





## Interview

Builder Levy

### ‘Hardscrabble realism, with hope’

#### *A vision of a ‘new, better world within the reality of the present’*

INTERVIEW BY MICHAEL COLES

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BUILDER LEVY

Builder Levy received an old Box camera in 1951 from his father and since then has produced a body of work grounded in traditions of photojournalism, yet also inspired by a fine arts sensibility. He explains his approach “is like the Zen artists where you work hard to understand your subject matter, immersing yourself in its life forces—its daily life, its history and culture as well as your craft so that the execution of making the work of art becomes totally spontaneous and intuitive. The machine becomes an extension of your eye and mind, and your understanding of your subject is both emotional as well as ideological.”

His camera work has explored communities within New York City, Appalachia, Mongolia, and Cuba. A recent hardcover retrospective (Builder Levy, *Photographer*) offers testimony to a lifetime dedication: that of recording those faces and communities to which he has given himself—a series of compassionate meetings with, sometimes confrontations of those worlds. His encounters share the drama of the human condition without prepossession. Levy resides in New York City where he has also worked as a teacher at alternative schools for at-risk adolescents.

Levy recently produced a series of photographs in Venezuela shown in this issue of *DoubleTake/Points of Entry*. And he has offered some of his thoughts on his work and the directions he has taken.

Michael Coles: It has been said that your photography draws upon and weaves together different directions from the continuum of photography—documentation, street photography and fine art aesthetics. Have you found it a struggle to retain a certain freedom in your work, to resist being pigeonholed.



At left, opposite page: Students in a classroom doorway, School for the Indigenous Community, Las Claritas. Above left: Students at the same school. Above: Girl with math book, El Palmer. All photographs by Builder Levy, Nov. 2006.

Builder Levy: I strive to be like the Zen artists who have used brush and ink to paint the landscape and natural phenomena with spontaneity and freedom achieved from having immersed themselves in their subject through intense observation and repeated practice. My struggle is to create a strong, honest aesthetic reality that is unified with a strong honest social reality layered with my emotional and intellectual response to that reality. To do this without inhibition or hesitation, and yet imbue the photograph with some depth of visual and social meaning—that is the constant challenge. In the end, it has to ring true to me. I grew up in a household where art was encouraged, and it was understood that the world needed to be changed. In the early 1960s I became an art student at Brooklyn College, studying painting with Ad Reinhardt and photography with Walter Rosenblum. At that turbulent time, people around the world were struggling for freedom and independence, and throughout our nation people were marching in the streets for civil rights and peace. At first I thought of myself as an abstract expressionist: DeKooning, Rauschenburg, Chamberlain, their works full of directed spontaneity, raw energy, sensuality and gritty vitality, spoke to me of real life.

My own explorations in paint and steel, however, left me unsatisfied, because my work did not seem to be reflecting enough upon the real world. Making photographs was dif-



Las Claritas, Venezuela. / Builder Levy, 2006.

ferent. With photography I discovered I could frame and abstract aspects of often chaotic reality within the rectangle of my viewfinder, working with line, form, texture, and tones of chiaroscuro to create something new and complete, while expressing what I saw, felt, and thought about what was happening in the world around me. The camera allowed me to capture and particularize the emotional and ideological experience of those intense times. In the history of photography there is a long continuum of practitioners doing that kind of work. I wanted to be a part of that continuum.

MC: I understand that you spent some time with Paul Strand toward the end of his life, even printed some of his negatives. What was this time spent with Paul Strand like? What did you take away from the experience?

