

## **Harlem in time-lapse photography**

*Holland Cotter*



*Camilo José Vergara/New-York Historical Society*

*Harlem: 1970-2009 Photographs by Camilo José Vergara "Girls, Barbies, Harlem" from 1970, is part of this show of urban transformation, at the New-York Historical Society.*

From the time he arrived in the United States from Chile as a college student in 1965, the photographer Camilo José Vergara has been haunting, and haunted by, American cities.

He lives in New York but has spent the better part of the past four decades in Baltimore, Chicago, Detroit and Los Angeles, urban centers with big, poor, largely segregated minority neighborhoods. He has also frequented smaller, fallen-apart industrial cities like Camden, N.J., and Gary, Ind., places he calls "permanent ghettos."

By his own estimate he has returned to Gary more than a hundred times.

On each visit he has done the same thing: take pictures, mostly of buildings, often the same ones, recording over decades their abandonment, disintegration, demolition and replacement by cheaper structures, or parking lots, or by nothing at all.

This vigilance has produced several books, among them two great, generative visual essays in architectural anthropology, "The New American Ghetto" (1995) and "American Ruins" (1999), and exhibitions like "Harlem, 1970-2009: Photographs by Camilo José Vergara" now at the New-York Historical Society.

His self-created job as documenter is demanding. It can require the fearlessness of a reporter in a war zone and the solicitous detachment of a doctor doing rounds, though Mr. Vergara doesn't claim these qualities. He has said in interviews that he goes where he goes and does what he does because he needs to.



*Photo: Camilo Jose Vergara/New York Historical Society*

Focusing on images of constant material change distracts him from anxieties, transports him back to the decaying, now disappeared world of his childhood, and connects him empathetically to an American culture from which he otherwise feels removed. Far from being a brash photographic adventurer, he is more like a ghost haunting ghosts.

The ghosts are unusually vivacious in the 100 pictures of Harlem at the New-York Historical Society. Mr. Vergara first visited that neighborhood soon after he arrived in New York in 1968, at the age of 24. Urban poverty and ill-conceived urban renewal had already done irreparable damage. New York was jittery with change. He started taking pictures.

At the time he was exploring a genre broadly known as street photography. (Helen Levitt was an artist he particularly admired. An exhibition of her work at Laurence Miller Gallery is reviewed on Page 29.) And the earliest pictures in the historical society exhibition are shots of people going about their lives on Harlem sidewalks: black children playing with white Barbies on a stoop, a nervous wedding party gathered in front of a church.

Although tied down by a Midtown desk job, Mr. Vergara returned regularly to Harlem on his lunch hours, establishing a repeat-visit pattern that would lead to time-lapse architectural sequences stretching over years.



*Photo: Camilo Jose Vergara/New York Historical Society*

In 1977 he photographed the exotic-looking exterior of a nightclub-bar called the Purple Manor at 65 East 125th Street, the wide facade, with sets of double doors, painted a very 1970s lavender; the windows, fitted with decorative paper borders, had a jazzy hourglass shape. The club's clientele was reputed to move in upper levels of the drug trade.

By 1980 much had changed. In a picture Mr. Vergara took that year, the bar is gone and its premises divided into two small storefronts painted different colors: the one on the left baby blue, the one on the right fire-engine red. Over several years the storefronts also took on different functions, each of which Mr. Vergara photographed.

In 1980 the left-hand storefront was a fish-and-chips shop, a year later a discount variety store. After an initial lag in activity, the storefront on the right began selling women's clothes before turning into a smoke shop, an identity it retained for some years, even as its neighbor morphed from furniture store to unisex boutique to beauty salon, with superficial alterations at each change.

Both stores hit hard times in the recession-plagued 1990s. The facades are marked up, the sidewalk cluttered. Then in 2004 the two stores were reunited to accommodate a Sleepy's mattress showroom. But within a few years that franchise moved on. In 2008 the space that

had been the Purple Manor 30 years earlier was plate-glass-fronted, accessible to the disabled, and for rent.

Mr. Vergara takes us through all these dramatic shifts in function, fashion and fortune with an attitude of studied neutrality. He shoots storefronts always straight on, from the same distance, in unmood light. The results are urban photography as archaeological field work. Over the span of eight images we see many changes, but we aren't asked to feel good or bad about them. We're meant to think: Look what life does.



*Photo: Camilo Jose Vergara/New York Historical Society*

By contrast an unmistakably elegiac current flows through Mr. Vergara's single pictures of Harlem architecture. The Renaissance Ballroom and Casino on West 137th Street, built in the 1920s as a showcase for performers like Count Basie and Duke Ellington, is now a moldering pile. A 19th-century fire watchtower in Marcus Garvey Park, the only surviving example of its kind, looks rickety and vulnerable.

A group of buildings on Madison Avenue near 127th Street that Mr. Vergara shot in 1982 is, we learn from his terse wall label, long gone. "There is now an empty lot in this space."

And yet, however ambivalently, an upbeat note comes through. Harlem is, after all, an economic success story. Old town houses, once derelict, are being preserved. Tenements abandoned in the 1990s have been rehabilitated. Churches are flourishing. Storefronts have paying occupants.

That the occupants may be McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken, and that portions of 125th Street are now corporate-brand shopping malls, may not be unalloyed good news. But the neighborhood around them suggests a degree of material security that its equivalents in Camden, Detroit and Gary can, at this point, not even dream of.

The show's true source of warmth, though, lies in the unusually high number — for Mr. Vergara — of pictures of people, of a kind that bring him full circle to the street photographer he was 40 years ago.

He made some wonderful portraits back then: one of a Bolivian Indian in traditional clothes in East Harlem in 1970 is in the show. And he's making some beauties now, as in his 2008 picture of the street evangelist Pierre Gaspar, known as the Hallelujah Man, and a 2009 shot of a man and child walking past billboard-size portraits of Malcolm X and Barack Obama on West 125th Street.

But in portraits, as in architectural pictures, time marches on. A man wearing overalls poses for the camera in what looks like a densely planted sunlit field. The year is 1990. From a wall label we learn that the man's name was Eddie; that he was originally from Selma, Ala.; and

that he farmed an empty lot on Frederick Douglass Boulevard between 118th and 119th Streets. We further learn that today, almost two decades later, a luxury apartment occupies the lot and "a Starbucks has opened on the exact spot where Eddie stands."



*Photo: Camilo Jose Vergara/New York Historical Society*

In "American Ruins" Mr. Vergara lists works of art in various mediums that have influenced him deeply. He mentions the photographs of Levitt, Eugène Atget and Walker Evans. From literature he cites the death-obsessed novels of Dostoyevsky and the apparition-filled stories of that connoisseur of decay, Edgar Allan Poe.

Miles Davis, Mahler and the British composer John Dowland, who wrote his sad songs of longing from exile in France, are on the list. Among artists, he singles out Piranesi, the Dutch landscapist Jacob van Ruisdael, and Claude Monet, particularly Monet's images of Rouen Cathedral with its facade disintegrating into light.

The reason for Mr. Vergara's attraction to Ruisdael — painter of crumbling towers, castles and cemeteries — seems obvious. And he specifically likens Piranesi's vast, hollow, exitless prisons to the bombed-out American cities in which he has spent so many years. He makes no direct connection between Monet's spectral cathedral — is it falling down or coming together? — and the facades morphing, dying and resurrecting in the Harlem photographs, but I think he could.

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