



Photographer's Paradise: Turbulent America 1960-1990 review - an eye for the surreal and the surprising

Jean-Pierre Laffont's photographs of the United States capture a nation undergoing an extraordinary transformation

Sean O'Hagan

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In his introduction to *Photographer's Paradise*, Sir Harold Evans describes it as “a startling portrayal of the theatrical velocity of American life, its traumatic divisions, its heady ambitions, its heroes and heroines and its unending parade of wanabes and weirdos”. That just about captures the power of Jean-Pierre Laffont's extraordinary photojournalism, which is collected here in a hefty book - at a hefty price - full of startling images from the 1960s to the 1990s.

Laffont is a French photographer who first travelled in America in the mid-1960s on a mission to evoke the chaos and excitement of the fast-changing times. “It felt good to be young then and the 1960s glorified freedom of expression,” he writes. “The country was going through

profound changes and it looked like everyone was in the streets protesting. I photographed the sex, drugs and rock'n'roll generation, the hippy movement, the women's revolution and the astronauts of Apollo XI returning from the moon."

Even if you are familiar with the best photojournalism of that time, Laffont's eye for the surreal and the surprising is almost uncanny. His images of inner-city New York in the early 70s show a much harder, economically depressed city on the verge of bankruptcy. He frames the twin towers of the newly built and largely vacant World Trade Centre in 1975 as it looms over two homeless men sitting amid a vast, desolate, rubbish-strewn landscape below. He captures pre-gentrification Times Square, a nexus for drifters, pimps, hookers and transvestites, who ply their nocturnal trade outside the many "flophouses" where rooms were rented by the hour. His photographs of Manhattan's transient demimonde are the visual equivalents of Lou Reed songs such as Walk on the Wild Side or I'm Waiting for the Man.



Two homeless men squat in the shadow of the recently completed World Trade Centre, New York, 1975. Photograph: J-P Laffont

As his turbulent America unfolds, you see a singular vision emerge: fearless and darkly poetic. He shoots the Savage Skulls, a street gang from the Bronx who look like a real-life counterpoint

to the romanticised toughs from *West Side Story*. He infiltrates the American Nazi party as they pose beneath billowing swastika flags as well as civil-rights marchers and the forlorn but dignified mourners at the funeral of Martin Luther King. Laffont has an eye for otherness: the transvestite community he finds on the Lower East Side pose as film stars on rooftops and sidewalks. He goes in close to make even more dramatic the images of anti-war demonstrators wearing garish death masks and makeup. Waiting outside Madison Square Garden before the much-hyped Ali-Frazier world heavyweight championship fight in 1971, he convinces some dandyish Harlem drug barons to pose in all their regal finery - they had better seats than Frank Sinatra.

Laffont acknowledges that his photographs depict America back then as “a ball of confusion: riots, demonstrations, disintegration, collapse and conflict”. But cumulatively, as he concludes, they also show “the chaotic, often painful, birth of the country we live in today... a place where a black president, married gay couples and women executives are part of our everyday lives”. A consistently arresting chronicle of a time and a place that already seem impossibly distant.

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