

Countercurrents

Kip Praslowicz: “Lake Effect”

Tim White

Just two hours’ drive from Minneapolis, the generally desolate, flat prairie landscape abruptly drops off, giving way to a more vertiginous perspective when you reach the Northeastern tip of Minnesota. Retreating glaciers during the last ice age left stark impressions on the port city of Duluth. It’s a small town that taconite mining once made prosperous, perched on ridges that bear down precipitously to Lake Superior. More aptly described as an inland sea, this vast expanse of frigid water that has spawned legends and swallowed legendary ships reaches seemingly to the boundaries of nowhere. It leaves in visitors—and must certainly stir in those who cling year-round to its craggy coastline—a profound awareness of void within what we blithely consider the solid earth beneath us.

When blizzard warnings last December cancelled my Duluth-bound bus ticket, fellow photographer Adam Costello gave me a white-



Kip Praslowicz (photo Richard Narum)

knuckled lift to catch Kip Praslowicz’s first major exhibition titled “Any Day.” This day, however, was anything less than common; the place had just been treated to over two feet of snow, and the air temperature fell to negative 20.

On arrival, we bolted for a gilded-age former railroad depot where above a soiree of veterans in uniform were 33 large-format color portraits of Kip’s eclectic neighbors—casually posed on frozen stoops, seated in cluttered living rooms, resting at their jobsites, reclining on ruddy porches, burning deadfall, or bicycling through a recent flood. There was even a wry self-portrait, cat in lap, reclined on a couch with fleece comforters, the strewn contents of emptied pockets and snacks nearby. The show’s title seemed as much to refer to its quotidian subject matter as to a stoic’s forecast for the prospects of positive change.

The large prints in “Any Day” are meditative and deliberate. For a person so highly competent with his craft Kip is far from socially at ease. It isn’t hard to imagine him at home beneath a dark cloth, working on his perfectly calibrated exposures alone, meticu-



Grandma's Sports Garden, May, 2012

The work featured here reveals another side to Kip as someone who negotiates the mayhem of bars and music festivals, wading viewfinder-deep into a raucous local music scene.

lously picking cat hair from richly detailed prints. But the work featured here reveals another side to Kip as someone who negotiates the mayhem of bars and music festivals, wading viewfinder-deep into a raucous local music scene. An infrared flash, red filter and high-ISO film allow him to work without intruding upon or blinding his subjects, thereby candidly catching inebriates tossing PBR tallboys and each other around, couples kissing unaffectedly, and stuffed animals joyously becoming unstuffed.

Outside that night's opening, a kid cadging smokes assured Adam and I that an after-party reception was "just" 20 blocks up a main road, which he set about walking toward. We slid hastily for the truck and took a harrowed trip down the narrowly visible streets, drifting snow occluding whatever businesses may've been on either side. We found a spot that was recently plowed and hoped was legal, then struggled to reach a Victorian manor overlooking Superior owned by friends of the artist. A growing crowd shook off their insulated layers, tore into growlers from a local brewer, and crushed an ad hoc stage for "Big Wave Dave's" band of smoldering R&B covers defying the arctic air outside. I was given a top-shelf whiskey, a view of many premium waggles, and sat

amazed by the music's ability to turn near-hypothermia into boundless capacities for movement and joy.

We were somehow ferried to an after-after party at a local club where I was wisely cut off, then whisked to a friend's home in the nearby hills. I watched the snow mount from a warm lair and enjoyed the surreal, muffled silence. That morning our crew layered any exposed flesh, and after failing to jump-start a neighbor's dead car battery we made for a nearby brewery. Its owner comped our table a round of stout, and I eased my rocky head with a view of the massive lake, now shrouded in steam like some death-metal concert by a burst municipal conduit, immense freighters made to look like toys through tricks of relative scale. Across the hall was the bar we'd lit on well past primes the night before.

Returning that night I made nice with yesterday's bouncers, and fell into warm hugs from that blurry evening's hosts. Kip and maybe a mere dozen of us were treated to the band "Murder of Crows;" a duet of Gaelynn Lea's violin and Alan Sparhawk (of "Low" fame) on guitar. They played impossibly sweet dirges, reminiscent of turf-fired pub craics and W.B. Yeats' observation that "the fiddle must ever lament about it all...until the heavenly gates swing open." Mingling intimately with



Clyde Iron Works, May, 2012



2104, May, 2012



2104, March, 2012



Blood on the Tracks, May, 2012

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the internationally renowned or the merely amiable became a common theme of these days, where the hellish weather and hard-won comforts enforced a leavening atmosphere.

