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SFGate

Photographer Mike Brodie spent 6 years riding the rails

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By Sam Whiting



Among things you don't expect to find in a diesel mechanic's tool drawer are copies of his own book of portrait photography. Only when the other mechanics are not around will Mike Brodie pull out an unopened copy of "Mike Brodie: A Period of Juvenile Prosperity," slice the shrink wrap with a greasy thumb nail and revisit the six years he spent riding the rails with the hoboes.

It's not the drifting way of life that Brodie, 28, is shy about. It's the fame and recognition. If you want to talk about his work in the collection of SFMOMA, or the gallery shows in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco, or the reason why he quit photography altogether, he'll meet you at his shop in West Oakland at 8 a.m., because the other guys don't get there until 9.

"I've admitted to being an artist," says Brodie, who pulls his dirty cap low and hangs his head as if admitting to a crime. "I never really felt like an actual photographer. I still don't know how to develop film or use a darkroom. I don't know what goes on inside a camera. I know it clicks."

But he'll perk right up when the topic is switched.

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"I like talking about train-riding and stories," he says, and his first one is a good one. It starts in 2003, when he dropped out of high school in Pensacola, Fla., and hopped a freight just to see how far he could get, which was not very. He planned to visit a friend in Alabama but got turned around in a switching yard and ended up back where he started.

All he had to show for his three-day journey were five Polaroid prints he'd taken with a fold-up SX-70 that a friend had given him. He threw those five images into a drawer at his mom's house and went back to the tracks, the clunky fold-up camera wrapped in a sweater. That was the beginning for this bindle stiff, who came to be known as "the Polaroid Kidd," scrawling out that handle on walls and bridges and boxcars.

He was self-taught as a photographer and self-taught as an editor. The images printed instantly, and he'd weed them out while still in transit.

"Most of them sucked," he says. "I'd say, 'Oh, that's a good one,' either the light or whatever. I wasn't sure what I was trying to document."

The end for the Polaroid Kidd came when film for the SX-70 was discontinued. He switched to a 35mm Nikon and became more invested in what he describes as "a weird situation. It wasn't an art project. I was just taking photos."

He'd be out for months on end, shooting 50 rolls a trip. He had full access because he was the same age as the tramps he lived among, though he always had a place to come home to. During a stop at his mom's in Pensacola, he bought a scanner and set up a website, www.ridingdirtyface.com. He didn't expect anyone to find it or care, but he was wrong about that.

"It was overwhelming, the feedback I was getting," he says. "I wasn't quite done with the photos and I was getting offers to do shows and exhibits and I wasn't ready for that attention. So I deleted the website."

The rides would range from three hours to four days. To stave off the boredom, he gave himself tattoos on both forearms down to the fingers. Otherwise he never got hurt, "just a lot of close calls," but he did get arrested in Illinois and spent 10 days in jail.

Riding along, he gradually became more interested in the engines that pulled the trains than the people riding them.

"I guess I had a realization that I can't ride around on trains forever and stare into space and look at the world around me," he says.

In 2009, he got off in Nashville and entered a full-time program to become a diesel mechanic. "In my mind it was just no more photos," he says.

But the photos he'd already taken, 8,000 in all, wouldn't go away. At the end of a long ride from Memphis to Oakland, he met Paul Schiek, founder of TBW Books, at a birthday party. They stayed in touch over the years until Schiek became his manager, a relationship solidified when Brodie finished the program in Nashville and got a two-year apprenticeship at Peterson Power in San Leandro, fixing Caterpillar equipment.

He also shares a shop in West Oakland for side projects. He introduces himself as "Brodie," because there are too many Mikes, particularly among mechanics.

Nobody knows he is the Polaroid Kidd but that's bound to change.