



EIRIK JOHNSON

WEST OAKLAND WALK

When Gertrude Stein failed to locate her childhood home in Oakland, California, during a visit in the 1930s, she coined her famous line “There is no there there.” While these words have often been understood as a denunciation of the city, they were likely intended more as a lament for how unrecognizable the place had become.

Nearly three-quarters of a century later, photographer Eirik Johnson began making color photographs of West Oakland that evoke a similar sense of loss. For two years, Johnson spent mornings walking around and documenting the city, a place that is full of hard edges and unkempt corners. These pictures give a sense of the great economic changes that have swept through and altered Oakland, and ultimately reveal a place that has been abandoned by its own past identity.

Founded in 1852, Oakland grew up alongside the burgeoning railroads. From its first days as a city, it maintained a rich industrial economy, which peaked during World War II as Oakland developed an immense naval shipbuilding industry. The promise of work here during that era attracted a substantial labor force, dominated by African-Americans from the South. In the decades after the war, however, industry all but disappeared from Oakland, deserting the city and its people.

Johnson’s pictures deal largely with the poverty that resulted from this abandonment, but they also discover unexpected lovely moments within the urban landscape. One image depicts a pale, peeling building sagging under a flat, gray sky; another counters with a set of orange steps sunbathing in warm afternoon light; the armature of a bicycle rests on a lawn, and a child’s playhouse looms beyond a fence in the background in all its plastic perfection.

There is an inclination toward beauty in all of Johnson’s photographs. It is a beauty that is not of his invention, but that he has located tucked amid the city’s roughness. In one image, a harp-strumming angel perches on a yellow cloud on a billboard; the painted white sky surrounding her is a shade warmer than the white of the real atmosphere. Telephone wires form acute angles against the side of the billboard, as if anchoring the specter in place.

Despite the keen consideration Johnson pays to West Oakland, he does not attempt to incorporate himself into the settings of his photographs, and the tensions that arise from his purposeful distance are among the strongest aspects of the work. Stray dogs frequently regard the camera with barely disguised ferocity. In a scene devoid of all living creatures, a car’s headlights take on a similarly defensive presence. In one of Johnson’s few photographs that include people, a boy in a blue shirt holds his left hand down by his side in a loose fist, and narrows his eyes at the camera. A stranger walking around a populated community armed with a camera cannot be an invisible persona, and there is hard evidence of this fact everywhere in Johnson’s pictures.

In another series, “Borderlands,” Johnson focused on uninhabited areas at the edges of society, showing us landscapes in transition, melting into the stage of human activity. Until recently, these were untrammelled spaces, at the electrified center of change, and the photographs Johnson made at these sites feel as much about the future as they do about the present.

In order to photograph West Oakland, Johnson used a 2¼-inch square-format Hasselblad, instead of the view camera employed with the “Borderlands” work. The Hasselblad is a familiar tool to the photographer, as this is the camera he used when he took four trips with Peruvian villagers to the heights of the Colquepuncu mountain range during their annual pilgrimage, beginning in 1999. With both of these bodies of work, Johnson relies on the smaller camera’s flexibility, which allows him to react more readily to surprises in the landscape.

There is a rich history of photographers who have had peripatetic relationships with their environs. Such artists understand what there is to be learned from what surrounds you, that beyond untraveled corners lie new facts to be discovered. Many of them, notably Eugène Atget and Robert Adams, have been driven by another impulse: to transcribe a place in some enduring way, understanding that change is, if not inevitable, at least the common course of things. Continuing in this tradition, Johnson’s photographs are made with the clear knowledge that there is very little in the world that will remain, and it is his drive to record the ephemeral that imbues his photographs with such strength. ●

