

A FEW

ROUNDS

OF PHOTOGRAPHY

John Goodman studied with Minor White in the 1970s and has worked as an editorial and fashion photographer for twenty years. His clients have included Levi Dockers, Zima, The Gap, Woolrich, The Peruvian Connection, and Gucci. His work has appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Vanity Fair*, *Fast Company* and *The Washington Post Magazine*. Joyce Carol Oates wrote in a recent book review that, "John Goodman's technically brilliant *The Times Square Gym* may well take its place as one of those works of memorialist beauty dedicated to boxing and the myriad ways it has gotten into our blood. ... Goodman's sympathy for these young athletes is apparent, and his skill at capturing what might be called aesthetic sympathy is riveting." His work is in the permanent collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The New York Public Library and the Fogg Museum in Cambridge. He is represented by the Bonni Benrubi Gallery in New York and the Robert Klein Gallery in Boston. He teaches at the Maine Photographic Workshops. You can visit John Goodman on the internet at www.goodmanphoto.com.

A Conversation with John Paul Caponigro

tography, how you were introduced, how you came to it or it came to you.

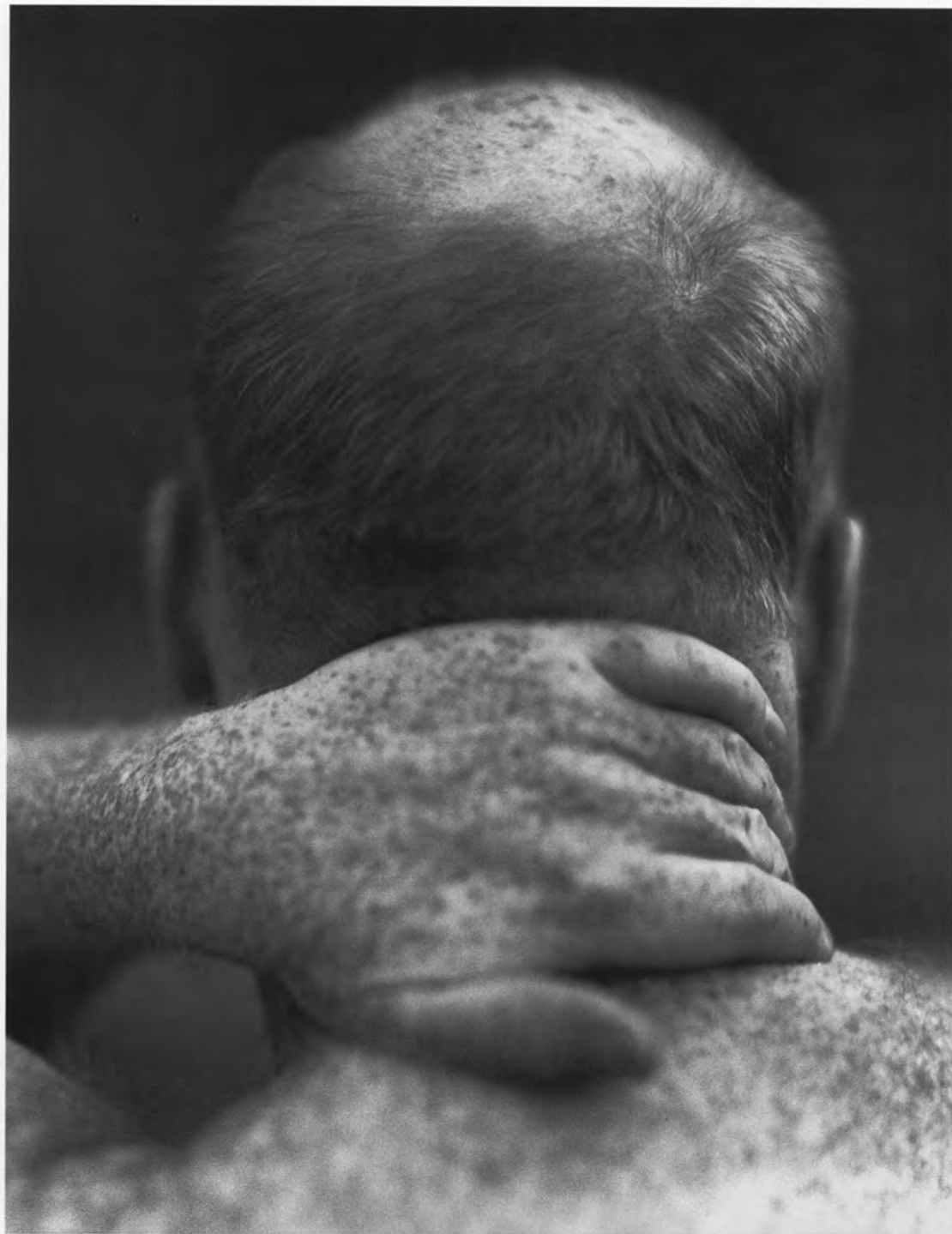
JOHN GOODMAN: Well, when I was a kid, 12 years old, my mom and dad bought me a Polaroid camera. I would take pictures of the whole family. I had these small albums to put the pictures in. My dad had a movie camera so I would shoot 16mm movies. I went to the University of Wisconsin at Madison. I was a history major. I started making pictures. I took a class in Cambridge over the summer. John Weiss was teaching a class and he was working with Minor (White). He said to me, "Maybe you want to come down to MIT and meet Minor sometime." My story with Minor is a trip. I went to see John at MIT. I remember I

