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J E F F R E Y   H E N S O N   S C A L E S

T H E   T R A N S F O R M A T I O N   O F   H A R L E M

**Gentrification is a term often associated with evil entrepreneurs, greedy landlords, and cultural suppression. On the flip side, however, upgraded neighbourhoods offer increased safety, higher quality services, and lower crime rates. Photographer Jeffrey Henson Scales' latest exhibition, House Barber Shop, on display at the Claire Oliver Gallery in Harlem through September 20, explores the transformation the neighborhood experienced in the 1980s to 1990s.**

As a resident of Harlem since 1985, Scales witnessed firsthand the changes that took place in the neighbourhood. While photographing his town, he recognised the delicate balance between community and

security, as the composition of Harlem took on a new form. A cultural cornerstone of the neighborhood, this series focuses on one particular barber shop that served as an important gathering space for men in the community.



Morning, House's Barber Shop ©Jeffrey Henson Scales/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Courtesy Claire Oliver Gallery

**Hi Jeffrey, thank you for taking the time to talk with us. I understand you started photography from a very young age, how did you develop this talent?**

My mother was an artist who would take me to her San Francisco Art Institute and UC Berkeley graduate school art classes when I was in elementary school, and my father, who was an amateur photographer and camera collector. We always had a full darkroom and he gave me a Leica camera and thirty years of Life magazines when I was about eleven.

**Given that you were taking photographs since childhood, were you always sure you wanted to be a photographer professionally?**

While I had my photographs featured in a variety of publications including Time magazine beginning at age thirteen, immediately after high school I was hired by PBS to be trained to be a television producer/director. So, I directed for the local PBS station in San Francisco for a couple of years in the early 1970s, following which I tried to get work in television in Hollywood. However, due to the prevailing racial segregation in that industry at

that time, I couldn't even get interviews, so I turned back to photography as a creative outlet and eventually a profession.

During that same time I found work as a tour manager and toured with many major rock and pop acts for about five years. I was also making photographs throughout all of these years. I think I was the only tour manager who also carried a Hasselblad in his briefcase. The main artist I worked for and toured with was Minnie Riperton.

**How has your relationship with the medium changed through time?**

As I moved into creating album covers and movie posters, the scale of production grew to be quite large for those types of jobs. As for my personal documentary work, it has always been part of my practice. Being mentored by a number of great artists fortified that. Also, branching into photo editing and accepting a staff photographer position when, along with a delightful team of art directors, writers, and editors, we founded the LA Weekly newspaper in 1978.

Then, in the late 1990s, as the album cover industry was shrinking, I was again invited to be a photography editor, but this time, at The New York Times, where I've been an editor for the last twenty-six years. In this capacity, I created and curated the Exposures, a photographic op-ed column that ran in the Opinion section from 2011 through 2023, as well as editing the annual Years in Pictures special section for the last fifteen or sixteen years.

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**As someone who has been in both the fields of photography and written journalism, what has your experience taught you about successfully sharing news with a community?**

I've been very fortunate to have always been embraced by publications, beginning with The Black Panther Paper when I was a teenager, followed by the LA Weekly, LA reader, The Village Voice, and The New York Times, as well as a number of other publications. So, getting stories out to a variety of communities has always been something available to me.

**I know you have been living in Harlem since 1986, and I would love to hear about how this series came about and what photographing this barber shop was like?**

In the few years in LA before I moved to NYC, I had been mentored by the photographer Garry Winogrand, from whom I learned the practice of trying to photograph every day. When I moved to Harlem in 1985, along with my wife Meg and daughter Coco, I began to photograph on the neighbourhood's streets almost every day I wasn't working, mostly street portraits and landscapes of the community. I had never lived in an inner-city community, and it was also my way of learning and becoming a part of this community. At one point, the owner of House's Barber Shop, Mr. David House, saw me outside taking photographs and asked me if I could photograph his shop because he was in danger of losing his lease. It was then that I began making photographs there and kept making them for about six years. He told me that when some of these photographs were exhibited at The Studio Museum in Harlem, it helped him keep the business at that location.

**As you lived through this period of gentrification, could you explain a little bit more about its impact on the cultural changes in Harlem?**

When we first moved here, it was a pretty rough neighbourhood with a lot of abandoned buildings and dilapidation. The crack cocaine epidemic came through not long after we moved here and life could be very intense on the streets. Services were also scarce, like quality groceries, so the gentrification leaves me conflicted. I see a lot of displacement of long-term residents and the increased cost of rent, goods and services, but at the same time, there are a lot more goods and services as well as safe nightlife available.



Mr. House, House's Barber Shop ©Jeffrey Henson Scales/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Courtesy Claire Oliver Gallery

**You have also described this barber shop as an important space for Black men in the town. How do you think the closing of this establishment impacted this community?**

It's a loss of some of the important history of the neighbourhood, but New York City is a very organic place; it's always growing, changing, and many things have and will fade into our collective memory. It's just the nature of this city, for the better or worse.

**How did it feel to be taking photos in this intimate space?**

Anytime you have access to photograph an intimate space or person's life, it's a delightful meditative activity. This even carried over to my professional practice as a working editorial photographer. Many years ago, I spent



four days photographing Robert De Niro, and that kind of access into an individual's life can be just as personally inspiring as spending so much of my own time in a space like House's Barber Shop.

**As a photographer, you are making creative decisions before every photo is taken. How do you try to convey truth in your photos and what choices are you making to show that authenticity?**

In documentary practice, it's always about framing what's in front of you without manipulation or artifice, and following through with that in the final presentation of the work. Very much like photojournalism.

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Mr. House, House's Barber Shop ©Jeffrey Henson Scales/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. Courtesy Claire Oliver Gallery

**As a Harlem resident, why is it important to you that people in your community see these photos?**

For long-term residents, it's important to see documentation of the people and history of their own community. For newcomers, it's the same I would submit.

**How does it feel that the exhibition is happening at Claire Oliver Gallery, which is precisely in Harlem?**

Claire Oliver Gallery is always a great place to show, and very accessible to the local community. It's always great to have my gelatin silver prints made with traditional analogue methodology (aka film and photo paper) on display.

**If viewers could take away one message after seeing your exhibition, what do you hope that would be?**

Everyone takes away their own message, but with all work, perhaps a little appreciation of what the world looks like when photographed in a straightforward documentary way. Also, that they get a sense of what the Harlem community has been built with. A view of some of the people and practices that have made this place such a vibrant community.

**Moving forward, how do you hope policy makers and other influential figures approach decisions influencing the culture of Harlem?**

Rent is too damn high!



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