



October 23—
December 14, 1986

Reception:
Thursday,
October 30, 1986
4-7 PM

Gallery Hours:
Tuesday—Friday 10-4
Sunday 12-4
Closed Monday, Saturday, and Holidays

Lehman College
The City University of New York

Childhood in the Bronx

Contemporary Photographs by Georgeen Comerford
and Vintage Photographs from the Collection of The Bronx Institute

LEHMAN COLLEGE ART GALLERY

BEDFORD PARK BOULEVARD WEST
BRONX, NEW YORK 10468 (212) 960-8731

Georgeen Comerford by Walter Rosenblum

Georgeen Comerford was a student in my graduate class in photography at Brooklyn College many years ago. Since then we have become friends and teaching colleagues. We share a common passion—a love for photography. Her commitment to our common medium was clear from the moment she entered my class. As a young photographer, Comerford roamed the streets of the Bronx, where she lived, seeking out those rare expressive moments hidden in the lives of ordinary people.

Many photographers today find their truths in the exotic and the bizarre, in mystical and surreal worlds. A different sensibility is required to explore the streets of the city traveled so routinely that they seem devoid of all novelty. The truly sensitive photographer looks closely, searches beneath the surface, re-examines the familiar, questions the obvious. Time and patience are indispensable: the moment that reveals the essence of an experience is as evanescent as the fleeting rest of a butterfly on the wing. As the photographer waits and watches, persistence becomes a virtue. The work requires the sharpest eye, an instinctive sensitivity that anticipates an action, so that shutter and lens will capture a revelatory instant. These talents are inherent, possibly even native, in the finest artists.

Comerford photographs in many parts of the city, but the milieu of the Bronx, where she still lives, inspires her most expressive work. I believe it is axiomatic that one photographs best the things one knows best, and the Bronx, with its wide spectrum of ethnic groups, has touched a responsive chord in this photographer. Quietly, without anxiety about museum recognition or the personal aggrandizement that results from public relations, Comerford has become a poet-laureate of the people among whom she lives. Her photographs reflect the warmth and compassion she has uncovered in their streets and homes.

Her photographs are not reflective of the latest trends in contemporary photography. They are neither avant-garde nor obscure in content but are in the grand tradition of Atget, Stieglitz, Strand, Hine, and Cartier-Bresson, photographers who found their artistic reason for being in the life of their time.

More than the others, Comerford brings to mind Lewis Hine, the great social photographer who documented the shame of child labor at the beginning of this century. They share the same quiet demeanor, the same gentle character, the same commitment of their passion and talent to children who are demeaned by a social system insensitive to their needs. As with Hine, Comerford has devoted her photographic energies to portraying the poor and the dispossessed. I once asked Hine why the people in his photographs all seemed so beautiful and he smiled and replied that he photographed only beautiful people. So it is with Comerford. Their people are beautiful because these photographers find in ordinary lives an essential humanity which is our common bond.

The photographs Comerford has made for the Bronx history project avoid crime, drugs, prostitution, and the dangers of street life. They concentrate on the simple people who live as best they can under considerable economic stress, who love their families and friends, and who try to build a better life for those around them. In the Bronx, Comerford has found, among the wide variety of ethnic groups who make up its population, the expressive life of her time. The captions that accompany these photographs testify that she has explored just about every area of the Bronx: the South Bronx as well as Riverdale, churches, an Irish dancing school, parks, subway stations, a shelter for the homeless, swimming classes in public pools, and an institute for the blind.



Baby on his way to Operating Room, 1985

On the record of this range, it might be said that Comerford, who is slight of build and gentle in manner, has a whim of iron. She will go anywhere at any time to make photographs that are true to her chosen theme. That sometimes can be frightening or dangerous, but if anything, Comerford is bold and intrepid. For these qualities, as well as for her sensitive imagery, she merits our respect and admiration.

Comerford's photographs are deserving of a wide and varied audience. Her subjects are revealed in photographs that are alive and rich in compassion and dignity. For those who have experienced the Bronx only through the eyes of television camera crews or newspaper photographers, new truths will become evident in these photographs. For future historians, the photographs provide a precious and honest document about a people and a time that needs to be remembered in the daily realities so sensitively recorded by Comerford. She has become not only a superb photographer but a dedicated teacher.

Her artistry and accomplishments have earned our praise and warm support. She is true to her time and to her chosen craft.

Childhood in the Bronx by Erita B. Hill

Childhood in the Bronx is the product of four years of research and artistic creation. The early photographs in the "Vintage Collection" were gifts to the Bronx Regional and Community History Institute at Lehman, established in 1982 to document the history of the borough and its residents. Although each is a personal selection, as are the accompanying quotations from our interviews, most Bronxites of the same generation will see themselves mirrored in these images. The faces we find here are predominantly white, the backgrounds Jewish, Irish, Italian, Polish, German—a reflection of the composition of the Bronx in the early

decades of this century. All the photographs were copied by Georgeen Comerford, whose original photographs portray children of the Bronx today, to whom this exhibition is dedicated.

Since 1982, when Ms. Comerford became the official photographer of the Bronx Institute, she has enriched our collections with more than 7,000 images, including hundreds of photographs of children in streets and parks in different neighborhoods. Ms. Comerford had access to 33 Bronx organizations that provide services to children—community and day-care centers; public, private, and parochial schools; as well as hospitals and shelters for the homeless, to name only a few. She travelled the length and breadth of the Bronx, observing, photographing, selecting, and returning for more and more images.

The faces here are of many hues—many different national and ethnic types—a true representation of the rich diversity of the contemporary Bronx. They are beautiful and poignant. In her searching images, we perceive the souls within these young bodies and can guess at the challenges that confront these young people in their daily lives.

Ms. Comerford through her photographs has paid tribute to the children of the Bronx. I am delighted to pay tribute to her, a former child of the Bronx and still a resident, a gifted artist here bringing her talent to bear on what is closest to her. Walter Rosenblum's essay speaks eloquently of her promise and achievement. I thank here also my deputy director, Ms. Tabitha Kirin, who spent countless hours in these four years researching the children's institutions, conducting interviews, planning, organizing, and bringing to fruition this exhibition. Assisting her in the past year was Ms. Barbara Fasciani.

Partial support for this exhibition was provided by the Agnese Lindley Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Bronx Council on the Arts, Lehman College, and the gifts of many individual Bronx residents.

Erita B. Hill is director of The Bronx Regional and Community History Institute.



Funeral of a Teenager, St. Ann's Avenue, 1984



*Irish Dancing School Student,
Bedford Park, 1985*

Julio, 1977



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