

SILENT WITNESS: HURRICANE KATRINA

WHEN FINE ART PHOTOGRAPHER KEITH FISHMAN WATCHED THE UNFOLDING DRAMA OF HURRICANE KATRINA ON HIS TELEVISION SCREEN, HE WAS OVERCOME BY AN URGE TO JOIN HIS BROTHER—A DOCTOR, ALREADY ON THE SPOT—AS A RED CROSS VOLUNTEER, AND JUMPED ON A PLANE HEADED FOR MISSISSIPPI. BETWEEN DOING HIS PART TO HELP, HE USED HIS CAMERAS TO CAPTURE THE HUMAN AND MATERIAL DEVASTATION AS HE SAW IT. SENIOR CONTRIBUTING EDITOR DAVID BEST VISITED WITH FISHMAN IN HIS STUDIO IN SANTA BARBARA, CALIFORNIA, AND FILED THIS REPORT.

It is Sept 7, 2005, just a few days after Hurricane Katrina turned the Gulf Coast upside down. There is immeasurable destruction, the madness and the mayhem and the fathomless misery all seen endlessly on television screens. But there is more to this story than heart-wrenching pictures of suffering. When Katrina ripped up the puzzle pieces and flung them madly across the map, those pieces often fell back to earth in unexpected ways.

As it were, that day, Santa Barbara, California, photographer Keith Fishman was catapulted into an incredible world of horror, disbelief and amazement that would shake him into a brutal awakening.

"I usually don't watch television," Fishman says, perched on a high stool in the photo studio of his home in the hills above Santa Barbara. "But I was in New York that week, with time to kill, and I watched the impending tragedy unfold. I knew that a hurricane of this magnitude would hit everyone and everything in its path. And I realized that those who were least able to protect themselves, regrettably, would be affected the most tragically. Where are they going to go? How will they survive? Something about this tragic reality resonated deeply inside me."



Amy Hopkins on her property in Gulfport, Mississippi.

Fishman felt he had no other option than to follow his instinct. The unrelenting voice in his head told him to go. Finding these feelings too powerful to ignore and the images too painful to watch, he listened to that voice and decided there and then to embark on the journey that

would forever change his life.

"The next morning, my brother, Dr. Scott Fishman, professor and chief of the Division of Pain Medicine at the University of California, Davis, shared with me, as we talked on the telephone, his change of plans from making a speech in Budapest

before the World Congress on Pain to traveling to Mississippi to assist in the relief effort. I insisted on going as well. Not knowing what I would do, not knowing how I could help, all I knew was that I needed to go."

Fishman is a compact, forceful man with a buzz haircut and black-rimmed glasses he pushes up on his forehead while talking. His speech is rushed with enthusiasm and carries a raspy syncopated trace of his many years in New York. He thrives on irony, and he laughs easily and often. He recently stepped down as president of a product design company he co-founded in 1980, and now devotes all of his time to building a portfolio of fine art photography, pursuing quiet, minimalist, reductionist images.

"That night I booked a flight to Jackson, Mississippi," Fishman continues. "I didn't know where I was going to stay—in a worst case scenario I figured I'd sleep on the hospital floor. I got to Jackson and rented a car. I don't know how I was lucky enough to get one. Scott called that morning. He'd met with the Red Cross people and they needed volunteers immediately. I ended up going in under the banner of the Red Cross, with the responsibility of photographing relief activities in seven counties in Mississippi.



MEMORY LANE, GULFPORT



THE MOODY BLUES, LONG DISTANCE VOYAGER

Every day, he ran into the most unusual, bizarre moments—scenarios even Rod Serling would have been hard-pressed to imagine.

“After arriving there, at first spending time by myself, I tried to absorb this world so out of context. I soon found that when the circumstances become this terrible, the trauma and the grief so thick, it all becomes surreal. I also found that, once I began to mingle with locals, a certain sense of humor that only survivors of such great tragedy can comprehend kept the spirit alive. One begins to joke about everything. Humor becomes the bandage that somehow heals this unbelievable insanity. We all found ourselves laughing. What else could we, or should we, do?”

Throughout the following week, Fishman lived in an impromptu whirlwind of activity. There were endless needs to address. He drove around in his rental car, delivering food and water, forwarding messages, ferrying people about, and just trying to be helpful. Chaos reigned. With almost no authoritative command structure, everyone was left to make up their own relief mission. And every day he ran into the most unusual, bizarre moments—would have been hard-pressed to imagine—like Humpty Dumpty, sitting fine and pretty on a cinderblock wall of an amusement park, untouched by the devastation around him. Fishman



Sonya Reid, Shelby Lynn and Tyler, Lumberton, Mississippi.

found the ravaged park with pieces strewn across miles of the surrounding countryside. He found carousel horses that had flown like Pegasus to distant, improbable places. And yet, Humpty Dumpty still sat securely on his perch. No great fall. No king's men putting him back together again. This was the kind of emblematic scene that exemplified the irony that Katrina dealt the Gulf Coast.

