Kodachrome Memory

AMERICAN PICTURES 1972–1990

Nathan Benn

Thames & Hudson House Books

Kodachrome Memory:
American Pictures 1972-1990

Photography by Nathan Benn
Essay by Paul M. Farber
Foreword by Richard Buckley

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AMERICAN PICTURES 1972–1990

NATHAN BENN

FOREWORD BY RICHARD BUCKLEY

ESSAY BY PAUL M. FARBER

POWERHOUSE BOOKS
BROOKLYN, NY

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Contents

7 FOREWORD by Richard Buckley

11 THE UNINTENTIONAL ARCHIVE by Paul M. Farber

18 PLATES

North East

Heartland

Pittsburgh

Florida

165 ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CAPE CHARLES, VIRGINIA, 1982

Foreword

RICHARD BUCKLEY

Stuff. We are constantly bombarded with stuff, much of it visual and most of it useless. Bleary-eyed and over-stimulated from the glut of content in almost everything from fashion to art, film and photography, this nonstop barrage of sensorial instant gratification leaves us looking for more and more: a quick glance and then on to the next thing. Digital cameras, cell phones, and social media have democratized photography, to the point where everyone today is a photographer. We look, but we don't see. By giving meaning to everything, we give nothing value.

There is something to be said, therefore, for an "old school" approach and the authenticity of the artist. Nathan Benn's discerning eye, as well as his experience and knowledge of photography, makes his work stand out from much of today's digital noise. The majority of the photographs in *American Pictures 1972–1990* were shot on assignment for National Geographic, and while many were published in that magazine, others were forgotten outtakes discovered in Benn's archives. Perhaps because of their journalistic origins, what is unique about Benn's photographs is their ability to engage and tell a story: their narrative depicting people, places, and a time that have long since vanished. Take, for example, "New Haven, Vermont, 1973" [page 25] Benn's image of a woman standing on the steps of her house. She is in the center of the frame and looking away from the camera, allowing us to really stare at her. We can scrutinize her hand on the railing, the other on her hip, one bare foot curling over the top of the step and the other gripping her shin. She is thin and wears a coral-colored apron. There is something poignant about this woman and this transitory moment in time. It is also a spot-on exposure of bygone Americana: you can almost smell the apple pie cooling on the counter inside.

Kodachrome Memory celebrates the significance of American regional diversity as it was 30 or 40 years ago, before the advent of Internet culture and before the country became one vast strip mall stretching from sea to sea. The seemingly inconsequential subjects of Benn's photographs, which are keenly observed and evocative of a time and place, act as metaphors for American culture and values. In his photograph of "Natchez, Mississippi, 1983" [page 69], a roadside restaurant called Mammy's Cupboard, is a testament to the evolution of the Old South. Benn's image depicts Mammy as she was then: a black woman with a do-rag and minstrel-like makeup. Google the restaurant today and what you will see is that Mammy is no longer a black stereotype but has been reincarnated as a white woman.

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While it is the stories the photographs told that originally drew me into Benn's work emotionally, increasingly as I studied each individual image I was struck with his painterly understanding of composition, light, and color. There is this juxtaposition in his pictures between the formality of their framing and the looseness and spontaneity of a snapshot. In some cases, such as a shot of a pair of eyes peering from a window in Miami, or a newspaper worker from St. Petersburg, the photographs seem to be more about the graphic abstraction of the image than an actual study of the subject.

And, it is no wonder that this volume is entitled *Kodachrome Memory*, as the book's content is an homage to Kodachrome, the film of choice for most magazine photographers from its inception in 1935 until its demise in 2009. Kodachrome was favored for its brilliant, but elegant, representation of color. Although much of Benn's work was done for a magazine and not gallery walls, his use of color throughout holds its own with artists of the period such as William Eggleston and Stephen Shore. And, like those artists, Benn's pictures were shot long before the advent of Photoshop, where colors could be enhanced or changed.

Some of Benn's photographs appear to be pure color studies such as the Wisconsin fireman in his blue T-shirt leaning against his cherry red fire truck [page 57], or a pair of orange and yellow chairs on a South Beach, Florida porch [page 155]. In other photographs the use of color accents faded architecture, such as, "Helena, Arkansas, 1983" [page 89] with the weathered gray of the houses offset by pink rosebushes, a mustard sweater worn by a man on a porch, and the shock of a red bedspread hanging on the line next door; or as in another picture, the accents of color are worn by people in the otherwise bleak setting in Pattison, Mississippi [page 67].

There are even grisaille studies with the image of porters in a Memphis cotton mill [page 79] or the close up of a white man in blackface shot in New Orleans [page 81], both from 1983. In one of the first photographs in the book, "Cape Charles, Virginia, 1982" [page 6], we see the entry to a store with it's marble wainscoting, black and white tiles, apple basket, and the ubiquitous faded Coca-Cola sign, which all form a perfect geometric abstraction, but there, if you look, is the shadow of the artist, a self-portrait if you will. A metaphor for Benn's ability to become invisible to his subject, but quite present in what his eye sees in that one split second before the shutter clicks.

