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The Year in Review

## **Artist of the Year: Wing Young Huie**

Four years in the making, the gigantic Lake Street USA was a moving and beautiful testament to a photographer who put people back in public art.



While artists often measure their achievements by fame and money, Minneapolis photographer Wing Young Huie earned his Artist of the Year citation for a vast project that had a big impact on the Twin Cities but brought him few markers of success.

Huie's photos have been seen by tens of thousands of Twin Citians this year, but the artist himself remains a quiet, anonymous guy few would recognize on the street. As for money, he's still about \$25,000 shy of the roughly \$125,000 it cost him to do the "Lake Street USA" project, a photo show that took four years to complete and sprawled 6 miles when shown this summer and fall in south Minneapolis.

Even his exhibition style defied convention. Most photographers want their work fancily framed in museums and galleries for the appreciation of connoisseurs. Not Huie.

The populist, Duluth-born photographer had his black-and-white photos of Lake Streeters blown up and laminated in plastic, like placemats. Then he hung 600 of them in the windows of restaurants, cafes and shops along Lake Street itself, a corridor of gritty urbanity stretching from the Mississippi River to Lake Calhoun. Some mural-size pictures were displayed on the walls of the defunct Sears tower. Others lumbered about on the sides of 25 Metro Transit buses for the show's three-month run.

"More than any one individual in this city, Wing has given a very positive identity to a neighborhood," said Vance Geller, director of pARTs Photographic Arts, a nonprofit organization that provided financial services but no money for the project. "The size of the project dilutes its power as art, but that wasn't what Wing was after—the precious few, the singular images. He was trying—always to share, to make the photos accessible to everyone."

"Lake Street USA" is likely to stand as a milestone in the history of photography and public art. Other photographers have turned their cameras for varying periods of time on particular neighborhoods or whole cities. Eugene Atget documented the buildings and streets of Paris in the early 20th century' W. Eugene Smith shot Pittsburgh's steel workers

and mills in the 1950s; Bruce Davidson recorded East Harlem life in the 1960s, and Eugene Richards photographed the Boston slums in the 1970s.

Huie's account of Lake Street at the turn of the millennium updates that documentary legacy and gives it his own humanistic flavor. That Lake Street is the heart of a nondescript neighborhood with little of architectural consequence didn't matter, because it's people he cares about, not buildings.

"Wing has a tremendous faith in human beings; I don't know how else to say it," said Vince Leo, a photographer and friend who heads the media arts department at Minneapolis College of Art and Design. "By that, I think he believes deep in his heart that human beings make the right decisions for the right reasons. That's what really transforms what he does and makes it possible."

For four years, Huie roamed Lake Street and surrounding neighborhoods taking photographs at all hours and in all seasons and situations. In the end, he had about 18,000 pictures of funerals and festivals, shoppers and toilers, hawkers and hustlers, parents and kids, office workers and idlers. People of many races and innumerable ethnicities, religions and political persuasions figure in the photos—Orthodox Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Lutherans, Laotian monks, Somalis, Cambodians, Scandinavians, Indians.

Unposed and unself-conscious, the photos are a multicolored mosaic, eloquently reflecting the dramatic demographic shift of the past 20 years in which Minneapolis has, somewhat awkwardly, become a multi-hued community.

"His photographs are just spectacular," said Tom Borrup, executive director of Intermedia Arts, a Minneapolis community organization. "He's shared an insider's look at Lake Street with so many people and has gotten them...to see Lake Street in a different light."

Unlike documentarians who use photography to prick viewer's consciences with images of the overworked, the homeless or the downtrodden, Huie avoids moralizing and sentimentality. His Lake Streeters represent a socio-economic spectrum from struggling immigrants and street vendors to lifestyle punks, upscale yuppies and suburbanites.

"I tried to be responsible to the neighborhood, to give the photos a kind of transparency: This is what it looks like, and you decide" what it means, Huie said.

As he photographed, he interviewed his subjects, too, using a digital recorder to collect comments about work, families, past, hopes and dreams. He plans to incorporate their remarks into a book of the pictures to be published by Ruminator Press of Minneapolis.

