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Curious Matter features photos of 'Falling City' by Arthur Brusio

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By **Brendan Carroll/For The Jersey Journal**
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Arthur Brusio received his first camera - a seafoam green Brownie - when he was 6 or 7 years old; it was a gift from his mother. Brusio, who came of age in Albany in the 1970's, has long found solace behind the camera. As the city deteriorated, he snapped pictures.

Brusio photographs what he sees: derelict apartment houses, passersby on the hustle, morning hangovers.

Curious Matter will present "FALLING CITY" by Arthur Brusio, a solo exhibition of 25 black-and-white and color photographs.

We recently caught up with Arthur to discuss his exhibition, the role of photography in his studio practice, and the cinematic aplomb of the urban jungle.

Brendan Carroll: When did you get your first camera?

Arthur Brusio: I got my first camera when I was six or seven years old. My mother got it with S&H green stamps (does anybody remember them?). She got one for me and one for my older sister. It was a Brownie in seafoam green. My sister's was peach.

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Arthur Brusio will have his photography exhibit, "Falling City" on display at Curious Matter in Jersey City. - The Jersey Journal

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'Falling City' by Arthur Brusco gallery (7 photos)



BC: Do you remember the first photo you took, and do you still have it?

AB: Actually, I do remember my first picture. My family had gone on a picnic to Thatcher Park in the foothills of the

Adirondacks. I was fascinated by this clump of wildflowers, so I took my first photograph of it. I do still have it. In fact I have the entire roll from that day. I don't have the negative, though. I remember getting the developed film back and my mother throwing out the negatives, saying that we didn't need to keep them, it was the prints that were important. I'm sorry about that now.

BC: What made you start taking pictures?

AB: When I received my first camera, it all just made sense to me. Maybe it had something to do with being nearsighted since birth. I didn't get glasses until kindergarten, so I was always looking closely at things in order to see them. The camera kind of did the same thing as my eyes. It restricts the way it sees and hones in on one part of a whole. I became fascinated with the magic of the photographic process and the way a camera sees. I learned to use that and the camera became a way of me looking at the world.

BC: What type of camera did you use as a kid and what type of camera do you use now?

AB: I used the Brownie. Then I got a Hawkeye basically a Brownie with a built in flash. Now I use Minolta point and shoot. I never became involved in the equipment part of photography. I prefer simple equipment, because I believe that the person behind the camera is more important than the equipment. The artist learns to use the limitations and anomalies of the medium and exploit them for the purpose of the idea.

BC: As soon as I saw the title of your exhibition, "FALLING CITY by Arthur Brusco," I thought of classic film noir from the 40's and 50's. (I am thinking of "Night and the City," "The Asphalt Jungle," "Sunset Boulevard," "Naked City.") Does this association resonate with you?

AB: Actually I would think more JT, "To Sir With Love," or even "Kojak." Something more about the 70's and 80's urban jungle kind of thing. I grew up in a "changing neighborhood" in an urban environment. I was exposed to a lot of life early. Art and study became refuges.

BC: The titles of individual photographs are as evocative as your show title. I am thinking of "My Death - No. 14 - Board Fortress," "On the Street No.4 Dodging Traffic," "On the Street - No. 3 - Missed Message." These titles remind me of Jack Kerouac's American haikus. What is the relationship between title and photograph?

AB: Since film is formatted as strips and the frames happen sequentially (I know digital people will have no idea what I'm talking about), it is easy to shoot a series of related images. The all-capitals part of the title is the series title. The series title relates to my idea of the group of images; the visual concept that runs through the images of that series. The second part of the title has to do with something specific about the particular image. So, "On the Street" is a series of images where I was relating figures walking with street objects. Missed Message has to do with the fact that the person in that image is walking past a church with a sign in front displaying the sermon theme and hours of services. The person isn't looking at the sign, he is facing the picture plane. He has missed the message.

BC: I've seen seven of the 25 images in the show. The hairstyles, the manner of dress, and type of automobiles reveal an earlier era in the United States, perhaps the 1970's or 1980's. What was your relationship to the people, places, and things in these photographs?

AB: The when and where of a photograph is probably the least interesting aspect of photography for me. I do not consider myself to be a documentary photographer. I use photography as a way to visualize ideas, like a painter uses paint. It is one medium of expression that I am comfortable with.

