

Before and After 9/11: Images and the Aftermath

by **Jeremy Wolff**

I have two sets of World Trade Center photos that you could call Before and Aftermath. Before was when the towers stood downtown and we somehow took them for granted. Up since the 70s, no longer the world's tallest and whenever you stumbled into the odd space created by the huge plaza and vertiginous towers, it was like, "Oh, wow, this is still here." But I loved those spaces, running and rollerblading through that isolated canyon was a thrill. They were out the window of my sixth-floor walkup studio in Little Italy for 12 years. Until they weren't. When I got back a few days later, sitting in my window, I cursed my brain for holding no images of what it was like, what was no longer there.

But I had photos. In the days that followed I searched my slides and prints and photo-CDs almost frantically, afraid they were really lost to me. I found a good deal, and wrote the following, *Homage to the Trades*:

"After the destruction of the World Trade Center, I was compelled to search my images of downtown New York - at first, just to



Before | PHOTOS BY JEREMY WOLFF



After

remember what I could no longer see: the view of the Towers from my studio on Mott Street. Looking through 15 years' worth of slides and photo collages, I found more shots of the Trades than I'd expected; and I discovered that, more than I recalled, the Towers have been a backdrop to my life - an easy setting for portraits, the envied view from various lofts, studios and sublets I've stopped in during those years.

"Like the sea in San Francisco or the mountains in Seattle, they were a physical presence that symbolized the city, especially downtown. And they conferred by that simple presence out our windows, down the street, or in the background of our photos, everything we new New Yorkers imagined and needed the city to

be: Yes, they said, This is the Place. And human creations can become geography, with the unquestioned belonging and rightness of nature."

At the instant of the event I was driving with my family from Manhattan to Pawling, as we did every Tuesday morning when Julie finished her overnight shifts. Had I been in my studio, would I have run to the scene? Probably, but I doubt I'd have gotten close enough to get into trouble. So I have no pictures of the event. There are no "after" pictures, because everything was gone. For us, in those first days, there were no ruins and no survivors. Only the aftermath. On everyone's faces.

My first steps into the neighborhood - four firefighters dead at the station on Lafayette, then heading

that time, and what I wish someone - Bush, Guiliani - had cultivated. The meaning of the event was loss, of course, but beyond that, community, not vengeance. What had finally visited us in our distant land, we did not want to spread. We didn't want to create another 9/11 for another family, trauma for any child, wherever they were born.

It stayed in everybody's minds a long time - the worry, the possibility, the fear. Like the rising smoke and acrid smell that was there for months, so long you almost got used to it.

9/11 images will be on display at the Front Street Gallery starting next week. Also showing will be Linda Puiatti's 9/11 series of four oil paintings - Sorrow, Anger, Hope, Fear - made at the time and which she synchronously titled "Aftermath." An informal reception/reflection will take place at the gallery from 5 to 8 pm on Saturday, September 24. Details and images at frontstreet-gallery.com.

JEREMY WOLFF lives in Pawling with his first wife and two biological children.

down to see how close I could get. Roaming the edges of the exclusion zone, and the memorials that sprung up at Bellevue Hospital and Union Square. A few weeks later I passed through security at Battery Park City with a friend of my sister who'd just been allowed back into her apartment. From her roof I finally got a view into the pit. A fantastic photo-op, but I was still numb to the scale of what I was seeing.

I don't want to forget: there was a feeling of community and politeness among New Yorkers that was heartwarming and reassuring. We're in this boat together, we'd been through something the blowhards on TV - taking credit, making plans for revenge - hadn't. This civility is what I miss about