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Mike Brodie: A Period by Juvenile Prosperity

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By Hannah Frieser



A lot has happened for Mike Brodie since 2002, when he rode his first freight train as a bored seventeen-year-old kid from Pensacola, Florida, looking for something to do. He discovered his own freedom, he discovered photography, and before long the world discovered him. When Brodie first started posting his moody images of young train jumpers, he took the online photo community by storm. Excited online chatter turned into a rush of blog entries and online magazine articles. The brick-and-mortar art world promptly followed suit: exhibitions sprang up from coast to coast, as well as internationally with a group show at the Louvre in Paris. People marveled at Brodie's warm-toned images, depicting the life of teenagers and twentysomethings suspended on a seemingly endless train ride, and they hailed the work as a "stunning solo debut," "bracingly authentic," and "oddly wistful." Since then the series has continued its ascent. It has become a book, already in its second edition, and an exhibition at a blue-chip gallery, both aptly titled *A Period of Juvenile Prosperity*.

In the meantime, the artist has withdrawn from the train-jumping scene as well as the art world to enter a new career as a mechanic. Yet this has in no way diminished the interest in his work. The project that could have been a nine days' wonder has proved its staying power. The complexity of the work and the enigmatic character of its author have ensured the continued momentum of these compelling photographs that resonate with the American spirit.

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"Brodie did not set out to document...he wanted to live the life"

Brodie's photographs capture the invisible world of contemporary freight train hoppers. The photographs are equally rich in color and in fervor, and evoke a nostalgic yearning for a life without boundaries as the freight cars speed past miles and miles of unobstructed, luscious landscape. Brodie did not set out to document this lifestyle or its participants; instead, he wanted to live the life. Yet somehow the immediacy of his Polaroid camera and his new experiences away from home were a perfect match. His camera accompanied him as he rode the trains for several years and allowed him to process his new life. The resulting images are striking paeans to youth and the allure of unencumbered independence and recklessness.

Brodie portrays his fellow travelers with extraordinary intimacy. His gaze is honest and sympathetic, never judging and always full of curiosity. His photographs distinguish themselves by their subjects' absence of pretense, shyness, or posturing, regardless of the situation photographed. Like Nan Goldin before him, nothing comes between Brodie and people he photographs. Every image expresses the subtle context of his unfettered access. Especially when they gaze directly into the camera, these adolescents seem to see nothing but their friend and peer in front of them. The camaraderie is tangible, the honesty profound, and the subjects' trust unlimited.

The images have frequently been called romantic, but this love song to a vagabond lifestyle also includes astounding amounts of dirt and grime. The level of filth is all-encompassing. Food is shared with coalminer-like hands, and the impromptu sleeping places are set up in whatever industrial rubbish happens to be in the boxcars. Yet these places also look comfortable and settled, as do the adolescents who curl up protectively together as they sleep or share a meal with relaxed ease, as if sitting around a campfire instead the unprotected ledge of a speeding train.

Rough and unkempt as life on freight trains may be, these train jumpers look highly fashionable. It's all too easy to think of Irving Penn or Richard Avedon's haute couture models placed in the midst of inner-city grime or in animal stables behind circus tents. Brodie's travel companions are chic in their timeless, somewhat punk-inspired thrift-shop attire. That they are also caked in filth and occasional blood only makes them appear all the more authentic, a term frequently associated with Brodie. In comparison, the pristine models photographed by Penn, Avedon, and others impress with an artificial otherworldliness that suggests their upkeep relies on a team of stylists. The former set of images presents beautiful but dirty people in an idealized landscape, while the latter presents a high-style fantasy in an imperfect and rough environment. Both are fraught with contradiction, mixing popular notions of reality and fantasy, of past and present.

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"The images are fixed...in their permanent state of locomotion"

The photographs elucidate Brodie's life on freight trains and his love of this mode of travel. His camera lens is always trained on the passengers, either cast down toward the blur of train tracks or upward to the backdrop of the fleeting, bucolic landscape. The settings are mostly open fields, with occasional glimpses of populated industrial areas. The trains and their passengers are never seen near residential neighborhoods or institutions such as churches or schools that might convey a familiar, traditional sense of home. In addition, the kids' retro-modern, patchwork look—which with minor alterations could have been worn decades ago—renders the images timeless. The images are fixed only in their state of permanent locomotion.

