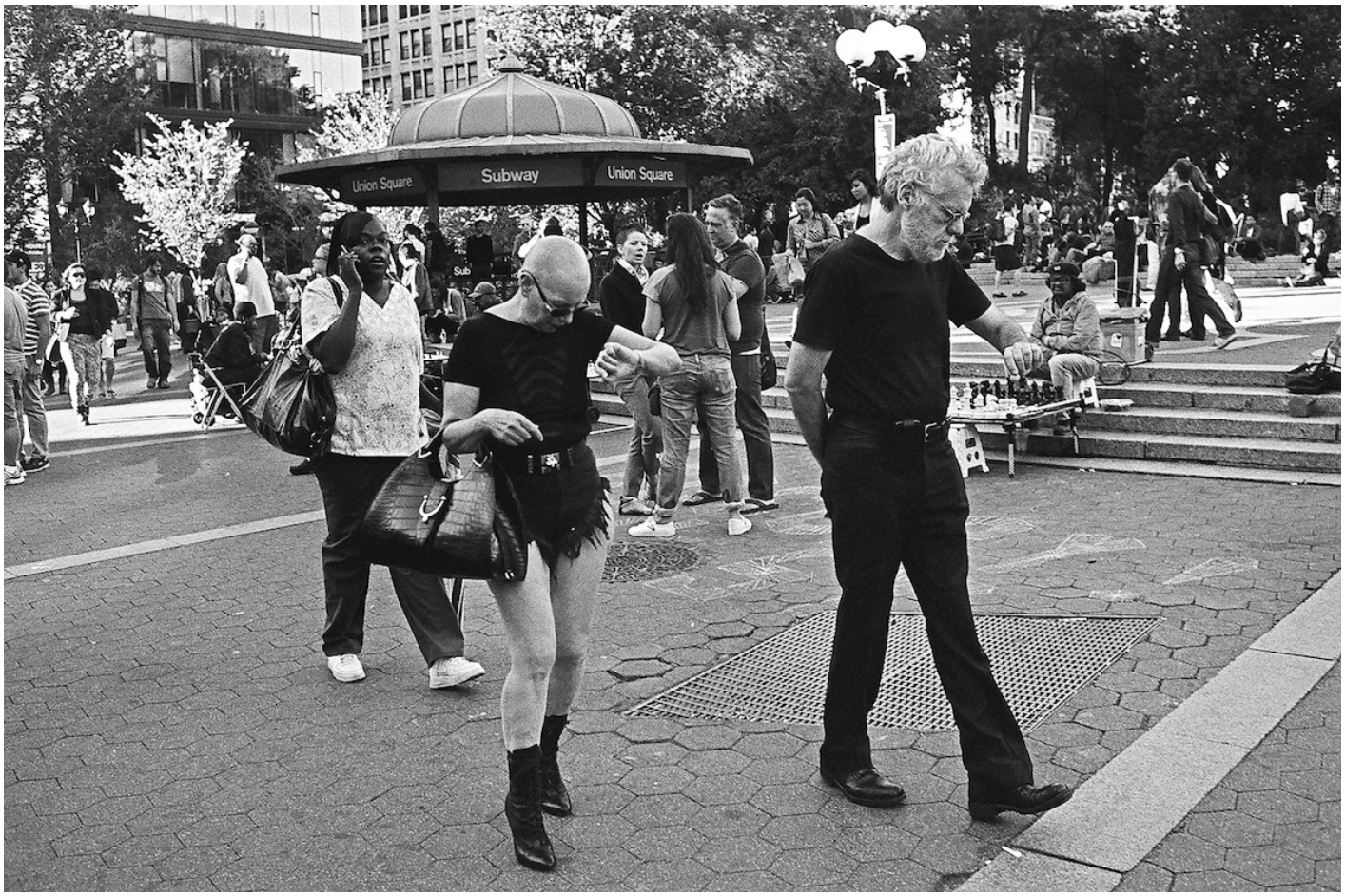
Controversial Beauty [1]

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TW Column by Judith A. Ross

A Street Photographer Exposes the Urban Wilds



Nature has been part of my regular routine since childhood. Almost every morning, I walk my dog in the woods near my home west of Boston. I doubt I'll ever lose my love of quiet, forested paths. Lately, though, as I snap photos during these walks to share on my blog and social media, I feel as if I'm capturing the same postcard scenes over and over: delicate drifts of fluffy snow from mid-February, say, or the first fiddleheads unfurling in early May.

My unquestionably beautiful surroundings, once so freeing, now seem limiting. There's nothing controversial about a picture of New England maple trees in the autumn. Such images are pleasurable in themselves, of course. But with my sixtieth birthday fast approaching, I'm eager for more thought-provoking kinds of beauty.

That's why Reuben Radding's city photographs delight me so. In his self-published first book of

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photography, *Apparitions* (2013), Radding documents life in and around New York City. He grew up near Washington, D.C., moving to NYC in 1988. Except for short stints out west in Missoula and Seattle, he's lived there ever since.

