



## Orchard Beach Reborn: Q&A with St. Kitts-born Photographer Wayne Lawrence

by Tanisia Morris  
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When Orchard Beach, the Bronx's only public beach, was built in the '30s, it was christened the "The Riviera of New York." But since then, the 115-acre, 1.1 mile-long beach's reputation has been tainted. Often regarded as dirty, unsafe or 'ghetto,' the Pelham Bay Park beach has experienced the same stigmatization that the borough did during the '70s and '80s when drugs and arson afflicted its community— keeping non-Bronx residents at bay. But the negativity didn't deter Wayne Lawrence, an award-winning 39 year-old Brooklyn-based documentary photographer (The New York Times Magazine, The New Yorker, New York Magazine) from visiting the coastline.

Through a photography project that spanned 6 years, the St. Kitts-born photographer documented the poised and loving Latino, African-American and Anglo working class communities of Orchard Beach, whom he felt were being marginalized.

Lawrence's portraits of the Orchard Beach community will be on view in an exhibition at the Bronx Museum of the Arts titled, Orchard Beach: The Bronx Riviera, which opens on October 13, 2013 and runs through February 16, 2014. His monograph of the project will debut via Prestel on October 14.

Below are edited excerpts from a conversation with Wayne Lawrence about his commitment to documenting minority communities, his fascination with Orchard Beach, and why artists shouldn't succumb to doubt.

*Tanisia Morris: One of the things that I notice when I look at your work is that there's a sense of grittiness. You seem to find beauty in unexpected places. Was that aesthetic or style intentional?*

Wayne Lawrence: I guess it just came organically over time. I don't really like clutter in my frame. I like things to be kind of clean and orderly. I'm attracted to environments that are scarred or have troubled history so that might explain the grittiness of it, and I like my subject to look great. I want them to look their best at that time. That's why I use fill flash to kind of give it that celebrity effect.

*TM: Do you ever feel confined by those aesthetics?*

WL: That's the thing. I haven't really set any aesthetics. This is just how my work comes out. People say I have a style, but I basically just go out and shoot and respond to what's around me. It just so happens that they share a common thread or aesthetic.

*TM: You mentioned on your site that you wanted to document communities that are overlooked. What role does being an immigrant or minority photography play in your desire to document those communities?*

WL: I think that as long as I've been in this country, I've always felt like an outsider. As a photographer, this is how I navigate my adopted home here in the U.S. This is why I feel a connection to those communities. It's what I'm attracted to. It's grassroots people who I feel more comfortable around. These are people who don't pull any punches. What you see is what you get. There's no pretense. They're just real people.

*TM: What are you surprised to learn about the communities that you document?*

WL: I wouldn't say that I'm surprised, but every situation has different challenges and different joys. You never really know what you're going to get on a given day so that's the beauty in what we do as documentary photographers. You go out into the world and remain open to whatever comes your way. The main thing is to remain open and to not really try to contain what it is you're trying to do with the work. That's when your work is most honest and the most fulfilling.

*TM: Orchard Beach isn't exactly at the cream of the crop when it comes to reputable beaches in New York. In fact, it's probably at the very bottom if you ask many New Yorkers. What was your first impression of it?*

WL: I thought it was a beautiful place. The people were really inviting from day one. I just happened to go there a day when they had salsa music, so that was an added bonus. I felt immediately that the stuff that I was hearing about it being one of the worst places in New York had more to do with the people that go there. It was more of a judgment against the community there than the actual place because it's nestled in Pelham Bay Park, which is a beautiful place. Of course, sometimes, there are days where you might have some trash that can be blown into the water, but it's not as bad as people make it out to be. I think it came from the stigma from the '70s and '80s when the Bronx was a rougher place, so naturally that was carried over to Orchard Beach. But they cleaned it up, and it's really not as bad as people think. There is a rough crowd, but these are hard working, grassroots people with families and they're just like you and I. There's no difference. They're just real people who want to be respected.