The immediate response to the photographs is one of fascination with the kids and their sense of freedom. We envy them for the vistas they see. Yet which of us would risk the very real dangers of riding a freight train? And who would choose to deal with the inconveniences? Instead, we gobble up the rich fare of these travel adventures from the comfort of our homes, in much the same way as other home dwellers have enjoyed exotic travel accounts since well before the days of Homer's *Odyssey*—probably since humans have resided in any kind of dwelling. Our fascination with these stories has encompassed all forms of transportation. Whether the journey is by foot, horse, camel, elephant, carriage, train, auto, or airplane, there have always been those who feel compelled to leave the safety of their homes, as well as those who want to hear all about it.

"The history of railways holds a special place in the American heart"

The history of railways holds a special place in the American heart and is deeply entangled with stories of pioneering new territories in the second, post-wagon-train wave. Riding freight trains adds a twist, exemplifying either a life where nothing more can be lost or one liberated from responsibility for the sake of an unbridled experience of the land. In other words, total failure or absolute possibility. Brodie's trains exist in the middle of this spectrum. Destined for eternal travel, they reveal neither destination nor purpose in the form of actual freight.



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Equally, their passengers are fully immersed in the act of traveling, without plans for arrival and with minimal belongings. Their travel recalls railway romanticism but also draws on the spirit of characters like Tom Sawyer who throw caution to the wind. Chasing the myth of the open road, these kids embody the choice of freedom over societal expectations. They seem carefree riding the rails, living somewhere beyond the restrictions of a settled life. Yet they were youngsters not so long ago, contending with their parents' ideas and rules, worrying about grades and pocket money, forming friendships with classmates. Their lives were thoroughly woven into the fabric of society. Many could probably return to their old lives with the ease of a phone call, but for now they stand firmly in this new life, invisible to most, except for Brodie's watchful gaze.

Clinging to a sense of freedom, Brodie's train hoppers are able to live as drifters, without slipping into the dark grip of homelessness. Their attire as well as their attitude suggests they have actively chosen this lifestyle and its entire package of risks and rewards. Their relationship to the railways is entirely different from those who jump trains because it's the only free way to get to a new place or because they simply have no other place to go. Train hoppers have existed since rail travel began, their numbers increasing especially during hard economic times. In the United States they were especially common after the Civil War and during the Great Depression. But "hoboing" has been a badge of honor for some, practiced by writers and musicians, for example, who immortalized the practice in writing and songs. Images like that of the teenaged Ernest Hemingway, grinning broadly as he climbs a freight train with his bindle stick in his hands, tell all about the joys and little of the dangers of jumping freight trains. People like Jack Kerouac, Woody Guthrie, and Hunter S. Thompson imprinted their attitude of independence on the collective mind and further sentimentalized an American way of taking to the road.

Mike Brodie took to trains with the same passion and curiosity that led Robert Frank to drive his used Ford across the United States nearly fifty years earlier—to see and experience the country with his own eyes. Brodie was seventeen and a Florida native, while Frank was a thirty-one-year-old naturalized citizen from Switzerland and the father of two young kids. One found his friends along the way; the other brought his family along to travel with him. One covered over 50,000 miles as he zigzagged cross-country; the other drove countless miles but measured his project in over 27,000 photographs taken. The series are different in scope and visual language, but they each address aspects of American identity. Brodie formed his project with a much more generous eye, casting the country in golden-red light, while Frank's black-and-white prints about race and class sent a shudder through the nation.

Both series are very American in concept and content, addressing how the United States values freedom, personal choice, and liberty, and how at the core of those values rests a belief in the limitless potential of the individual—the notion that people can achieve anything if they put their minds to it. Within this framework, Brodie depicts youthful vagrancy as a privilege that will allow the kids he photographs to ease back into society when they choose to do so. Meanwhile, Robert Frank emphasizes the social stratification that has kept different classes apart.

Mike Brodie's life is tightly intertwined with a sense of authenticity that runs throughout his work. He discovered freight train hopping during his youth and participated in this lifestyle for several years. He started making photographs at almost the same time, using a friend's Polaroid SX-70 Land Camera. A classic chicken-or-egg question lies at the heart of what followed next. Was Brodie able to create such remarkable photographs because of his passionate obsession with trains? Or was he able to appreciate his experience of riding the trains in a new way through his camera and online postings? Whatever the answer, it's not as important as the effectiveness of this combination. He made a name for himself under his moniker "Polaroid Kidd," which he later dropped. The notion that he was one of the train-jumping kids himself, got just as dirty, slept right in the middle of them, and took the same risks counterbalances critical questions about valuing style over substance, as well as viewers' surprised reactions that this life still exists. The photographs have been considered genuine because Brodie is genuine. And whether by design or by virtue, his personal story and recent decision to leave art photography behind have only reinforced the common belief that he is the real deal.

