To celebrate the bicentennial of the country’s founding, in 1976 the National Endowment for the Arts launched a multi-year program supporting photography surveys in communities across the United States. Most were commissions of new work by an emerging generation of documentarians; many of them became prominent figures in American photography. Of the more than seventy projects funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, the East Baltimore Documentary Photography Project was the only one conceived, led, and carried out by a team of women —Elinor Cahn, Joan Clark Netherwood, and project director Linda Rich. Rich had begun teaching at Maryland Institute College of Art in 1975 and brought her students to East Baltimore to photograph the neighborhood. What began as a class project evolved into a multi-year undertaking and became a survey project for the National Endowment for the Arts. The photographers introduced themselves to local clergy, who invited them to bingo luncheons, exercise classes, first communions, and sauerbraten suppers. “In a community with such a strong religious identity, an introduction by a neighborhood religious leader meant easier acceptance of us by parishioners,” Rich wrote. The photographers were never paid; what grant money they received went for equipment and expenses. All portrait subjects received a print for their participation. Between 1975 and 1980, these women made more than 10,000 exposures and offered a vivid portrait of the private and shared lives of an American neighborhood. For this exhibition, all titles are transcriptions of annotations made by the photographers on the reverse of their prints.

In 1983, SAAM received 1,500 photographs by National Endowment for the Arts grant recipients in a transfer that inaugurated its photography collection. The images included work from thirteen of the completed surveys, including the East Baltimore survey. An
additional group of prints came in 2020 from Joan Netherwood, the last of the photographers who survived, and her husband Paul. They dug through old files and storage boxes for records and discovered a complete “community exhibition” of the survey, which is now the centerpiece of Welcome Home. They also recovered more than 1,000 forgotten transparencies, two sequences of which are featured in the exhibition. These newfound images bring to the exhibition a greater sense of the diversity of the neighborhood, and they underscore the degree to which the photographers were welcomed into it.

Welcome Home: A Portrait of East Baltimore, 1975-1980 is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Generous support has been provided by the Gene Davis Memorial Fund, the Margery and Edgar Masinter Exhibitions Fund, the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Smithsonian American Women’s History Initiative.

The exhibition, SAAM’s first presentation of these photographs, is organized by John Jacob, McEvoy Family Curator for Photography at SAAM, with Vitoria Bitencourt and Krystle Stricklin, curatorial assistants. Vitoria Bitencourt’s work at the museum was supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities; Krystle Stricklin’s work was supported by the National Endowment for the Arts.
Introduction

In her application to the National Endowment for the Arts for project support, Linda Rich wrote, “while many urban communities seem to be fighting a losing battle against physical, emotional, and spiritual decay, East Baltimore continues to grow and change, preserving its culture, integrity, and humanity.” From the late nineteenth century into the twentieth, European immigrants were drawn to Baltimore by jobs in ship building, steel, and other industries. Southern and Eastern Europeans settled among earlier German immigrants, establishing ethnic neighborhoods bound together by religion, family ties, and patriotism for their new home. Following World War II, a wave of white Appalachian migrants, African Americans, and a large group of the Lumbee Tribe of North Carolina came from the South to Baltimore to escape poverty and violence. But industrial jobs were declining by the late 1960s, and by the early 1970s wage and benefit cuts, high oil prices, unemployment, and inflation were taking a toll on working class neighborhoods. Baby boomers departed, leaving their elders holding fast to their homes and traditions.

In the late 1970s, when Rich, Cahn, and Netherwood photographed there, East Baltimore was undergoing a revitalization. Drawn by the architectural charm of the neighborhood and homes made cheap by its decline, families and young professionals seeking an urban lifestyle began to return to East Baltimore. Longtime residents banded together with those newly arrived to re-shape the community. In 1975, they organized the Southeast Community Organization (SECO), a federation of block clubs, church groups, ethnic fraternities, and union locals that successfully halted a proposed highway system that would have run through Fell's Point and Canton, displacing thousands. One of SECO’s initiatives, Neighborhood Housing Services, developed an experimental loan system for credit-risky tenants. Older residents encouraged those tenants to buy, then helped them to restore old and vandalized homes. It was this moment, and the individuals contributing to its renewed optimism, that the East Baltimore Documentary Photography Project sought to capture. (290)
I Am an American

Linda Rich attended the I Am an American Day parade for the first time in 1975. Held annually since 1938, in the Highlandtown–Patterson Park area of East Baltimore, the parade was hugely popular. It attracted large crowds of onlookers as well as politicians and celebrity participants and, according to one account, might take up to four hours to pass a given spot. Rich was struck as much by the patriotism of the event as by the distinctive characteristics of the neighborhood: its treeless streets, clean marble stoops, painted door-screens, and public-facing window displays. “The valued traditions of its people were everywhere,” Rich wrote. “These people and their neighborhood continued to be a part of my thoughts long after the day of the parade.” In addition to the I Am an American Day parade, the photographers documented other popular expressions of civic pride, from scouting to its annual Fourth of July parade, all of which captured the community values identified by Rich.