BL: Paul was like a father, grandfather and mentor all wrapped in one. Paul would ask me to show him my photographs. After looking at mine and giving me critical feedback, he would get out his photographs to show me. I saw the beautiful way his photographs were finished and presented. Rosenblum had introduced me to gold toning (which I am sure he got from Strand). In addition though, Paul backed his prints with a piece of acid-free rag paper trimming so that you still have the white border around the print. They were semi-matte prints which Paul varnished, using a formula developed for Strand by Richard Benson. Paul and I went to exhibitions, we talked about elements of a good portrait, a landscape, Cezanne, Van Gogh, his favorite photographer—Atget, Ansel Adams, Bruce Davidson, Emmet Gowin, the universe, politics, etc. I assisted Strand in making photographs in the backyard garden. I developed the film for him and made the contacts. I



Las Claritas, Venezuela. / Builder Levy, Nov. 2006.

made a few photographs of his apartment. Paul helped me understand the relationship between art and life. He loved art and he loved life. He helped me see the very real, strong connect between art and life.

MC: Tell me a little about the background of the miner in your portrait appearing on the cover of this issue of *DoubleTake/Points of Entry*.

EL: Born on July 21, 1943, in Jenkins, Letcher County, Kentucky, Lucious Thompson worked in the mines for almost twenty years. He had been a member of the Jenkins JCs as well as the Jenkins Volunteer Firefighters. He was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1968, serving fourteen months in Korea and two months in Vietnam. Among other jobs, he worked as a Kentucky Power lineman, a hospital orderly and on a road

construction crew. The Teco Coal Company (based in Florida) began mountain top removal mining on the mountain above his doublewide trailer home in the mid 1990s. The blasting caused the cinder-block foundation to crack. Sometimes twice a day, the blasting caused pictures to fall off the wall, everything to shake and a separation of the new addition from the old trailer mobile home, causing leaks when it rained. Having finished extracting what seams of coal it could, Teco moved its mountain top removal mining operations to another part of the mountain (closer to the main road and the post office where it is today). Mr. Thompson remains an activist with the Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC). The girls are the great great grandchildren of Lucious' common-law wife, Juanita Felmon. She passed away on December 11, 2005 at age 76.

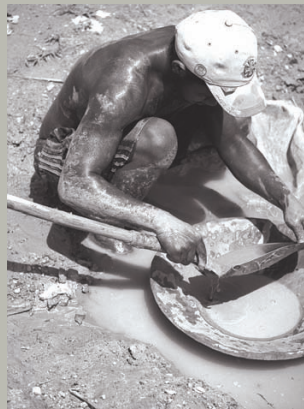
I met Lucious Thompson in Neon-Flemming, the town



**Above:** Small independent open-pit gold mine, near the village of Dorado, Las Claritas. **At right:** Panning for gold at the same time, near the village of Dorado, Las Claritas. / Builder Levy, Nov. 2006.

The miners set up campsites and live at the mine for days at a time, some with their families. They work in small independent crews. The government has been trying to close this and other small open-pit gold mines because the technology used causes mercury pollution that seeps into the ground and the water.

down the road from McRoberts, at a local community meeting of about thirty-five people sitting around in a circle. Lucious was chairing the gathering for the Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, an organization that has been trying to stop mountain top removal mining and other destructive coal industry practices in Kentucky. Kevin Pentz, a full-time organizer for KFTC whom I had spoken to by phone several times before making my trip, and whom I had met a few hours earlier in Whitesburg where I would be staying, introduced me at the meeting so that everyone would know who I was and asked me to say a few words explaining what I was about. When I saw Lucious, I knew I wanted to photograph him. Larry Easterling another local activist for KFTC offered to take me to visit Lucious and also his own parents the next day. Larry's mother, Betty, and step-father, Irvin Banks, lived in



Chopping Branch, the next hollow over from where Lucious lived. Their home had been flooded several times—a result of mountain top removal mining above their hollow.

MC: During your work in the coalfields of West Virginia and Eastern Kentucky you boarded and lived with miners. I gather you have managed to remain positive towards these communities that you have photographed in over the years—that you still pay homage to those mountains and those who live there?

