



DO YOU REMEMBER?: Racioppo's work chronicles contemporary displays of grief and memorials like the one for war vets at Our Lady of Peace (center).

## Memorializing the Memorials

PANORAMIC CAMERAMAN RECORDS LARGE SWATHS OF URBAN ART FOR POSTERITY

PHOTOGRAPHY

As the official photographer for the city's Department of Housing, Preservation and Development, Larry Racioppo regularly travels into impoverished neighborhoods to photograph run-down homes and empty lots. For someone who sees beauty in places most people take great pains to avoid, it's the perfect job. "I find so many alive things," he says.

During his free time Racioppo returns with a panoramic camera to photograph some of what has captured his eye—an abandoned movie theater in Bushwick, a mural dedicated to a slain gang member in Red Hook, a collapsed pier along the Sunset Park waterfront. Often a couple of kids will approach while he's setting up his equipment and ask why he's photographing an object that they regard as particularly uninspiring. "I will say,

'Because I think it's beautiful.'" His answer is usually followed by a stunned silence. "They don't know what to say. It's not fake. It's not a tactic. It's what I feel."

Racioppo is taking a year off from his city job—with the help of a Guggenheim fellowship—to concentrate on a couple of ongoing projects: a series of photographs of the Good Friday reenactment of Christ's Passion at St. Barbara's Church in Bushwick and a group of portraits of

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Brooklyn children on Halloween. He also continues to traverse the city in search of unnoticed treasures. Like the Auto Gobblers junkyard in Canarsie, where he photographed crushed cars. Or the 51st Street Pier in Sunset Park, where Racioppo had to sneak through a hole in the fence to get a good look at the rotting structure.

"It's a side of New York that people don't see," he says. "It's not on an official tourist route, but this is a vital part of the city. There has to be recycling plants."

He was born in South Brooklyn, but his family, displaced by the construction of the Gowanus Expressway, moved to 40th Street in Sunset Park. A mostly self-taught photographer who first picked up a camera in his early 20s, Racioppo

worked as a cabbie, telephone repairman, photographer's assistant, waiter and construction worker before landing his job with HPD in 1989. "It was a fluke," says the friendly 50-year-old. "They needed a photographer who knew construction."

He has exhibited his work a number of times, most recently at a SoHo show of his memorial-mural work, and is making plans for future shows—one would include photos taken at Coney Island over the last two decades. "You can't be a photographer in New York and not photograph Coney Island," he notes. Racioppo, who hopes to publish books based on his St. Barbara's and Halloween projects, has recently discovered the metal-salvage plants on the Brooklyn side of Newtown Creek. "It's new territory for me," he says with excitement.

"A lot of what I shoot isn't landmarked," he says. "It's not officially put up, so it's not officially taken down. As soon as it stops making money, it's vulnerable. Like the abandoned movie theater in Bushwick. No one speaks for these places." —Peter Duffy

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