

Three galleries create an urban portrait of Rochester

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The pictures of graffiti-smeared walls and abandoned buildings seem to come from a Third World country.

But the scenes happen to be from right next door, in gritty Rochester neighborhoods that some area residents have never seen. Three new exhibits explore hot-button issues such as poverty, unemployment and urban renewal — seen through the eyes of a dozen Dutch and American artists.

The largest display goes on view Sept. 2 at the Visual Studies Workshop. Another opened recently at the Rochester Contemporary Art Center and is devoted entirely to the Inner Loop. And on Oct. 6, a George Eastman House exhibit will address the changing lives of Rochester's residents.

This frank urban portrait is a major collaboration between three institutions and the artists called Transitions-Rochester.

"It's a snapshot of Rochester that will make people think a little harder about what's happening to industrial America," says Rick Hock, the new curator of collections at the Visual Studies Workshop.

The crescent of poverty explored by the local artists and sophisticated outsiders is sometimes painful to see, especially contrasted against the area's well-developed suburbs.

Although some might disagree, a Dutch photographer portrays the Inner Loop as a "scar" slicing through vast expanses of concrete and bleak offices, and a local artist paints dreary images along the roadway. A local student photographs the ramshackle but proud Clinton Avenue neighborhood where her friends live. A planned photo display for the fall will feature empty lots throughout the Rochester area.

Many of these stark visions (especially of the city's west side) aim more for consciousness-raising than entertainment. The artists maintain that they see opportunities in Rochester despite the problems.

They include Oscar Palacio and Gregory Halpern — both faculty photographers at

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Rochester Institute of Technology — and VSW graduate students Juliana Muniz and Dan Varenka.

The Dutch visitors are noted photographers Cary Markerink, Theo Baart and Andrea Stultiens, whose acquaintance with the city hasn't been casual.

Working visits

Markerink has made four trips here since 2009, sometimes assisted by a native tour guide. Hock drove him around the city in his **van**, which is equipped with a sunroof. "He'd pop it open and photograph the Inner Loop," says Hock, 63, a Rochester resident. "He made a pretty exhaustive examination."

Yet no matter how many times he circled the Loop, Markerink never felt quite at **home**. The Inner Loop, he says, is "carved out through neighborhoods that seem to have lost their ability to recuperate."

His photos at VSW exude a kind of desolate poetry. One shot taken at Canfield Place shows a plywood heart festooned with artificial flowers and chained to a rusty pole.

"I'm sure it's a memorial," says Markerink. "The heart is a very melancholic symbol."

Another of his photos depicts a dismal, empty parking lot beneath a serene, cloudless sky.

Both scenes create an elegiac mood by

mingling urban decay with faint hints of beauty. Many of Markerink's images are devoid of people, as if there were an exodus from Rochester's west side.

Documenting home

By contrast, Muniz's photos of Clinton Avenue have an authentic, lived-in look.

She grew up on Rochester's northeast side and visited friends and family on Clinton Avenue between Upper Falls Boulevard and Avenue D.

She photographed Clinton after the city spent \$1.9 million on improvements such as planters, light poles and park upgrades.

"I asked the people I met what difference these changes made to them," says Muniz, 38. "One guy said he loved what the city was doing. Others thought it was a Band-Aid over serious problems such as poverty and drugs. I believe that the community needs to change its consciousness and sense of ownership. The key, I think, is

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educating people how to care for the community."

While her photos reveal an intense personal involvement, Rochester photographer Halpern's images have a detached aesthetic power.

A dead tree or a flock of crows emerge from shimmering early-morning haze. A dense tangle of discarded wires in a field becomes an abstract sculpture. There's a bleak romanticism to these urban landscapes.

Kodak's influence

Palacio calls his VSW display "The Great Yellow Father." It refers to Eastman Kodak Co.'s former paternal role in shaping its Rochester workers' lives, cradle to grave. Kodak's waves of layoffs since the 1980s have had a lasting effect on the local economy. "I'm taking the metaphor of the death of a father figure and showing what it means for a company town," says Palacio, 41, an assistant professor of photography at RIT.

As an example of Kodak's paternalism, he photographs the Koda Vista community in Greece that Kodak launched for its workers in the 1920s. The Yellow Father's decline is charted by aerial images of Kodak Park from 2005 to 2009. Empty spaces multiply after buildings are razed in 2007.

