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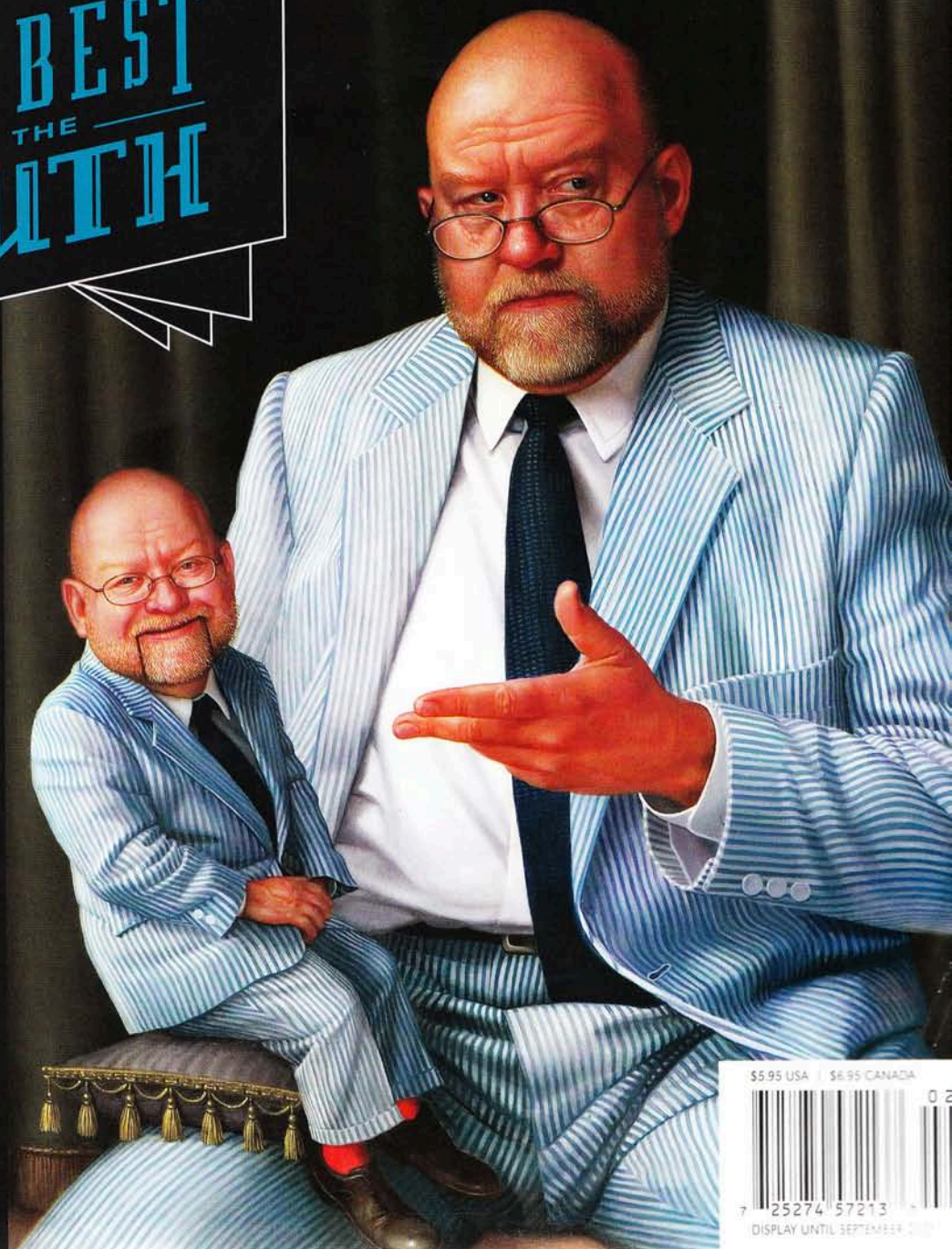
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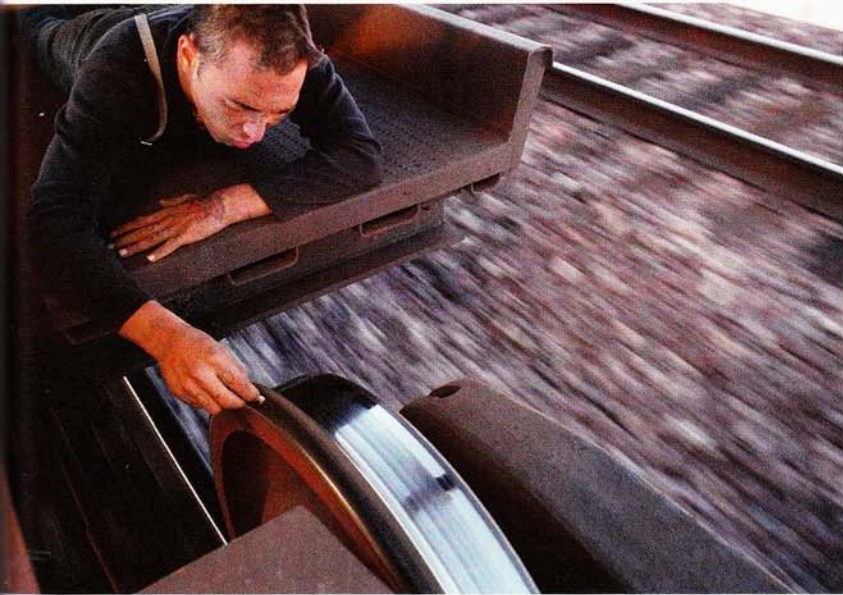


