

Childhood Memories - Allen Weitz

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, long before the days of jetting off to distant lands for the price of a fancy dinner, the average New York City dweller had two choices. You could board a train (or your own automobile, if you were rich) and head upstate to the Catskill Mountains, or you could board a subway or trolley car to Coney Island. Depending on which of the five boroughs you departed from, the trip varied from under an hour to the better part of the day. While Coney Island today is not what one would call a prime destination for an exotic vacation, back in those days it was considered an enviable destination.

As a Brooklyn boy, many of my summer days were spent surfside at Coney. Even though almost all of the boardwalk attractions were already long of tooth by the time my friends and I had our time in the sun, there were still many remnants of the place my parents, uncles, aunts, and their friends spent their own summer days a generation earlier. Nathan's Famous had, and still has to this day, the best hot dogs and fries on the face of the earth, and the sole remaining wood-framed roller coaster, The Cyclone, still outmatches anything Six Flags has to offer. Fueled by my love of the place, along with the realization that the clock was ticking on what was still standing, I decided to photograph the Coney Island landscape before it completely vanished. Armed with a 4x5 view camera, a bag of film holders, and a dark cloth, I began photographing the remnants of a fading world.

My efforts didn't stop in Brooklyn. A friend who saw my work suggested I check out the Jersey shore, a place he had spent a parallel childhood. I loaded up my VW and began documenting shore towns that included Seaside Heights, Point Pleasant, Asbury Park, Ocean City, and Wildwood. Three decades later, the fruits of my earlier labors now bear witness to places long gone.

Almost all of the images in this series were taken off-season. With the crowds absent, I was able to capture each structure unencumbered by throngs of beachgoers and other seasonal distractions. The structures stand naked, like actors stripped of props, on a white seamless backdrop. On a few occasions, somebody (usually someone not much younger than the building and signage I was photographing) would pass by. A few would stop to chat and offer stories of their own memories of the boardwalk. Most passed by, never noticing I was there.

"Amusements" is the name of this series of photographs. Although I originally shot these photographs in black and white, my creative side wouldn't let things be. I have always loved the color palate of old postcards. Until the late fifties, most postcards were black and white images, reproduced as color lithographs by people who had never been to the place they were colorizing. The palate of colors chosen for buildings, skies, and other landmarks was more often interpretive, as opposed to factual. My original prints, made back in the early

seventies, were sepia toned and colored in using translucent photo oils. I too, chose my colors based on memories and gut feelings.

The photographs included in this series are a combination of old and new technologies. Starting with digital scans of the original black and white negatives, they have been colorized using a variety of tools found in Photoshop. The color and tint choices, along with the ability to zoom in on finer details, has allowed me to control the look and feel of the final images far more accurately than I was able to on my original prints three decades back. Though my earlier prints were unique one-of-a-kind images that harbored the scent of Marshall's Photo oils, the digital prints I am producing today are, in fact, truer to my original intent, as compared to the hand-colored prints I toiled over way back when. The ability to zoom in to pixel resolution to tweak details and produce colors from an infinite color palate produces results I simply could not accomplish in my original efforts.

Today, if you take any number of New York City subway lines to the last stop in Brooklyn, Nathan's Famous and the Cyclone roller coaster still greet you as you exit onto Surf Avenue. Look south, and the Wonder Wheel, the long-mothballed Steeplechase Parachute Jump, and the Half Moon Hotel still stand out above the seaside skyline. The rows of bungalows draped in burgundy, blue, and green awnings, formerly called home by my father, my wife's father, and his father before him, have long since been replaced by bland 30-story housing projects. Almost all of the arcades and haunted houses I remember from my own childhood have been replaced by newer, invariably electronic variations of the same seaside attractions. But if you stand on the boardwalk and close your eyes, you can still smell the hot dogs, fries, and the salt air, and hear the sound of the surf and the laughter and clatter of yet another generation claiming Coney as their very own.