

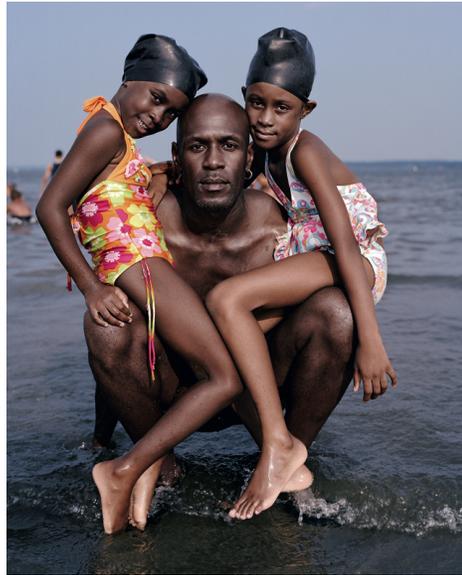
HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Photographing the 'Bronx Riviera,' New York's Unloved Beach

by Allison Meier
October 31, 2013

Orchard Beach in the Bronx doesn't exactly have the best reputation. While the 1.1 mile stretch of beach, formed from landfill and sand shipped in via barges, was declared "The Riviera of New York" when it opened in the 1930s under the direction of Parks Commissioner Robert Moses, its profile has since declined. It's been named one of the five boroughs' dirtiest beaches, according to the Natural Resources Defense Council, and some people even forget it's there. Yet Orchard Beach is still the Bronx's only public beach, and when summer arrives the locals who love it embrace the sandy shores.



Photographer Wayne Lawrence has been documenting Orchard Beach for six summers. And the trek for the Saint Kitts-born, Brooklyn based artist was no easy journey, as he describes in his book *Orchard Beach: The Bronx Riviera*, published this month by Prestel: "I rode the C train uptown from Kingston-Throop, switching at Fulton Street to the number 4 train. This took me to 125th Street, where I'd transfer to the number 6 train, taking it to the end of the line at Pelham Bay Park. A short ride later on a number 12 or 5 bus and I'd be at *la playa*."

And what he found was a vibrant gathering of individuality that, skimming through his book of portraits, seems to have provided endless opportunities for photographs with an engaging emotion and fashion that would make any street style blogger jealous. As he writes in his book introduction:

"From the first day that I visited Orchard, I knew the stigma attached to this place was unjustified. I felt a very strong connection to the environment and the people. I decided I'd stay a while, though I had no idea where the journey would lead. I sensed it was the beginning of a catharsis, and I committed on that day to let the work be a reflection of the love, cultural pride, and generosity of spirit I witness there."

Currently, along with the recently published book, there are dual exhibitions of his Orchard Beach photographs, one at the FLAG Art Foundation and one at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, and he's also giving a talk on November 12 at the New York Public Library.

One wonders why this is all happening long after the last sand has been washed off swimsuits and the final scraps of summer have been shrouded by the crisply falling autumn leaves, but perhaps summer nostalgia kicks in early. Lawrence has a special focus on overlooked community gatherings — such as the J'ouvert festival in Brooklyn and the world of Little League players — yet the Orchard Beach portraits have a cohesive directness to them that takes you right into this Bronx beach community.