

Eyewitness

Jean-Pierre Laffont: Turbulent America

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"There is one thing the photograph must contain, the humanity of the moment. This kind of photography is realism. But realism is not enough—there has to be vision, and the two together can make a good photograph."—Robert Frank

The visual history of the world is continuously being rewritten as photographers mine their archives, bringing to light images unpublished or unseen, often for decades. Viewed through the prism of history, these rediscovered gems offer new perspectives on the visual narrative. One such remix is Jean Pierre Laffont's vision of three game-changing decades in the history of the United States—*Photographer's Paradise/Turbulent America 1960-1990* (Glitterati, 2014).

Born in Algeria in 1935, Laffont's entry into photography was serendipitous. An avid diver and spear-hunter, he attended the 1952 world championships for scuba diving in Tangiers, Morocco, purchasing a Leica to try his hand at underwater photography. "I never put the Leica underwater," he says laughing. "I started to take pictures of things happening around me. I was much more interested in grabbing those moments that I could see—and keeping

them for myself."

Photography had wholly captured Laffont's imagination. Coming from a family of doctors, it was assumed he would follow suit, but when he was accepted into the prestigious Vevey Photo School in Switzerland he knew that was where he wanted to be. He spent three years in formal study garnering a Masters in Photography. "It was all about the composition," he says of the school's aesthetic. He lived for a time in the studio of Ernst Haas. "The rigor and composition and layout I learned from Ernst were extremely important to my development as a photographer."

The young photographer quickly realized his passion was reportage. "I wanted to photograph what was happening around me—funny, sad, daily life, little moments of nothing." He took for his inspiration the work of Henri Cartier-Bresson and Marc Riboud. "They go into a country for a while. They step off their plane, out of their train, out of their hotel and they begin to shoot. Their vision of the country started on the curb, just walking, and the story developed in front of them." This letting the story unfold became Laffont's M.O.

Starting as a photographer's assistant in Paris, in 1960-62 he was called for military service in Algeria. Returning to Paris, he resumed photography, shooting fashion and portraits. One rainy night, Laffont hit someone crossing in front of his car. Rushing out to see if the person was all right, he discovered it was Eliane Lucotte, whom he had met a year before in Casablanca. They began dating.

