

DAVID BROOKS

STESS

David Stess literally lives in a darkroom. The windows of his tiny apartment in Manhattan's West Village ("Vintage, the real deal," he would say) are covered in black fabric that can be rolled down when he is in printing mode. His coffee table is invariably pressed into service as a stand for a drying screen. Stess is an inveterate collector of sculptures, paintings and photographs. His walls are covered floor to ceiling in an eclectic blend of books, folk art, prints, posters, Inuit carvings and numerous other items that defy categorization. Hanging from the ceiling is a delightful array of flying sculptures, from tin zeppelins to antique model biplanes. It is a curiosity shop, and David Stess is curious indeed—about life, about people, about stuff.

A native of Florida, Stess attended the University of Miami, where he studied both film and photography. "I got exposed to a lot of the documentary shooters and the street photographers—the whole history of the medium. I realized that what I liked to photograph was people," he says. He is inspired by the work of the great humanistic and documentary photographers such as Josef Koudelka, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Walker Evans and Robert Frank. During a six month biking trip around Europe, Stess became acquainted with many film students, and was greatly inspired by Cinema Verite, the Italian Neo-realists, as well as the French New Wave.

"I came to New York City 21 years ago to work in film and to



really start to explore photography, although I make my living mostly in film." Stess knows the business from the bottom up, having done props, styling, grip and electric as well as having been a production assistant. He hopes to begin work on his own documentary this summer. "The best work is work that is done from the inside out," says Stess, "Like Danny Lyons' bike riders. They are people who lived their work and didn't just observe it. Koudelka lived with the Gypsies for eight years." Stess doesn't see himself giving up the darkroom just yet. "I'm old school. I like the craft of it," he says. "I would like to learn wet collodion. I like platinum and alternative processes."

Stess' role models were uncompromising in their pursuit of their art, and this focused single-mindedness has spurred him on. When he photographs a wedding he does not show up on the day of the festivities. Instead of treating the gig as a necessary "evil," he views it as part of his art. "I spend a week or 10 days with the couple, and shoot mostly black and white." Stess uses quiet rangefinder cameras, and his method of working is unobtrusive. He becomes so familiar with his subjects that by the time the wedding day arrives he seems like just another family member, and the resulting photographs are unique and intimate. "It's how I approach all my personal work," he emphasizes.

"I'm a real New Yorker," says Stess. "I love to go to museums, antique shows, art shows, and photography galleries." This city mouse revels in shooting on the streets of New York, but there is a country mouse in him as well: For almost 20 years he has been migrating north each year to work on the Maine blueberry harvest. His images of the blueberry "rakers" and their families are subtle yet powerful and reflect a reality that is born of mutual trust, an example of his philosophy of having a personal connection with his subjects. "It makes a difference in how one sees the world." Stess works side by side with his subjects, priding himself on being one of the top rakers. "I like to rake," he says. "I like the physical aspect of it. Unlike New York, where you've worked a billion hour film days, after

raking for 12 hours you sleep very well." He is energized by nature.

Stess' photographs are held in a number of collections, notably the Farnsworth Art Museum, Rockland, Maine; and the Portland Museum of Art; as well as in many private collections. He has also enjoyed having his work featured in one-person shows throughout New England, including at the Maine Coast Artists Center for Maine Contemporary Art, Rockport; and the Salt Gallery (Salt Center for Documentary Studies) in Portland, Maine.

"I do this work for me," Stess says quietly. "This is my autobiography, only I'm doing it with pictures instead of writing. I'm going to go prune apple trees this spring."—Shawn O'Sullivan

■ PRINT INFORMATION

All prints offered are selenium-toned gelatin silver, printed by the photographer and signed, titled and dated. Available sizes are 11x14 inches and 20x24 inches (not all images are available in the 20x24-inch size). Prices are \$900 and \$1,500, respectively. The prints are un-editioned (except for the image titled Kids in the Rakers series, which is limited to 20 in the small size, and 15 in the large size).

■ CONTACT INFORMATION

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