

The Hoboken Fires: A Call to Witness

The Hoboken Fires is a multidisciplinary show that surfaces the living histories of the fires and arsons that transformed the city of Hoboken from the 1970s-1980s. Through a violent cocktail of intimidation, greed, corruption, and indifference, over 50 Hoboken residents, mostly children, lost their lives in fires that ravaged the city during the era of post-industrial urban renewal. Arriving four decades after the apex of the fires, photographer Chris Lopez, a Bronx native of Puerto Rican parentage, critically engages the afterlives of arson, displacement, and dispossession. Unlike the historic and well documented history of fires in the Bronx, very few photographers captured images of the arsons in Hoboken and even fewer scholars have studied the phenomenon. The existing archive is deeply indebted to the work of journalists, the painstaking work of community organizers, and a few documentary filmmakers who captured the terror, uncertainty, and destruction of that time period. In this context, *The Hoboken Fires* represents the first exhibit of its kind to visit this history alongside those who were most deeply impacted.

More than documentary photography, Lopez engages in interviews, archival work, site visits, and portraiture. He traces the jagged edges of this history and tends to the wounds induced by its erasure. The work retells the stories of resistance and survival in the face of the city's reluctance to revisit this pained chapter in its history. In doing so Lopez, allows us to perceive the decades-long effects of what geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls "organized abandonment"—the withdrawal of care, resources, and concern for the lives and well-being of residents—which was evidenced by the lack of smoke detectors, the blaming of victims for their living conditions, the creation and exacerbation of residential deterioration. This form of abandonment resulted in arsons and fires for vulnerable populations considered unimportant or moveable in the face of a reimagined Hoboken. Despite the pressure to change the narrative, to equivocate, or deflect—thereby protecting the interests and feelings of developers and current residents—the goal of this work is to underscore what is owed to the families who lost their lives, the many children who were taken, and the many survivors who live on with the trauma of loss. *The Hoboken Fires* offers us an opportunity to sit with the memories of those who survived systemic displacement and centers those voices, those lived experiences.

Like many of the survivors, Lopez remains unsatisfied with the official narratives of arsons as tragedies with unknown origins. By seeking those most impacted for their living memories and reckoning with their unending grief, Lopez maps how the very air we breathe, the grounds we walk upon, and housing units that we live and socialize in, are layered with the lives and deaths of these residents, the majority of which were Puerto Rican but also Cuban, Guyanese, Ecuadorian, and others. We have inherited the ruins and we have built on them, often without considering the loss underfoot. A quietly segregated city, Hoboken offers us a point of departure for engaging some of the most important local and national conversations about geography, inequality, gentrification, development, and race. The research for this show brought to the forefront old and new frictions between residents advocating for vulnerable communities and other interested parties. Many pointed to the lack of evidence, especially the absence of criminal prosecutions and legal paper-trails as a sign of innocence and happenstance. The lack of official closure fosters the ease with which the stories of survivors and the stories of the dead have been

dismissed. And yet, as scholars, survivors, and community members, we know that the lack of official evidence is often evidence itself.

Hoboken, the storied birthplace of baseball and Frank Sinatra also boasted the largest Puerto Rican community, per capita, in the US during the 1970s and 1980s. This dwindling yet vibrant community remains largely understudied. Lopez meets the reluctance to revisit this pained history of arson and displacement with a visceral rendering of this era as more than just an inconvenient past. The survival of these stories offers some of the most important of the scant evidence of this tragic past. As such, *The Hoboken Fires* is a documentation of what the late photographer and community activist Frank Espada called “the survival of a people.” *The Hoboken Fires* demands that we bear witness, that we ask ourselves in the words of educator Tamara T. Butler, “what do we owe the dead?” Indeed, we must wrestle with the discomfort of official and unofficial narratives as we mourn, remember, and respect those who were effaced in the name of progress.

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