At the End of the Pier

Photographer Richard Renaldi covers the waterfront

April 1, 1998 By Stephen Greco

“It’s a great big open-air hangout,” says photographer Richard Renaldi of New York City’s legendary West Village waterfront, a place he captured in *Pier 45*, a series of slice-of-life pictures taken between 1994 and 1997. “The attraction is the openness. You don’t get that kind of sky anywhere else in the city. And people like to photograph it the way they like to photograph Coney Island -- because of the past and this quality of ’life at the edge.’”

Two decades ago, what photographers found standing here were the noble ruins of New York’s once-great maritime economy: Early 20th-century commercial sheds, abandoned and weathered. The piers offered pleasures unavailable in the rest of New York City: Sex, solitude and that amazing light when the sun sets. What Renaldi found -- what remains after the superstructures are demolished and the piers fenced off -- is pure spirit.

“Recording this place was important because the scene changed so fast -- and now it’s vanished,” Renaldi says. “Last summer, when I went back, all this was gone.” Individually, these pictures are community snapshots, full of affection and ardor for their subjects: Sunbathers recline on folding chaises; Stonewall survivors perch, chatting, on lane dividers; bikers, bladers and strollers give each other the eye. But taken together, these pictures compose an epic.

Renaldi lives here, too -- in a multistory townhouse as sparse and elegant as his photographic compositions, tucked into a small cobblestone mews half a block from the river. At 29, he’s been HIV positive for over a year and has just started a drug protocol that seems to have him in good health. Only recently has he quit his day job as a researcher in a photo stock company and begun to devote himself full-time to his own commercial work.

Renaldi has a documentary-journalistic approach to photography -- and that, he says, is one reason that it’s been difficult to interest a publisher in *Pier 45* as a book. “There just aren’t many Eugene Smiths, Robert Franks or Garry Winogrands around,” Renaldi explains, referring to some of the century’s great slice-of-lifers. “Nowadays the galleries can sell journalistic or documentary stuff only if it’s old. I don’t think we look at ourselves anymore. What’s out there is so conceptually based. Nan Goldin is the one exception -- but then, that sells because it’s shock.”

Looking at Renaldi’s photographs -- even the explicitly sexual ones -- you sense that shock is the last thing this photographer aims for. He’s friendly, frank and free of irony. There’s no tension

between his roles as observer and as participant, and you get the feeling that we -- photographer, subject, viewer -- all share a vibe.

“Why I do it is simple: I love photography,” he admits. “When I’m shooting, those are my best moments. I have great experiences that I wouldn’t have without my camera.”

Renaldi’s current project is to document the life of one of the world’s ultimate shopping centers, Madison Avenue. “I thought it was going to be difficult, but all these ladies want is to be photographed. The other day, one was telling me proudly how many times her picture has appeared in newspapers and magazines.”

How does this compare with covering the waterfront?

Renaldi considers for a moment. “It’s different and the same,” he says. “The people on Madison Avenue are so totally unembarrassed about being their amazing, individual selves. I guess I like that.”

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