DISPLAY UNTIL SEPTEMBER 2009

RIDIN' DIRTY FACE

THE TRAIN PHOTOGRAPHY OF MIKE BRODIE.





Mike Brodie arrived in West Hollywood for his first major photography show dressed in a sleeveless Japanther shirt he hadn't washed in two years.

"Why don't you clean up?" Benjamin Trigano, the owner and director of M+B in Los Angeles, asked him. "Wear something nice." It was Trigano's idea to showcase Brodie's work, and his assistants had tacked forty of the photographer's Polaroids to the bone-white walls of the studio.

"I ain't taking a shower," Brodie grinned. "I want to be dirty."

It was an appropriate entrance into the L.A. art world—Brodie rode in on a freight train from Oakland. In the years prior, he'd zigzagged the country jumping locomotives with little else but his pack, a toothbrush, and a Polaroid camera he'd found stuffed behind the seat of a friend's car in his hometown of Pensacola. That's where, one day, his mom busy working at Walmart and his dad in jail on a nine-year stint for stealing ceramic tiles from a construction site, a CSX intermodal train went by Brodie's house. He was seventeen. He sprinted after it and jumped on. Instead of taking him to Mobile, Alabama, where he had a friend, he ended up on the orange-juice express to Jacksonville, Florida. He surprised his mom and girlfriend by reappearing in Pensacola four days later, his face shaded black with grease, excited to share with them his story and a handful of Polaroids.

For the next five years, Brodie careered around the country, following a map of obscure railroad-town names: *Tacoma, Butte, Ocala, Yuma, Long Beach, Whitefish, Pine Bluff*. He visited those towns and hundreds of others, slept outside, met traveling kids along the way, and snapped photos obsessively. En route from Jacksonville to Louisiana one trip, he rode with Blake, Corey, and Harrison. Brodie split up with them in New Orleans but the photo that remains is an artifact of adventure: three travelers ride "suicide" (in a car with no floor) and pass a can of beans, an image of both Depression-era breadline camaraderie and Nike "Just Do It" ad. In another, a cadaverous hand reaches toward a coal-caked sleeping boy, evoking Matthew Brady's wet-plate prints of wounded Civil War soldiers (the same soldiers, incidentally, who after Appomattox rode the transcontinental railroad west

in search of work and became history's first "hobos"). It doesn't matter that Brodie never had a photography course other than one in seventh grade he almost flunked out of, or that he'd never heard of William Eggleston or Robert Frank. He populates his postlapsarian landscapes with sneering and sleeping faces, rendered with a portraitist's skill for capturing character and the discipline of a documentarian who always has his camera handy. A Mad Max Madonna offers her breast to a baby. A boy dressed in a lacy shawl defecates from a gondola, the sun-splattered bal- last beneath him purling like a river. A girl parts her legs to reveal a dollop of red blood on her white underwear. The balance of comeliness and crustiness, filth and beauty, is finely measured.

“You're going to be *buge*,” a friend told Brodie one day as they sat in a punk house in Florida looking at a black-and-white Xerox of one of his photos. Brodie had no money; he'd failed even to successfully sign up for food stamps; but the friend was right. Sort of. After Brodie adopted the road handle “The Polaroid Kidd” and created a website, “Ridin' Dirty Face”

(the term comes from train-hoppers argot, meaning to ride the front of a train where wind and dust can more easily blow into your face than in the back), people began buying his photos online. It provided him enough money to live on. It also led to the 2006 show at M+B, to an exhibition of his photos at the Louvre, to a book coming out next year, and to upcoming shows in Los Angeles and New York. Coolhunters and collectors find his insouciant characters sexy if somewhat unbelievable.

“Who did your makeup?” one of the fashionable patrons asked Brodie that night at M+B, as she got up close to peer at his tiny Polaroids on the wall.

“What?” Brodie said. “*What?*”

“Who did your makeup? It's stunning.”

“It's not makeup,” he said. “These people are real.”

