Reframing New Jersey

Seven Photographers Connected to the State Examine Its Pull and Reach Beyond Stereotypes

By JILL P. CAPUZZO

CRANFORD, N.J.

Whether they were born in New Jersey, work in New Jersey or fled New Jersey, the seven artists showcased in a new photography show at Union County College feel the pull of this often-maligned state.

For each of the photographers whose works are featured in “Site Specific, NJ,” the show on view at the college’s Tomasulo Gallery, one region, one town — sometimes even one structure — became compelling subject matter. From the state’s more obviously photogenic subjects, like the decaying Asbury Park amusements depicted in haunting black-and-white photographs by Andrzej Jerzy Lech, to the more elusive, like Tom Sullens’s streaked flight patterns at Newark Airport, the work on display is meant to look beyond the stereotypes of New Jersey, said Mary Birmingham, the guest curator.

“I got taken with the idea of people who became obsessed with a place,” said Ms. Birmingham, “especially in New Jersey, because there are so many different kinds of places in New Jersey.”

For some of the participants, like Deborah Garwood and Christina L. Wilson, the obsession meant returning to the same pond or abandoned railroad car over a period of years, to capture shifts in nature, or advancing rust. For others, repeat visits to one site provided not only an opportunity to document change but also perhaps a means to unravel a complicated relationship with their home state.

“Site Specific, NJ” is on view at the Tomasulo Gallery, in the MacKay Library building at Union County College, 1033 Springfield Road in Cranford. The show runs through Oct. 26.

Guided Tour

Brendan Carroll, who moved from Kendall Park when he was 17, revisits his hometown in 162 Polaroids, with captions, in “Site Specific, NJ,” an exhibition at the Tomasulo Gallery at Union County College in Cranford. Far right, Andrzej Jerzy Lech’s black-and-white take on Asbury Park.

“I sipped my double espresso from a white paper cup in the food court at the local strip mall. There is nothing worse than being a suburban artist.”

Online: 7 Views of New Jersey

More images from the show at the Tomasulo Gallery are available at www.nytimes.com/theregion.

Schooled as a painter, Brendan Carroll began taking Polaroid snapshots a few years ago. One subject he turned his lens on was Kendall Park in Middlesex County, the place he grew up in and couldn’t wait to escape. He managed to leave at 17, when he moved to Philadelphia.

Now 32, Mr. Carroll lives in Jersey City, and, through his photo montage, has made peace of a sort with Kendall Park. Each of the 162 Polaroid pictures on display includes a typed caption. Some humorous, some dark, some lewd, they reflect his memories and associations with the sites of his childhood.

“I wanted to write stuff that people could identify with, stuff that my parents would understand,” said Mr. Carroll. One photograph of a field and farm buildings in Dayton, near Kendall Park, is captioned, “It took my parents 30 years to leave Jersey City, and it took me 30 years to return.”

Bryan Zanisnik has spent much of the last three years walking through the Meadow-
ARS AND ENTERTAINMENT

State
...

and, through his photo montage, has made peace of a sort with Kendall Park. Each of the 162 Polaroid pictures on display includes a typed caption. Some humorous, some dark, some lewd, they reflect his memories and associations with the sites of his childhood.

“I wanted to write stuff that people could identify with, stuff that my parents would understand,” said Mr. Carroll. One photograph of a field and farm buildings in Dayton, near Kendall Park, is captioned, “It took my parents 30 years to leave Jersey City, and it took me 30 years to return.”

Bryan Zanisnik has spent much of the last three years walking through the Meadowlands, taking photos and video, in an attempt to get a handle on an area he said “even the government has deemed as unclassifiable.”

His work, which he calls a “quirky cartographer’s project,” combines satellite maps, tongue-in-cheek legend keys and blown-up color shots of juxtaposed images, like rusted oil tanks in a wooded glen. The fantasy legend keys include symbols for things like “mercury contaminants” and “Mafia-related activity.”

“This is the mythology of the Meadowlands,” said Mr. Zanisnik, who grew up in Union Township and now lives in Brooklyn. “It’s touched, but untouched. It’s a landfill, but it’s also a beautiful landscape.”

For Emma Wilcox, who has spent the last five years photographing obscure industrial sites in Newark, Kearny and Jersey City, the goal was to focus on “issues of land use and justice,” she said.

Having been evicted from one studio in Newark because of eminent domain, then offered another space in a neighborhood undergoing gentrification, Ms. Wilcox has been caught in the ebb and flow that often defines New Jersey.

“There is a lot of pain in all of these photos,” said Ms. Wilcox, pointing to her stark black-and-white work. “But at the moment, life is incredibly good.”