“One morning I got into my

car and began to drive,” Fishman recalls. “I pointed the car toward the coast, ending up in Gulfport, Mississippi. Walking through the middle of this absolute chaos—mesmerized by the sight of every possible variety of household goods, ruined building materials, you name it, all covered in mud—I suddenly heard a woman's voice say, ‘Excuse me, you're standing in my living room.’ I spun around. ‘I'm terribly sorry!’ I blurted out, startled. ‘No, no, it's ok,’ she said,

reached for my hand and took me on a tour through what was once her home—only the foundation was left. As we sat down on a low wall, my eyes fell on a cup and a ruined vinyl record lying on the ground right in front of us. Ironically, it was *The Moody Blues: Long Distance Voyager*—very apropos. I made an image of Amy Hopkins, and then another of the only two things left in her life: the cup and the damaged record.

“People on our coast are very resilient,” Amy Hopkins tells this writer over the phone, talking from the new condo her family moved into three months after the storm. “And we're a very caring community. When I saw Keith with his cameras, I was thankful that someone cared enough to be here to record our loss. All the focus was on New Orleans. We felt ignored and forgotten, and that's been very frustrating. I'm not trying to take away from their devastation, but our loss is also very real.”

“We spent hours and hours just chatting,” Fishman recalls. “She had lost her home. Her husband, a dentist, had lost his practice. Yet she was still cheerful and smiling. Life was going to go on. I was just amazed that somebody could be in the ‘eye’ of this hurricane, and still have such grace and dignity. The odd thing to me is that they wanted me to be there. First,



HAD NO GREAT FALL



SUBMERGED



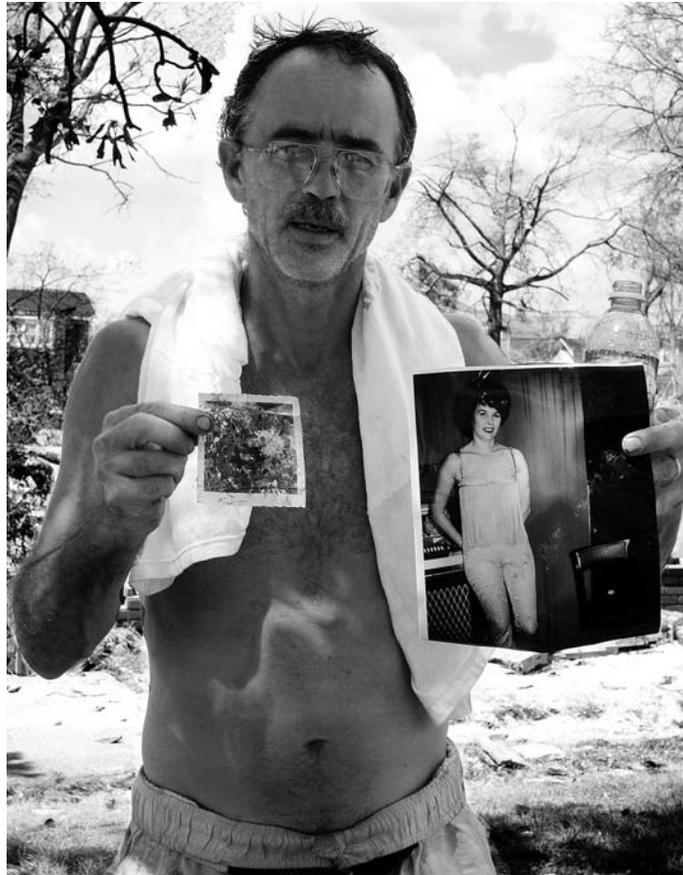
NO WALKERS HARMED

He didn't have to wait for Cartier-Bresson's decisive moments—they lay scattered all around him, naked and exposed.

they wanted company—they wanted to connect with other people. But they also wanted me to shoot pictures, to bear witness to what had happened."

"When you lose everything," Amy says today, "it wipes the slate completely clean. What you had, everything that defined your life, is gone. When that gets wiped out in eight hours—when everything you own in life is just gone—that's hard to put your arms around. So really, to survive that, you have to make a mental note to yourself. You have to realize that the only place you can go from here is up. And you have to have a sense of humor about it. I went from a beautiful house with a panoramic ocean vista to a trailer with zero view."

There are thousands and thousands of photographs of the destruction, the loss, the looting, the tears and the emotions wrought by Katrina. We are deluged with images as each new tragedy hits. We watch the suffering of others from the comfort of our living room lazyboys. But these are not the kind of images Fishman wants to capture. He leaves those kind of pictures to the photojournalists. Instead he takes eclectic photographs connected by a very refined sense of style. His images have always been quiet, individual moments of reflection. He's



Grandmother and daughter—lost without a trace.

looking, he says, where something is not, hoping to find something that could be.

