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A Photographer's Paradise in America

By James Estrin Sep. 2, 2014 7

PERPIGNAN, France — Jean-Pierre Laffont's book, "Photographer's Paradise" will be launched this Thursday at the Visa Pour l'Image festival.

Jean-Pierre Laffont's America is a land of poverty, corporate greed, racism and violence. But it is also a land of optimism where hard work, sheer will and following your dream can lead to almost anything. It is so vast that it can contain both the quiet desperation of fifth-generation farmers struggling to remain on their family land and the hopes of a new immigrant searching for a better life.

Mr. Laffont himself arrived in New York in 1965 from Paris. He was a 30-year-old photographer raised in North Africa and a veteran, on the French side, of the Algerian war of Independence. He had led a somewhat glamorous life in Paris as an assistant to Sam Levin who was a portrait photographer of movie stars like Ava Gardner and Brigitte Bardot.

But he hated photographing celebrities and dreamed of being a photojournalist. So he set off to America. Speaking very little English, he took a series of odd jobs, including teaching children to ride bicycles. He soon began printing for photographers, sometimes working 18 hours a day and sleeping on darkroom floors.

Whenever possible, he wandered the streets of New York following his curiosity and making pictures. He encountered his fellow New Yorkers with enthusiasm and respect, and they embraced him.

It was unlike anywhere else he had photographed.

"Nobody stops you, nobody asks about your politics, or talks about your accent or where you came from," he said. "As a photographer you're respected and allowed to work. In the rest of the world, especially the Arab world where I grew up, you have to tell them the name of your mother and your

father and show that you are really what you are, and say that you believe in what they do — even if you don't.”

The United States he says, is a “photographer's paradise” — and that is what he has named his book of photographs published by Glitterati that will be launched this Thursday at the Visa pour l'Image festival in Perpignan, France.

Though he became a well-known photojournalist and covered the world, he always returned to New York, where he and his wife, Eliane Laffont, live. And he continued to travel America, telling tales of his adopted homeland through self-assigned photo stories.

The couple opened the New York office of the Gamma photo agency in 1969. Four years later, they co-founded Sygma, which quickly became one of the world's largest and most important photo agencies. Ms. Laffont managed the agency and became known for being smart, charming and a very agile negotiator. She currently serves as a Senior Consultant for Visa Pour l'Image.

After being a dominant force in the photojournalism business for 15 years, the Laffonts sold Sygma which later became part of Corbis, the giant photo licensing company, in 1999. When Mr. Laffont's archives were returned by Corbis a decade later, he said they were “disorganized and in shambles.”

Along with several assistants from the International Center of Photography school, he organized the material and scanned thousands of negatives. Meanwhile, his wife took out her loupe and went to work, poring over the images and carefully whittling them down.

At the heart of “Photographer's Paradise” are those earliest images from 1965-68, when Mr. Laffont was a newcomer to New York. He had put those negatives into a storage facility in New Jersey when he moved into a small apartment around 1970. Only after 40 years of faithful payments were the boxes reopened and the images reconsidered.

Among the treasures inside were a series of photographs of a group of cross-dressers, many of them prostitutes on Manhattan's West Side, not far from Lincoln Center. The images show them living as a close, supportive family.

Mr. Laffont spent two years in the 1980s on his own, documenting small farmers around the country. He grew to admire their rugged self-reliance and their fierce sense of independence.

“Farmers are the purest people I ever met in this country,” he said.

One of his best-known images (slide 16) captures the devastating moment when a farmer lost his land at auction. Like almost all the photographs in the book, he took it for himself, not for an assignment. Mr. Laffont, who had a bit of self-reliance and stubborn independence, preferred to work for himself and market the photographs afterward.

“You cannot have an honest view of somebody if you receive an assignment because you immediately obey the magazine,” he said. “You are like a horse with blinders — you work only in one direction.”

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