

## **BERNIE BOSTON: AMERICAN PHOTOJOURNALIST**

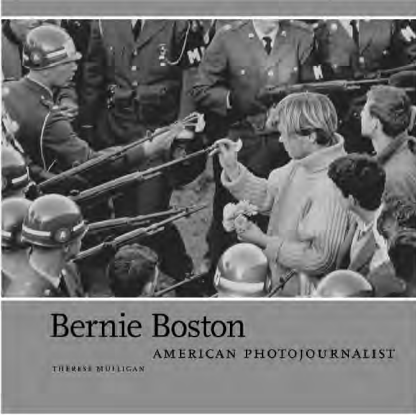
by Therese Mulligan. RIT Cary Graphic Arts Press, Rochester, NY, U.S.A., 2006. 112 pp., illus. ISBN: 1-933360-19-4.

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In 1977, Susan Sontag's award-winning book *On Photography* argued that our capacity to respond to images of war and atrocity in our rapaciously media-driven culture was being dulled by "the relentless diffusion of vulgar and appalling images." Twenty-five years later, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, she reversed her position. With maturity, Sontag concluded that images turned us from spectators of events into witnesses. When we are empathetic viewers, according to Sontag, images open our minds and deepen our comprehension of events within our world. I do not know if she knew Bernie Boston's work well, but her later arguments about how pictures can inspire dissent, foster violence, or create apathy come to mind when looking at *Bernie Boston: American Journalist*, the catalogue for his exhibition at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in October 2006.

Boston, a 1955 graduate of RIT's photojournalism program, has captured intimate moments of public figures as well as the nuances of momentous events for many decades. Beginning at *The Dayton Daily News* (Ohio), he went on to work for *The Washington Star* and *The Los Angeles Times* and later was a White House photographer. His talent for recording

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the social and political history of the United States is well documented in his photographs. Like Gordon Parks, whose image is included in the portrait section of the catalogue, Boston was uniquely positioned to show us the shape of history as it was taking form. Moreover, Boston's chronicle allows us to contextualize recent historical events as we witness the "imperial presidency" of George W. Bush operating on the stage today. Some of the most compelling parallels come through in the photographs of the early civil rights movement, the Vietnam demonstrations, and Bill Clinton's Middle East peace talks.

The first section, "Civil Strife," was so powerful that it immediately drew me into the publication. *Flower People*, an iconic image that placed second in the 1967 Pulitzer Prize competition, is included in this section (and serves as the cover image as well). Taken outside the Pentagon, the photograph captures a standoff between a rifle-bearing National Guard detail and the youthful protestors of the Vietnam era. Perhaps Boston's best-known photograph, it effectively records the tensions of that time. Looking at it 40 years later, I find myself wondering if the Vietnam protestors were younger than those of today, who increasingly seem to be of all ages, classes and life-styles.

The Poor People's Campaign photographs, recording a cross-country demonstration organized by Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to address social and economic inequality, are in this section as well. Particularly memorable is Boston's ability to make the viewer think about how social and political issues intersect, as is evident in a photograph of Richard Nixon visiting with a crowd of protestors on 7th Street in Washington D.C. after the April 1968

riots. Other striking images include a 1968 "mule train" of the Poor People's Campaign and a pile of worn and tattered shoes from Resurrection City, also associated with the campaign (in Washington D.C., 1968). In addition, we meet younger versions of well-known figures (e.g. Jesse Jackson, H. Rap Brown and Coretta Scott King) as they embark on their fight for civil rights.

Section 2, "The National Stage," turns to political figures and memorable moments. These photographs humanize powerful leaders, highlight key events and remind us of the ebbs and flows of history. One compelling image shows the crowd outside the White House in 1974, as then-President Nixon tells the country via television that he is going to resign. Another reveals a tearful Nancy Reagan during a memorial service for U.S. Marines killed in an attack on their barracks in Lebanon in 1983. I was also quite taken with several photographs from the Clinton era. In one from his 1993 inaugural ceremony, Boston caught a young Chelsea Clinton picking up the notes of her father's speech after they fell from the lectern. In addition, I was moved to see President Clinton looking on at Israel's Yitzhak Rabin and the PLO's Yasser Arafat as they shook hands after signing a Middle East peace accord (Oslo, Norway, 13 September 1993). There was so much hope in their gesture! The sense that some of the diplomatic progress of the late 20th century has receded in the 21st was magnified by the final image, a view of participants in Hands across America, a 1986 event, in the third section, "Features and Portraits." Here Boston pictures events that range from Beatles concerts and battle re-enactments to Pope John Paul II giving a stern look as he answers questions from the press in 1979.

*Bernie Boston: American Photojournalist* demonstrates the ability of the photographer to intuitively capture momentous events and personal details. The photographs are so much a part of recent history that they also encouraged me to question facts that sometimes seem etched in my mind. Looking at Nixon shaking hands with protestors after the Washington riots, for example, reminded me that Watergate was only a part of his legacy. While he was undoubtedly as politically driven as others, when I saw this photograph I thought of George W. Bush. More specifically, I recalled how Bush ignored the people in the Superdome during the Hurricane Katrina debacle,

preferring to look down at the devastation from his airplane rather than exposing himself to it in person. Similarly, the photograph of Afghanistan protestors burning a Soviet flag at the Russian Embassy in 1982 reminded me of how the U.S. was involved in arming and training people in the fight against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Admittedly, I am at a loss how best to characterize the many levels of reflection the images evoked. Suffice it to say that this first-ever survey of Boston's groundbreaking photojournalism is a fine tribute to his career. Indeed, there is little to criticize in this book. The only thought that comes to mind is its slim size, which is, of course, more of a compliment. I liked this catalogue so much that I wished there was more of it. RIT has offered a wonderful tribute to its alumnus Boston. Definitely read the book, or go to [http://wally.rit.edu/cary/CP\\_publications/CP\\_BernieBoston.html](http://wally.rit.edu/cary/CP_publications/CP_BernieBoston.html) to see some of the images.