

Bad Perms and Chill Vibes: Photographing Staten Island in the 1980s

Christine Osinski documented the quiet, wide-open spaces a ferry ride away from Manhattan.

JESSICA LEIGH HESTER | [@jessicahester](#) | Feb 23, 2016 | 4 Comments



The photographer Christine Osinski moved from lower Manhattan to Staten Island, near Snug Harbor, in 1982. She and her husband had just been booted from their loft, which was slated for redevelopment. They decided that they wanted to buy. “We were tired of renovating places,” Osinski says, “just to get thrown out.”

Before embarking on their house hunt, the couple didn’t know much about Staten Island. Arriving in New York from a working-class neighborhood on Chicago’s south side, Osinski was intrigued by the pull of the epicenter; she thought of Manhattan as the mainland. For her, Staten Island had been a place to breeze past when Manhattan’s close quarters and scorched sidewalks became insufferable. “We took the ferry a lot in the summer just to cool off.”

But Staten Island inspired an onslaught of nostalgia. Osinski immediately noticed “how familiar everything seemed, and how that brought everything back so immediately.” It reminded her of Chicago. She and her husband bought a house and got to work repairing its crumbling roof and siding.

Osinski had just accepted a job at Cooper Union, where she still works as a professor. But she had summers off, which gave her time to take photos. Throughout the hottest months of 1983 and 1984, she lugged her heavy tripod and 4x5 camera around the town, snapping photos of her new neighborhood. A selection of her landscapes and portraits are compiled in a new book, *SUMMER DAYS STATEN ISLAND*.

Her new neighborhood conveyed, she told me, the pride people take in their homes, however modest. “A sense of people struggling to live as well as they can,” she explained.

Osinski photographed scrubbed vinyl siding, tidy lawns with neat hedges, and the occasional picket fence with sloughing paint. She also trained her eye on social rituals: neighbors gathering for beers and conversation; two young women with hair teased within an inch of its life, seemingly waiting for something exciting to happen to them.

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Roaming around with her camera helped Osinski connect with her new home. “The thing is, when you go out and take pictures, you’re looking---you’re really using your eyes,” she says. “You’re looking at things and thinking, ‘what’s interesting?’”

What jumped out right away was the sense of space and breathing room. There might be a lot between two houses, or a multi-acre parcel containing just one single, small home.

In one image, overgrown grass spills through a chain-link fence, while portly Putti stand atop brick columns of the home next door. In another, two young boys lounge around a car parked on the side of a driveway or road, not a single house in sight.

This quiet, quotidian landscape is a sharp contrast to the contemporary street photography that documented daily life in Manhattan. Those images were more likely to feature women in ankle-length fur coats stomping down gum-pocked sidewalks, or grimy, graffiti-covered train cars---high-octane, high-decible stimulation.

Osinski now lives in Connecticut. And since she snapped these images, the sleepy veneer has eroded, replaced by concrete, glass, and steel. Though Staten Island is still the least populous New York City borough, construction has boomed as a result of ambitious plans for development along the North Shore. Between 1990 and 2010, the number of housing units on Staten Island increased by 26 percent, and the number of vacant commercial properties shrank by 23 percent between 2001 and 2010, according to a report prepared by the think tank Center for an Urban Future.

“All those spaces are gone,” Osinski says. “Everything’s built up.” What’s left are the photographs, preserving calm, quiet summer days.