By Dalia Azim



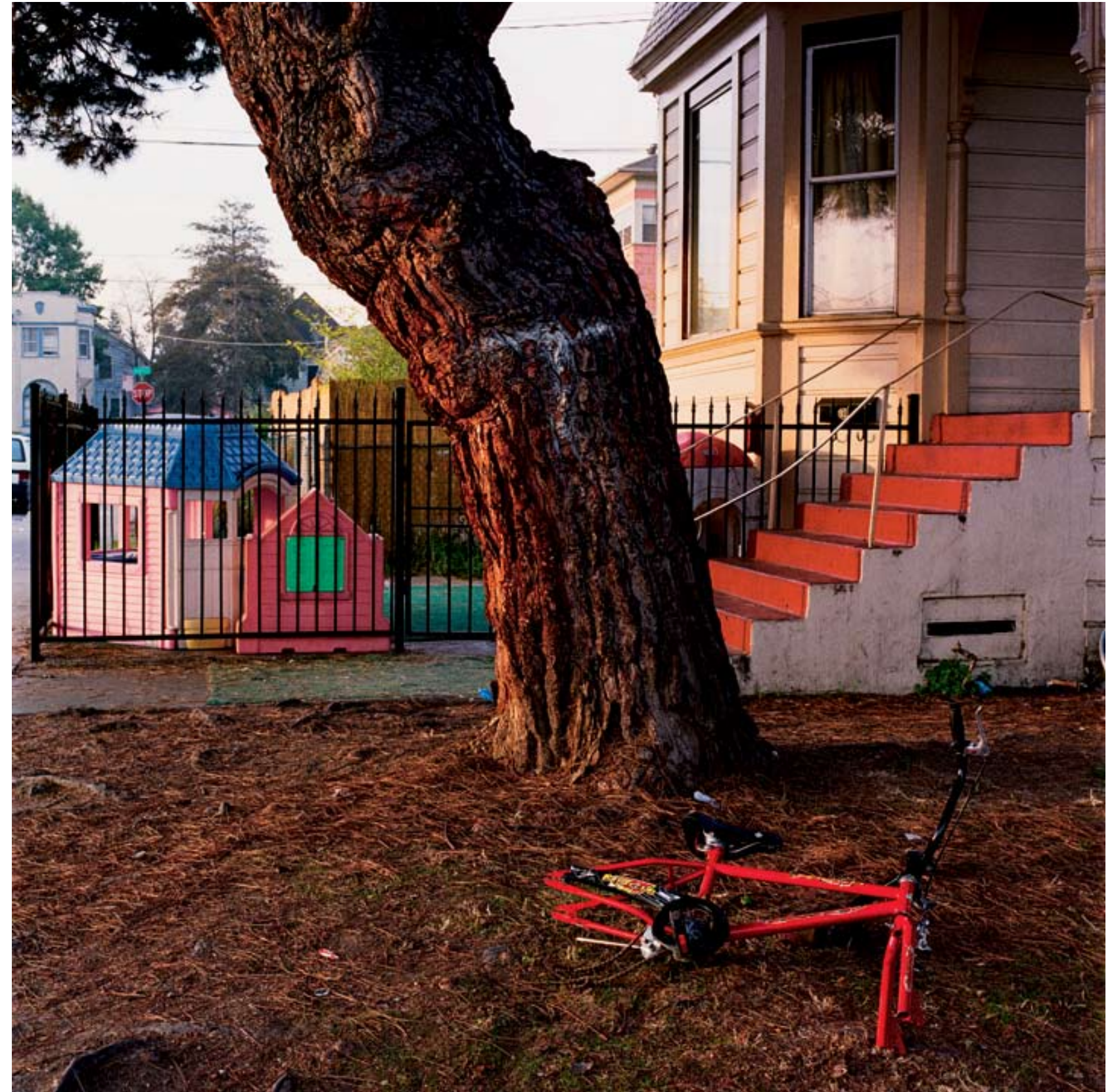
PAGE 72: *Fenced-in Car*, 2002; ABOVE: *Red Fence Blue Bag*, 2002.



Fenced-in Dog, 2002.



Car in the Grass, 2002.



Bike Beneath Tree, 2002.

Photographs courtesy Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco, and Yossi Milo Gallery, New York