

## Builder Levy: Photographer

Arnika Dawkins Gallery, Atlanta



Builder Levy, *Toby Moore, Old House Branch Mine, Eastern Coal Company, Pike County, Kentucky, 1970.*  
Courtesy Arnika Dawkins Gallery

communities of Brooklyn in the 1960s, '70s and '80s. In 1968, Levy made his first trip to Appalachian coal-mining country to document the lives of the miners and their families, which he has continued to track over the decades. A selection of those images was published in 2013 as *Appalachia USA: Photographs, 1968-2009*. Iconic among them is *Toby Moore, Old House Branch Mine, Eastern Coal Company, Pike County, Kentucky, 1970*. In the vein of Walker Evans's *Allie Mae Burroughs, Hale County, Alabama* and Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother* (both 1936), it features a black miner

Over the 50 years that Builder Levy has been photographing, the genre of street photography has gone from being novel to ubiquitous. While the evolution of technology has coincided with the outsourcing of technical skills, Levy continues to shoot film and produce fastidious gold-toned gelatin-silver prints.

This survey at Arnika Dawkins Gallery provided an overview of Levy's work that also suggests his values, as seen in his choice of subject matter. Raised in New York in a socially progressive home, Levy has had a lifelong interest in issues of social justice. Influenced by mentors Paul Strand and Helen Levitt, he has consistently sought to represent hard-luck people in troubled times.

He photographed the Civil Rights struggle and anti-Vietnam protests in the 1960s, and street scenes throughout New York City, especially in the poverty-ravaged

staring directly at the camera, headlamp askew, with a look of tired resignation.

*Church and Tipple*, shot in West Virginia in 1970, has a Becher-like quality – a dilapidated church, dingy with soot from the coal-moving tipple behind it, occupies nearly the entire frame, so that two young children standing in front are easily overlooked, their lives literally lived in the shadow of the coal industry.

Several of Levy's interests converge in *Harlem Peace March (No Vietnamese...)* NYC, 1967, which shows two young boys in the foreground and a man holding a sign that says "No Vietnamese Ever Called Me Nigger." In another work from his Civil Rights series, *Martin Luther King Funeral – Woman with Umbrella*, 1968, a black woman with a forlorn expression stares past the camera. Its poignancy lies in its understated quality, a magnitude of grief belied by stunned silence.