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I have been working through my backlog of images and working up good quality prints of images I find interesting (not always the images I found interesting when I may have exposed the film). So while style may betray, I still look at the image as being recent and new because that is when the print was made.

Now, after getting a MFA and having worked as an artist for some years, I seem to be more interested in those images that my photography professors would have considered failures. The bad exposures, out-of-focus images, off-color, something that creates visual interest and expresses my intention even more than I had initially get my interest now. With my better-trained eye, I can be more critical and more experimenting than I was.

BC: Your statement: "I use photography as a way to visualize ideas, like a painter uses paint" interests me. I studied painting in school, and spent 10 years of my life taking Polaroid photographs. Throughout this period, I never identified as a photographer. Painters were my heroes. If possible, I'd like you to elaborate on the connection between photography and painting. Is there a particular painter you feel a certain kinship to? If so, what is his/her connection to your photographs?

AB: When I was in art school, there was a big divide between artists (painters) and photographers. My professors were all about the Ansel Adams school of photography: pristine prints, no spots, no scratches, sharp focus over the entire image, full gray scale, good contrast, minimal grain. Photographs were expected to be spotted and dry mounted.

Documentary photography was the epitome. You were expected to expose lots and lots of film to just get one good print. I wasn't interested in any of this. I wanted to see what the camera and the darkroom could do. I experimented a lot. I tended to work with ideas rather than chance. Invariably, my professors asked with disdain if I was from the painting program.

I began my career as a photorealist painter. It was the way I was able to combine the two disciplines. But the process became too slow and limiting that I eventually moved on to other art ideas that were interesting to me. I define myself as an artist and photography is one of many media that I work in.

There are many painters that I feel a kinship to. When I first graduated with my MFA, I became enamored of Giorgione, Seurat, van Gogh and Munch. What these artists had in common was a total commitment to their work and I believed that I had to have the same commitment to my own. Then I discovered David Wojnarowicz whose work not only influenced my own, his life story became an inspiration.

BC: Many of the photographs appear to be taking off-the-cuff. Is this an accurate assessment?

AB: Actually, no. Most of the images were carefully composed and were taken with concept behind them.

BC: I am 0 of 2. I got two strikes against me. Does the concept inform the composition or how you frame the subject matter?

AB: Yes! With the series "My Death," I was not only going for images of decay, but a certain emotional response to that decay. If I'd been simply documenting a doorway for its architectural style, for example, I might be inclined to shoot straight on. But, when we see the image framed slightly askew, or as you say off-the-cuff, something else comes into play.

BC: "On the Street - No. 3 - Missed Message" is a dynamite image. It sings. I hear music. It drips the same kind of juice as "Josefine" by Dizzy Miss Lizzy or "Baby Please Don't Leave Me" by Buddy Guy. What role, if any, does music play in your photographs?

AB: For most of this show, think "Trouble Man" by Marvin Gaye. Music plays a big part in my work, I listen to it constantly when I am working. I often have a music score in mind when I work. I would have a score to my life if my partner didn't complain about my choices occasionally.



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BC: "Hard Morning" is one of the most striking images in the show. The picture was snapped in a doorway in an apartment or house. The room is bare, save a nightstand lined by a few odds and ends. The walls are bare - we see no pictures, no photographs, no shelves. Sitting on the bed in the middle of the room is a young African-American man. He is undressed. A jumble of sheets obscures his lap. His head is turned to the left at a 45-degree angle. He makes no eye contact. Can you tell me a little bit about this photo?

AB: The subject was a person I knew in undergraduate school. I was trying to take a photograph that compressed the entire of a person into one image. This was one of the images that I believed worked. He used to party heavily and I wanted to capture that aspect.

BC: As a former partier, I can say without reservation that you captured the feeling of the morning after. I can feel his headache. Any last words?

AB: The show is up through August 28. Please come by and see the work.

If you go:

Who: Arthur Brusco

What: Exhibit: "Falling City"

When: Opens Sunday at noon

Where: Curious Matter, 272 Fifth St. Jersey City

Details: Runs through Aug. 28 and open on Sundays from noon to 3

LINKS:

Arthur Brusco: www.arthurbrusco.blogspot.com

Curious Matter: www.curiousmatter.blogspot.com/

Brendan Carroll: www.brendanscottcarroll.com/

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