BL: Miners are just some of America's many unsung heroes. And coal miners, in particular, helped build our nation. Their collective (multiracial) struggle to make life better for themselves and their families and American working people throughout the country remains one of the most inspiring examples of what is so great about this nation. This region, these people, are us—our America—the real America with a great heritage that is struggling to stay alive against some of the most powerful forces on earth—the Bush administration and the energy companies. The most destructive and polluting form of coal mining, mountain top removal mining, has been destroying the most bio-diverse mountains in North America, and destroying the communities in the valleys and hollows below. Generations of families and communities are being threatened with destruction, but the great American tradition of fighting for justice for the common man is still alive and growing in Appalachia.

MC: You started photographing the coalfields of West Virginia and Eastern Kentucky in 1968, funded by a teacher's salary, and have kept returning until this day. What is it about this region that makes you return?

BL: The beauty of the mountains and the heritage of the people. This is America to me! I want to add to the legacy of Appalachian photography left by Lewis Hine, Walker Evans, Ben Shahn, Russell Lee, Doris Ulmann and others.

MC: You have spent a good deal of your life teaching photography and creative writing to at-risk adolescents in New York City. What have you been able to learn from your students? How has your teaching influenced your photography?

BL: Through their writing, photography, art work and discussions and daily interactions, my students' sharing of their intensely lived young lives, has immensely enriched my own life, and I believe, the content of my photographs.

MC: You have recently been photographing in Venezuela and other parts of South America. What do you hope to learn, to see through this new work? What sparks you about this area of the world?

BL: We arrived in Venezuela a couple of weeks before the elections in November 2006. For several days I walked up and

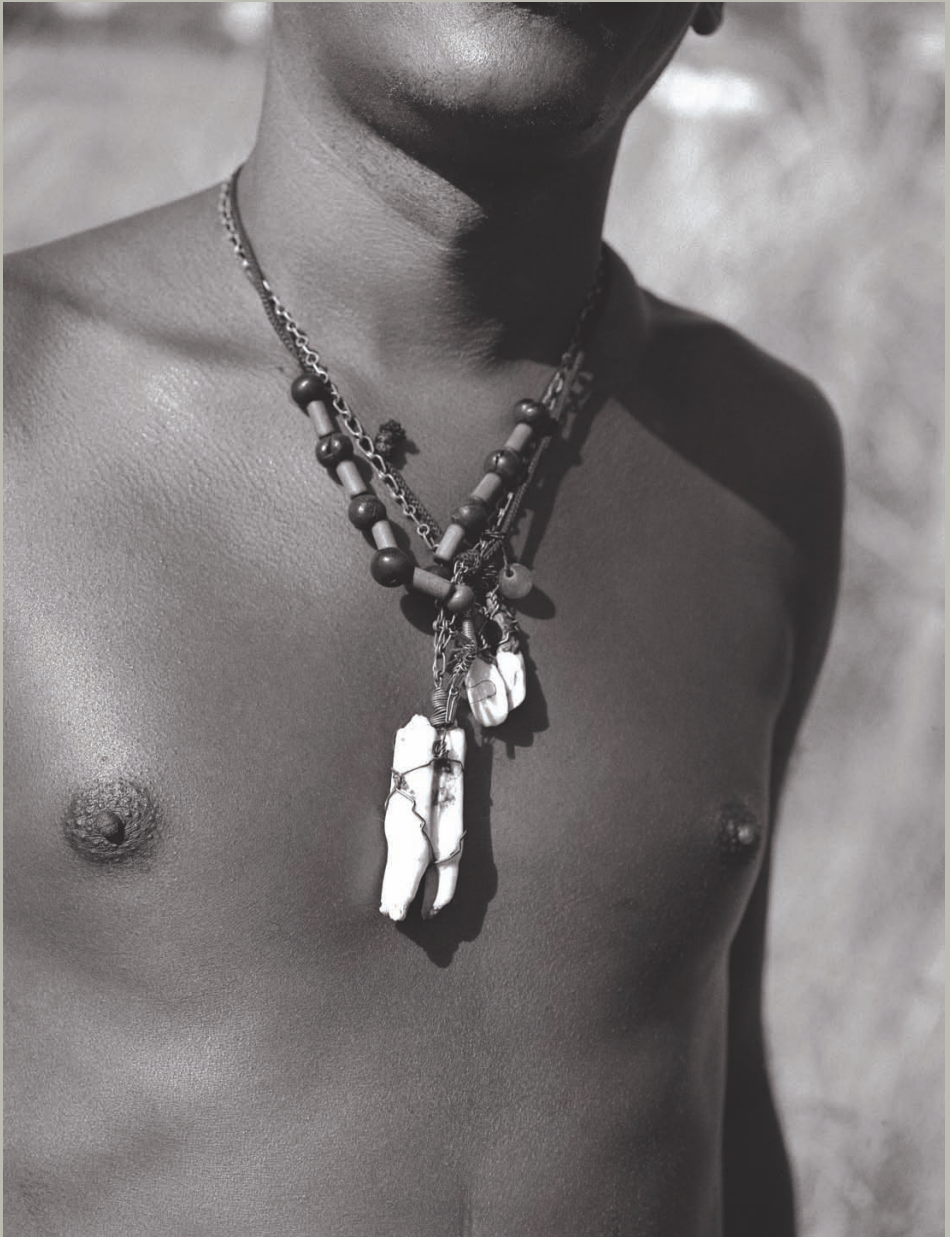
down the bustling, dusty main street, dense with humanity. The street was lined with shops, vendors, merchants of all sorts. I also explored some of the back streets and barrios of the town. I found Las Claritas to be an open, lively, vibrant town. In the barrios just off the main street, new housing was under construction, replacing sheet metal shacks. The government community housing program provided the building materials free. I met and spoke to many people in the street and in the barrios using my broken Spanish. Some of the people thought I was a photographer for the Chavez campaign. On one day a woman vendor gave me a sticker for Chavez, which I put on my cap for the rest of the day. I visited a school for the Comunidad Indigena, Araimatupu, 7.2 km from the town, and a small open-pit gold mine just past Dorado, about a kilometer outside the town of Las Claritas.

