

Haiti's Agony, And Its Heroism



Photos by Maggie Steber / JB Pictures / Aperture

Maggie Steber has made about 25 trips to Haiti since 1986 to document 'the heroism of the Haitian people.' Above, pre-election violence in 1987. At left, Jean Bertrand Aristide during his successful campaign for the presidency; he was overthrown in 1991.



Newsday / Erica Berger

Photojournalist Maggie Steber

By Karen Kramer

I THINK EVERY artist finds his one place on Earth that speaks to him like no other," says photojournalist Maggie Steber, "and every other place pales in comparison. I wanted to show the heroism of the Haitian people, and if the work accomplishes that, then I think it's successful."

The work Steber refers to is the collection of her 50 color photographs on display at the Burden Gallery, 20 E. 23rd St., through Aug. 1, and the accompanying book, "Dancing on Fire: Photographs From Haiti" (Aperture). With titles such as "Eloquent corpse warns Haitians not to vote" and "Victim of army massacre," Steber's chronicle documents the tumultuous years between the ousting of Jean-Claude (Baby Doc) Duvalier in 1986, through the various regimes and bloody turmoil that followed, and on to the election and overthrow of Jean Bertrand Aristide in 1991.

When Steber was first sent to Haiti by SIPA Press in 1980 to cover the wedding of Duvalier and Michelle Bennett, she didn't realize she was walking into a life-long obsession. Back in New York, she still couldn't get the people and problems of Haiti out of her mind. Five years after that initial trip she was sitting in her Manhattan apartment when she spotted a one-inch story in the New York Times which said "Haitians Riot for Food."

Says Steber, "I thought about how repressive it was there, and thought if they're really rioting maybe something is going to happen. So I went, and sure enough, the whole country was just

exploding."

Steber stayed in Haiti for about a month documenting the food riots (she was caught in cross fire often), the growing demonstrations, and the final overthrow of Duvalier. Once Duvalier fell in 1986, she thought that would be the end of her story, but her thoughts kept returning to Haiti. Steber went back again and again — making about 25 trips in six years. "At some point, about a year into it," she says, "I realized it was not just a news story for me, but somehow I'd made the connection and I no longer had the choice."

Photographs as powerful as hers don't come easily, and Steber's life was in danger several times. On Sept. 11, 1988 she was photographing Aristide saying mass at his church, St. Jean Bosco. About 40 men (believed to be right-wing forces working for the government) burst in armed with guns, machetes and sticks with spears. Steber, trapped, watched people being slaughtered all around her; at least 30 people were killed. At first she tried to document the scene with her Leica (she was the only journalist there) but quickly realized that she, too, was a target. It was only through what she describes as a miracle that she was able to escape through the courtyard. After the incident she went into hiding for a few days, then left the country, with American friends escorting her to the airport to ensure her safety.

The experience left Steber shaken for months (she still has nightmares about it) but when the government in Haiti changed hands again, Steber returned yet again to continue her work. "I decided I'd never let anything bother me

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again," she says, "because I was living on borrowed time." Her book is dedicated to "the martyrs who died at St. Jean Bosco."

Steber has been determined to not only document the horrors of Haiti, for it is a land of bittersweetness. Her pictures of violence, turbulence, and hunger are juxtaposed with images of everyday life, beautiful Voodoo ceremonies, children playing. It is this juxtaposition that makes her story so powerful and complex.

Steber is a chestnut-haired native of Texas who received a degree in photojournalism from the University of Texas in 1972 and has studied with such masters as Gary Winogrand. But to her, photography is not an end in itself. She uses it as an excuse to meet people, to learn about their lives. In her work for National Geographic, Life, and various agencies she has traveled throughout the world. She spent two years in Africa covering Rhodesia as it turned into Zimbabwe. But it was in Haiti, in particular, that she found herself pulled into every aspect of people's lives — their dreams, their struggle, their daily fight for existence.

"You go into a slum," she says, "and you see your friend who you're not only photographing, but you're giving them money to help them live, and you bring them medicine and food and clothing, or you're trying to find an operation for a kid who can't walk. You have no intention of being that drawn into their lives, but you just are. All you want to do is take a picture, but it's not enough. When you take a picture you take something, and you have to give something in return." / ■

Karen Kramer is a free-lance writer who has produced several documentary films on Haiti.