Responses to the photos depended on the viewer's experiences and notions about Lake Street, Huie said. Two teens he encountered at Lunds assumed the pictures were of an advertising campaign, "a Nike thing," as they put it. A Mexican boy got emotional when he recognized members of a rival gang. "These are my mortal enemies, but they look so peaceful," he told Huie.

In a response book that Huie left in the Blue Moon coffee shop, an anonymous observer described the photo's compassionate dignity as a tonic for craven consumerism:

'Where art is not afraid to look into the eyes of us, regular poor folks just living our lives, this art comes down from the pretentious, self-conscious and exclusive upper-class realm and becomes community art, art with a purpose, humane. These are the pictures you'll never see in Nike ads or car ads or perfume ads. These are the majority of Americans picking up their broken identities and trying to scrape together a living, a culture, and identity, a life. Most of the images we see are of advertisements, trying to sell us a euphoria and prestige we could never achieve. We look around us and are disappointed; we struggle but don't measure up. These photos show us, real and valuable just as we are. They are sad because they aren't the perfect images of others we're used to seeing. They are empowering for the same reason. Thanks, for these images and a chance to respond. Peace.'

### **Married, and more optimistic**

Souvenirs of the Lake Street Project surround Huie in the compact studio of the shares with his wife of four months, Tara Simpson Huie, in a former bakery complex in south Minneapolis. Before Tara, a potter and massage therapist, moved in with her slouchy old sofas, arm chairs and window-garden of potted plants, the place was strewn end to end with thousands of photos. Tara domesticated the loft and brought a new contentment to Huie's life.

'I'm different now, too; I'm married and I think I'm more optimistic about life,' Huie said, sipping tea at the kitchen counter on a recent morning.

Since Tara arrived, the Lake Street pictures have been organized, filed or sold. The 18,000 negatives and contact prints are archived. About 300 of the laminated pictures were sold at a November community party and auction at Intermedia Arts. The event raised about \$30,000 to help pay down the project's debt. The remaining 3000 or so are sorted by size and piled on the floor—or stowed in the bathroom that doubles as a darkroom.

"He looks obviously to me like someone not born here, like he could be my relative," Huie said of the Asian. "He looks like the stereotypical Asian man who works in an office, probably an engineer. I hate to stereotype my people, but it's true."

The photo triggered a flood of associations for Huie, whose family emigrated from China, before he was born. Growing up in Duluth, where his father ran a popular restaurant, Joe Huie's Café, Huie was typically the only Asian in his school or class. As the youngest of six children, he was the only family member born in this country, the only one without an accent, the only artist.

"The more time I spent away from home, the more exotic my family seemed to me," he said.

In fact, he was so accustomed to being the only Asian in any situation, that he became uncomfortable when he moved to the Twin Cities in the early 1980s and found himself among other Asians. He graduated from the university of Minnesota's journalism school in 1979 and spent several years tending bar and honing his photographic skills. In about 1988, he turned pro, shooting photos for weddings, businesses and magazines, especially City Pages, Corporate Report and City Business. Eventually he grew bored with such work, and in 1993 he abandoned it for the financially precarious life of a documentarian.

His first independent project was a two-year record of St. Paul's Frogtown neighborhood. He displayed the photos on clotheslines in a vacant Frogtown lot in 1995; the next year the Minnesota Historical Society gathered the pictures into a book. The book's success led to a series of grants—from the Jerome, McKnight and Bush foundations, among others—that covered some living expenses while he photographed Lake Street. The project took much longer than he expected.

"All the time I spent on this show I could have been making a living, and really need to do that," Huie said ruefully.

With the exhibition over, he's focused on paying off the Lake Street Project debts, finishing the new book and preparing for a June show at Franklin Art Works in Minneapolis. And then, of course, there are new pictures to make.

"There are a lot of things you want to stare at but can't," he said. "Photos give you the opportunity to stare and, in staring, to know something you didn't know before."