

Unseen America – NYC Immigrants and Laborers Speak Through the Lens

Sarah Gray

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In New York City, the world's center of finance, fashion and art, a vast portion of this city's nine million people live and work outside of the glitz. They are the city's laborers and immigrants, vital to many of the city's industries but invisible to the world of wealth and power.

Chinese garment workers, Latino day laborers, homeless living in shelters and Afghan homemakers—these are people who live on the fringe of American society, not the type to have their art on display in the nation's museums and art galleries. But thanks to a unique union project, more than 400 groups like these nationwide have done just that.

The project, titled "Unseen America," was started in 2000 by Bread and Roses, the cultural arm of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) 1199 in New York. The program provides cameras and lessons to those with no public voice and little visibility in American society and encourages them to document their lives through pictures. Most recently, Bread and Roses helped teach photography to Afghan women, whose culture has been depicted in mainstream media since the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center, but not from the perspective of Afghan women living in Queens, many of whom speak little or no English and are unemployed.

Over the past five years, the project has gradually gained recognition within the union community and will attract more attention when Governor George Pataki announces "Unseen America" week in March 2006. On the 28th of that month, Bread and Roses will present its first volume of Unseen America photographs at a book opening at the Guggenheim museum in New York City.

The Bread and Roses Cultural Project was founded in 1979 by Moe Foner, one of the city's best-known labor advocates. Now, SEIU 1199 represents more than 220,000 predominantly Latina and African-American women working in health care institutions in the metropolitan area, New Jersey and Florida. Bread and Roses, which acts as a non-profit organization and is fiscally independent from the union, has established the only permanent union exhibition space in the nation, Gallery 1199, at their New York City headquarters. The New York Times has recognized the organization as "the most important cultural project in the labor movement".

Unseen America embodies the basic principle inherent in the organization's name—that culture is just as important as food to the working class. Not only should they have access to art, they should have the ability to create it. When Esther Cohen, the Director of Bread and Roses, conceived of the Unseen America project, she saw photography as a potentially powerful medium for the working class.

“The idea was that language gets in the way of people showing what their lives are like from their perspective,” said Cohen. She thought that “doing it visually with images might be appropriate because our members come from so many countries, and everyone can show what they see with an image,” she said.

The agency has always celebrated the photography and images of the working class by famous social documentarists like Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans and Lewis Hine, but Cohen saw the need for a different perspective.

“I asked myself, how can we get people to tell their stories on their own terms without having them mitigated by famous people who take over from the workers,” said Cohen, “who take the spotlight and become the subject rather than the subject themselves?”

When a volunteer at Bread and Roses asked Wolf Camera, which had just opened a store in her neighborhood, for a donation, they gave her 100 35-mm cameras. Unseen America came to life.

Women living in shelters in Gainesville, Florida, Lakota Indians on poverty-stricken reservations in South Dakota, janitors at JFK airport—how have so many diverse groups been able to participate in the project? Cohen describes the selection process as “unscientific and intuitive and random.”

“I made a really big list when she brought in the cameras, and I said...that I’d really like to get migrant workers...their lives are tough,” Cohen said. “I wanted them to tell their story, not have some sensationalized weird reporter writing about 45 living in one room, and they’re beaten up, and white people don’t like them.”

For the first Unseen America project in 2000, Bread and Roses partnered with the State University of New York (SUNY) Stony Brook on Long Island and had Latino migrant workers document their lives in their homes, with their families and as they waited to be picked up—if they were lucky that day—for low-wage work in construction. A photographer volunteered to go to Long Island to teach the class for a small stipend, and after 3 months, the laborers’ pictures were on display at Stony Brook Union Art Gallery at SUNY-Stony Brook.

Five years later, more than 400 groups from union, non-profit agencies and high schools have participated in the project. In its most recent program, Bread and Roses partnered with Women for Afghan Women (WAW), a non-profit organization in Flushing, Queens that aims to empower Afghan women and ensure their rights in the United States and Afghanistan.

“I found out about Unseen America about three years ago,” said Maggie Keady, Art Director of *City Limits* magazine and instructor of the photography course.

