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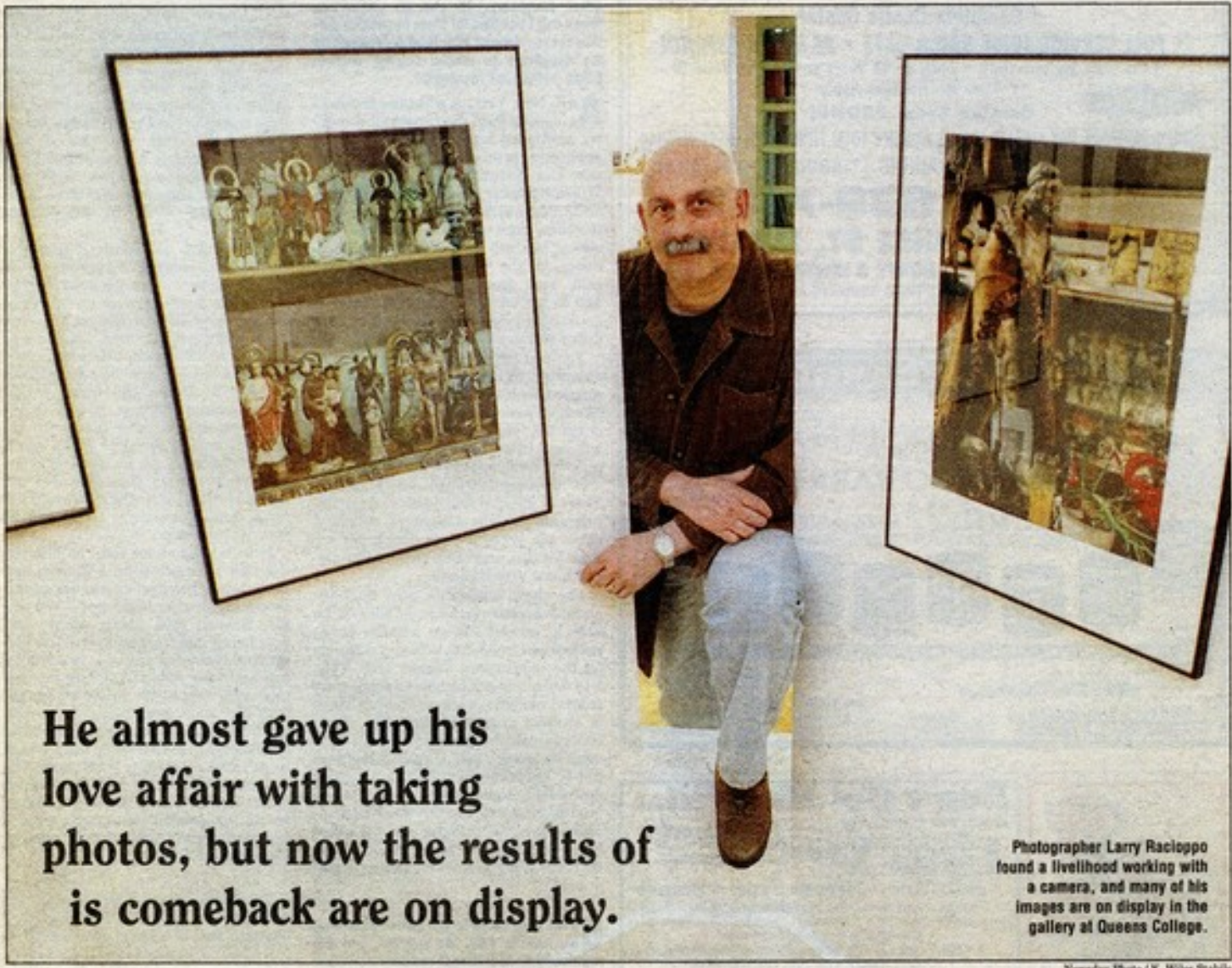
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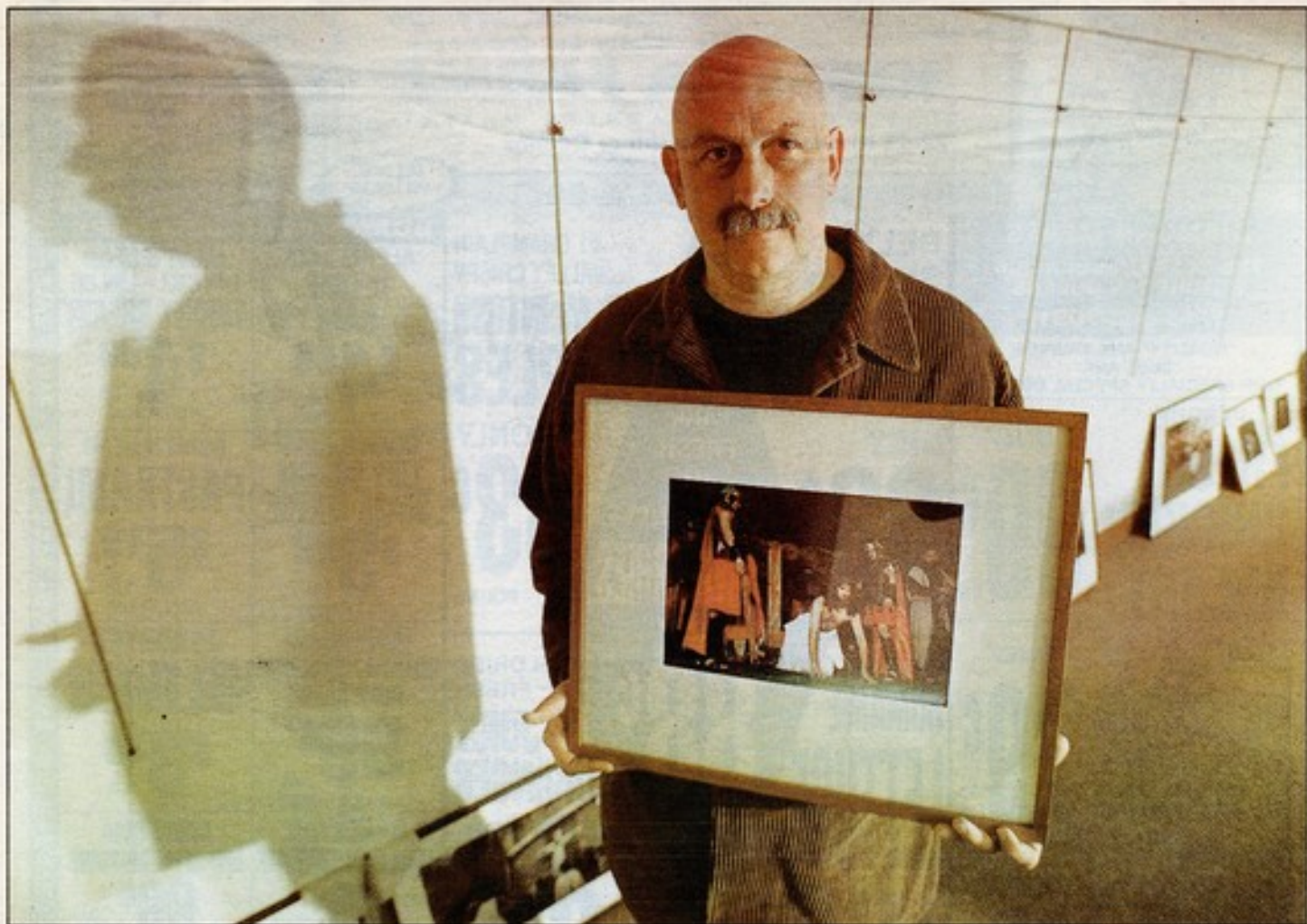
He almost gave up his love affair with taking photos, but now the results of his comeback are on display.

