

the world in black and white

It is a peculiar alchemy of black and white photography to document life in all its complexity. Somehow the flattening of dimension and the removal of color become gains rather than losses, as if without the distraction of such accuracies we might finally see. In the hands of a gifted photographer, the camera becomes more than a tool for framing and capturing images; it is a laboratory by which the moment becomes iconic, open to interpretation and yet incontrovertibly real.

All these attributes are amply on display in Harvey Stein's **Harlem Street Portraits** (Schiffer Publishing, \$45), which gathers over two decades of pictures taken in that eponymous place. Talk about iconic—the streets of Harlem are legendary for their mainstay in African American culture, their artistic outpourings and social challenges, their ceaseless teeming with life—and Stein has made the most of slowing down time in this particular place. His portraits reveal a sensibility that shows he meets his subjects eye to eye and invites every human emotion in their gazes: joy, defiance, resilience, exhaustion, hope. A short introductory essay by the photographer confirms he views the process of taking street portraits as one of collaboration; a longer closing piece by photography maven Miss Rosen eloquently spells out the unique aspiration of the street shutterbug to seek us out in public, “where we can play so many roles at the same time.”

Fittingly, most of the portraits here are shot in landscape, allowing Stein to capture the context that surrounds his chosen subjects. Occasionally these landscapes are printed across the spine, which comes across as



photo by Harvey Stein from *Harlem Street Portraits*

more charming than not, a sign that the page can't always hold the fullness of life within the photograph. It is evident that Stein has mastered the challenges of light: every image here has the crispness of a film still, and there is only shadow if it serves the composition.



Coney Island Teenagers, 1949 from *Harold Feinstein: A Retrospective*

New York street photography is also at the core of **Harold Feinstein: A Retrospective** (Nazraeli Press, \$65), especially if one includes (as one should) Feinstein's celebrated Coney Island photographs. The images here span from 1946 to 1990, though the lion's share date from the '50s and '60s. No matter the place or subject, Feinstein is more a fine art photographer than a documentarian—he's as apt to focus on a lace curtain as a human figure—and

his compositions are casually stunning, achieving sculptural depth or a painterly palette with ease. Light—whether neon, incandescent, or sun—plays a pivotal role. The best of these photographs deserve mention in the same breath as Steichen, Cunningham, Edward Weston, and other renowned masters.

While only a few of these images are portraits per se, Feinstein's unveiling of people in their street or beach

habitat has that same innate strength as Stein's—he has clearly bothered to relate to his subjects on a level beyond that of the voyeur, to see them as people rather than as props. Occasionally the symbolism is heavy: bedraggled children in front of a “Storefront

Christ,” or the uniformed soldier sitting somewhat apprehensively in a photo booth, for example. But more often, these photographs revel in the ordinary, showing people at work, at play, and perhaps most importantly, in that liminal space between doing nothing and being one's true self.

Although this verges on a slim book, it is filled with masterpieces (more books should be so slim). The “retrospective” of the title is rounded out with an arresting series of photographs taken

in Korea during Feinstein's deployment there during the '50s, as well as a few nudes, nature scenes, and avant-garde compositions. These images are important as further proof of Feinstein's range and technical abilities, but for evidence of his humanity and vision, one can see he didn't have to go far past his doorstep.

—Eric Lorberer