Signs of Life

November 1, 1998 By Stephen Greco

Photographer Frank Jump captures traces of a lost world.

It's true that they'll never finish building New York City, but they'll also never finish tearing it down. Frank Jump has focused on the intersection of these two processes, tracking down and photographing fading commercial advertisements painted on the walls of old city buildings. His creations are elegant mementos of huckster history.

"I like to get a feeling for a place by taking pictures of its graffiti and billboards," Jump says. "This advertising shows a time in New York that was much more innocent." Jump, 38, who says he's "always been drawn to archaeology," sees his elegiac photographs in that tradition -- less artwork than documentary. "I do as much research as I can," says the photographer, picking up a shot he took of a Reckitt's Blue ad he discovered on the side of a brick building at Atlantic and Washington avenues in Brooklyn. "For instance, this company is now Reckitt and Colman, which owns Lysol. Reckitt's Blue, I think, is still made in Europe. My lover, who lived in Italy, said his mother used it in the laundry to whiten clothes."

Jump's photos, for all their charm, capture a certain heroism. Despite harsh winters, urban renewal and corporate encroachment, these ads have been blessed with a long life. It was a teacher at New York University who first alerted the photographer that his images were metaphors for living with HIV. "She told me, 'These things are temporary,'" Jump says. "'That they've made it through all these years makes them survivors.' And it was true. Being positive is so central to my life -- and it's why I was so drawn to this project."

Jump learned he had HIV in 1984 and devoted the rest of the decade to ACT UP and, as a playwright, lyricist and musician, to putting the culture of AIDS on stage and film. Today, he lives in Brooklyn and gives photography his full attention. A show of his work, *Fading Ad Campaign,* is currently on view at the New York Historical Society, and Pantheon will publish a book of his photographs next year.

Jump glances over at another of his photos -- an ad for Fletcher's Castoria, a famously bitter tonic for children, long gone from the marketplace. "I don't think Fletcher's intended its sign to last into a new millennium, but it has." He smiles. "Well, I wasn't supposed to make it, either."

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