Photographer Larry Racioppo found a livelihood working with a camera, and many of his images are on display in the gallery at Queens College.

Newsday Photo / K. Wilen Stabile

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'Everything Clicked'

Larry Racioppo almost gave up on his love affair with taking photos, but now the results of his comeback are on display

BY CARL MACGOWAN
STAFF WRITER

IT BEGAN one inauspicious day in 1972 with some children playing outside Larry Racioppo's house in Brooklyn. He picked up a camera, walked outside and found a doll that had been leaned up against a fire hydrant.

Click!

Today, 28 years later, that plain black-and-white photo is one of about 60 prints on display at the Godwin-Ternbach Museum, on the Queens College campus in Flushing. The exhibit, "A Vision of the Street: New York City Photographs by Larry Racioppo," chronicles changing times in the neighborhoods of Queens and Brooklyn, and the personal journey of its creator.

Pictures taken in 1970s Brooklyn, where Racioppo grew up, are joined by color photos made during the past decade, a prolific period thanks in part to his job as staff photographer for the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development.

"It's hard to have a retrospective if you're unknown," the Belle Harbor resident said. "This represents about 30 years of work."

In the '70s, Racioppo fashioned a career as a "street photographer," taking pictures of young gang members and colorful characters he met in his travels. One such person was a fellow photographer in Coney Island. Racioppo snapped his picture in 1974.

Twenty-three years later, Racioppo found a different man taking and selling photos near the same spot off Surf Avenue. The more things change, the more they don't.

"It really wasn't a conscious decision" to assemble a collection of before-and-after photos, Racioppo said. "It's just certain places that I'm interested in."

Certain places he returns to year after year. Beginning in 1974, one of those places was St. John the Evangelist Roman Catholic Church in South Brooklyn, where Racioppo was baptized. The parish's annual Good Friday street procession led to Racioppo's first forays into panoramic photography, using a 35 mm. Widelux camera with black-and-white film.

