

San Francisco Chronicle

THE TAKE

Photographer Jim Goldberg packs SFJazz

By Judy Walgren / March 3, 2015



Photo: Jim Goldberg/Magnum Photos

"At the corner of U.S. 1 and Ella T Grasso Blvd.", New Haven, Connecticut, 2014.

The San Francisco arts community came out en masse last Wednesday evening to pay homage to their own Jim Goldberg, a visual storyteller extraordinaire, during a talk framed in an intimate setting at SFJazz. During the event, "Rich and Poor: A Conversation with Photographer Jim Goldberg," New York Times culture writer Randy Kennedy attempted to lead the charismatic visual artist through a conversation about his 40-year career, but in the end Goldberg took the reins and recounted story after story surrounding the relationships he has built while documenting the lives of people he finds compelling.

The main theme of the evening was the re-publication of Goldberg's book "Rich and Poor," a chronicle of the haves and have nots in San Francisco in 1985. The original version sold out quickly, and the artist said he was excited to revisit the pages and have them printed on better paper, with higher quality ink on more precise presses. The present economic boom in San Francisco also played a role in his decision to bring it back to life.

My wife is acceptable.
Our relationship is satisfactory.
Edgar G.



Edgar looks splendid here. His power and strength of character come through. He is a very private person who is not demonstrative of his affection; that has never made me unhappy. I accept him as he is.
We are totally devoted to each other.

Regina Goldstine

Dear Jim:
May you be as lucky in marriage!

Photo: Jim Goldberg/Magnum Photos

"Edgar and Regina Goldstine," San Francisco, 1981.

Goldberg could be considered one of the first successful multimedia artists. While trying to create a portfolio he felt would gain him access to graduate school, he began experimenting with his prints by adding text on top and around his images, causing critics to recoil. He was invited to exhibit his work at SFMOMA while he was still in graduate school at the San Francisco Art Institute. As his images materialized on a huge screen hanging above the pair, Goldberg silently reflected on the photographs or their content — maybe remembering the moment he pushed the shutter release or the movement of the subject's hand as s/he scrawled a thought across the photographic paper. Reflections of empathy and compassion flirted across his eyes — for both the rich and poor subjects who allowed him into their lives.

Wearing a casual pair of green pants, a black unadorned T-shirt and skater shoes, Goldberg seemed uneasy having the spotlight positioned toward him. He spoke about his childhood, telling the crowd about being an insider within his own family, the proverbial "black sheep." I have the intuitive perception of being the Other," he admitted. Even within his agency, the prestigious collective Magnum photos, Goldberg exclaims, "In Magnum I am considered a bad boy because I use text — I need those 30 images to make my pictures."



Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

New York Times culture reporter Randy Kennedy (left) moderates a conversation with photographer Jim Goldberg at the SFJAZZ Center, Wednesday, Feb. 25, 2015, in San Francisco, Calif.

In 1976, he moved to San Francisco and studied with Larry Sultan at Lone Mountain College after he was turned down by the San Francisco Art Institute because his images were "too normal." He went on to explain that he never was a street photographer, as many of his contemporaries were, because the relationship with his subjects was important for his process. "I was not a trained photographer so my mind was open to different ways to approach my work. Larry gave me other ways of seeing."

During the time that he was working on "Rich and Poor," the public was starting to scrutinize images and challenge their truth. Goldberg says, "I wanted to question how we look at things and how where I stand — above, below and to the side — affects how I see." Ultimately, he observed that the images he produced did not tell the "whole truth" and that he needed to collaborate with the subjects to make them complete. He asked them to write, draw and intervene on the images themselves. "That is why I am an artist and not just a photographer. You have to be much more than just an observer."

Goldberg works with multidimensional installations because a photograph or a group of images is not able to contain all that he wants to communicate about his subjects. "Probably in another life I would have been a sculptor," Goldberg said. "I like working out what is going on in my mind."

When asked by the moderator how he feels about the massive influx of imagery through smartphone cameras and the use of social media, Goldberg paused and said, "This explosion in some ways validates what I have been working on with words and pictures all of this time." He moved right along to asked the audience, "Maybe someone can ask me a question about what I am doing?" After the laughter subsided, Goldberg mentioned that he is working on a project about Eden in the Florida everglades and collaborating with well-known artist and former student Hank Willis Thomas on race. "I have been thinking of making a rich and poor perfume, actually." More laughter.