What he found in Mississippi was the largest supply of irony he'd ever experienced. He wandered around in a world that was thrown into a tailspin. And he shot rolls and rolls of film, recording quirky, offbeat juxtapositions left by Katrina's indifferent tantrum. He didn't have to wait for Cartier-Bresson's

decisive moments—they lay scattered all around him, naked and exposed.

"I've never been a thematic photographer," Fishman says. "I search for disparate images of whatever strikes my interest. When I look at the 80 or so images that I'll edit for this exhibition, they tell the story in a very different way. They tell a story of a world so out of context that even a dictionary wouldn't have adequate words—there weren't enough words to express what

had happened. I think it's going to be years and years before these people recover and have their lives back. But they were so full of hope as a group that it just changed me. I hate to use the word 'epiphany,' but to me it was an epiphany. It really did restore my faith in humanity."

Because he was based at the hospital where his brother worked, Fishman adopted hospital scrubs as his "uniform." For one thing, he'd given away all his clothes to people who had literally lost the shirts off their backs. And the scrubs were very comfortable in the 105-degree humidity and provided lots of pockets to carry his Leica cameras. But what he soon realized was that when he went into the back-country of Mississippi, the scrubs put people at ease.

"Everyone was so fearful of FEMA and of government agents coming to take advantage of them," he says, "that if I'd gotten out of my car in civilian clothes, I think I probably wouldn't have been received as warmly and as graciously. I'd tell them I wasn't with any government agency, and they would relax and invite me into their homes—or what was left of them—and share their stories."

A good example of this was his meeting with Sonya Reid and her two children, Shelby Lynn and Tyler, in Lumberton.



KING NEPTUNE, THE COPA CASINO, GULFPORT



GOD BLESS THE COAST

The hospital scrubs were very comfortable in the 105-degree humidity and provided lots of pockets to carry his Leica cameras.

When Fishman drove up, the kids were sitting outside on their lawn. Sonya came out and invited Fishman in. She explained that they had been without water and electricity for days. And she had not heard from her sister since Katrina struck. She wrote a note to her sister, which she gave to Fishman together with directions to her house. Fishman, driving through an alien landscape that lacked both street signs and landmarks, finally found the sister and delivered the note.

Fishman obviously wasn't alone helping these people in need. He kept meeting passionate volunteers doing whatever they could to help. One day he photographed Harrison Ladner who staffed the volunteer fire department in Pearl River County. Ladner was the volunteer, all by himself. He had a succinct sign written on a piece of cardboard that said "Relief." He would go out every day and buy water with his own money. Fishman loaded his car with this water and drove it to Gulfport.

"Why do people heed this higher calling?" Fishman wonders, talking about Ladner and the many volunteers he ran into. "Why do people feel compelled to do these selfless acts? Ladner is a very good example of the fact that there are people who



Photographer Keith Fishman (photo by Denise Lewis).

do good and step up when they are needed. Watching the tireless volunteers made me realize that there are people who at the drop of a hat leave their lives, their families, their wives, their children, and just go. They just have to do it.

"I came to Mississippi without any idea of what I was going to find. I brought my cameras, but I really went there to help. If I had to move pallets of water, for instance, I would have been happy to do that. I certainly didn't know what I was going to

find. And I didn't know whether I would quit after one day and be on a plane home with my tail between my legs. I didn't know if I was going to wilt. It was a little like that opening scene in the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, where they get ready to land in Normandy and knew it was going to be bad but not how bad. I felt like that, and hoped that I would be up to the challenge.

"Unsure even today why I felt so compelled to go, the skepticism of this seasoned cynic has been tempered by the kindness,

courage and benevolence demonstrated daily by a group of Americans who are the real heroes in this unfolding drama. Ultimately, they gave me much more than I could ever have given them. They have forever renewed my faith in the human spirit."

SILENT WITNESS

Opening reception with the artist
April 1, 2006, 3 to 5pm
The Arts Fund Gallery
Yanonali at Santa Barbara Street
Santa Barbara, California
805.965.7321
www.artsfundsb.org

Silent Witness—In the Wake of Katrina. A selection of images and talk with Keith Fishman
April 2, 2006, 2pm
The Santa Barbara Museum of Art
1130 State Street
Santa Barbara, California
www.sbma.net

After its California premier, the exhibition travels to Mississippi. Dates were not available at the time of printing. Please log on to www.keithfishman.com for dates and future exhibition venues

100% of proceeds from the sale of *Silent Witness* prints go to local charities in Mississippi. For further information log on to www.keithfishman.com or write keith@keithfishman.com



WHAT A DAY FOR A DAYDREAM, GULFPORT



GULFPORT WELCOMES YOU