All in the Family

Photographer Steve Hart finds love and despair in the South Bronx

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You know you've truly been welcomed into a Puerto Rican household in New York City when you're asked to squeeze onto the living room sofa and peruse the family photo album. This is an invitation to enter a beautiful tangle of stories, each linked to one of a sea of faces belonging to extended relations. With his stunningly graphic and deeply emotional photo essay *A Bronx Family Album: The Impact of AIDS,* Steve Hart refashions this ritual by narrating the story of Ralph and Sensa, an HIV positive couple, and their attempt to raise four daughters.

We may not be surprised at evidence that poor Latinos in this country have been hard-hit over the past 20 years by the decline in public education, by substance abuse and by inadequate health care. Still, viewing Hart's project -- exhibited last fall at New York City's International Center of Photography and now available on CD-ROM from Distributed Art Publishers -- can be a harrowing experience.

Hart met the family in 1990 through an HIV positive therapy group at Bronx Lebanon Hospital. In his 100-plus photos spanning seven years, we see the family undergo more than its share of traumas. Sensa becomes addicted to crack, Ralph is sent to prison, and the couple's daughters (all HIV negative) are abandoned, sexually molested and moved in and out of relatives' apartments and group homes.

The well-traveled Hart, who is white, says he was drawn to this family's uninhibited displays of emotion over their mounting crises -- sharply different from his own family, which had trouble confronting the death of his sister years ago. He sees his documentary photography as a form of self-portrait, a process of reacting to his own life. The trust he elicited from Ralph, Sensa and their daughters is evident in the photos' intense intimacy and in his continued monitoring and mentoring of the girls.

Images of the family's most tense and vulnerable moments -- and the CD-ROM's accompanying audio interviews -- expose Sensa's and Ralph's difficulties in engaging with each other and helping their children grow. We are brought into a world where responsibility to the body and the family appears only in flashes: A happy moment, such as the day the two learn that their youngest daughter is HIV negative, is almost always tempered by an episode of Ralph's violence or one of Sensa's disappearing acts.

But Hart finds the enduring love in this family, too, particularly in Ralph’s dedication to raising the children after Sensa leaves. In one photo, as Ralph washes his daughter Rosa’s face, we, too, feel momentarily cleansed, and other photos seem to hint at an as-yet- unimagined rebirth.

Ralph and Sensa have both died from HIV-related illnesses. But in this record of their faces and voices, their sadness and almost-spiritual fatalism, Hart captures a uniquely Puerto Rican sensibility that resonates beyond their deaths. At once a textured community portrait and a profoundly universal work, *Bronx Family Album* has the power to win the battle against indifference in this war against the weak.

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