“A friend told me about it. I went to an exhibit and immediately called [Bread and Roses] to ask them about it...I’m a photographer myself, and teaching is one of the best ways I do documentary and journalism, and I thought it was an amazing project,” Keady said.

Beginning in February 2005, Keady traveled to Flushing, Queens and taught a group of 12 Afghan women the basic techniques of black-and-white photography for 12 weeks. The resulting body of work was displayed in an exhibit, “Beyond the Window,” at the Queens Museum of Art from October 24 to November 24, 2005.

The title of the exhibit aptly illustrates the intention of the Unseen America project.

“Part of why the exhibit is named Beyond the Window is because a lot of the students the first week of class took all of their photos from the windows of their apartments of the life below,” said Keady, “and I tried not to let it freak me out.”

Indeed, one photo spoke for just how invisible some Afghan women are. Shot from inside looking out, the photo shows the brick wall just outside the window and a flowering tree down on the sidewalk below.

The caption, signed Anonymous, reads, “this talented photographer shot most of her pictures out of a window of her apartment. Halfway through her unseen photography and ESL classes, her husband demanded that she stop attending, and she obeyed.”

While this woman remained hidden, the others ventured outside of their homes, snapping shots of an empty platform on the 7 subway line, couples in the park, children ice-skating in Central Park and young Afghan women smoking a hookah pipe, all shot in crisp black-and-white.

In the beginning, Kareema Nooristani, a 45 year-old mother of two, said she felt “nervousness, shyness and fear.”

“For me, it was a lot of pressure. It’s not easy to just take a picture and put it in a museum. You have to have courage to do that,” Nooristani said, “I think especially Muslim women; they don’t want their picture to be exposed.”

Nooristani was actually the only woman in the group to take self-portraits, including one of her praying. In a culture where privacy, especially that of women, is highly valued, her pictures portray a willingness to be visible that she did not feel before.

She hopes that others can experience this sense of self-confidence too. “I would like to tell other people, especially Afghan people, because they’re really shy; I would like to tell Afghan women to participate in this project,” she said.

Shahla Mazrati, 44, who has lived in Flushing for six years, had never taken a photograph before Keady's class. One of her most striking images (and indeed of the exhibit) was a photograph of a very thick tree that had been cut and left as a sturdy stump surrounded by other trees still growing tall.

"I took a lesson from this picture, from the tree, [that] the human can be strong...with any problem in life," Mazrati said. Upon seeing her pictures hung in the Queens Museum, Mazrati said, "I [felt] very happy because my husband was there. He was very happy. He was proud of me, that I took beautiful pictures. If somebody comes here for a visit, they will see, he said."

The goal of Unseen America is twofold; that those taking the pictures will see themselves differently and that Americans will look at people outside of mainstream society differently, whether noticing them for the first time or seeing them in a new light.

"Post September 11, we've been hearing about Afghan women and the plight of Afghan women, but there's a whole variety of experience and each have their own stories to tell," said Keady.

Through teaching the course, Keady said, "I learned that, yeah, there was one woman who is in a lot of ways a prisoner in her own home, but then there are others who aren't, who have parties and smoke hookah pipes."

Unseen America will tell its own story in its most prominent way yet when Bread and Roses releases its first book of images from the last five years at the Guggenheim Museum on March 28, 2006.

According to a Bread and Roses press release, Governor Pataki is issuing a proclamation to announce an Unseen America day/week in March, 2006. In Washington D.C., Mayor Anthony Williams will issue a proclamation for an Unseen America day, and the D.C. City Council will host a book signing and exhibit. The national book launch will take place in 23 cities from Los Angeles to Gainesville, FL and all five boroughs of New York City, celebrating the lives of those who live and work in the industries vital to the American economy and culture of diversity but who remain largely invisible.

"The strength of society is in the energy of the immigrant population and the energy of the ideas of the immigrant population," said Cohen. "That's one of the wonderful things about this society."

Cohen dreams one day that there will be an Unseen America project in every major city in the United States. She also hopes that this book will be volume one in a series as more people participate in the project and a wider audience sees people they might normally overlook.

"We're trying to connect the disconnected parts of life in some real way," said Cohen, "and, you know, I have this primitive belief that once we see things, they become part of us."