In 1995, Racioppo began shooting a similar procession created by Grupo Dramatico de Santa Barbara, at a parish in Bushwick. Returning each year, the photographer is able to gain the trust of participants.

"I build relationships with people," he said. "I start out with them in the street, and then maybe they invite you into their house. It takes time."

Son of a longshoreman, former VISTA volunteer, frustrated writer, failed filmmaker, Racioppo, 52, started taking pictures of family and friends in the early '70s, developing the prints in a small storefront

The Exhibit

- "A Vision of the Street: New York City Photographs by Larry Racioppo" continues through May 31 at Godwin-Tembach Museum, Paul Klapper Hall, Queens College, 65-30 Kissena Blvd., Flushing.

- Racioppo will give a gallery talk Monday at noon, and a reception for the exhibit will be held Tuesday, 5-7 p.m., at the gallery. Both events are free and open to the public.

- The gallery is open Monday to Thursday, 11 a.m.-7 p.m. For information, call 718-997-2787.

Opposite page, Larry Racioppo stands with one of the many photos that make up his vision of the street. This page, near right, his "Street Photographer: Coney Island, 1997." At far right, the same Coney Island corner, captured on film 23 years earlier.



Racioppo's lens captured this haunting, desolate scene with "Pablo's Cross, Rockaway, 1994," which is included in the Flushing exhibit of works by the Belle Harbor resident.

he rented in Sunset Park. He loaded trucks, drove cabs and worked other jobs for money.

In 1979, he launched a project called "Time Flies," in which he re-created family photos. An uncle and cousin were posed sitting on a couch, matching a picture taken of them some 20 years earlier. The details were the same, right down to the positioning of a small throw pillow on the chair.

"It was very heavy," Racioppo said, and the memories and emotions brought on by the project took their toll.

In the early '80s, he took a series of pictures on Halloween — stark images of people in spooky make-up, including one man bearing a faux sword and identifying himself as "Hamlet's father." Another picture from this period shows a camera that had fallen to the ground and shattered.

Racioppo all but gave up photography and took a job in construction. The exhibit features few photos from the 1980s.

But in 1989, Racioppo learned that the Department of Housing Preservation and Development needed a photographer. Though it turned him from street photography to architectural photography, the job allowed him to criss-cross the city, meeting people and discovering new neighborhoods.

"Everything clicked," he said. "My knowledge of construction, my knowledge of photography, and my knowledge of how to shoot in the street."

"From 1994 on, it's been a flood."

Carol Abrams, HPD's assistant commissioner for

communications, said Racioppo helps put a human face on the agency while assembling a historical archive of its work. The department creates low-income housing and redevelops old buildings in neighborhoods such as South Jamaica and Arverne.

Racioppo's photos of workers and homeowners, some of which are in the exhibit, "are so dynamic. I think it's because he's got such great people skills that people warm up to him," Abrams said.

"He also, because he's worked all over the city, knows all the best places to eat."

Racioppo began renting a panoramic camera and learning how to make enlargements of his color prints. This process allows him to produce such stunning images as "Pablo's Cross," taken in 1994 under the elevated A train tracks in Rockaway.

Religious imagery is a constant in Racioppo's work, beginning with the pictures he took at his home church in South Brooklyn, when that community was populated mainly by Italian immigrants. From 1974 is a shot of participants in a May Day celebration at the church's grotto; 24 years later, the grotto was the setting for Racioppo's picture of first communion for children from South Brooklyn's Latino community.

"One thing I photograph is liturgy and ritual," Racioppo said. "It's a way of getting people in the street and together."

When he got married and moved to the Rockaways in 1991, he discovered a new world in the working-class neighborhoods of Queens. His photo-

graphed a place called O's Pub in Broad Channel shortly before it closed, preserving the bar's pool tables and ancient decor for posterity. A concrete yard in the Rockaways became the subject of a wide-angle panorama highlighted by the yard's heavy machinery. The owner didn't mind letting a stranger come in to take pictures, Racioppo said: "He thought the machinery was very beautiful."

Often using older, heavier equipment that requires a tripod for support, Racioppo needs both access and time to do his work. He likes to make 30-second exposures, which result in sharper, larger negatives and more detailed prints. "I've been doing this in large format," Racioppo said, studying his photo of a deteriorating Brooklyn cathedral. "If I'm in there five or six hours, I might get three or four pictures."

In 1997, he received a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship to concentrate on making pictures. "I did six or seven years of work in one year," he said.

"A Vision of the Street" is a compilation of several different exhibits Racioppo has worked on over the years, including the "Good Friday" and "Rockaway" series, and what remains of the "Halloween" and "Time Flies" exhibits. As much as they document the people in front of the lens, the pictures of shrines and sanctuaries, relatives and revelers also paint a portrait of the man looking through the viewfinder.

"This is like the Larry Racioppo story," he said. "How I gave up photography and how I got back in, and how I got back in."