A tour guide book (Lonely Planet) describes Las Claritas, in the southeastern border region of Venezuela, as "a particularly dirty and ramshackle town... a gold-mining supply center for one of Venezuela's major gold-rush areas... [with] prospectors much in evidence, and noisy bars crammed with tipsy miners... [it does not] seem to be the safest place on earth..."

I am focusing on those developing nations in Latin America, attempting to create an alternative to the socio-economic approach of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund model which mandates austerity belt-tightening programs for the majority of the citizens in these nations. Rather than that model, where international debt payback and private profit for a few is the priority, the developing nations I visited and photographed (and plan to continue to visit) are attempting to channel the wealth and resources of their nations toward health care, education and housing, culture and a sustainable environment as a priority for the majority of the people. In these nations, I am interested in the everyday lives of the ordinary people. I am interested in a hardscrabble realism with hope. In 2004, I was in Cuba. In November 2006, in Venezuela, and, in March 2007, in Brazil. In December, I will go to Ecuador.

MC: You recently published a photo book—*Builder Levy, Photographer*—that includes work spanning New York City, Appalachian coalfields, Mongolia, Cuba and demonstrations. Now that the process is complete, what is it like for you to open this book and flip through the pages of work covering nearly a lifetime?

BL: The book is me, and I am very proud of it. The monograph, especially as it arranges and presents my photographs, has allowed me to share what I have seen in my lifetime and what I believe in and understand about the world—basically to share what I have lived—to share my life with the world. I have been blessed with the good fortune to be able to do all this. With this book of my photographs I can perhaps offer a vision of a new better world within the reality of the present one in which we live. ■



Itatiaia, Brazil. / Builder Levy, 2007.