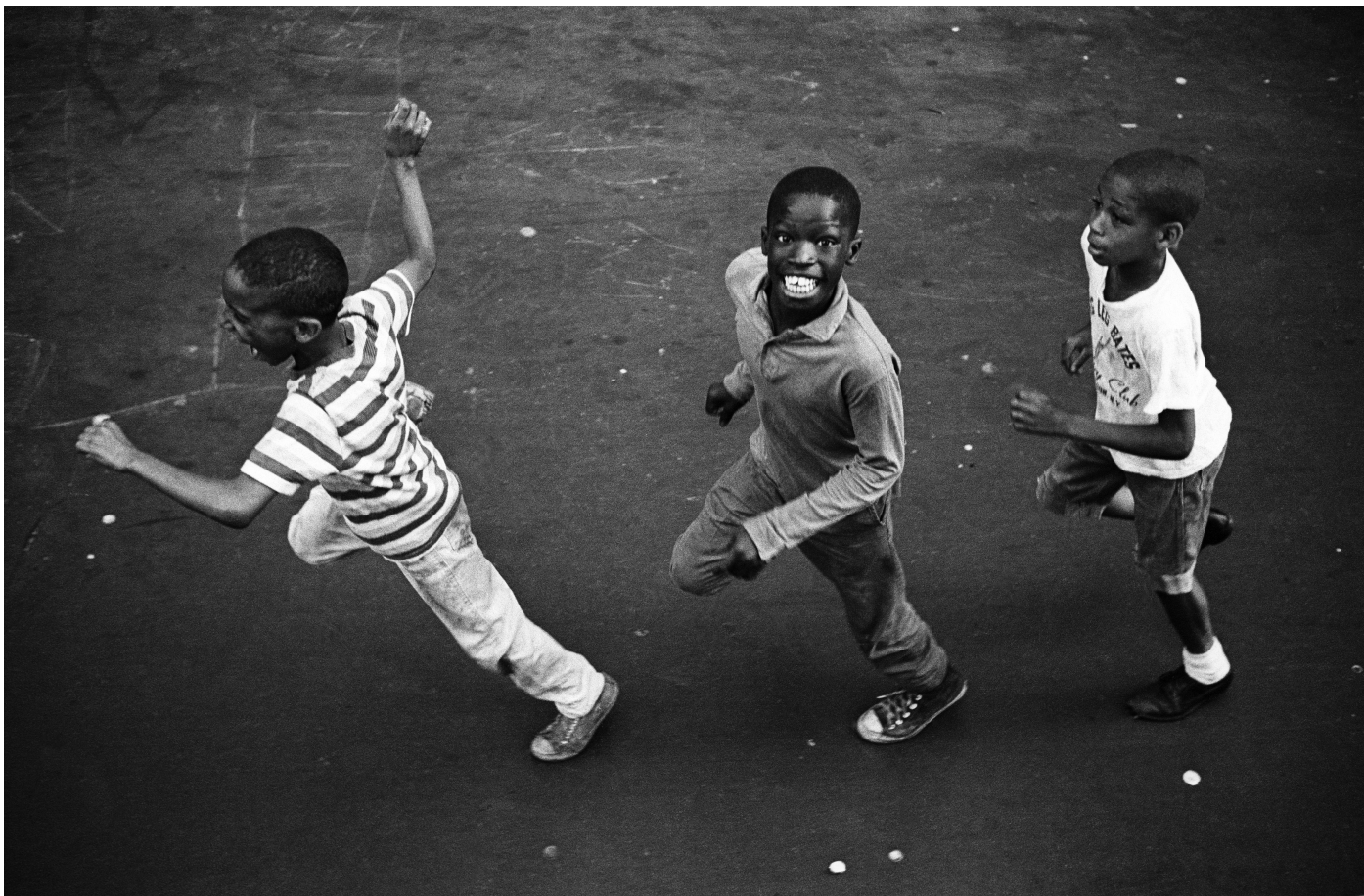
Restless, Laffont moved to New York and soon began shooting for *Status Magazine*,



Jean-Pierre Laffont, Washington, DC, 1970



During an anti-communist demonstration in favor of the Vietnam War, a protestor burns a Vietnamese flag. Times Square, Manhattan, 1966



Kids running alongside the Harlem Jazz Mobile. Manhattan, NYC, 1966

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owned by Igor Cassini, brother of Oleg. In lieu of payment, the brothers sponsored his green card. "I am still thanking them for that," Laffont says, smiling. Eliane soon arrived in the U.S., and they were married at City Hall in 1966.

Laffont's adopted city became the cornerstone on which he honed his vision. He was drawn to the humanity he found on the street—prostitutes, gangs, homeless. He would spend nights on the streets of midtown Manhattan with the NYPD, photographing the daily dose of crime. He walked the poor neighborhoods of Harlem and the Bronx, shooting children in garbage-strewn streets. "They played with nothing," he recalls. "They played with a fire hydrant; with an abandoned car."

In 1969 Laffont was named foreign correspondent for the French photo agency Gamma. Eliane began representing them in New York. Together in 1973 they founded Sygma Photo News, which they would grow into the largest photo agency in the world. "I learned everything about photography from Jean Pierre really," says Eliane. "Our life

together made me really appreciate photography."

Photographer Douglas Kirkland, who has been a close friend since the late sixties, feels it is Laffont's European perspective that gives his work resonance. "I refer to it as another Robert Frank stepping forward," says Kirkland. "It's the European eyes on America, going back to the '60s and '70s, a rediscovery of what we were like and how we evolved."

Arnold Drapkin, former Picture Editor at *Time*, who worked closely with Laffont throughout those seminal years, concurs. "I don't ever recall giving him an assignment. He came with these wonderful ideas. One of the great things about JP is that he came to America and he looked at our country with quite a different eye."

That eye captured the pulse of the country through the Civil Rights Movement, Gay and Women's Liberation, anti-war demonstrations, the economy and race relations. "He is socially so concerned a photographer," says the *New York Times*' Michele McNally, who worked at Sygma in the late '70s. "He was always deeply committed. He had the pre-



During a funeral procession, a woman raises a Black Panther salute to six black prisoners found dead at Attica Prison. Brooklyn, NYC, 1971



A prostitute leans playfully on a police car on 42nd Street in Times Square. Manhattan, NYC, 1980

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science to produce his own stories before they became universally important. He always knew what was going to happen, what was going to be important."

