Looking for Home: A Yearlong Focus on the Work of Mary Ellen Mark

The MUSEUM OF STREET CULTURE at Encore Park

Opening October 1, 2017
11:00AM - 4:30PM
by Alan Govenar, Founding Director, The Museum of Street Culture

The Museum of Street Culture is located in Encore Park, the heart of an historic area of downtown Dallas, flanked by the Farmers Market, City Hall, and the Main Street District. Founded as a non-profit organization in 2013, Encore Park works with a diverse coalition of partners to coordinate programming that unites human services, creative arts, and historic preservation in an unprecedented collaborative system focused on building relationships and abundant life.

The Museum of Street Culture selected the work of internationally-acclaimed photographer Mary Ellen Mark as our opening exhibition because it demonstrates artistic excellence and explores social issues crucial to the revitalization of Encore Park and the surrounding neighborhood.

Mary Ellen Mark’s 33-year documentation of the harsh realities of street life, from 1983 to 2015, of Erin Blackwell, a.k.a. Tiny, in Seattle, Washington parallels, and presents a poignant counterpoint, to the ongoing efforts of the First Presbyterian Church of Dallas and The Stewpot to offer a safe haven for homeless and at-risk individuals, providing resources for basic survival needs, as well as opportunities to start a new life.

In 1983, Mary Ellen Mark and reporter Cheryl McCall began working on a story on runaway children for Life magazine. They chose Seattle, “because,” wrote Mark, “it is known as ‘America’s most livable city.’ Los Angeles, San Francisco, and New York were well-known for their street kids. By choosing America’s ideal city we were making the point, if street kids exist in a city like Seattle, then they can be found everywhere in America, and we are therefore facing a major problem of runaways in this country.”

In Seattle, Mark and McCall met several children whose life experiences they documented. But one girl, in particular, attracted Mark’s interest in a way that distinguished her from her friends and companions. “The first time I saw Erin Blackwell,” Mark said, “was in this parking lot [of the Seattle discotheque called The Monastery]. A big station wagon taxi pulled up and two little girls looking about ten and twelve stepped out. The one who looked twelve was actually almost fourteen and her street name was Tiny. The other was her friend Phillis and she was eleven. They both wore tight sweaters, tight jeans, and lots of make-up. They looked like girls playing “dress up” and they were amazing. I approached them, introduced myself, and asked if I could spend time with them to take pictures. They both started to giggle and ran toward a waiting car. The next day, Teresa, a social worker, introduced Cheryl and me to Tiny. She also assured her that that we were journalists, not police. That was the beginning of a long relationship.”

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Mary Ellen Mark and Cheryl McCall’s article appeared in Life magazine in July 1983 and they returned to Seattle to produce the documentary film Streetwise with Mark’s husband, the director, Martin Bell.

When Streetwise was released in 1985, it was nominated for an Academy Award. About the film, Janet Maslin, in The New York Times, wrote: “One of the things that gives Streetwise its impact is an event the film makers could not have anticipated: the suicide of one of the half-dozen subjects they studied most closely. The film does not overemphasize the sordidness of street life or the bleak prospects it holds for these people’s futures (if anything, many of the interviewees are captured at the height of their energy and bravado).”

Mary Ellen Mark and Martin Bell returned often to Seattle, and maintained active contact with Tiny, documenting Tiny’s life on and off the streets from 1983 to 2015 and the obstacles Tiny sought to overcome. On April 19, 2015, about month before Mary Ellen Mark died of cancer, she wrote: “I remember every detail from the first time I saw Tiny and photographed her. She was so striking and candid. The camera was meant for her and I knew it immediately. She was a star. Over the years, I’ve spent a lot of time with other subjects often returning to them. But my relationship with Tiny and her family is entirely different from any other photographic relationship I have had. She has always been such an incredible character, so alive and honest. I was always curious to learn what she was doing, and eager to document her life .... Now, when I look at Tiny, even after so many years and so many difficult life changes (children, addiction, romantic hardships, financial struggles, etc.), I can’t help but see the thirteen-year old girl I first met jumping out of a taxicab all dressed up for an evening of fun at The Monastery nightclub, full of hopes and dreams and the great expectations that life can bring.”

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Looking for Home is curated by Alan Govenar (Founding Director, The Museum of Street Culture), and Martin Bell, Meredith Lue, and Julia Bezgin (Mary Ellen Mark Foundation). Exhibition design is by Studio Adrien Gardère.


In conjunction with Looking for Home: A Yearlong Focus on the Work of Mary Ellen Mark, The Museum of Street Culture is planning a broad range of programming, including the screening of Mary Ellen Mark and Martin Bell’s documentary films (Streetwise and Tiny: The Life of Erin Blackwell); a public dialogue series; and a partnership with The Stewpot’s Saturday Kids’ Club, Junior and Venturing Crew, and The Stewpot Art Program.

Upcoming exhibitions, to be installed in Encore Park

Picturing Homelessness – Opening January 27, 2018
Presented in partnership with the Saturday Kids’ Club

The Stewpot staff with support from The Museum of Street Culture will work with the children in the Saturday Kids’ Club to develop their ideas about homelessness and how they visualize it. Children will create artworks portraying homelessness in terms of both the way things are now, and what they would like to see happen to the same people in the future. Staff will facilitate discussions about how this type of change occurs, and how art acts as a catalyst for changing the world around us. Participants will be able to view their artworks in an exhibition at The Stewpot and at the opening reception at The Stewpot Alliance’s Soup’s On luncheon in January 2018.

Photography and Social Justice – Opening April 14, 2018
Presented in partnership with the Junior and Venturing Crew

The Museum of Street Culture will partner with The Stewpot staff for this special program offered to middle and high school students involved in the Junior and Venturing Crew programs. Participants will gain understanding of homelessness and will explore photography as a means for documentation, with an introduction to photojournalism. An exhibition of their works will open in April 2018.

Think of Me as an Artist: Breaking Down the Stereotypes of Homelessness - Opening June 16, 2018
Presented in partnership with The Stewpot Art Program
Multimedia group exhibition featuring The Stewpot artists

The Museum of Street Culture’s mission is to validate the history and everyday experience of people in public places through diverse forms of art, education, and new ideas, activating social change and building community.

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For more information, see: www.museumofstreetculture.org