Whereas Brodie has been celebrated as an insider, Frank was initially criticized as an outsider. There was significant resistance to the Swiss-born photographer, who was seen as a foreigner even though he was a naturalized citizen. The idea of an immigrant creating a defining series on Americans was seen as an audacity. Frank's work was rejected by many publications and curators when he first completed his Guggenheim Fellowship-sponsored project. In 1958 his book *Les Américains* was published in France and included an introduction by Jack Kerouac. It was published the following year in the United States. But it took several more years before the book gained well-deserved critical recognition and museum support. It is now considered a seminal work that redefined documentary photography as it was then practiced.

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Frank's contributions to documentary photography are now well established, but Brodie's place in this canon is tangential at best. The photographer makes no claim at objectivity, and creating an accurate portrait of train hoppers or his own experiences was never his intention. Brodie's images bask in the warm glow of long summer evenings, communicating his sentiment toward train hopping while drawing the focus away from the people he travels with. His images tell a story based on some of his experiences, but they are not meant to be accurately autobiographical or documentary or all-inclusive.

The selection of sixty images for Brodie's book represent a tight edit of the photographs he took during his years riding trains. This editing process in itself is not surprising. Robert Frank took well over 27,000 photographs, of which only eighty-three made it into his publication. In Brodie's case the final selection emphasizes his experience as an observer. None of the images show his participation or interaction in the group, yet he is always subtly present in people's reactions to him. He mitigates the situation with his camera and braves the seasons, dangers, filth, and thrills in the viewer's stead. He does not have to commit to a neutral camera in the way that photojournalists do. As a fellow train hopper, he was there for the experience as well as to take photographs.

Brodie communicates the essence of freight train riding as he observed and chose to represent the experience. His message is tightly controlled. It is therefore notable how much of his experience on the trains is not included in this series. Most images show his peers sleeping and looking at the landscape. The kids exist only for the present moment on the train—basic and primal. Cold weather is merely suggested, and the travelers never suffer in snow or rain or through a full range of seasons. They never get sick, cook food, or pursue other basic occupations during their life on wheels. Personal hygiene, suggested in the form of menstruation blood, is shown primarily as an absence of boundaries. There are no cell phones or other indicators of technology.

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The kids express few emotions except for occasional daredevil ostentation. Significant emotional response to a major injury to one of the boys is even lacking, although care is given. They don't seem to be plagued by sadness, worries, anger, disillusionment, or any other inner turmoil that typically befalls people their age. Few physical clues are given about the inner life of these travelers, only a few crudely inked tattoos, scribbles on the walls, and a copy of Hunter S. Thompson's book *The Rum Diary* used as a makeshift pillow.

Brodie is presenting his trains, his message. The carefully composed images suggest that all is well and that we are seeing all we need to see. We are too distracted—wrapped cozily in our blanket of nostalgia—to notice that anything is missing. Why not share in Brodie's mostly untarnished picture of freedom, if this means that we do not have to experience the dirt, stink, and risk of a broken neck ourselves?

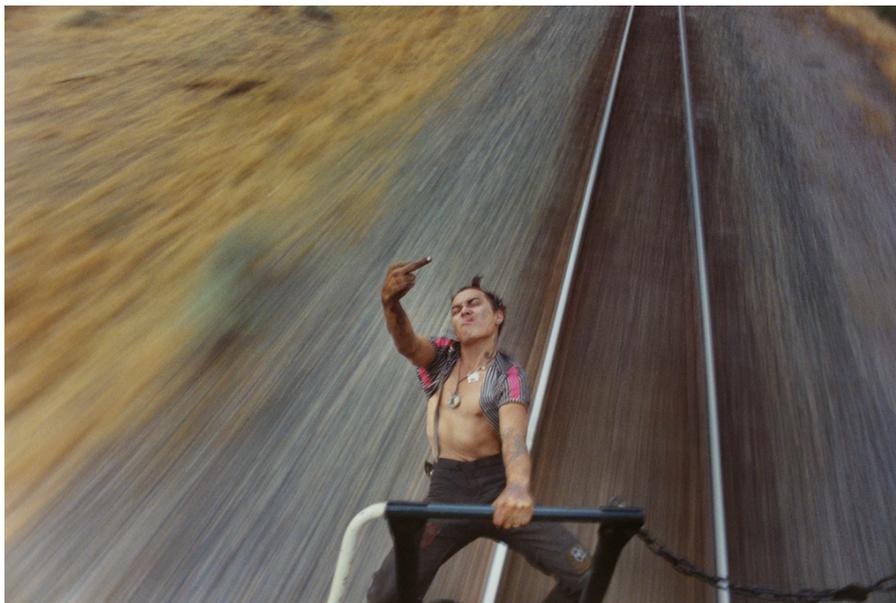
"Brodie gives poverty a polish of fiercely independent freedom"