Somewhat startlingly, the centerpiece of VSW's exhibit is a nostalgic mural by the FUA Krew of graffiti artists. It shows

Midtown Plaza at its 1960s peak, with prosperous-looking couples strolling past the Clock of Nations and monorail.

It strikes an ironic note following PAETEC's recent sale, which raises doubts whether the Midtown site will become an empty space or a thriving commercial center.

View might not hold

All three exhibits are likely to revive old concerns about numerous Rochester neighborhoods' poverty, physical decay and loss of manufacturing jobs.

But Kent Gardner, president of Rochester's Center for Governmental Research, notes that negative stereotypes are giving way to promising new trends. He cites the success of Corn Hill Landing's restaurants and **apartments**, and feels encouraged by student housing that the University of Rochester is building on both sides of the Genesee River.

Even Eastman Kodak Co.'s protracted

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downsizing was handled responsibly, he says. The photography giant demolished unused buildings, cleaned up sites and reutilized some facilities at the former Kodak Park. The company said at the end of last year that half of the workers in Eastman Business Park received paychecks from companies other than Kodak. State job numbers show signs that the manufacturing slide might finally be leveling off.

"Whenever I get (inquiries) from the national media, it's usually after a Kodak announcement," says Gardner, a 57-year-old Irondequoit resident. "The editor probably reads it and says: 'Rochester is getting whacked again — a manufacturing city is falling on hard times.' So the photographer comes here and takes pictures of a Kodak guy who lost his job. And those visual images are so powerful, they can make readers see only the negative."

Markerink insists that his vision for Rochester is anything but negative, despite the stark photos he took here.

"I see opportunities for Rochester," he says. "There are a lot of great historic buildings — and it's still Image City. That's why we photographers from the Netherlands like Rochester, after all."

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Juliana Muniz, a graduate student of Visual Studies Workshop, stands in front of a graffiti wall made by artists from Brooklyn. Muniz, one of the photographers featured in Transitions-Rochester, is documenting buildings, businesses and residents in the North Clinton Avenue area. / MARIE DE JESUS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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If you go

Rochester's new face as a former company town experiencing rapid change is shown through photos, videos, paintings and sound installations at three exhibits:

Transitions-Rochester at Visual Studies Workshop, 31 Prince St., through Nov. 13. Free. New books based on the exhibits from the Dutch publisher Fotodok will be available. Call (585) 442-8676 or go to vsw.org.

State of the City: In The Loop at Rochester Contemporary Art Center, 137 East Ave., through Sept. 25. Admission is \$1. Call (585) 461-2222 or go to rochestercontemporary.org.

Transitions-Rochester at George Eastman House, 900 East Ave., Oct. 6 through Nov. 6. Admission is \$12 (\$10 for seniors, \$5 for students). Call (585) 461-2222 or go to geahouse.org.

Exhibit partners

Transitions-Rochester is the latest in a fruitful series of collaborations between area museums and universities. These partnerships began 18 years ago with Montage '93 an international festival of Rochester imaging industries and artists.

In 1997, 12 cultural groups and colleges hosted Landscape/Land Use, a set of exhibits on environmental awareness.

And just last spring, 10 area galleries and universities hosted fiber art shows.

In today's increasingly lean economy, cultural groups are deciding that it makes sense to pool their resources. Montage '93 had a \$2.2 million budget, including \$600,000 from a still-prosperous Eastman Kodak Co. Transitions-Rochester hopes to draw crowds with a shoestring budget of \$60,000, including \$20,000 from the Mondriaan Foundation of the Netherlands.

"This is a real grassroots initiative," says Rick Hock, curator of collections at Visual Studies Workshop. It will host Transitions-Rochester together with Rochester Contemporary Art Center and George Eastman House. This project grew out of close professional ties at Eastman House.

Hock used to be its exhibitions director and worked there with Bleu Cease, now executive director of Rochester Contemporary. They helped develop Transitions-Rochester with Alison Nordstrom, curator of photographs at Eastman House.

"We all worked well together," recalls Hock. "We talked about an exchange between photographers, institutions and students. VSW was the right place to coordinate it because it's both a school and an art center."

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Rochester Contemporary exhibit focuses on Inner Loop. **Page 5C**

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