Laffont eschewed working on assignment, preferring his own parameters for telling a story. "In my opinion, if you have an assignment, you are like a horse with blinders; you don't see on the right or left. You see your assignment. You say, 'this is not for the assignment.' You say, 'this picture is not my story.' The assignment disturbs completely the mind of the photographer."

"His ideas were always very interesting and fresh," recalls Drapkin. "There are two parts to the word photojournalist. Sometimes we neglect to emphasize the second part. He was a really wonderful photojournalist. He had a great eye as a photographer, but he also had a good eye and ear for a story."

Laffont didn't confine himself to America. He was a citizen of the globe. McNally, always amazed at his curiosity about everything and by his in-depth research, recalls, "Before he would go off to do anything, he would know the story inside out. A lot of photographers aren't that good at research. He would nail it," she says.

"When you arrive in Japan or Korea or India—then the world changes," Laffont explains. "I was surrounded by new visual

things to see, new photos to take. I need to have a new environment to see the pictures." He enjoyed working with Rick Smolan and David Cohen on 10 of their *Day in the Life* books.

With each return, he saw America anew. "When I stay too long in my neighborhood, I don't see the people. I don't see the street, I don't see what's new. I become blind. There is an erosion of my visual emotion. When I go somewhere I photograph the whole aspect of the country. I was doing this with America."

"JP was very in love with the American people," Eliane adds.

Always acutely aware of the link between social issues and the economy, during the 1980s Laffont became extremely moved by the plight of the American farmer, following the story for three years across a multitude of states. "I was passionately in love with the farmers of the United States," he says. "They are so humble, so extraordinary, so pure—farmers and people living in the countryside." Laffont witnessed their hard work, their ingenuity and fortitude, and all too many foreclosures. "All this moved me so much. There was nothing I could do but photograph it the best I could."

Laffont's work has garnered numerous awards, including first prizes from World Press



The National Socialist White People Party pays tribute on Abraham Lincoln's birthday. Washington, DC, 1972



Former U.S. military analyst Daniel Ellsberg surrenders at the U.S. Attorney's office in downtown Boston. Boston, MA, 1971



An instructor holds a child's hand to help him fire a gun. Pleasant Acres Ranch, College Station, Texas, 1981

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Photo; the University of Missouri School of Journalism's Picture of the Year competition, their "World Understanding Award" and the Oversea Press Club's "Madeline Ross Award" for his work on child labor around the world.

When he arrived in the U.S. he witnessed an incredible surge towards social change. "I believed that I arrived in this country just at the moment of revolution...but it took decades for change. I was so devastated when I saw the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. I realized that it was not a revolution, just another violent chapter."

A retrospective of Laffont's work was featured at Visa Pour l'Image in Perpignan in 1996. That year he was also awarded the Order of Arts and Letters for his contribution to French culture. His images and stories have been published in major publications such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, *Paris Match* and *Stern*, as well as in many books. An exhibition of his work will be shown at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in 2015.

In 1999 Sygma was acquired by Corbis,

with Laffont named as general director. He then went on to serve as general director of Gamma Press from 2000-2002.

"I have seen a lot of change," he says of his 50-year career, "but there is still more to come." It is the pictures that he missed that haunt him. "I still see them in my mind, absolutely," he confesses.

We will remember the pictures that he took.

Fact File

Learn more about this extraordinary photographer at jplaffont.com.



A "wanted" sign hangs outside the gates of the White House depicting the major players in the Watergate scandal. Washington, DC, 1974



Howard Rondel sells his farm equipment after he couldn't keep up with payments. Gamaliel, Glasgow area, Kentucky, 1983



A woman faints in emotional exhaustion at the funeral of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Atlanta, GA, 1968



Kids pose atop a wrecked car on a hot summer day. Brooklyn, NYC, 1971



The U.S. flag hangs upside down atop the Statue of Liberty during a two-day occupation by Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Liberty Island, NYC, 1971