

M+B

DRY INK

Have Camera, Will Travel

An interview with Mike Brodie, the Polaroid Kid

By William Inman

Mike Brodie left home at 18 for a new life on America's grid of railways and began to photograph the people he encounters on the tracks and in the squats – those who, for whatever their reasons, embrace the travel culture.



A portrait of the Polaroid Kid, photo by

William Inman

Now 21, he arms himself with little more than his Nikon F3 camera and spends his time traveling the United States telling his own story and those of the ruddy faces he encounters aboard freight, in abandoned warehouses, in homemade shacks and the landscapes in between.

His photographs have been exhibited in galleries in Milwaukee, Los Angeles, and his current exhibition, *Homesteadaz*, is on display at Get This Gallery in Atlanta. His work was also selected to appear in the 2006 edition of the Paris International Photo Fair at the Louvre.

Known as the Polaroid Kid for his work with time-zero film, which Polaroid discontinued early last year, Brodie tells us he now shoots strictly with 35 mm and his work is evolving to include more candid photography. He also

M+B

discusses his motivation, his traveling lifestyle and talks about his father, who is serving nine years in an Arizona penitentiary.

Dry Ink: So, you're the Polaroid Kid, do you still use Polaroid?

Mike Brodie: Nope, they discontinued the SX-70 film, the time-zero film...the film I used. It's what I think is the best film ever. So I was like, shit, I've got to learn how to use a 35 mm. So yea, I don't use Polaroid.

DI: Well, what kind of camera are you shooting with these days?

MB: Nikon F3, from 1980, it works good though. It's kind of a classic.

DI: When did you start traveling, taking pictures and finally getting attention from art galleries?

MB: It's really all thanks to the internet. If I didn't have a Web site and the ability to send people my photos; it, of course, would be a longer process and I probably wouldn't be (showing in galleries). But, as far as simply taking photos, I got into it about four years ago when I found a crappy Polaroid (camera) in the back of my friend's car, and she said I could have it so I went and bought a pack of film and shot a picture of the handlebars of my BMX bike – I used to ride BMX for six years – and it came out with the craziest colors. I was hooked... I started shooting Polaroid. Simultaneously, I met Savannah, my girlfriend, and we both had freight trains rolling by our house. And she's the wild punk girl I was fascinated with and we wanted to hop trains, but she was still in school, so I said 'Fuck this, man, I want to ride trains!' So I quit my job and waited around for a while and she still wasn't ready so I hopped a train to Jacksonville from Pensacola. I didn't know what I was doing, and ever since then it's been a learning process,

M+B

learning how to ride trains correctly, and what I photographed has evolved.



And then having a Web site that anyone in the world can look at, and all types of people contact me so...

DI: Do people that you travel with resent you for taking their photo? Or what's their response?

Oakland to the L.A. River, by Mike Brodie

MB: Everyone I photograph, I'm on good terms with. Sometimes, when they see the photo, they'll put their two cents in, but, I don't know, I think a lot of people – I've had a couple shows recently – and it's like... there's a bunch of dirty kids in a gallery and (art patrons) think it's fucked up. I don't know what they're talking about, and I don't want to have a conversation with those people. But, everyone I photograph... they're down with it. They know what I do with the photo. I mean, some of them I'll never see again, but most of them I keep in touch with.

DI: You seem like you've done a good job reconciling the art and the traveling culture, is that difficult? I mean, not necessarily keeping your travelin' `cred, but... you've had a show in Beverly Hills?

MB: Um, I don't know, it's funny, I hopped trains to the show in Beverly Hills. Me and four of my friends rode down to L.A. from Oakland, and we all got real wasted at the opening. People think train riding is some sort of sacred culture, and it definitely has deep roots in history, but it's 2007 and

M+B

people nowadays who ride trains do it for fun. Some want to act like their like, down and out, like impoverished young kids being exploited or something and that's silly. I ride trains for fun. I just like photographing these people because they interest me and they're beautiful and they're important to me. And I want to keep the document open on traveling because I need something to keep me going. I mean, if I wasn't taking photos, I wouldn't be traveling. Sometimes I take a train the wrong way or... whatever happens a photo will come out of it, so it doesn't really matter where I end up.

DI: So is there like a network of traveling kids? Do they all know each other?

MB: Half the people in my photographs know each other, and they all are in a similar age range and they're all traveling and hanging out in the same areas, most of them, same groups. So if they don't already know one another, they will down the road. Or they're MySpace friends. All those



traveling kids all are on MySpace, all have cell phones and all keep in touch with one another (laughs).

DI: Ha! That's hilarious, an interesting juxtaposition.

Soup//Paradise City, U.S.A, by Mike Brodie

MB: Yea, that's why it needs to be made fun of and not taken seriously. I don't mean to make people look so down and out in my photographs, but I

M+B

think that comes with portrait photos, you know, I'll say 'Look right here!' And they don't smile. So I think that gives an undertone of sadness.

DI: So how many shows have you had?

MB: This is my third. Milwaukee, Los Angeles and Atlanta.

DI: Why do you call this one *Homesteadaz*?

MB: I named this one after some kids who used to squat this abandoned apartment complex in Philly. A couple of 'em are in these photos.

DI: Home base is Pensacola?

MB: Yea, it's been my home base for about six years.

DI: So do you just pick up and go whenever?

MB: Yea, pretty much. I usually have a solid plan of where I want to go, but different things – different adventures - will sprout from it. And whatever pictures come along during the way...

DI: So are you going to continue doing portraits?

MB: No, I don't like doing portraits actually. I'm evolving more into shooting candidly. I really like just shooting stuff, being there, like when no one's really paying attention. (Portraits) can make good photos, but I like the weird stuff that happens when no one seems to be looking.

DI: So what's next?

MB: Well, I hope I stick to it for a while, I don't know how long, my project

M+B

is really just scratching the surface. I have a lot more photos to take and I'm going to keep riding trains. I know I'm going to keep shooting till 2012; my dad gets out of jail around 2011. And he's going to ride a train with me, but he'll probably have to sit around in Arizona on parole or something. So hopefully I'll stay motivated to shoot photos until then and wrap up the project when we go for a ride.

DI: So, if you don't mind me asking, what's he in jail for?

MB: Being stupid (laughs). Stealing stuff, he's been in jail his whole life. He went to this construction site, this subdivision, he stole like \$25,000 worth of marble tile. This guy actually hired him to do it, and he got caught and got nine years.

DI: Do you talk to him?

MB: No not really, I have a hard time... I've visited him the last two years in a row and I'm visiting him again this year, but I have a hard time writing him. I just would rather see him in person. I could write him and tell him everything that going on with my life, but I just send him a few notes here and there and tell him I'm looking forward to seeing him, and (when I see him) I'll run my mouth for a few hours, whatever.