

Time and the City

Matt Weber's unflinching photographs of New York City are a perfect portrait of a shifting urban landscape. He talks to **Oliver Atwell** about the methods behind his work

For a city that's been endlessly mythologised, the spirit, perhaps even the true face, of New York has always eluded strict definition. The city is a cultural Chinese whisper, a shape-shifting entity where one's experience of the streets rarely matches those of your neighbour. Author Don DeLillo has his version, one full of conspiracy and political intrigue. JD Salinger

has his, where all adults are phonies and the ducks have vanished from the ponds. Jay McInerney's is chock full of hedonistic yuppies and cocaine-fuelled magazine writers. Then there are photographers such as Saul Leiter and William Klein, who were both able to capture New York's kaleidoscopic palette.

Over to former cab driver Matt Weber, whose ongoing documentation serves as perhaps one of the most vital current records we have. Matt's beautiful and unflinching street photography lays bare the strange schizophrenia of a city where everything is happening at once. In one shot, two lovers embrace unashamedly in the street (see left), while in the next frame a young child on a bicycle calmly gazes upon the gun in his hand (see pages 26-27). Matt's project is one that breathes, one where the smells and sounds of its subject almost seem to haemorrhage from every frame. The images stretch back in time and reveal the changes that have slowly taken place across the city.

'I noticed on Facebook, and on various other social media platforms, that my older pictures of



Left: 'Midnight Kiss,' date unknown

Harlem and Times Square are usually the ones with the most likes,' says Matt. 'A photograph that's very boring can become a topic of great interest 30 years in the future. The parked cars and the signs on the stores, which are long gone, make many people very nostalgic for their youth. I remember buying my first pack of smokes for 50¢. Pizza was 25¢. How can someone not long for those days? The answer is crime. Back in the "good old days" you had to put up with getting mugged. A couple of my girlfriends back in the 1970s were raped. I'm not saying

there's no crime today, but it has diminished considerably. All the people longing for the old Times Square porn theatres should just recall the fear of walking the streets at night.'

Taxi driver

When asked about his background, Matt says: 'Photography was just a hobby when I was a kid. I shot on Kodak Tri-X and Kodachrome back then. That was around 1969-72. Then, as a teenager, I got sidetracked and found myself up to no good. It would have been great to

photograph all the crazy stuff I did, but there's no going back. In 1984 I got tired of seeing all these unbelievable things in New York City and not being able to record them. That was when I dove right back in.'

One of the most interesting aspects of Matt's life is tied up with his former career. For years during the 1970s he worked as a New York cab driver, cruising the streets and soaking in the city's often-surreal atmosphere. This period was vital in that it taught Matt a few things about the

Above: 'The Unknown Soldier-Marine,' Times Square, 1989

residents of New York City. 'While driving a taxi in the 1970s when New York was quite dangerous, I learned to form quick studies of the people I allowed into my taxi, says Matt. 'I literally had just a few seconds to decide if the people were a possible threat to me. In 1988, I think 34 taxi drivers were killed. It was far more risky to drive a cab than to be a policeman. I learned that many poor people would tip me a lot more than rich ones. The old cliché "you can't judge a book by its cover" certainly applies to judging people.'





▶ You'll never cease to be surprised by how kind some people are while, at the same time, others can be so mean and selfish.'

Sharp shooter

Everyone has their own philosophy when it comes to photography, although street photography seems to be the genre that inspires the most debate, particularly when it comes to methods. Looking through Matt's images, it would be tempting to see him as the kind of photographer who stalks through the streets shooting from the hip. Actually, the reality isn't quite that straightforward.

'I make a big deal about not shooting from the hip,' says Matt. 'Garry Winogrand, the legendary street photographer, always took a peek through his viewfinder. That may surprise people, considering the tilted images he's famous for. When I take a picture of a person, I want more than just their torso. A single person fits nicely in a vertical frame. From the hip, most shots are a little bit off and that may satisfy some people, but it just leaves me feeling angry at myself.'

'Of course, my approach has its downside, too,' Matt adds. 'The amount of threats I've received are too numerous to count, and it does get ugly sometimes. I guess I could just ask people for permission and

Above: 'Flag, Rainy Night,' Times Square, 2012

Above right: 'Boy with the Silver Gun,' date unknown

Right: 'Homeless Cripple and Jesuit,' 2011



do street portraits, but then that's not what I want my pictures to be about. I might consider approaching a person if they have a cool tattoo or something [that stands out], but most of the time I won't.'

The thing that perhaps strikes the viewer about Matt's images is that on the surface they appear a little rough around the edges, but a closer inspection reveals that great care has gone into every frame and composition. The images appear almost effortless, which is perhaps the sign of a natural photographer.

'I used to attribute most of my success to luck,' says Matt. 'A few years ago, I realised that I am talented enough to take some credit for my better work. That said, luck is undeniably still a huge



factor, as the strange events and arrangements of people on the street are completely beyond my control.'