BEALE STREET, MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE, 1983

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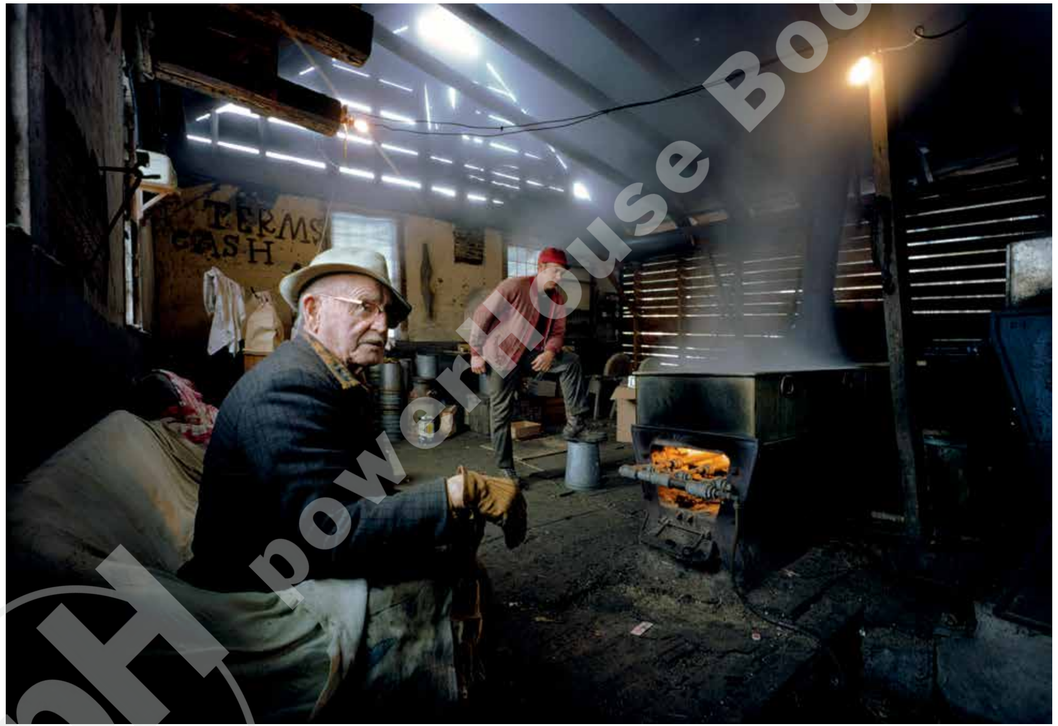

PITTSFIELD, VERMONT, 1973

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KEY WEST, FLORIDA, 1981

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NATCHEZ, MISSISSIPPI, 1983

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NEW ORLEANS, 1983

PATTISON, MISSISSIPPI, 1973

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NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA, 1977

NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA, 1977

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CAPE CANAVERAL, FLORIDA, 1981

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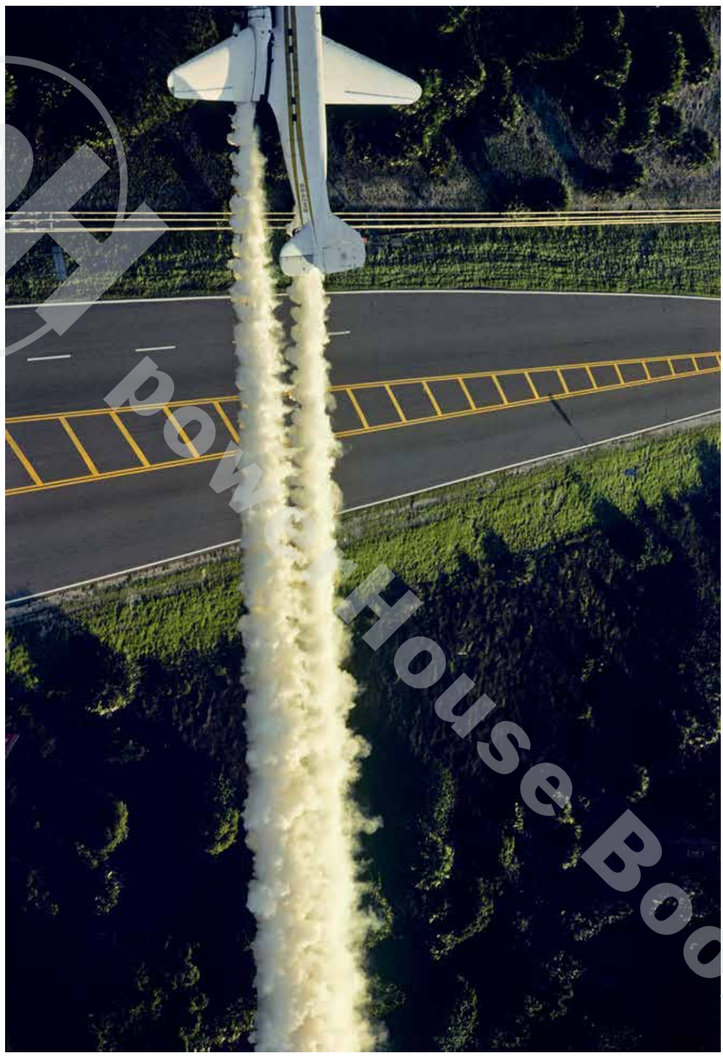