Approaching East Baltimore

When Linda Rich and two of her students came to East Baltimore, their approach to the neighborhood upended methods adopted by other documentary projects. Most surveys of the time worked from a script, subdivided by subject and genre and parceled out among a team of photographers. Rich, Cahn, and Netherwood did work from a script, in that the survey had specific themes. But they did not specialize—they all worked to document the full range of themes. They approached people through their established institutions, including the secular celebrations and church functions shown here, winning the community’s trust on the street and in parish halls before gaining acceptance in homes and at family gatherings. The intimacy of the public and private images is clear evidence that these women were not tied to the notion of the camera as an instrument of objectivity. First, the photographs acknowledge, first, that the camera is not a neutral machine but a presence that affects the action, the photographers and their subjects becoming co-conspirators. Second, after hundreds of hours with their subjects at work and leisure, in joy and sorrow, the women and their cameras had become part of the fabric of this neighborhood. “Our lives and the project merged,” Linda Rich wrote. Their purpose was as much to document as “to relate our
Photographs to the history, culture, and social concerns of East Baltimore and to create for residents a clearer sense of the richness of their lives.” The photographers were, in a sense, acting both for their subjects and acting with them, making the pictures they themselves might have made if they had the skill and vision.

**Exteriors & Interiors**

The photographers captured a cross-section of East Baltimore homes and workplaces, celebrating the neighborhood’s diversity while also acknowledging its many challenges. Most often, what drew their attention were the details, inside and outside the places they visited, that they considered distinctive. They didn’t specialize; according to Joan Netherwood, “We did not tell each other what to do, like one photographs landscapes, one architecture, one people, etc. but left each of us to photograph anything that caught our interest.” In many images we can see the community’s rootedness. Families remained in the neighborhood their entire lives, often living in the same home from one generation to the next. A photograph of a woman showing pride in a meticulous stoop might have just scrubbed the same stones her mother had once cleaned. Similarly, the religious icons decorating a family’s home refer to a devotion practiced over generations. The details of these exteriors and interiors form a rich visual language that conveys stories of the public and private lives of East Baltimore.

**Where We Work**

As the East Baltimore Documentary Photography Project captured the everyday activities of the neighborhood, including themes of work, home, and tradition, it explored the tensions that existed between ethnicity and Americanness. Factory work, the main source of income for many men, is implicit in images of streets and homes but not directly visible, so the photographers followed men to the factory floor. Other kinds of work, including the ownership and operation of small businesses, was often done by both women and men or by families; many such establishments are also portrayed in the photographs. The photographers also captured community organizers, whose work sought to maintain basic social services and to block policies that would divide the neighborhood.
Gallery 2

A Community Exhibition

The National Endowment for the Arts included 220 prints from the East Baltimore Documentary Photography Project in its original transfer of 1,500 prints to SAAM. As part of its research process for mounting this exhibition, SAAM contacted Joan Netherwood, the last of the photographers who survived. As she reviewed her files, Netherwood recovered more than 1,000 transparencies that were not a part of that transfer, as well as a complete set of prints used in one of the “community exhibitions.”

Among the recovered transparencies, mostly taken with 35mm cameras, are alternate takes of portraits as well as street scenes that may have been shot by Netherwood’s husband, Paul. Some images forego the formality of documentary photography for an intimacy that is even more obvious than that in the portraits included in the survey. Some are in color. The transparencies have been edited into two slide-show sequences, featured in the first and third galleries of this exhibition. The prints in this gallery recreate one of the community exhibitions held by the photographers during the course of the survey. These small-scale exhibitions were organized by the photographers and were held at churches and community centers, often on feast or holy days. Netherwood wrote, “When one person was photographed and hung in an exhibit, others also wanted to be in the exhibits. When we had a major exhibit, the people photographed stood near their pictures and told anyone who would listen to them what it was like having their picture in an exhibit.” The thirty recovered prints were donated by Joan and Paul Netherwood to SAAM, and are a welcome addition to its photography collection.

Gallery 3

Introduction

The images included in the East Baltimore Documentary Photography Project were taken in the late 1970s—a period that overlapped with the United States Bicentennial celebration. The Bicentennial closely followed the severe recession of the mid-1970s, with unprecedented inflation and unemployment that went from five to nearly nine
percent; it also came just one year after the final withdrawal of troops from Vietnam. So for the Gerald R. Ford administration the Bicentennial was a moment to promote a theme of national renewal, tempered by social and economic uncertainty. A national photography program, conceived by the late Senator Walter Mondale, was approved by Congress as part of the Emergency Jobs and Unemployment Act of 1974, to employ photographers and filmmakers to create a visual record of the United States during the Bicentennial celebration.