How “authentic” is Brodie and how real is the world he documents? With this question in mind, I recently caught a freight train near my house in North Little Rock. I thought I might learn something about what makes Brodie tick, and about my own interest in his photography. I also wanted to go south to visit the town of Hot Springs for a music festival. Under a bridge, I waited near a neat little collection of 40 oz. bottles and swastika graffitos and, with a friend, watched a string of Union Pacific junk trains cut a line through the yard. “This train is definitely going to Hot Springs,” James said. “Thirty minutes. It'll be like the subway.” “Is it going too fast?” I said. “Not for me,” he said. We ran after it. We jumped on. We didn't meet any of Brodie's characters—no one with lace shirts or facial tattoos or chicken-bone earrings. But as we rode and ducked our heads through downtown Little Rock, and then left the city on a bridge over the Arkansas River, it was easy to feel as if we were passing through one of Brodie's scenes. Our boxcar door framed a panoramic landscape: Hummocks. Barns. Arthritic sycamores. James sang “Bound for



PHOTO INDEX: Total number of Polaroids taken by Brodie, from 2004 to 2011: 900. Total number of 35 mm shots, taken with 1980 Nikon F3: 7,596. Total states Brodie has hopped trains to and photographed: 40. Locations that appear here: Montana, Louisiana, “Hobo Beach,” Pensacola, Los Angeles, Miami, Jacksonville. People that appear here: Soup, Oliver, Savannah, Mulberry, Allison, Attica, Blake, Corey, Vanessa, Dixie (dog), Harrison, Cody. Publication date of Brodie's forthcoming collection of photographs, *A Period of Juvenile Prosperity* (Steidl): March 2012.



be a dog, muzzled by its owner while trying to bark at the police. It's an updated Huck Finn story, the characters drifting through post-industrial America. Brodie's tableaux repurpose symbols of decline—trains, Polaroids, thrift-store clothes—into a glamorous form of ragamuffin high-fashion and freedom.

Eight hours and fifty miles later, James and I arrived in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. We'd gone the near-opposite direction of Hot Springs. It was 3 A.M. The music festival was long over. We wandered around all night trying to find a train back. We got lost in an old part of town, the kind of neighborhood where even the second-story windows are layered with bars. Two young men drove us back to the train yard.

Glory" until I asked him to be quiet.

If photography gives us the opportunity to access our "baroque dreams," as Roland Barthes writes, Brodie's work articulates an almost perfect boyhood fantasy: Traveling west, his subjects meet friends along the way. The setting is sunny and nobody bathes. The only one in his photos aware of civilization and its fusty constraints seems to

Both James and I had hopped a lot of trains in our early twenties, and this trip reminded me that it was a dreamy way to travel—and an exhausting one. Brodie's subjects seem to confront this same dilemma. Notice how frequently they are framed by blurriness. They threaten at every second to move on, to move out of the picture,



where, inevitably, they will grow up—or at least take showers and change into more practical outfits.*

Eventually, James went to sleep beneath a tree by a bridge. I became ill and caught a train back to Little Rock.

• At home, I called Brodie.

“**T**rains and hobos are this uniquely American thing,” Brodie said. “Sometimes people have seen my photos and said to me, ‘You’re not homeless. You’re wearing Nikes. Why are you hopping trains?’ But it was never about that for me. I just wanted to travel and see things I wouldn’t have otherwise seen.” And then he added, “You know I’m done taking train photos, right?”

“Really?” I said.

“Yup.”

“Why?”

After riding trains for four years nonstop, Brodie explained, he went on a trip through the Arizona desert. He didn’t take out his camera once. He didn’t think much of it at the time, but that had never happened before. Then, not long after, he was arrested for tres-

*Or they will become the bums in William T. Vollmann’s *Riding Toward Everywhere*. Vollmann’s adult, train-hopping men are poked, drug-addled, and defeated—documents of desolation, not movement or freedom.

passing in a train yard in Sullivan, Illinois, and spent ten days in Moultrie County Jail. He had nothing to do so he read a book, Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*. He thought, *I’m in jail, I’m reading On the Road, this is cool*. But then he thought, *I’m in jail. This is cheesy. I don’t want to be in jail*.

“I was always like, ‘I just want to ride trains till I’m old, with gray hair, and own nothing except a backpack and a fricking broken toothbrush and some toothpaste and my train map with some tape all over it,’” Brodie said, explaining that he had initially planned to shoot photos until his father got out of jail in 2012 so that they could take a train trip together. “But that is ridiculous. That’s not challenging. I want to do something different.”

For now, Brodie lives in Oakland, California. At twenty-six, he’s not sure exactly what that something different is. He’s adamant that while he considers himself an artist, he doesn’t want to make a living as one. Last year, he went to school to become a diesel mechanic. And just a few weeks ago, he interviewed for his “dream job”—a conductor for BNSF railroads. “I guess I’m kind of in love with the machines,” he said. After he showed up to their Oakland office, they asked if he had any “last-minute additions” to make to his application. Feeling guilty, Brodie noted his misdemeanor train-hopping conviction, which he’d left off the first time around. When they saw what he’d added, they sent him home.

—WES ENZINNA



All photos here are 35 mm and appear courtesy of M+B, Los Angeles, and Yossi Milo, New York.