

DANA LIXENBERG

IMPERIAL COURTS 1993 - 2015

Dana Lixenberg's Imperial Courts project (1993—2015) tracks the changing shape of a small, inner-city community from South Central Los Angeles through a combination of beautiful black and white photographs, and a series of videos made in the final years of the work. These photographs and videos result from Lixenberg's familiarity with the neighborhood and community of Imperial Courts, and from her extended and collaborative relationship with its residents.

The project comprises three hundred and ninety-three black and white photographs, compiled in a monograph published by ROMA Publications in 2015, and a sixty-nine minute three channel video projection. These cumulatively mark the generational passing of time as sons become grandfathers, daughters become mothers, and parents, neighbours and friends pass silently into the grave. Imperial Courts is a work that frames the continuity of community against the changelessness of an inner-city landscape—each of which we discover through Lixenberg's tender, elegant and visceral work.

In 1992, Lixenberg travelled to South Central Los Angeles to photograph a magazine story on the riots that erupted following the acquittal of four LAPD officers filmed mercilessly beating Rodney King. What Lixenberg encountered there inspired her to revisit that part of the city, and eventually led her to the Imperial Courts housing project in Watts.

Beginning in 1993, and continuing until the spring of 2015, Lixenberg gradually created an extensive portrait of this community over twenty-two years, electing to face away from the spectacle of destruction, and to look toward those whose lives typically receive public notice only in the event of calamity. Her portraiture addresses the individuated characteristics of the residents with delicacy and specificity, reflecting a series of individuals who collectively constitute an evolving community. In parallel with her black and white photographs, Lixenberg created a series of short videos within Imperial Courts beginning in 2012. These function as a series of vignettes that skip across three channels, adding color and continuity to the stillness of her black and white portraits.



Wilteysa, 1993

Freeway, 1993



Lixenberg's episodic videos are set against the changeable sounds of nearby houses, cars, ice-cream trucks and streets. In one, she invites us to observe a rite of passage, as a young couple prepares to depart for their senior prom, their every move photographed by a panoply of cameras and camera-phones. In another, she sets a still camera close to a modest memorial that borders a jungle gym while small children play in a bounce house in the distance. In yet another, three women debate the merits of wood-grilled fast food in an impromptu hair salon arranged outside their row houses, set in the shade of the glistening sun.

The videos capture life in Imperial Courts in a spectrum from inactivity to celebration, grounding our sense of the normalcy of life in a part of the American inner-city habitually derided as aberrant and extreme. Together the photographs and videos act in complementary ways: the former cherish the specificity of those individuals that make up the community, while the latter immerse us in the dense fabric of daily life. Imperial Courts thus explores growth and change against the constancy of political neglect, rejecting sensationalism and spectacle in favour of sensitivity, and constituting a multi-layered, evocative record of twenty-two years in an underserved community in south central LA.



Spider, 1993



Imperial Courts 1993 - 2015, Huis Marseille, Museum installation view



Imperial Courts 1993 - 2015, Huis Marseille, Museum installation view

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Imperial Courts 1993 - 2015, Huis Marseille, Museum installation view



Imperial Courts 1993 - 2015, video installation

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