

## **Baltimore photographer documents transition of a city neighborhood**

**P**hotographer Ken Royster is tall and trim with a refined look – even in shorts, polo shirt and baseball cap. It’s not just the close-cropped gray hair. His articulate manner suggests the precise observations of a college professor – which he is.

Royster is an associate professor of art and coordinator of the visual arts program at Morgan State University in Baltimore. He has been a member of the art department faculty at Morgan for 30 years. He’s also an alumnus of the school.

The photographer has exhibited his work at museums and galleries in Washington, D.C., Dallas, New York and Philadelphia, and across Maryland. In addition to being a Maryland State Arts Council Individual Artist awardee, he received a Fulbright-Hays Grant award that allowed him to photograph in Namibia, a country in southwestern Africa. He has also curated two exhibitions at the arts council’s James Backas Gallery in Baltimore, near M&T Bank Stadium.

Six years ago, Royster began to document the redevelopment of an East Baltimore community – from the way it looked before demolition crews arrived to how it

looked through and beyond the transformation. The key element, he says, was depicting the residents of the community. “I wanted to create a complete narrative, one that showed the people as they moved.”

To produce meaningful images, Royster knew he had to get to know the people in this community: Middle East Baltimore. He recalls going to numerous community meetings and gatherings, and visiting with the residents, before picking up his camera for the project.

Royster started this endeavor at the request of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a private charitable organization (one of the largest in the U.S.) that works to improve the lives of at-risk children and families. The Casey Foundation, he says, had seen examples of his work in a brochure for an exhibition he had at Goucher College.

### **Exhibit at Lewis Museum**

The photographer estimates that he captured 10,000 images for the project. He turned about 400 of them into prints. Fifty of those prints are now part of *East Side Stories: Portraits of a Baltimore Neighborhood*, an exhibit at the Reginald Lewis Museum of African American Culture in downtown Baltimore, which has been extended to Aug. 16. A companion exhibit of Royster’s images is also on display at the Backas Gallery until Sept. 25.

*East Side Stories* reflects what Royster calls a “social-realism” style of photography – an approach that focuses on working-class people struggling to rise above troubling circumstances.

Dorthea Lange – a documentary photographer whom Royster admires – adopted this style for a project sponsored by the federal government during the Great Depression. Lange’s 1936 image, *Migrant Mother*, is a Mona Lisa-like emblem of the Depression years. (The photo was taken in a California pea-pickers’ camp.) In it, a woman appears to be pondering her family’s plight – an apparent representation of the nation’s displaced sharecroppers and farm families in the 1930s.

The displacement and relocation of families in East Baltimore is at the heart of *East Side Stories*. As Royster strolls through his portion of the exhibit, he keys in on the subjects of his archival black-and-white prints – many of them 16 x 20s and 20 x 24s.

### **Familiar faces**

“There’s Mr. Kane,” he says. He points to a smartly dressed gentleman with what is evidently a characteristic smile. The photographer says the now-deceased Mr. Kane was a World War II vet who had a prosthetic leg – a result of the war. Mr. Kane stayed alive, Royster says, by keeping a self-made tourniquet wrapped

around his leg for hours. For Royster, Mr. Kane is the epitome of dignity.

To the left of Mr. Kane’s photograph is *Taniesha*, a portrait of an expressive girl who sits confidently on the edge of a crumbling brick wall adjoining several steps. The background is a deteriorating brick façade with boarded-up windows. Taniesha wears jeans and a camisole-style top. Her left arm forms a diagonal line to her crossed-over legs. She shows restraint as she looks directly at the camera with a slightly tilted head and the start of a closed-mouth smile. “She said she wanted to be a model,” Royster says, “so I told her, OK, be a model.”

Two portraits of the McArthur’s, a couple that Royster got to know during the project, also hang in the exhibition. One shows the pair contemplating their pending move; another shows them in their new home. Royster says he gave Mrs. McArthur a print of one of the photographs on exhibit after her husband passed away.

In *Left Behind*, a child-sized replica of a Hummer – an H2 – is in the foreground. It appears to be in good shape. Past the little Hummer is a block of vacant houses that will soon be demolished. The Hummer is like a NASA vehicle parked on the desolate terrain of the moon.

*Street Shower*, an exhibition image that the Baltimore *City Paper* selected for the

cover of one of its June issues, shows a young man standing by a fire hydrant. Water gushes up as the silhouetted figure extends his arms outward. Another young man standing over his bicycle watches in the background. The flowing water, the manner in which the central figure is standing, and the image's dominant shadows evoke a religious tone.

Such images are reminiscent of other collections in Royster's work. *From the River*, for instance, reveals an in-progress baptism: Two men, waist deep in water, support a woman who has just emerged from the water. The photograph was part of an exhibition at the Baltimore Museum of Art, called *Show of Faith*.

Royster has photographed frequently at churches and church-related activities, especially at "charismatic churches" where there's a wellspring of emotional energy. As with much of his work, he strives to capture the authenticity of his subjects.

He can also show a playful side. Royster was one of 19 area photographers selected to fashion images inspired by the work of prominent 20th-century photographers on display at a Baltimore Museum of Art exhibition in 2008, *Looking through the Lens: Photography 1900–1960*.

Royster did a riff on Man Ray's 1926 image, *Black and White (Noire et Blanche)*. The avant-garde Man Ray

photographed the head of one of his favorite models (and lovers), Kiki de Montparnasse, next to an African mask. Kiki's almond-shaped head – pale complexion with dark hair – rests sideways on a flat surface. Her eyes are closed as she holds the dark African mask (also almond-shaped) upright beside her head, to a viewer's right.

Royster's image reverses the elements. His model's head is chin down on a flat surface. She is an African-American woman and her eyes are also closed. An African mask rests on its side to the viewer's left. Both the model's seemingly floating head and the mask are oval in shape.

Through his varied projects, Royster continues to embrace a spectrum of techniques for creating photographic images – from large-format contact prints to digital technology.

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**Story by Gerald H. Levin**

*Maryland State Arts Council*