Unlike many online images of oh-so-cool specimens situated within New York's artsier neighborhoods, Radding's street photography shows everyday people going about their business in less precious locations. Those ordinary moments contain the controversial beauty I long for, and they're often surprising—urban "wilds" full of people that still feel private; parades or other spontaneous outbursts.

"The whole reason I started taking pictures," Radding told me in a phone interview this January, was "amazement and amusement" about everything surrounding him in the city. "Ninety percent of that was the people," he says.

In his 2013 photo, "Dreams, 7th Avenue," I see my own dreamy self reflected in the middle-aged woman in the foreground. Her eyes closed, she turns her face up into the drizzle, while walkers wearing hoods and hats cross against the light behind her.



Another 2013 image, "Snow Melt, Sunset Park" (see below), depicts a reflection of a person of uncertain gender in a curbside puddle as he or she walks under a traffic light. It's a seemingly straightforward picture that asks the viewer to look—and then look again—to work out how the image fits together.

"I like there to be more than one point of interest," Radding says. "Not just a close up of a subject, but also the environment they are in and some sort of interaction."

Gestures particularly fascinate him, and his ability to notice, predict, and then capture such behavioral tics with his camera transforms an otherwise mundane scene into a magical one. In the opening image with this column, "Watchers, Union Square" (2012), an older couple dressed in black—his outfit nondescript, hers a thigh-baring fringed number—simultaneously check the time.

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It may look like an impossible catch, but Radding can explain it. Close observation has taught him “that lots of people, myself included, look at the watch again,” he says with amusement. “I don’t understand it, but I have learned to expect it. Dogs will even do certain things more than once. If I see them do something strange once, I get ready for them to do it again.”

“Photos are wonderful liars,” he adds, referring to the “little slice of time” a camera snaps. “You don’t know what came before it. It’s just enough of a lie that it creates that sense of wonder.”

Radding is a longtime professional musician whose bass playing appears on more than thirty recordings. His musical repertoire includes classical, jazz, avant garde, and Balkan folk music. (I met him through my son, a trumpet player and composer, when the two played at the same event a few years back.) Now 48, Radding has been a serious photographer for seven years. In addition to his street work, he also does portraiture, often of musicians and their bands. His work has appeared in print and online publications that include the *New York Times, Time Out New York, San Francisco Bay Guardian, Huffington Post,* and NPR’s website.



While many of the photographers he admires travel to exotic places, Radding says he plans to keep his lens focused on his beloved New York City, which, “has retained its character, and has strange collisions of culture that keep it interesting.”

More to the point of his work as a creative artist, photographing his fellow New Yorkers has opened up internal barriers. In the artist statement on his website, Radding writes that he’s spent most of his life “struggling to love life and myself.”

It’s hard to imagine this well-spoken, gifted musician and photographer struggling. He has a stocky build, thick dark hair, full beard, and a low-key demeanor. When my son and some fellow musicians needed a place to stay while playing at a nearby Balkan music festival, Radding was a mature, humorous presence in my home.

And yet, his stated struggle strikes a chord in me, as I confront my own uncertainty at late middle age and my desire to convert the anxiety I feel, the lack of control over what happens next, into something quietly luminous. As he said in our interview:

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> If I'm taking pictures, I lose that pain of feeling alone in the crowd and feel connected to the world…. One of the things that keeps me in it is what it does for my soul. I have a rather judgmental voice going on in my head: 'This person's in my way, this person's ugly, this person smells.' When I'm taking pictures, these things become features rather than bugs.

Perhaps one reason my own pictures feel static is because I often traipse through the woods lost in thought, judging myself. Radding's photographs, on the other hand, do convey unexpectedly captivating features in neighborhoods that could easily be dismissed as ugly, low rent, or artificial.

In order to capture the human behavior all around him, he has to turn outward, to move beyond his own limits—which may well be the artistic process that gives any image, whether of a mountain peak or a grimy subway platform, creative spark.

So, I'm grateful for Reuben Radding's thoughtful lens and the controversial beauty it reveals. At this turning point in my life, it helps me find my own place in the crowd.

Publishing Information

- *Apparitions: New York City Street Photographs* [5] by Reuben Radding (2013).
- Reuben Radding [6] (music bio), *All About Jazz*.

Art Information

- "Watchers, Union Square"; "Dreams, 7th Avenue"; and "Snow Melt, Sunset Park" © Reuben Radding; used with permission. To see more of Radding's street work, go to his website *Reuben Radding Photographer* [7].



Judith A. Ross is a contributing writer at *Talking Writing*, where her "Talking Art" column appears regularly. She plans to spend her next chapter living in and exploring urban "wilds" on the West Coast.

Judith also writes about climate change for *Moms Clean Air Force* [8] and helps managers with their written communications. She blogs at *Shifting Gears.* [9]

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