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Features

Artists Help Historical Society To Interpret Brooklyn

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Photographer ‘Repopulates’ Portrait Collection To Reflect Borough’s Diversity

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BROOKLYN — Hundreds of Brooklynites recently became a part of history. Their portraits are being stored for posterity, archived as we speak, on special, long-lasting gold DVDs at the Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS).

Photographer Nora Herting, 30, has just completed her mission to document the diversity of our borough. She set up mini-outdoor portrait studios, hauling her white backdrop and collapsible reflectors in a grocery cart to the public parks and parkways of Brooklyn in search of subjects who would pose for her. Hundreds happily obliged.

Herting’s project is part of the Brooklyn Historical Society’s imaginative new undertaking, Interpreting Brooklyn. Ten artists — visual artists, writers and a composer — have been chosen out of more than 300 applicants to create pieces inspired by BHS’s collection. Ultimately, all 10 artists’ work will be displayed along with the pieces from the collection that inspired them in a large-scale exhibit at BHS’ building in Brooklyn Heights.

More and more, BHS is opening its doors, and its collection, to artists, inspiring them to generate new material. “It’s an opportunity to open up our collection in an entirely different way, for a different interpretation of Brooklyn,” said Kate Fermoile, VP of exhibits and education at BHS.

“Our mission is to connect the past with the present,” said Janice Monger, who is in charge of visitor services. “We’re really interested in our collections being actively used by people.”

Before hitting the streets, Herting, who gave a work-in-progress presentation on Wednesday night, poured over boxes and boxes of portraits brought out by BHS photo archivist Julie May.

“What struck me was what I didn’t find, which was diversity,” said Herting. “When the historical society was founded, it was a private club, so a lot of the images were of upper-class New Englanders. I decided I would populate the archives, so in the future people looking through [the archive] would find a more diverse group.”

Herting set up her “studios” in Fort Greene Park, Prospect Park, Ocean Parkway in Midwood, the Red Hook ball fields, the Coney Island boardwalk, a small park next to the Brooklyn Museum, McCarren Park, and Eastern Parkway in Crown Heights.

“I wanted to cover different key neighborhoods with different demographics,” Herting said.

“I could have tried to find a quintessential background representing each neighborhood. But I wanted to isolate the subject,” Herting explained of her decision to use the white backdrop. “This allowed the individual to speak through.”

With friends volunteering as her assistants, Herting set up the backdrop next to a folding table, where the willing participants filled out surveys including their names, addresses, occupations and how long they’ve lived in Brooklyn (all of this data is to be archived along with the photos). “The nice thing was that it would become an event. The more people stopped, the more we drew a critical mass,” Herting said. Sometimes strangers posed together. Sometimes people scurried home to change their clothes first. Sometimes kids had to translate what was going on for their parents, she recalled.

Herting captured many multigenerational family portraits, as well as a cricket team fresh off their first victory, a member of the Coney Island Polar Bear Club, a man who has been practicing tai chi on Ocean Parkway every day for 18 years, a couple who had been married the weekend before, an umpire, a cotton candy vendor, a West Indian Day Parade performer, a number of Jews hailing from the Caucasus Mountains, as well as some Israelis. (Herting set up shop one day in front of 770 Eastern Parkway, not knowing it was the worldwide headquarters for the Chabad-Lubavitch Hasidic Movement).

“Besides people wanting to talk about their connection to Brooklyn, we found that their connection was also very specific to the neighborhood we were in,” Herting said.

In all, she handed over 281 portraits to BHS. “It gives us a pretty big snapshot of Brooklyn,” said archivist Julie May. Not one participant was edited out, and every one is being sent a free copy of their portrait.

“It was a terrific way to meet people who I wouldn’t have talked to otherwise,” said Herting. “When I look at them, it’s just amazing how different people are.”

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