander, to name a few—to teach and guest lecture. The intense, creative environment fostered Gonzalez's commitment to photography and his interest in a teaching career.

After receiving an MFA from Yale, Gonzalez taught photography at a community college in Jersey and later accepted a part-time teaching position at The Cooper Union. He returned to the Jersey Shore project in 1991. Shooting with a Leica M4-2 35mm camera, a graduation gift, Gonzalez frequented the boardwalks and amusement parks of the Shore, snapping documentary images of the vibrant life there. "I had a desire to go back to the Shore because I felt that

there was something more I needed to photograph," he said. "I wanted to explore what happens in-season. It was a very familiar subject on one level and an entirely new one on another."

Gonzalez became a permanent fixture on the Shore—so much so that no one really even noticed him. "I was like the pretzel vendor," he laughed. "The Leica is pretty inconspicuous and people just feel less threatened by cameras at the Shore." Using an Elmarit 28mm f/2.8 wide-angle lens, Gonzalez had to stand close to his subjects—no more than three feet—but no one seemed to mind. He shot Agfapan APX 25 black-and-white film because of its fine grain and maximum sharpness.

About five years ago, Gonzalez purchased a 2x3 Crown Graphic camera to photograph the larger-than-life water park structures and landscapes on the Shore. For color work, he used Kodak Pro 400 MC (PMC), Vericolor III Professional

Type S (VPS), and Pro 1000 (PMZ) films; the latter allowed him to handhold the camera, even in low-light situations. "The Shore is really beautiful at dusk, when there's still plenty of natural light and the artificial lights come on," he said. "It turns into this cotton candy, fantasy, wonderland type place."

After six years of work, Gonzalez finished the Jersey Shore Project in 1997. Selected works from the project, titled "Memories of Adolescence," were exhibited last May at the Cheryl McGinnis Gallery in New York City.

Throughout the project, Gonzalez was an adjunct professor at The Cooper Union and taught at New York University and the Pratt Institute as well. "The students are exceptional," he said. "They're talented, intelligent, mature, and motivated. When I'm teaching students photography for the first time, it reminds me of all the reasons I do this. Their infatuation with photography constantly feeds my pas-

sion for making my own photographs."

Though he never acquired a taste for commercial photography, Gonzalez produced work for the Ford Foundation, one of the largest private foundations in the country. His work consisted of black-and-white documentary-style photographs for the annual reports of the Foundation's educational programs. He did similar projects for the American Indian College Fund.

Gonzalez has exhibited in numerous shows, and his work has been published in *Marie Claire*, *The Best of Photography Annual*, and several other publications. His photographic work has brought him many honors and awards.

With his Jersey Shore Project behind him, Gonzalez has a new focus. "I'm going back to the Canon AE-1 SLR camera that I used in college, but added a macro lens and an extension tube," he said. "I'm dealing with many of the same aesthetic concerns

as with the Jersey Shore Project, but with the close-up perspective, I'm eliminating much of the social context. The resulting photographs, which are primarily about light, surface, and form, have become abstractions of the former subject matter."

The photographer feels he's getting closer to his origins in drawing and painting. "Because of the shallow depth of field in close-up photography, I can draw the viewer's attention to the point of focus. I can select certain details while obscuring others. I'm using the camera as a drawing tool to achieve a painterly approach rather than a photographic one." Gonzalez is also experimenting with alternative photography techniques, such as gumbichromate, a century-old process using pigments.

"I've never really identified myself strictly as a photographer," said Gonzalez. "I've always remained interested in other art forms. The Jersey Shore experience was very rewarding because it provided this incredible theater for me to capture moments that had meaning. I saw a chance to bring some of my own understanding into the image."

In Gonzalez's photographs, it's the simultaneous understanding and curiosity about the nature of humankind that draws us to them. We recognize the basic components of ourselves. The timeless qualities of many of the Jersey Shore photographs also release them from the boundaries of age. "At the Shore, there is flesh, sand, water, and light," said Gonzalez, "all sensual in different ways and elements with which we are all familiar."

The Cheryl McGinnis Gallery in New York City currently represents Tony Gonzalez. E-mail: cmggallery@aol.com. ■

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Kris/Kim: I think we need to cut this
down by at least one column