

125th: Time in Harlem

A conversation with Vicki Goldberg

What were your individual intentions in undertaking this project?

Isaac: Harlem was my home for 9 years, and I found it to be a constant source of inspiration for obvious reasons - its architecture, culture and people. I was looking for a way photographically to reinterpret its landscape: working collaboratively with a different camera seemed an appropriate strategy for addressing an environment rich in history and verging on drastic change.

Edward: My work often explores issues of rupture and trauma, and the role of the artist in keeping memory alive. I am interested in what Harlem represents in the collective imagination. When I moved to Harlem in 2003 zoning for development was already a contentious conversation. Now it's in full swing. The push to develop Northern Manhattan puts all that Harlem embodies, its legacy and its current population, in a fragile balance. And I do feel that photographs can engage aesthetic and social sensibilities to influence the dialogue and actions that shape the future of a place.

Did you agree on what the project should be, and do, or what you hoped or strove for before embarking on it?

Isaac: The choice of working with a 4x5 camera in color came at the beginning as did working collaboratively in the street. We also decided to photograph only 125th because it provided all the necessary elements to speak about Harlem generally and say something about American culture as well. Our process - slow, meditative and collaborative - was key to making the photographs we wanted which needed to feel contemporary and timeless at the same time.

Edward: We agreed about what we wanted the project to do, but we didn't always know what it would tell us. This uncertainty was built into the process; we were aware of it and allowed it to unfold. Sometimes we spent hours lugging our equipment without stopping to make a picture. At the outset we had locations in mind, but as the work evolved we realized they were a "pretense" - we often made several pictures on the way to a predetermined location and never arrived there.

Have either of you ever collaborated to this extent, and what do you think the collaboration contributed to the project, for good or ill?

Isaac: Edward and I hatched this plan together from the beginning and have pursued it together over the course of many years. It has been an entirely good experience. We inspired each other to keep going when our spirits flagged. We supported one another's strengths and managed to help each other overcome our respective weaknesses.

Edward: I think we were lucky to find complimentary attributes and a mutual trust. On the few occasions when we did not agree on why a particular photograph should be made, or how a print should be interpreted, we submitted to the other's wishes. This has enriched the project.