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About New York; A City's Heart Seen Through Its Bare Edges

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LARRY RACIOPPO looks downright calm for a guy who is always on the edge. He finds serenity on the margins of the city -- whether it is among the physical limits on the abandoned waterfront or the temporal boundaries commemorated by spray-painted memorial walls in rundown neighborhoods. They are all secret spaces whose ruins spark rumination and inspire his photographs.

"Maybe I'm a marginal person," he chuckled. "The margins are not that built up. There's more room for personal expression on the edges of the city."

Fittingly, an exhibition of his photographs that opened last night at SoHo Photo Gallery occupies two small rooms tucked above the main space. The show, "Memorial Landscapes," features richly hued photos of Rest in Peace graffiti walls that range from crazily detailed cartoons to simple words of condolence scrawled on a garage door. Like the artistry he finds in obscure urban vistas, the walls are a touching -- if sometimes menacing -- reminder of people and places that once were.

"Part of what I do is about stuff disappearing," said Mr. Racioppo, 49. "There's all this personal, individual stuff in this city. We're going to an impersonal, mass-produced world, where people are influenced by mass media. Someone who does something on their own does something raw, something powerful."

In some ways, he was destined to gravitate to the margins. Growing up in Sunset Park, he would go to the Brooklyn docks where his father was a longshoreman. Roman Catholic school steered him away from the blue-collar life, and he earned a master's degree from Brooklyn College. He worked as a carpenter for a while and in 1989 he became a staff photographer for the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development.

There, he documented the vacant lots, rundown buildings and other properties in various corners of the city. After a while, he was intrigued by the memorial walls that adorned some buildings, and began to jot down their locations so that he could return later on to photograph them with his panoramic camera.

Mr. Racioppo sees these walls as part of the unofficial city, a counterpoint to the bronze plaques in churches and parks that memorialize those who died in wars that were declared. The walls remind him of the Mass cards he would get at an Italian wake, with the birth and death dates on one side and a saint's picture on the other. He also feels a cultural kinship with the makeshift altars erected at some of the walls and inside apartments he has visited.

"They had all these altars and shrines like my grandmother had," he said. "When I was a kid I was afraid to go into her bedroom where she had a dresser with flickering candles and statues of saints. To me, it's all part of the same impulse as the graffiti."

MANY of the photos share an iconography of crimson hearts (broken and otherwise), praying hands and comforting saints. There are lists of names, sometimes dozens, as on the Lost Boys wall in Bed-Stuy. Like Peter Pan, these boys will never grow up -- the phrase "Dead Homies" floats in a sea of names. A Bushwick wall that says "Rest In Peace Huni" features three gun-toting hoods walking over a bloody corpse. "There are always contradictions," Mr. Racioppo said. "A big painting of the Blessed Mother will be next to a big red sports car."