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Photography

Josef Koudelka's 'Wall,' and More



Shu'fat refugee camp, Northeast Jerusalem, from "Wall."

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Sometimes the world of photography books can seem not unlike that of popular music on disc, with endless repackaging of the classics — each new volume containing pictures that haven't been previously reprinted, so that if you are a devotee or a completist you will have to shell out for another tome. And yet major surprises continue to arrive, dispatches from the past. Consider, for example, the work of the Chilean photographer Sergio Larrain (1931-2012), whose career was both extraordinary and unusually abbreviated. It was only after studying forestry at Berkeley that he began seriously taking pictures in the mid-1950s, and then an encounter with the Bolivian mystic Oscar Ichazo in 1968 caused him to retreat for the remainder of his life into meditation and yoga, taking small, quiet photos only occasionally, as complements to his inner quest. But for the decade or so that he was in the world and regularly taking pictures, his work, as amply illustrated in *SERGIO LARRAIN* (Aperture, \$85), edited by Agnès Sire, was a constant source of wonder.

You may see resemblances to the early work of Henri Cartier-Bresson (who invited Larrain to join Magnum) as well as to his contemporary Robert Frank, but he had his own sinuous style: doing more with less, inviting chance and mess, savoring rough textures. His angles stay low, sometimes seeming to emerge from the ground, which is especially apposite in his early pictures of Santiago street kids, but the low angles come to define him as a photographer of all-seeing alertness and irreproachable modesty.

In London and Paris and Palermo and Valparaíso he hugs walls, assumes the point of view of dogs and beggars, enters the loneliness of prostitutes and widows, records every bump and rock and puddle, almost as if he is becoming one with the streets of the city. His pictures are all about fleeting

and hard-earned beauty, well away from any imputation of glamour. They certainly suggest that his meditative practice was already in effect the first time he looked through a lens.

An appreciation of stony texture also marks *WALL* (Aperture, \$60), by the veteran Czech photographer Josef Koudelka, although to somewhat different effect. Koudelka is no stranger to conflict — he documented the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and became a political refugee two years later. Here he has produced a remarkable collection of panoramic photos (each 29-by-10½-inch spread is a single picture) of the barrier that has been erected over the past decade in defiance of the internationally recognized border.

The wall, which divides Bethlehem from Jerusalem, Rachel's Tomb from the rest of Bethlehem, the proposed capital of the Palestinian state from the rest of East Jerusalem, farmers from their fields, families from their relatives, and Palestinian Bedouins from their native environment, is made up of concrete slabs, steel plates, razor-wire fences, boulders and bricked-up buildings as in the Berlin of yore. The vistas are resolutely grim, and Koudelka makes no attempt to aestheticize them, yet his sweeping photos are overwhelming. The moral chasm that opens between the sheer impact of the visual and knowledge of what is being depicted is fully intended: an invitation to consider, rather than to simply turn the page in horror and sadness.

On the other hand, the gap between image and underlying reality can be queasily farcical, as demonstrated in Simon Menner's *TOP SECRET: Images From the Stasi Archives* (Hatje Cantz, \$30). The Stasi ruined innumerable lives, hounded people to their deaths, insinuated pervasive distrust among family members, co-workers, friends — but the photographs could easily persuade you that they were an assortment of bumbling amateurs whose training involved viewing episodes of the '60s TV comedy "Get Smart!"

From demonstrations of disguises and secret hand signs to surveillance pictures of mailboxes to Polaroids taken during house searches documenting Western sympathies based on, say, a wall of magazine shots of Madonna in a teenager's bedroom, it is hard to believe that these pictures were actually produced by one of the world's most feared secret police forces and not by a college humor magazine. Every image is sourced, however, by its index number in the Stasi files. And pieced-together photos — of uniformly impeccable banality — that had been torn up in the last days of the G.D.R. suggest that there may be more here than meets the eye. The book might be a primer on the banality of evil.

Humor as well as heartbreak — in fact most of the emotions of everyday life — are present in *THE NON-CONFORMISTS* (Aperture, \$45), a slim but satisfyingly rich chronicle of the Yorkshire district of Calderdale in the 1970s, when the traditions that had sustained the area for centuries, including the nonconforming sects that give the book its name, were plunging into decline. The approach here, by the photographer Martin Parr and the writer Susie Parr, is elegiac, deeply affectionate, but not without some cheekiness, as in the photo reproduced on the cover, showing the respectable attendees of the inaugural banquet of the mayor of Todmorden climbing all over one another to fill their plates at the buffet.

There are views of farmers, miners, gamekeepers, moviegoers, a traveling hairdresser, a mouse show, a harvest produce auction, the Ancient Order of Henpecked Husbands and a small boy with a toy gun behind the plinth of a statue, pretending to shoot the assembled congregations of three chapels at an outdoor service. The Parrs savor all of it and mourn an end that was already starkly visible then, when the pews were nearly empty and the majority in any setting were elderly. This is a lovely and melancholy book.