For the most part, the images circulated online and in the book show the same group of kids, yet the viewer does not get to know any of them. No names are given, and with the kids' faces repeating irregularly across the collection in a fragmented family-album style, it isn't possible to piece together more than an impression of their personalities. Brodie's emphasis has always been on the broader sentiment. When lined up into a storyboard version of reality, the images reveal Brodie's full vision of the eternal train ride, a vision of adventure, bravado, breathtaking landscapes, dirty kids sleeping curled up like puppies, and fashionable grunge. Brodie gives poverty a polish of fiercely independent freedom.

The fact that the images may not be documentary in no way means they are not authentic. By weaving actual situations together with the bigger notion of freight train hopping, Brodie has been able to capture more than the scene-by-scene happenings in front of his lens.

He has, like some of the finest photographers, opted to show the audience a representation of the bigger experience rather than a photojournalistic string of tight-knit reportage. These are beautiful images filled with the lore of their subject matter. For this, they are a privilege to see. Brodie does not betray the viewer's trust in the authenticity of the images; nevertheless, one should be aware of the subjectivity of this project as well as the strength this subjectivity conveys.

"At least in his photographs the ride will always continue"



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Brodie's photographs are as personal and emotional as diary entries, while they are also representative of his very own period of juvenile prosperity. His fellow train hoppers are essential to expressing his experiences. When we see the wind whipping through their hair, it is doing the same to his. As they hang tight while "riding suicide," open wheels spinning below them, we can be sure that he has done the same. Brodie keeps all focus directed toward the exclusive existence on the trains. Images depicting life on firm land show it in relation to the freight cars: someone climbing a barbed wire fence to get to the trains, kids taking a short nap along the road before jumping right back on, or the actual act of hopping on a rolling train.

Brodie never shows his friends looking toward a settled life, and he never suggests his own eventual decision to get off the train. This is where his life and his photographs diverge. At least in his photographs the ride will always continue.

Hannah Frieser

Hannah Frieser is a curator, photographer, and book artist. She has worked on dozens of curatorial projects with contemporary photographers such as Pipo Nguyen-duy, Kanako Sasaki, Don Gregorio Antón, Rachel Herman, Ben Gest, Alexander Gronsky, Shen Wei, and Adam Magyar. Frieser served as the director of Light Work, an artist-run organization in Syracuse, NY, for over eight years, and in various positions for the Society of Photographic Education for over ten years. She has reviewed portfolios and juried exhibitions internationally for Photo Lucida, Critical Mass, FotoFest, En Foco, Rhubarb Rhubarb, the Photographic Resource Center, the FotoTriennale.dk, and more. She has served on the review panel for Visual Arts for the New York State Council on the Arts. Ms. Frieser is currently traveling abroad to pursue a curatorial research project. She is also working on multiple writing projects and juried exhibitions.

Mike Brodie

Born 1985 in Arizona, Mike Brodie first began photographing in 2004 when he was given a Polaroid camera. Working under the moniker The Polaroid Kidd, Brodie spent the next four years circumambulating the United States, amassing an archive of photographs that would go on to make up one of the few true collections of American travel photography.

In 2008, Brodie received the Baum Award for American Emerging Artists. A book of his work, *A Period of Juvenile Prosperity*, was published by Twin Palms in early 2013. Brodie recently graduated from the Nashville Auto Diesel College and is now working as a mobile diesel mechanic in his silver '93 Dodge Ram. Although he has stopped making photographs, the body of work he made in four short, intense years has left an enduring impact on the photo world.

Photographs © Mike Brodie

Text © Hannah Frieser

Featured in a monograph published by Twin Palms

A limited edition of the book is also available from TBW Books