

Size Matters in Larry Racioppo's Photos

By [Free Times](#)
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Larry Racioppo, *Williamsburg Savings Bank*

Photographs are a part of everyday culture and have been for about 150 years, so much so that our expectations of photography are defined to at least some extent by the way that they appear in common usage. A large part of those expectations has to do with scale. The prevalence of the postcard-sized snapshot preconditions an element of surprise in response to large-scale photographs, even more so when the imagery is seductive in its use of color and surface. Larry Racioppo uses all of the above to advantage in his photographs that are currently on view at Art + Cayce. The works in *A Photographer in the City* are all large images, many mural-sized, ranging from 20-by-24 inches to 40-by-50 inches and larger. At this size, the photographs take on the mantle of painting, history painting in particular.

Racioppo has been the staff photographer for New York City's Department of Housing Preservation and Development since 1989. There, he documents changes in urban architectural structures. This has led to his personal work, using large-format cameras to shoot the forgotten and abandoned corners, usually interiors, of the urban environment.

Most of his images focus on the buildings that are at the core of the community — its churches, schools and theaters; spaces that hold key positions in the collective consciousness of the community.

The state of the buildings Racioppo photographs is a reflection of the nationwide trend of urban decay and blight. But it is also an indicator of the value, or to be more precise the lack of value, that contemporary culture places on these 20th-century institutions of community. From beauty salons to movie theaters, schools to churches, contemporary culture has super-sized and standardized everything. Mega-churches and mega-malls draw people away from neighborhood centers, out to artificially constructed suburbs.

There are no human figures in these photographs, although the buildings hold onto the memory of human presence in a way that is haunting. Classroom, Holy Rosary School shows an abandoned classroom filled with 1970s-era furniture. The room has obviously been out of use for a long time — floorboards are popping up and paint hangs in sheets from the walls. Yet confetti and streamers cascade over the desks and onto the floor as if school let out for the summer just yesterday. The blackboard at the front of the room is still covered in the teacher's carefully written notes



Larry Racioppo, *Hospital Corridor, Ellis Island*

Ellis Island is an American icon, as charged a symbol as the Statue of Liberty, standing for all the dreams and possibilities of the 20th-century American ideal. Racioppo uses a direct frontal perspective in *Hospital Corridor, Ellis Island* to capture a seemingly endless corridor in a building that no longer functions as the gateway to the American dream. Broken windows, dust and grime coat the hallway.

Domino Sugar Factory #1 has the same sense of decay, mixed with a feeling of grandeur. Huge rusting pipes form tall vertical lines, as if weighty columns were punctuating bays, echoing the design elements of a European cathedral. The industrial structure is crumbling at a much faster rate.

Factories and banks both pulled design elements from traditional sacred architecture.

The vaulted interior described in Williamsburg Savings Bank contains an enormous central aisle lit by clearstory windows. Tall, Romanesque arches draw the viewer down the center to where an altar would be in a church. This monument to commerce is as empty, though, as the silenced factory above.

Balcony, Loews Kings Theater moves from the sacred precincts of commercial and industrial architecture to the decaying elegance of an old movie theater with the peeling paper of the decorated walls towering over the moldering red velvet seats. Once again, the viewer is dwarfed by the soaring ceilings of the space and the scale of the actual photograph itself.

Racioppo uses monumental size and seductive surface and color to create photographs that are contemplative elegies to the ruins of the 20th century American ideal. A Photographer in the City will be on view at Art + Cayce through May 8.

Art+Cayce is at 1329 State St. in Cayce. Call 765-0838 for more information.