

## EXPOSURES



THIS PHOTO AND IMAGES ON PAGES 98, 100 © GREGORY HALPERN

### URBAN STUDIES **CITY SEARCH**

ALONE WITH HIS CAMERA, GREGORY HALPERN EXPLORED SEVERAL RUST BELT CITIES, MAKING IMAGES THAT REFLECT THE COMPLEXITY OF LIFE AT AMERICA'S MARGINS.

BY CONOR RISCH

IN THE SUMMER of 2010 photographer Gregory Halpern set out to explore and make photographs in some of the country's oldest Rust Belt cities. He traveled to Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Detroit and Buffalo, where he grew up.

As a Buffalo native and Rochester resident—Halpern teaches photography at Rochester Institute of Technology—who shoots mostly around his upstate New York home, Halpern is inspired by “old neighborhoods in old cities,” where “the beautiful sits next to the ugly, the hopeful and redemptive next to the despairing.”

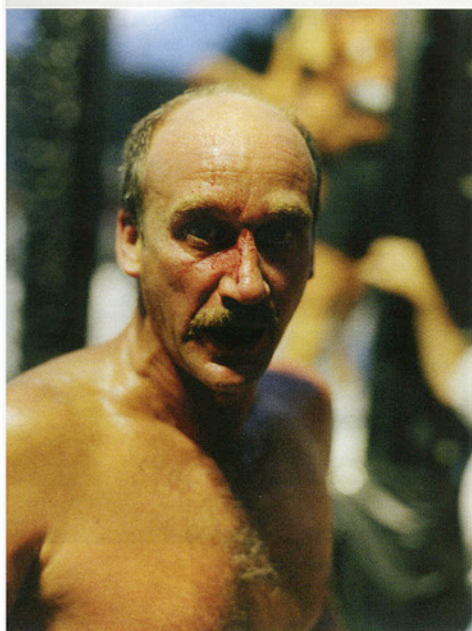
Halpern spent most of the summer alone with his Pentax 6x7, exploring these places “in a slow, somewhat intuitive way,” he says. “On the one hand, I am interested in the specific histories of these places. On the other hand, I don’t see these photographs as being about the cities in which they were made, or about the American Rust Belt in general. They do feel very much from the Rust Belt, however,” Halpern explained via e-mail from South Korea, where he was on press for the printing of his new book, *A*, out this month from J&L.

Halpern made most of the images in his new book hand holding his Pentax 6x7.

*continued on page 98*



## EXPOSURES



Halpern chooses to explore cities "intuitively," without the aid of a map. "There is a pleasure in the alertness of not knowing what is coming next," he says.



### CITY SEARCH

*continued from page 96*

"For me, the location of the images is usually less important than the feeling of the thing pictured," Halpern says.

Halpern's book opens with a photograph of a skinny feral cat crossing a road. The cat hisses angrily at the viewer. In another photograph a kitten crouches in a small, rusty cage. A formerly grand house with a turret sits hollow and decaying, the vegetation growing up its stone walls, seemingly pulling the structure down into the earth. A pair of raccoons pick at discarded chicken bones. Antiseptic office buildings stretch into the sky, looming. A chain-link fence abuts the columns of a forgotten monument overgrown with weeds.

Photographs of trees recur throughout the book. Some bear complex tangles of branches. An old, massive tree sits at the center of a lawn shorn of its limbs. A small tree with pink blossoms thrives in an overgrown yard. It wasn't until Halpern was editing the book with J&L publisher Jason Fulford that he realized he'd been preoccupied by trees. "In the book, each of the trees functions a little differently, depending on its relative vitality," Halpern says. "In general, I find trees reassuring. In a way, I think they serve to counterbalance some of the darkness in the book."

Houses and other dwellings, like a large bush that has been hollowed out to create a shelter, are also important. "I sometimes see them as forts or nests, if you will, for humans. Other times, photographing them is

*continued on page 100*



# EXPOSURES

## CITY SEARCH

*continued from page 98*



**In his portraits, Halpern is interested in the tension created by a mixture of traits—like strength and vulnerability—evident in his subjects.**

almost like making a portrait. The windows are like eyes on a face. And just like one's countenance, they advertise strength and success, or betray weakness and injury and failure."

Halpern's portraits of recognizably working class people show a mix of struggle, vulnerability, strength and tenderness. A bare-chested man stares defiantly into the camera, his brow and the bridge of his nose bloodied. A couple poses cheek to cheek. A little boy wades in a river, the smokestack of a factory or refinery (perhaps abandoned?) rising behind him. A woman in a bathing suit clutches a puppy to her face.

"We are all vulnerable," Halpern explains. "Our weaknesses can be endearing, interesting, and to an extent define who we are. . . . That said, I hope my portraits don't simply show vulnerability. What interests me more is a tension in the mixture of traits—strength plus vulnerability, for example."

In his wanderings, Halpern also found what appears to be an unmarked grave; a peacock; gold or some other precious metal stashed away in a hollow at the base of a tree; a shard of mirror in a patch of dirt reflecting a piercing light. These discoveries reflect Halpern's artistic process.

"In getting to know a place, there is a pleasure in the alertness of not knowing what is coming next," Halpern says. "I'm not interested in creating a tight 'project' where unpredictability is lost or sacrificed for visual consistency. . . . Our surroundings are complex, in my opinion, to the point of being visually or verbally indescribable. I want my photographs to reflect that impossibility, to respond to that complexity and create an equally complex, perhaps impenetrable, thing." **pdn**