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August 9, 2013 / Q Guide: Arts & Entertainment / Art / Sunnyside

Photographer captures borough's stories through her lens



This photograph of Long Island City is part of Michelle Cheikin's "Queens Surface" exhibit. Photo courtesy of Michelle Cheikin

By Tammy Scileppi
TimesLedger Newspapers

In a city as richly steeped in history as New York, every neighborhood has a story to tell. In Queens, where you can experience the world in a nutshell by riding the No. 7 train, a Sunnyside photographer, compelled to focus her lens on "the Queens of yesterday and today," captured local images that she says "depict serene moments and initiate a feeling of a lost time."

Michelle Cheikin couldn't wait to share her reverence for the borough with its residents and visitors.

Her project, "Queens Surface," is a montage of 40 evocative photographs that will be on display at the Flushing branch of Queens Library at 41-17 Main St. Aug. 10-28. An opening reception with the artist will take place Aug. 10, at 4 p.m.

Going about their daily lives, most New Yorkers never notice the wonderful details that are part of the city's architecture or the quality of light as dusk hits the skyline, signaling yet another sunset. Life is just too hectic.

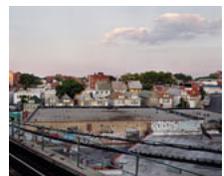
It takes an artist to understand the beauty of ordinary things and everyday scenes; to see poetry in old buildings and new structures; to capture the juxtaposition of lines, shadows and textures in her photographs.

"Generally, in my artistic practice, I'm attracted to what is overlooked," said Cheikin, who sees Queens as "an under-represented, but important borough, as far as its contribution to the arts." In her view the borough has "an understated feeling, and is both international and middle America – a pretty quiet place to live, compared to other boroughs."

When she first moved here in 2001, the artist said she was "immediately struck by how the light at dusk and dawn illuminated the



Michelle Cheikin's photograph shows a sculpture of the iconic "Lady Guadeloupe" slanting in front of a parking garage near Queens Plaza. Photo courtesy of Michelle Cheikin



Rooftops photographed in Elmhurst are part of Michelle Cheikin's "Queens Surface" exhibit at the Flushing Library. Photo courtesy Michelle Cheikin

landscape, since there was a lack of tall buildings.” It seems her artist’s soul is drawn to subdued color, reflections and vacant spaces.

“Emerging above ground on the 7, N, or Q trains from Manhattan, the light has an uplifting effect on me,” she said.

Taking medium-format, color negative images that “trace a layering of forms,” Cheikin said, “there is something intuitive that happens when working from a negative and using the light to create an image.”

Before coming to New York the artist lived in San Francisco and was inspired by the vibrancy of the light on a daily basis. She describes the light in Queens as more subtle: “My series has a pastel-like color palette, with cool-blue skies and brick warm-toned buildings.”

Attracted to the light and architectural forms of the borough, Cheikin observes the Queens of yesterday “as it disappears in renovation and development.” This is reflected in her work:

In her “Elmhurst, 2005,” charming residences are juxtaposed next to a wall of graffiti and industrial warehouses. Reflective windows, orange netting, and cement pilings of a new condominium appear to engulf the Queensboro Bridge in “Long Island City, 2012.” In “Queens Plaza, 2007,” a heavenly, light blue sculpture of the iconic “Lady Guadeloupe” slants precariously in front of a concrete parking garage.

“The structures I saw in the landscape seemed outdated, in the past and ripe for renewal. Soon after I took my pictures of Queens Plaza, the old parking lot was torn down; since then Queens Plaza has become a much different place.”

All along, Cheikin’s artistic goal had been “to photograph a place where I had lived.” So, she set out to document the visual cues from the landscape that would form a narrative of her new home.

Conducting her research visually instead of academically through the lens of her camera, Cheikin’s vision for displaying “Queens Surface” became a reality when she saw the perpendicular walls at the Flushing-Queens Library last fall.

“I started arranging the pictures in groups of 20 on the perpendicular walls of my kitchen,” Cheikin said. “The photographs began to work off each other and create a narrative. New images I made within the past year replaced older images and broadened the story.”

Part of the exhibition also captures local stores and shops.

“I wanted to document small businesses for their character and history. Many are closing down and being replaced by chain stores,” Cheikin said. “There’s a special quality to these stores, as they are places where people from the neighborhood congregate. While there seems to be a new generation of small businesses, I’m nostalgic for a slower, more personable mode of business transaction.

“Trade jobs were how life in the city began. Now trade has gone digital.”

The artist said she’s interested in exploring the material aspects of objects in the city’s stores as a way to capture what it feels like to be inside those businesses.

Cheikin explained that the absence of people in her photos has to do with her attraction to objects and spaces. “While I may have the intention of photographing people, I’m more attracted to the meaning behind the objects that people leave behind.”

With regard to the artist communities here, Cheikin said she has enjoyed participating in the LIC Open Studios and meeting artists working in Queens. “New York City artists seem to localize themselves into what borough or neighborhood they live in. Having so many artists in one place is what makes it dynamic. I just hope we all don’t get pushed out with the high rents.”

Cheikin, who was born in Virginia Beach and grew up in Connecticut, comes from a family where artistic expression was an important part of life. Recalling her very first photos, taken with a pinhole camera she made in a high school photography class, she said, “it was a thrill to see the image I had in my head, appear on the photographic paper, as it went through the chemistry. I also enjoyed the negative to positive aspect of working with a paper negative.”

And her tip for great picture-taking: “Always take the image that inspires your creativity instead of thinking too much about how to take the picture. Photography is about having an awareness of light and being inspired by a moment.”

Cheikin’s work has been exhibited at the Queens Museum of Art, the Bronx Museum of Arts and in galleries nationwide.

IF YOU GO

“Queens Surface” Photography Exhibition

When: Saturday, Aug. 10 through Wednesday, Aug. 28

Where: Flushing-Queens Library, 41-17 Main St. Flushing,

(718) 661-1200

Free admission (all visitors, all hours)

www.michellecheikin.com

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Photographer Michelle Cheikin stands in front of some of her work that is included in the "Queens Surface" exhibit at the Flushing Library. Photo courtesy Michelle Cheikin

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