When financial support for Mondale’s program was not forthcoming, the National Endowment for the Arts stepped forward. Founded in 1965 as an independent federal agency, the National Endowment for the Arts initiated its photography fellowships program in 1971 as well as funding for artists’ spaces and museums to support photographers, and funding for periodicals and books to expanded scholarship and critical writing about photography. In 1976 it added a Bicentennial State Film Project and a Photography Surveys category. The film program lasted only one year; the Photography Surveys program continued until 1981.

**Faith & Community**

East Baltimore is a district of the city of Baltimore, with fourteen to seventeen overlapping neighborhoods (depending on how boundaries were drawn) at the time the East Baltimore Documentary Photography Project photographers worked there. Immigrants arrived in the district in the late nineteenth century mainly from southern and eastern Europe. The majority were Roman Catholic; some were Eastern Orthodox. For the most part, they settled into parishes according to national identity, where christenings, weddings, and funerals brought neighbors together around shared traditions and values. Ethnic heritage and religious practice were intertwined. “People identify themselves by parishes,” Father Lou Esposito explained to the photographers. “They like everybody to know what their nationality is. So, most of them will identify themselves first as Italian, German, or... and then they say, ‘Look, I am an American.’ They will add that very quickly, but first they will say, ‘I am an Italian,’ ‘I am a German.’”
Changes & Challenges

“Well, it’s changing, but everything is changing so what are you going to do?” Mrs. Francis Lukowski, a resident of East Baltimore said to the survey photographers. During the recession of the mid-1970s, facing the decline and deterioration of their neighborhood, East Baltimoreans did a lot. “They went after city officials with a vengeance,” Linda Rich wrote. “One day they formed a human barrier to truck traffic on their blocks, while the next day they formed and are directing multi-million dollar redevelopment corporations.” Dedicating themselves to saving the neighborhood, they stayed in their homes and encouraged others to do likewise; they kept their children in local schools and insisted on educational reforms; they shopped at corner stores and sustained the local economy. When services such as trash removal, street cleaning, and public health care were threatened, neighbor joined with neighbor and formed partnerships with city government and local financial institutions. They worked together to develop solutions, such as programs to buy, rehabilitate, and rent low-cost housing, or to help homeowners maintain their homes.

At Home

In a neighborhood wary of outsiders, it was a remarkable accomplishment for the photographers to be invited into the homes of East Baltimore. Joan Netherwood wrote, “I think that because we were women it was easier. One lady asked me in and I told her she should be very careful about who she allowed to come into her home. She assured me that she was a good judge of character and she knew I was O.K.” The obituary of one of Netherwood’s subjects, Mr. Peter Frenchie, stated that his participation in the East Baltimore Documentary Photography Project was the highlight of his life. Netherwood photographed Mr. and Mrs. Frenchie at home in their living room and at church re-confirming their vows on their fiftieth wedding anniversary. “Through months of observing, talking, interviewing, and photographing, our concept of the project broadened into an exploration of what constitutes a neighborhood,” Linda Rich wrote, “not as a geographical but as a moral and social concept.”
East Baltimore Faces

In her application to the National Endowment for the Arts for support, Linda Rich wrote “The photographs will document the strength and pride of the people of the East Baltimore neighborhoods.” Viewing the photographs today, the East Baltimore of the late 1970s looks closer to the nineteenth century than it does to the twenty-first. There is little evidence of the greater Baltimore of more recent popular imagination—as portrayed in the grim urban police procedural The Wire (2002–2008); as conveyed by news media in following the death in police custody of Freddie Gray (2015); or as characterized on social media by former President Donald J. Trump (2019). There is a disconnect between past and present; between the largely white past depicted in the photographs and the predominantly Black present to which all these more recent portrayals refer. There is a disconnect, finally, between the optimism that the photographers documented and the reality that viewers know with hindsight, that that success was exuberant but short lived. Behind the faces of strength and pride, the precariousness of the community’s survival is evident in its need for activism, for basic services and against efforts to divide it, which at that moment was meeting with success. With the nation in severe recession, industry and shipbuilding were in decline; downsizing and union busting meant that wages and benefits decreased. White flight had already begun. The impetus for the neighborhood to organize and sustain itself was a grand struggle that these East Baltimoreans lost. Like other such neighborhoods across the United States, many would leave and the neighborhood would reinvent itself more than once. These photographs are the record of a unique time and place; a neighborhood that valued its community life and the photographers who worked with them to enact, cherish, and preserve those values.