

Artist Statement

The idea of displaying the details of other people's lives on gallery walls for people to ponder is something I've never been completely comfortable with. That is why my initial intention was to keep the more intimate and voyeuristic shots I took at Unity Park to myself – to keep them separate from a public body of work which would be much more impersonal, consisting mainly of typographic examination of the varying states of the site's decay.

But those intentions changed one day when I walked past a unit that had been boarded up except for one window where the plywood had come loose. Inside was a dark, empty room stripped of everything except newspaper clippings that had been taped to the wall. I pulled myself through the open window to find out what someone would want to live with on their wall all the time. What I found was the story of the 1998 *Gutshall Tragedy* involving students from Gaskill Middle School in Niagara Falls, NY.

The room was very dark and required a seven minute exposure to photograph, plenty of time for me to look around and notice some things. The address of Unity Park wasn't that of the boy who had died, but that of the family of the boy who'd been arrested in connection with the death. The bedroom was not the



Child's Chair, 2006

largest one in the apartment, presumably occupied by the parents. It wasn't much of a stretch then, to assume this clipping had in fact been taped to the bedroom wall of the accused boy, to always be the last thing he saw at night and the first thing he'd see in the morning.

That's when I realized that the photograph I was taking had little to do with the tragedy of a boy's death. What my camera was really pointed at was a parent's desperate effort to reach a child, in a gesture of discipline, desperation, and love. And that's something everyone can relate to. Prison

letters are a similar case. Who hasn't known the desperation of trying to hold onto something even when our grasp on it isn't threatened by the separation of prison?

It's well acknowledged within photographic circles that the camera points both ways. But considering the material presented in Unity Park, I hope viewers recognize that the camera actually points in three directions— at the subject, the photographer, and also at the viewer themselves. If viewers are drawn to experience the material with sympathetic recognition rather than distant curiosity, then my goal for the project will be met.

Michael Veit, 2008

Michael Veit

A long time resident of Niagara County, Michael Veit studied Psychology at Niagara University and film making at New York University. Varied interests led him to pursue wide ranging opportunities, from landscape design to gold prospecting. Rediscovering his affinity for photography,

Veit embarked on a career as a freelance photographer in 2000. Beyond portraiture and architectural photography, his personal photographic projects include extensive documentation of Buffalo's grain elevator district and a new photographic study of tourism in Niagara Falls.

TopSpin

Artists of Western New York and Beyond

The museum's Tops Gallery – long dedicated to the exhibition of work by local and regional artists – presents the **TopSpin** series. This juried series of solo exhibitions draws from the richly diverse work of WNY artists, as well as that of artists beyond the region. **TopSpin** features a broad range of visual expressions, varied in media as well as message. **TopSpin** is made possible through the generous support of Tops Markets, LLC. Catalog design: JCharlier Communication Design



The Institute of Museum and Library Services, a federal agency that fosters innovation, leadership and a lifetime of learning, supports The Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University.



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Michael Veit: Unity Park

May 2 - September 14, 2008

Opening reception with artist's talk: First Friday, May 2, 5:00-9:00 p.m.

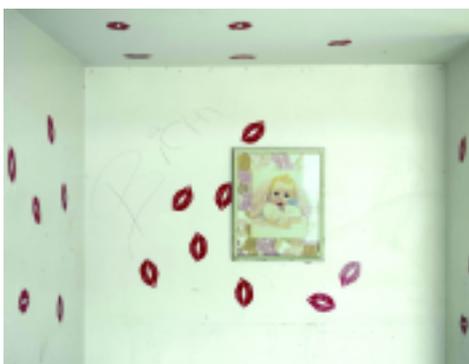


michaelveit

Unity Park was a large low income housing complex built in the early 1970s in Niagara Falls, New York. As such projects go; it was fairly ambitious, comprised of 198 units within twenty-three buildings on twenty-six acres. Unity Park's decline started in 1993, marked by various complaints about deteriorating upkeep by its absentee landlord based in Boca Raton, Florida. This led to inevitable code violations and a rolling condemnation of the project that saw the last forty-nine families relocated to a neighboring housing project in 2003.



Patriotism, 2006



Deltasonic Worker, 2007



Green Stairway, 2005



Kitchen, Once Personalized, 2006

Niagara Falls, New York has long been known for its magnificent and majestic falls. For centuries, travelers' have made the falls an American destination stop. Since the 17th century artists and naturalists have documented the falls and surrounding region. From early etching and lithography to photography and digital recording, visitors have recorded the splendor of the region in a multitude of mediums.

Adjacent to the roaring cataract is the city of Niagara Falls. Like many cities across America, it has been through booming economic periods of growth as well as significant periods of decline. In the past few decades, the city of Niagara Falls has seen perhaps the most devastating period of decline imaginable. In the shadow of a mass exodus of corporations and populations, the physical and social fabric of the city has been shattered.

Michael Veit has captured this atmosphere of decline through the lens of his camera. Documenting the post-habitation of the housing complex—Unity Park. Many units were vacated



Smoke Damaged Bathroom, 2006

hastily, with tenants leaving a myriad of personal items behind. Inadvertently, or perhaps on purpose, abandoned items were left where they sat when the apartment was occupied. These actions created a strange environment as if suddenly all human presence vanished.

Adding to this strange atmosphere, a number of apartments were occupied after the building was condemned. Squatters moved into empty living spaces and on occasion changed arrangements, damaged property, or brought their own limited possessions which were in the end also left behind. Veit's photographic record details countless families forced to leave their homes by the mismanagement of others.

Each apartment in the complex housed a family, a history, a story. Demolition of Unity

Park began in December of 2006. By January 2007, only piles of rubble remained. In spring of 2007 construction of Unity Park II was scheduled to begin.

Michael Beam
Curator of Exhibitions and Collections



Burned Closet, 2006



Happy Kitchen, 2006