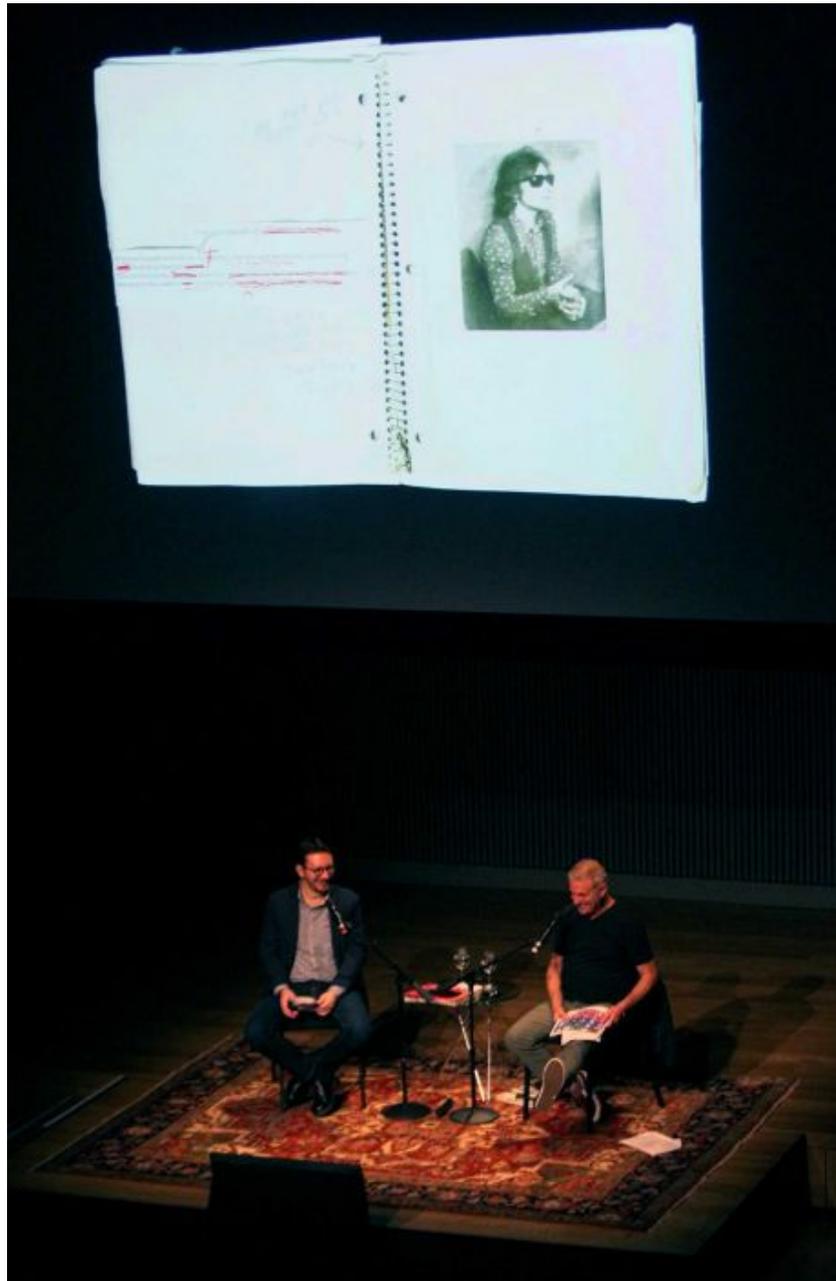


Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

New York Times culture reporter Randy Kennedy (left) moderates a conversation with photographer Jim Goldberg about his work at the SFJAZZ Center, Wednesday, Feb. 25, 2015, in San Francisco, Calif. Goldberg's first photo taken is displayed on the large screen.

As the evening neared an end, someone from the balcony begged him to take a question from above. Goldberg's eyes wrinkled as he tried to look out and connect with the voice. As he put his hand up to block the spotlight, I wondered what it must be like to be inside Goldberg's brilliantly intense brain and how it is that someone who has been working so hard for nearly four decades still burns with the desire to continue to grow, give, create and inspire.

Goldberg bridges the gaps between rich and poor, right and wrong, left and right. He is the crux and the nexus, drawing us into worlds we would never be privy to without him. "My ideas of wealth and poverty — I really haven't worked them out yet."

And hopefully he never will so we can continue to witness his amazing process.



Photo: Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

Photographer Ben Molina, who came to see a talk between New York Times culture reporter Randy Kennedy and photographer Jim Goldberg, walks by one of Goldberg's photos following the end of the event at the SFJAZZ Center, Wednesday, Feb. 25, 2015, in San Francisco, Calif.