Street by Street and Photo by Photo

Carlos Ortiz Tells Story of His Bronx

By Clarisel González

In the 1970s, the South Bronx was plagued by a wave of arson and abandoned buildings, leaving whole communities devastated. The Bronx became the symbol of urban decay. Movies like *Fort Apache the Bronx* and that famous *The Bronx is burning* quote engraved images of ruin in people’s minds for decades.
For Bronx photographer Carlos Ortiz, his lens became a tool to shoot his own images and tell his Bronx tale his way: one photo at a time in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. He walked Bronx streets, including those in his beloved Longwood neighborhood, which he knew by name, capturing heartbreaking and glorious moments as well as documenting the devastation and rise of the Bronx he loved so much and never abandoned. Ortiz, who was born in Puerto Rico and raised in the Bronx, shot images of the devastation in his community and the resiliency of his people, including the smiling kids growing up among all the rubble.

Juan Fernando Morales, who selected the photos for Centro’s new exhibit at the lobby of the Hunter College Silberman School of Social Work in East Harlem, said Ortiz’s work should be better known, remembered and researched more. He got advice in the selection process from José Morales, artist and close friend of Carlos Ortiz.

The exhibit, which features a selection of Ortiz’s Bronx photos, will only be a snapshot of the extensive collection Centro has of his work. Ortiz donated his collection to Centro before he died as a way to ensure that this history is preserved and shared. Morales said about 30 of Ortiz’s black and white images, which come from just one box in Centro’s collection, will be displayed in the exhibit.

“The goal of this exhibit is to go on an amazing voyage with an amazing photographer,” Morales said. “It is for more people to get to know the work of this exceptional and accessible photographer who became sort of a guardian of his community and who used his photography to document the community he lived in and chose to stay in. It is also to share his collection and let researchers, artists, filmmakers, students, community leaders and the general public know that more of his work is available at the Centro Library and Archives for them to see and further research.”
Pedro Juan Hernández, senior archivist, said Centro decided to have an exhibit on Ortiz now because his collection has finally been processed. This collection, he said, serves as a valuable resource in understanding and chronicling the history of Puerto Ricans in the South Bronx.

There is great interest in his collection, he said. For instance, he said the Centro Library and Archives was awarded a grant from the Documentary Heritage Program/ New York State Archives/NYSED to aid in the arrangement and description of Ortiz’s documents. The materials in the collection consist of his personal files, correspondence, clippings, flyers, slides, and photographs dating from the 1970s through the early 2000s. The strength of the collection is the vast array of print photographs, slides and negatives that document not only multiple facets of Puerto Rican life but also of grassroots politics and organizations in the community such as The Police Athletic League and The Puerto Rican Day Parade. His pictures are noted for their somber portrayal of the desolation of the decaying landscape of the South Bronx.

Ortiz’s South Bronx images especially moved Morales. As he browsed through the collection, Morales said he kept going back to this one box. He could tell this collection was “very personal material” for Ortiz.

A detail that grabbed Morales’ attention was how organized the photographer was in cataloguing his images and files. For instance, he said, the box he is using as well as many other boxes in the same order the photographer left them in. He left annotations on his contact sheets. He labeled his Bronx files with the actual street names he visited.

Morales said his work goes beyond just documentation. “It’s art,” he said. “He has a statement. He revisited the same streets, the same places through the years, so you could see the transformations of the Bronx: The physical transformations, the transformations of the people and the transformation of the energy of the places.

“He had a commitment with his people, his family, his surroundings,” he said. “He was committed to his art, his aesthetic. He found beauty even in that space. You can capture form, people, space, but it was as though he could capture the atmosphere, the air.”

It is almost as though he captured a sense of time and feeling. For instance, he said, Ortiz used weather elements such as fog, the rain and snow in his images. He used the space between objects and people too. “He was able to see this through his lens.”

You could see the beauty even in those images that depict the Bronx at its worst. “You could see that in the faces of the people even in the most devastated situations,” he said. “His images show that you could
always find beauty.”

Centro Senior Archivist Pedro Juan Hernández noted that this is the first exhibition featuring Carlos Ortiz’s work since his death in 2008. Centro exhibited Ortiz’s last photo show in 2005. To see the Guide to the Carlos Ortiz Collection Click Here. [3]

November 22, 2013 - February 1, 2014
Reception Friday, November 22, 2013
6-8 pm
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