*TM: Your subjects come off as confident and resilient in their photos despite popular opinion about the beach. You see it in their eyes and their stances. How did you get them to be as open as they were in their photos considering that you've never met them before?*

WL: An important part of being a documentary/street photographer is being able to read body language. A lot of times when I'm walking and looking for connections, that's the first thing that catches my attention—how they walk, how they carry themselves and the look in their eyes. I find that I'm often attracted to individuals who are comfortable in their own skin. When you see the photographs, I'm responding to a moment where everything comes together. What I'm trying to capture and what they're generous to give me, comes together in that one moment. It doesn't always happen. I probably have a 10 percent success rate because it's a collaboration and a lot of times people may not understand what it is that I'm trying to do, or they're just not willing to give me that energy.

*TM: Your Orchard Beach project was done during a six-year period. That's an extensive amount of time to work on something. Why did you stick around for so long?*

WL: I wanted to create a well-rounded body of work that represented that community, and it took me six years to do that. It was just a feeling. I just didn't feel like it was complete until 2011. Even though I shot hundreds of people, my ratio was not that high so I had to keep going until it felt complete.

*TM: What kinds of challenges did you face in trying to put the project together?*

WL: In the beginning, I've always been a really quiet person so it took me a while to get comfortable approaching people to take their picture. I think my ability to do that increased as I got better and more confident with my skills as a photographer. Of course, like most artists, there have always been financial challenges. There were times when I was going to the beach with only three rolls of film, but I would go anyway just to see what I would get that day. And then I would have bags filled with rolls of film because I didn't have money to process the film. Just having the determination to keep going was the most important thing. As an artist, oftentimes we have our loved ones and people around us who may not see our vision the way that we see it and tend to challenge you like, 'When are you going to be finished with this thing?' So that's always in the back of your mind like 'Am I really spending too much time here, and how do I know when enough is enough?' I think a lot of times we fall short because we start listening to these voices and start doubting our own vision. By the time you realize that you've stopped too prematurely, it's too late. If I listened to everybody, I would have stopped years ago.

*TM: I saw an interview with you in which you said that sometimes photographers are like tourists in that they stick around for action, but once it's gone, they're gone too, leaving the subject to deal with his/her life. Can you talk about that struggle and how you're able to go beyond what can be deemed as exploitative documentary photography in your work so that you walk away feeling somewhat content?*

WL: In the beginning of my journey as a photographer, I really wanted to be a photojournalist traveling afar to tell these tough stories about war, famine and different challenges that we face. But then I started realizing that for a lot of these photographers, it's work. Once it's done and the headlines are over, they move on to the next thing. I just didn't feel like that was the kind of life that I wanted to design for myself. I had a son so my whole thinking about what I wanted to do with the work changed. Then my brother was murdered. I think about my brother and remember his potential as a young man. The world would never see his potential because it was lost. That got me thinking about all of these other families who go through the same kind of trauma and we never really learn how to deal with that kind of grief. I thought that my photographs should be medicine to help people deal with that kind of grief. It was medicine for me. Going to Orchard Beach and being by the water was healing for me. Aside from celebrating the individuals and families, if the work goes beyond that and speaks to more universal themes of love, culture, pride and family, then my work would live on and go further than I could ever reach on my own. That's the only way that you can really get beneath the surface.

*TM: How has photography changed the way you look at the world?*

WL: It has forced me to commit to the uplifting of the communities that I engage with. It's helped me develop a strong sense of who I am as a person and what my purpose is as an artist, which is to inspire culture and people to live good lives. I just hope that my work is empowering people when they see it.

*TM: What are you looking forward to about your exhibition at the Bronx Museum? What does it mean to you?*

WL: This is the most exciting time in my whole career. The struggle is real and the struggle continues, but after all these years of grinding and trying to work on honing my voice, I feel like I finally found it and now people are really starting to take notice. Having my first book published

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is major. It's a very satisfying feeling knowing that I stuck to my guns. I always did the work that I wanted to do, that I felt was important. It went beyond the sleek, glossy pages of magazines. I shoot what interests me. That's the work that feeds me.

*TM: What advice would you give to an aspiring or struggling photographer?*

WL: The most important thing is to just understand that nothing happens overnight. It takes real patience and determination to really see it through. Find out what it is that moves you and find a way to create work that can give others the same feeling that you get creating it. That's the key to creating lasting work. Do what you do—regardless of what anybody says. Criticism is good, but only to a certain point. Take the criticism with a grain of salt and keep it moving.