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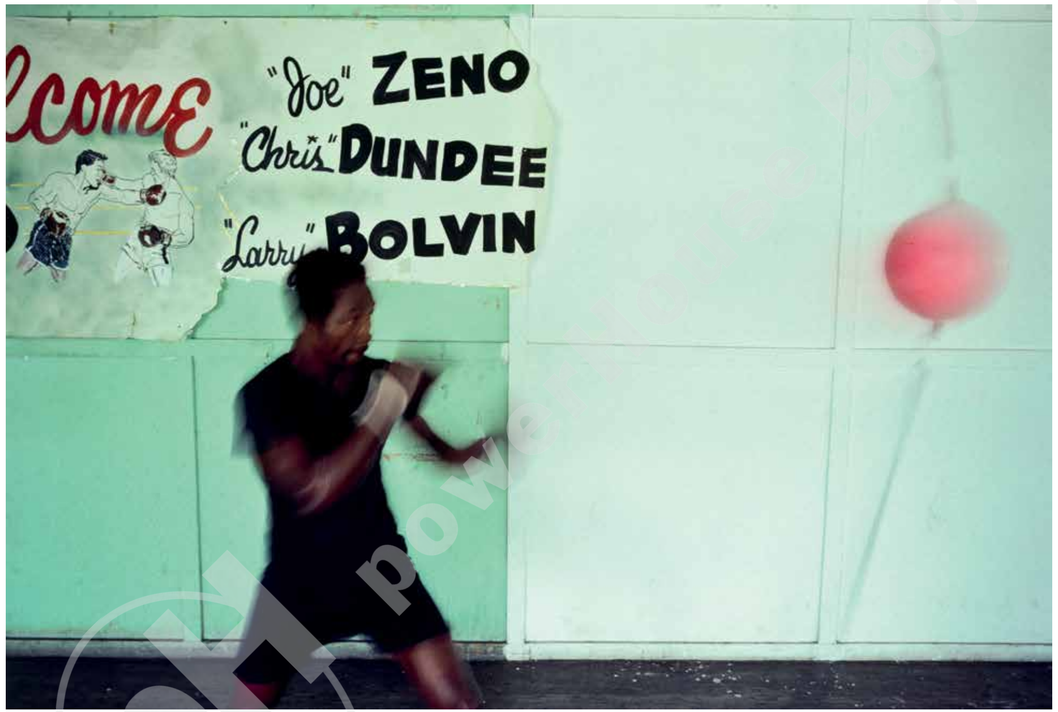

MIAMI BEACH, FLORIDA, 1981

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CAPE CANAVERAL, FLORIDA, 1981

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KODACHROME MEMORY
American Pictures 1972–1990

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Even if you've never seen Nathan Benn's photographs from the 1970s, they feel somehow familiar—like the refrain of a half-remembered song. With a uniquely American mix of formality and ease, and a color palette so tart you can almost taste it, Benn makes the past vividly—even painfully—present. So, there's nothing nostalgic about his pictures of parades, homecomings, and town meetings, juke joints and barbershops, front porches and back roads, because you are there. Maybe that's why *Kodachrome Memory: American Pictures 1972–1990* feels like an instant classic.

— VINCE ALETTI

It is a happy and welcoming cruise down Nathan Benn's *Kodachrome Memory* lane. With over 100 fine photographs we are immersed in the nostalgia of a pre-digital time when the subtlety in images somehow communicated an intimacy now absent in the current binary techniques. So, welcome to a wonderful world, now passed but not forgotten.

— ELLIOTT ERWITT

This retrospective glance at America during Nathan Benn's nearly 20-year career as a *National Geographic* photographer reveals his seasoned eye for order, albeit tempered with a sense of whimsy. The pictures often invite our participation, asking us to anticipate what could come after someone peers out a window, steps out a door, or waits at a roadside. In environmental portraits of American patricians, people from the middle and under classes paused at work, relaxed at home, going about their ordinary lives, Benn shares his optimistic look at being human and proud. Meanwhile, the energizing color, soft beauty, or dazzle of light never mask vexing problems of late 20th–century race relations, economics, environment, and material excess. This winning book offers contemplation along with a heavy dose of enchantment.

—VERNA CURTIS

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— RICHARD BUCKLEY

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