

The Arts

Art review

Let us now praise artist's skillful eye

**'Life Stories:
Photographs
and Films
1981-2007'**

By PHILIP E. BISHOP || SPECIAL TO THE SENTINEL

Photographer and filmmaker Eric Breitenbach is virtually an institution on the local arts scene. So when the Southeast Museum of Photography in Daytona Beach mounts a midcareer retrospective, the question occurs: Hasn't Breitenbach had a whole career already?

For the current show, titled "Life Stories: Photographs and Films 1981-2007," Breitenbach has selected and reprinted nearly 100 black-and-white photographs from his substantial portfolio. The topical groupings — "Landscapes," "Portraits," "Stray Dogs" — belie the photographs' emotional range and geographical variety.

Breitenbach is a determined documentarian, a "straight" photographer from the old school of Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange. His camera seeks out, as he says, lives "lived in close proximity to the Earth." Yet his subjects often strike a sentimental chord in us despite the camera's documentary intent.

Look a little closer

Breitenbach's portraits from a stay in India illustrate this dissonance. To the Western eye, the garments and dark faces of a group of Indian girls at first promise exotic charm and beauty. But Breitenbach has pushed his camera right into the group. One foreground figure is out of focus, and another is nearly cropped out. The image's claustrophobia is an emblem of these girls' likely future of constrained choice and opportunity.

Breitenbach's work frustrates expectations of the picturesque, instilled in us by travelogues and *National Geographic*. The camel herder in "Man with Camels" is a workaday guy making a living from beasts. There's nothing cute or noble here.

The same is true of other "Portraits" — the Mexican girl tidying a grave on the Day of the Dead, a boy standing with head bowed in a church, or a nude woman posing in a naturist camp. All are emotionally conflicted, their poignancy touched by the absurd, their grotesquerie softened by innocence.

The dissonance heightens when Breitenbach turns to stray dogs, photographed in his travels to the Caribbean and Asia. These cast-offs nap on a stoop or gambol in the dirt, anonymous except for when Breitenbach's camera gives them perhaps their only moment of positive human regard. In some extreme close-ups, we can even see Breitenbach and his camera reflected in their eyes.

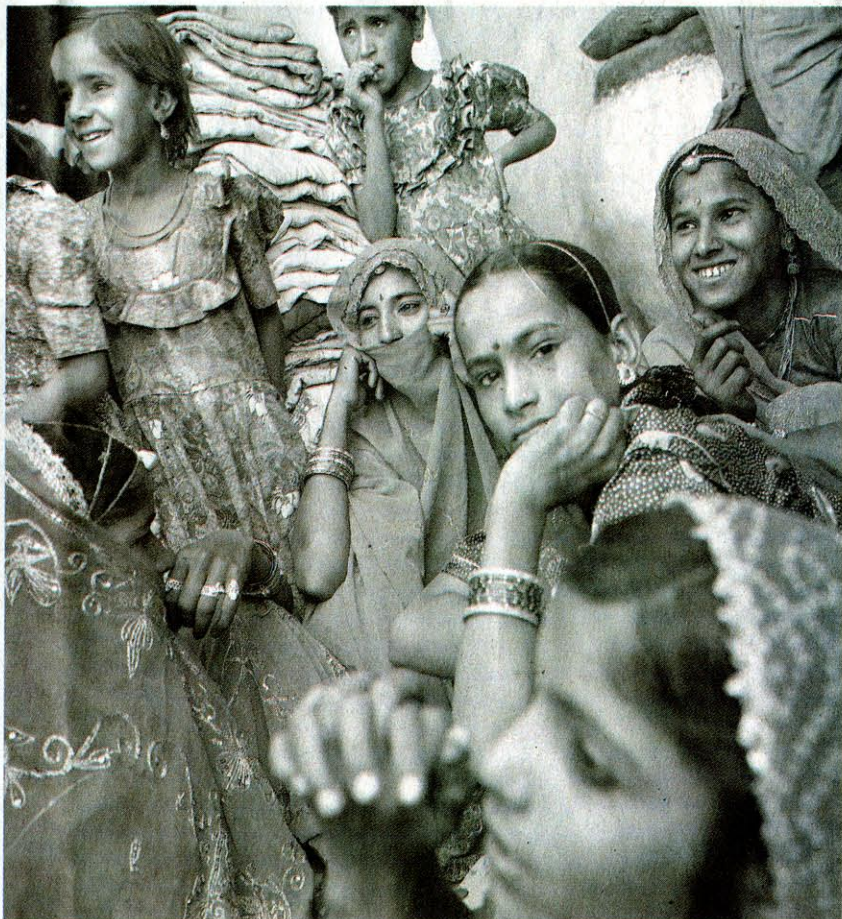
It's easy to draw the same lessons from "Stray Dogs" that Breitenbach teaches with his human portraits, the "lessons of humility and acceptance." Yet any pathos the images inspire is purely the viewer's own human projection. The camera shows us matter-of-factly: These are dogs, living a dog's life. The feelings you see in them are your own.