In larger cities we pay a lot of lip service to the idea of an "art community," and here I was among a group that embraced varied arts as naturally as any other creative act—whether you're a famous raconteur in town signing books, a hipster bartender slinging generously unmeasured pours, even a photographer. Artists in Duluth aren't put on pedestals, or prone to pedagogical monologues regarding their process. It's a culture that won't abide your preening rock god posturing, even if you've earned the status to merit it. Kip and I may have kvetched about the prevalence of tourist-friendly work done here, bemoaned galleries' fondness for HDR, and grouched about affluent hobbyists with mortgage-equivalent DSLRs capturing the North shore's abundant natural beauty—but it wasn't to posit something higher-minded or

esoteric in their place. Photography in Duluth was a nascent medium; one that only seldom drew on human capital for source material and could create narratives in ways that storytelling, music, even alt-comic had for far longer here.

Kip's images are about plain people, and are abundantly empathetic. They have initiated a dialogue that allows his fellow residents to recognize their stories through his. In capturing the spontaneous reveries of a strange amalgam of the barely employed to the unemployed, the scions of once-moneyed families, aging counter-culture types and college students navigating intemperance, one derives a sense from this work that everyone seemed equally valued and integral to the spirit of the places he documents. In the democratic venues of under-regarded cities like Duluth the potential to lead the broader country from its present troubles and towards the experience of true community exists; enclaves where the unorthodox is valued because convention has so profoundly let us down—small



Pizza Luce, March, 2012



Rex Bar, August, 2011

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enough where the effects on all are evident, near and keenly felt—where a sense that we're all in the same boat pervade.

This is Kip's milieu; I was only visiting, but gained a better sense of the balance between the riotous and the reflective that seems to inform his bifurcated bodies of work. One of his iconic 8x10 color images features an adolescent girl (daughter of Kip's after-party hosts) peering self-consciously from behind a brightly-striped towel. She's merely sitting on a rocky outcrop as Superior's placid summer facade recedes near-infinitely behind her, only the barely-discernable form of a cargo ship tracing the distance. When you consider a work of such contemplative stasis next to one of Kip's frenetic, high-contrast club shots—say, of debutantes tossing a dear's heart onto a beer-soaked stage—the effects are jarring. You begin to gather that after the few idyllic months Minnesotans are given, and the many more less-so they've chose to endure, that an energy accrues which begs release.

At 28 Kip is young by comparison to the alt-process, film-philic fossils he meets online and in regional groups. He came to the medium in his senior year of high school to fulfill a technology requirement, yet continued for all of his three remaining quarters. After a few

years hiatus, he took an art minor in college for darkroom access. Digital cameras were relatively new, and having already worked with large-format film photography, the capabilities of late-'90s technology seemed meager.

While attracted to street photography, Kip realized the limitations of his less-than-metropolitan hometown for work of the type he then felt defined that genre. Duluth's streetscapes could best be described as sparse, and working in a place where photography is less ubiquitous once garnered him the unwanted attentions of the law. After quibbling over statutes and impugning what he imagined were Kip's motivations, a police officer, unable to "chimp" Kip's 20-year-old Olympus XA2, retreated.

At around this time, most of Kip's closest friends had left for greater opportunities outside Duluth, and now less socially connected, he considered that concerts were a venue he'd likely find large groups of people. Fortunately, the city's music sub-culture was flourishing, led by the eminent slo-core band "Low," but soon followed by other artists who would go on to reach wider prominence, like Charlie Parr and "Trampled by Turtles." Though a stranger to the scene, Kip was gratified by the photographic results he began to realize. In 2008 he mustered the nerve to



Clyde Iron Works, May, 2013



Pizza Luce, May, 2011



Rex Bar, August, 2011



RT Quinlan's, May, 2013

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show his initial work at a venue frequented by his unwitting subjects. The reception to them was warm, and soon his circle of acquaintances grew. He found that "with each new release of these photos the same cycle of people who I didn't know, but were in the images, would love them and we'd be introduced and form new friendships."

The more he persisted, "the smaller the city would feel ... as I was no longer working with strangers, but people I knew who accepted the work." There now seems to be little separation between Kip's circle of friends and his creative life, which strikes him as fine—as does working in what some may consider a smaller pond: "I find this very healthy for a social life, but also really awesome for my art. Working with people I know, and who aren't on edge because I have a camera near them, yet still trying to be as candid about it as possible definitely has a benefit of making strong images. The art has made me a happier person because of that, and I'm not sure if it would have worked as well in a larger area

where there is more anonymity."

Duluth has the sort of vibe where a stranger can spend a few days and leave feeling they've found their tribe, or meet a soulmate in a blue-collar bar over potluck when your return bus is cancelled. Kip's work is replete with this kind of easy, unfeigned camaraderie, and while a more ecstatic component is foregrounded in images of shared concert experiences, an underlying warmth and a solid community spirit is fully apparent. Like his art, his hometown oscillates almost effortlessly between the grounded and the buoyant, the lofty and the low; after all, the distance from the manor to the dive is more proximal there, the divisions less stark. Again, I credit that grand horizon-less lake—a thing to make one recurrently mindful of their relative significance, a great leveler of hierarchies, and one hell of a view.

Fact File

Check out Kip's other projects at kpraslowicz.com.



Amazing Grace, May, 2010