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TIME

The Unseen Lives of Train Hoppers

The acclaimed photographer-turned mechanic unveils never-before-seen images

By Laurence Butet-Roch
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“Behind every discarded objects, there’s a story,” says Mike Brodie. Days before the new year, the photo wunderkind, who gave up his camera after releasing the immensely popular *A Period of Juvenile Prosperity* in 2012 to become a mechanic, spoke excitedly about picking up an engine, imagining the life it had before landing in his hands: the roads it drove down on, the people it carried.

Similarly, the Polaroids that make up his new opus *Tones of Dirt and Bone* tell the tale of a free spirit’s thirst for adventure and serendipitous encounters. Back when they were taken, between 2004 and 2006, Mike Brodie was known as the “Polaroid Kidd”, a young man hopping trains and immortalizing those he met along the way in the distinctive style afforded by his SX-70.

“The engineers that created that camera, and the film that went with it, put some indescribable magic into it,” says Brodie. “The final product, is unlike any other.”



Suzanne. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

He was seduced by the soft hues, the wild edges and the haphazardness of the process. “I was really sad when it was discontinued. It was such fun. It made me want to make pictures. It lasted a year. And then that was it.”

During that time, he traveled from Pensacola, Florida to Olympia, Washington, a serpentine journey that lasted around five months, three of which he spent in Oakland. En route, he met Benny, Nadia, Brontez; ran into Monica, Ben, Yoni; crossed paths with Hannah, Corey, Chris. Kindred spirits who, as Brodie sets his lens on them, gaze up at him, inquisitive and brazen. Free birds forever caught on film.

“I would stay with each person for a while and really focus, making sure that I got the picture that I wanted without wasting too much film. I’d usually take two or three photos,” says Brodie. He would then either give these ephemera to the sitter or add them to the stack bound by elastic that weighed his pockets down before moving on, to the next town, the next state, the next chance meeting.

However frenetic Brodie’s life on the road was, there’s a quietness to the photos he shares in *Tones of Dirt and Bone*. These serve as a preface to the 35mm captures, taken after the SX-70 film was discontinued, that make up *A Period of Juvenile Prosperity*. The Polaroids are the calm before the storm, moments of tense stillness before running to catch a freight convoy charging ahead. “Unlike many of the pictures taken during ‘heated’ moments aboard the trains – images, that when I look back, I say, ‘I can’t believe that happen’ –, I took the Polaroids when I was ‘safe’, when I could take my time,” says Brodie.

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Three days before Katrina. 3036 Rampart St., New Orleans, Louisiana.



Northbound through Pueblo, Colorado.

Doing so allowed the self-taught photographer to familiarize himself with his camera and develop an understanding of composition – also gleaned from looking at the works of the likes of Mary Ellen Mark and Steve McCurry. Such artistry came in handy when life unfolded at full speed in front of his lens. “Developing the skills associated with a craft should be a priority. Today, there’s an epidemic of putting being an artist before honing the craft. You should spend a lot more time putting your skills together before saying you’re this or that,” says the 28-year-old who, despite sweeping acclaim from the milieu, never claimed the “artist” title.

After ten years as a vagrant, Brodie no longer has the same drive to capture images. “I tried to photograph what’s going in my life nowadays but can’t. I can either be a photographer or be a mechanic. I can’t stop doing what I’m doing to do something else. It’s calling on different parts of my brain. It’s all or nothing.”

Admittedly, working on *Tones of Dirt and Bone* while running his shop turned out to be a challenge. “But I needed closure with these images,” he says.

Not all photos in the book are memorable. Some are haunting. Others seem spoilt. But, as a whole, they provide a glimpse into the consciousness of an indomitable soul. “I don’t know why I’m doing the things I do, but I am. And this is who I am and what I’m doing, so why think about it too much.”

Tones of Dirt and Bone by **Mike Brodie** is available now from Twin Palms Publishers, with a limited edition released by TBW Books.