

Photographer's mission coming into focus



Photographer Jason Lazarus in his home-studio. (Joel Wintermantle/Tribune newspapers)

By **Lauren Viera**

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Barely a decade into his career, photographer Jason Lazarus and his work are everywhere, all the time.

From Floridian residencies to solo shows in Cologne, Germany, to single snapshots plucked for local project spaces, Lazarus is a photographic man about town. His work is catalogued in the collections of the Art Institute, the Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies and the Milwaukee Museum of Art, as well as the local David C. and Sarajeon Ruttenberg Collection, alongside [Irving Penn](#), [Andy Warhol](#) and [Annie Leibovitz](#).

The difference between Lazarus and Leibovitz? Lazarus does weddings.

“It’s every professional photographer’s dirty little secret,” he says.

These days, though, he’s all but stopped capturing new images. “I’m sort of having a crisis about making photos,” Lazarus says, perched on a stool in his tiny Ukrainian Village kitchen, a cup of tea in one hand and a cigarette in the other. And he’s serious.

“I just don’t know what to make pictures of,” he says. “And that’s OK.”

It’s OK because at 35, Lazarus has graduated from picture-making into a deeper, much more philosophical exploration of photography, an art that he describes as “this wonderful fixed variable ... a set of limitations that is a constant joy to work with.”

The word constant is apt.

On a recent warm evening, he rattles off his summer obligations as if they were errands he might run the next morning. He talks excitedly about the show he’s curating, “Hang In There” at Bridgeport’s Co-Prosperity Sphere, which he says is a “motivation as politics as art” — one of his obsessions. Opening Friday, the show includes the work of 45 artists from around the country who have been asked to address what makes them keep on keepin’ on.

“Instead of the show being, ‘Let’s pat each other on the back,’ it’s more about artists finding ways to keep their gestures going not only in the show, but have them radiate outward,” Lazarus says. “For me, that was one of the great afterthoughts.”

Meanwhile, he’s been cramming for a summer course he’s teaching at the School of the Art Institute, where he was recently promoted to adjunct assistant professor of photography. He’ll spend the fall semester at University of South Florida in Tampa as a visiting artist and parallel to that residency, he’s included in a group show at the Museum of Contemporary Photography and is the subject of a solo show at Andrew Rafacz Gallery, where he’s been represented for years.

Lazarus says all of this while absently staring out his houseplant-infested kitchen window. His apartment is so covered with plants and art — some of it bought, most of it traded — that there’s little empty wall space. Sporting a pair of striped jeans with a hole in the back of one of the legs and a rogue button that refuses to stay fastened, he tours his small apartment with a labored limp, pointing out works with inwardly twisted wrists — physical reminders of a rare birth defect from which he says he “got off relatively well.” He had a number of surgeries before the age of 3 at which point he started walking, and thereafter was raised like any other kid in Kansas City, Mo. His dad is an engineer for the Department of Energy, his mom works in an office, his sister designs shoes in New York City, and he makes pictures in Chicago.

Sort of.

For the past handful of years, Lazarus has busied himself with numerous serial projects, none of which requires him to purchase film or memory cards. Most notable is “Too Hard To Keep,” a living collection of photographs too sentimental to destroy but too difficult to keep in one’s possession. Lazarus issued an open call via the Internet for related images last summer and has since received some 1,500 photos. They vary drastically, from a straight-on stunner of a dishwater blonde with a tender black eye, to a snapshot of a paragliding couple shot from so far away that their faces are indiscernible. The latter photo is one of 144 received from a single donor.

For Lazarus, the “Too Hard To Keep” archival project was born of necessity. “I am the kind of person who would have pictures that are too hard to keep,” he says via telephone while driving back from a late-May trip to New Orleans. “There’s a lot of faith in it. I offer the archive as a sort of graceful repository: It gives people a way to distance themselves from images.”

It’s a significant enough project in Lazarus’ mind that, several months in, he set up a repository with friend and frequent assistant Aron Gent, who will take over the archives should Lazarus fail them.

“Almost in a way it’s reassuring that it will get passed on,” Gent says via telephone. “Even if it’s too hard to keep, it will still be there.” The archive has already been exhibited a handful of times in its short life, initially last summer at Riverside’s Freeark Gallery and presently at the Queens Museum of Art, on view through August, and will travel to Belgium in 2012 before eventually finding its way back to Chicago. Earlier this year, a selection of the archive was shown at Illinois State University’s massive University Galleries in “Jason Lazarus: Your Time Is Gonna Come, Selected Work, 2005-2011,” the artist’s largest show to date. A kind of early career retrospective, “Your Time Is Gonna Come” (the title borrowed from [Led Zeppelin](#) for its “half-motivational, half-macabre warning”) included post-grad self-portraits as well as selections from Lazarus’ vaguely titled collection “2004-Present”: a hodgepodge of pictures that he feels evoke an ongoing conversation about private and public experiences.

“This sort of back and forth — making a diaristic picture of a dead fly on a windshield, and then an obvious more public, historical moment — I love that push and pull,” Lazarus says. “And then some of the photos are also about photography itself; they’re more meta gestures.”

Among the most meta work he’s done is the “Heineken Studies” of photograms (images made by placing objects directly on light-sensitive paper) created to memorialize abstract anti-photographer Robert Heineken, whose dying wish in 2006 was to have his remains cremated and dispersed to friends and family via commemorative salt shakers. (No, really.) Lazarus procured one of those shakers with permission from the Robert Heineken Trust and, in [Columbia College](#)’s darkroom, literally laid Heineken down on photo paper, his remains leaving a series of eerily beautiful images in the style for which he was known. A handful were exhibited last fall in a Los Angeles gallery.

Other works are spelled out in the title. A simple photograph of the top half of tree against a perfect blue sky is dubbed “The top of the tree gazed upon by Anne Frank while in hiding (Amsterdam),” and he went there, with Gent, to shoot it. A pale, white-haired man awash in an almost fluorescent absence of color is framed in a head-and-shoulders portrait, gazing off into the distance. The title: “Eric Becklin, first human to see the center of our galaxy.” Lazarus tracked him down after watching a NOVA [documentary](#) in which he was featured, dozing off in the midst of it but not before writing Becklin’s name down on a scrap of paper. That photograph will be on view at the MoCP this summer in a show called “Our Origins.”

“Photos that came out of my (education) were things that I encountered, and now it’s all about ideas without material — just statements about hypothetical possibilities,” Lazarus says. “That continuum, for me, is really exciting.”

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