Any street photographer who's been working for as many years as Matt has will tell you that, after a while, you learn to reconfigure your perception of your everyday environment; you essentially train your awareness and become more receptive to ideas.

'It's a strange thing to notice, and watch everything and everyone all the time,' says Matt. 'It's like you can never just relax and let down your guard. I am always looking, and I guess that's something I can no longer control. It's like an off-duty cop. He never stops watching people; he's always looking to make

CAMERAS IN THE CITY

Matt Weber on the kit that has helped him in his career



'FOR THE first 15 years (1985-1999), I used the Canon AE-1 and F-1 with a 50mm and a 200mm lens,' says Matt. 'Then I bought a pair of Leica M6s. In 2014 I was struggling to come up with \$500 per month for film, so my friend Mike Peters taught me how to use a digital camera. I now feel comfortable and have found it to be very liberating. I can take several pictures of anything when the faintest inspiration hits – and if the pictures stink, it's not a problem. I've been using a Panasonic Lumix DMC-GX8, which just came out. Its 20 megapixels are more than adequate, and it's not a heavy SLR. I miss the Leica's viewfinder, but the cost of the M240 is just not in my current budget.'

'I'm content to still photograph the city and its eight million stories'

sure crime isn't happening.'

These days, Matt is able to make a living from his images. Much of his older work finds its way into documentaries and magazines. The sales of his prints, too, have steadily started to increase. Perhaps most impressively, Matt saw himself as the subject of a 2012 documentary called *More Than the Rainbow*.

'My friend Dan Wechsler asked me if I'd like to make a movie with him,' says Matt. 'It sounded like it would be fun, even though we'd be taking a long shot that it would ever be accepted into film festivals. I didn't think it had a chance, but Dan worked very hard on the film for at least five years. In the end, it received a lot of great reviews. I hope it makes its way onto Netflix, as it's a film that photographers really like, and also one that can be appreciated by people who just like great documentaries.'

Now and then

The great thing about a place like New York City is that there's no shortage of things to shoot. As



▶ Matt says, 'I'm very content to continue photographing the city and its eight million stories.' The city never stands still. It's always changing, and Matt is there to catalogue the new and the old.

'When I was young in 1975, anyone, including artists, could afford an apartment,' says Matt. 'There were four-room railroad flats renting for \$90 a month in Hell's Kitchen [midtown Manhattan]. If you wore shoes and had the cash in your hand, a super would hand you a set of keys, and you had a place to live, just like that. You could always figure out a way to pay your rent when it was \$3 dollars a day, and you had plenty of space to work on your art. Today you had better be working for Goldman Sachs if you're young and want to live here.'

New York City is one of the most photographed places on earth for good reason. Like London – in fact,

like any major city – the world in microcosm is laid bare: all forms of life, all forms of culture, they're right there in front of you. Old buildings, ones full of vital cultural history, aggressively rub shoulders with young upstart architecture. The city is a time capsule, but perhaps not for long. New York is at real threat from the shiny boot of gentrification stomping it into a flat, beige monospace. With that in mind, the preservation of its visual records is of utmost importance.

'The most obvious place where the change is overwhelming is on the Bowery [south Manhattan],' says Matt. 'What for almost a century was the gathering place for the poorest of the poor, and a major population of alcoholics, is now as sought-after a real-estate location as almost any. Glass towers are popping up on there and the whole Lower East Side like mushrooms.'

Above: 'The Exorcist', 2010



Matt Weber is a photographer living in New York City. You can view more of his images at www.mattweberphotos.com

But that's not to say poverty is vanishing from the city. Matt has lived there long enough to know that gentrification does nothing more than paper over the cracks. In the tradition of photographers such as Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, Matt is much more interested in documenting the lives of those living on the periphery of the city's consciousness.

'There's a new generation of young people in their teens and early twenties who are now on the street and without homes,' says Matt. 'Most of them come from other cities. They allow themselves to become very dirty and that may offer them some protection. Many have dogs. The new rich and young New Yorkers are being driven around town in their Uber cars, and I have to say I don't find them very interesting to photograph. I'm pretty sure they don't mind.'



MATT WEBER ON THE INFLUENCE OF ANSEL ADAMS

AS WELL as Garry Winogrand and Robert Frank, Ansel Adams is a photographer Matt identifies as being a primary influence on his own photographic work.

'Ansel Adams published three books on how to be a photographer,' says Matt, '*The Camera*, *The Negative* and *The Print*. Those three books were invaluable to me. In 1984

you had to learn how to use the darkroom, and also how to use filters and master manual exposure if you expected to become a competent photographer. Of course, today that's not the case. Thirty years ago, the slower learning curve made sure that being a photographer was something a person really wanted to become. Today, a kid can buy

a fancy camera on the high street or wherever, and within a few days technically fantastic pictures will begin to pile up on their computer's hard drive. I suppose beginner's luck may convince someone that they have found their calling. I guess that's a good thing even though, in my opinion, it was a little harder in the "old days".'