A porcine photographic topic

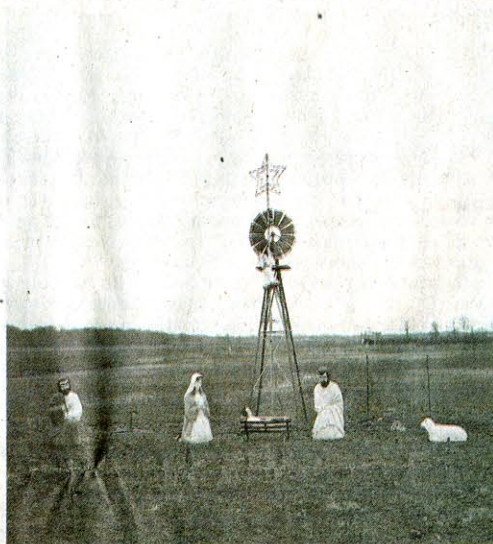
There's a different pathos in "Landscapes." Most of these rather bleak images were taken during a health crisis when Breitenbach stopped photographing people altogether. As with the dog portraits, humans are often near but indifferent or forgetful. In "Decaying Building," the forest's growth overpowers the derelict brick walls. In "Star and Ladder," an oversized holiday decoration is stored haphazardly, awaiting its season. In these images' astrigent desolation there's something almost restful, even restorative.

The current exhibition devotes a whole gallery to *When Pigs Fly*, the documentary film by Breitenbach and his wife and partner Phyllis Redman. The film and companion photographs depict a life lived literally close to the Earth. Lory Yazurlo, "Pig Lady of Bunnell," navigates her electric wheelchair through the mud of a property where she tends some 7,000 pigs. The 2007 film, which was well-received at the Florida Film Festival, gives voice to the kind of "life story" of which the photographs are a mute witness.

The contradictions here are the same, just easier to make out. The Pig Lady's determined compassion for her pigs (she's saving them from the slaughterhouse) is a burden to her family. Her self-denial is also a kind of self-indulgence. In other words, she's a lot like the rest of us.



In 'Women, India,' the image's claustrophobia is an emblem of these girls' likely future of constrained choice.

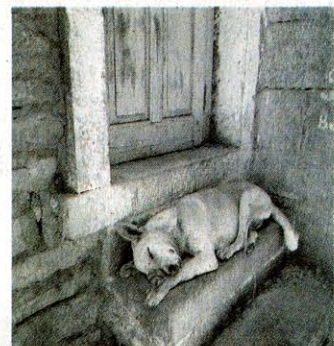


Eric Breitenbach's 'Nativity Scene' is one of the many photos in 'Life Stories: Photographs and Films 1981-2007.'

On a wall near the Pig Lady portfolio, Breitenbach displays signs he has collected from poor folks, mostly stoplight beggars. Scrawled on each is a life story: "Disabled, homeless, please help. God bless."

This retrospective shows how Eric Breitenbach got his rhythm, lost it and went searching, and then found his stride again. We can trust that he's out there looking for more odd and moving lives to tell.

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The viewer must bring his or her own humanity to Breitenbach's images of dogs, such as in 'Stray' (above).