parked my car, walked over, and saw him talking to this old man. I was very young and very crazy. I didn't pay much attention to this older man. I don't know what I was thinking. I don't think I was thinking about anything is what my problem was. Then this man started walking away. John said to me, "What's the matter with you? Do you know who that is?" I said, "Oh no, is that Minor?" I watched Minor walk off. I was just staring at him walking down the street with my mouth open. He

JOHN PAUL CAPONIGRO: Tell me about your journey to pho-



Hooded, Times Square Gym, 1993.



was about 150 yards away when he stopped and turned around and smiled. He knew that I was looking at him. That was the first time I met him.

Caponigro: What were you thinking at that moment?

Goodman: I had to connect with him. We had already connected but I had to continue it.

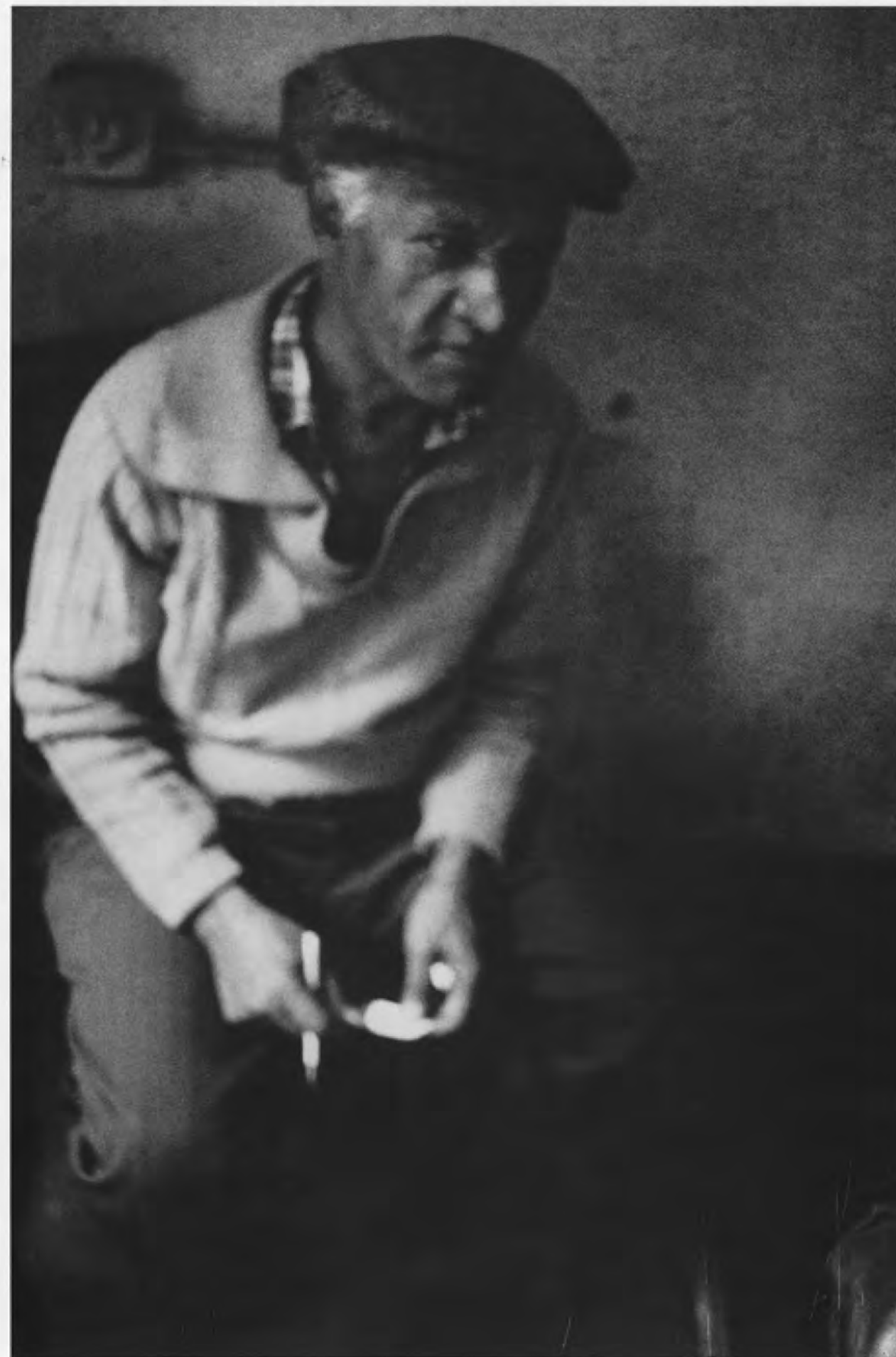
Above: *Ed/40*, 1997.

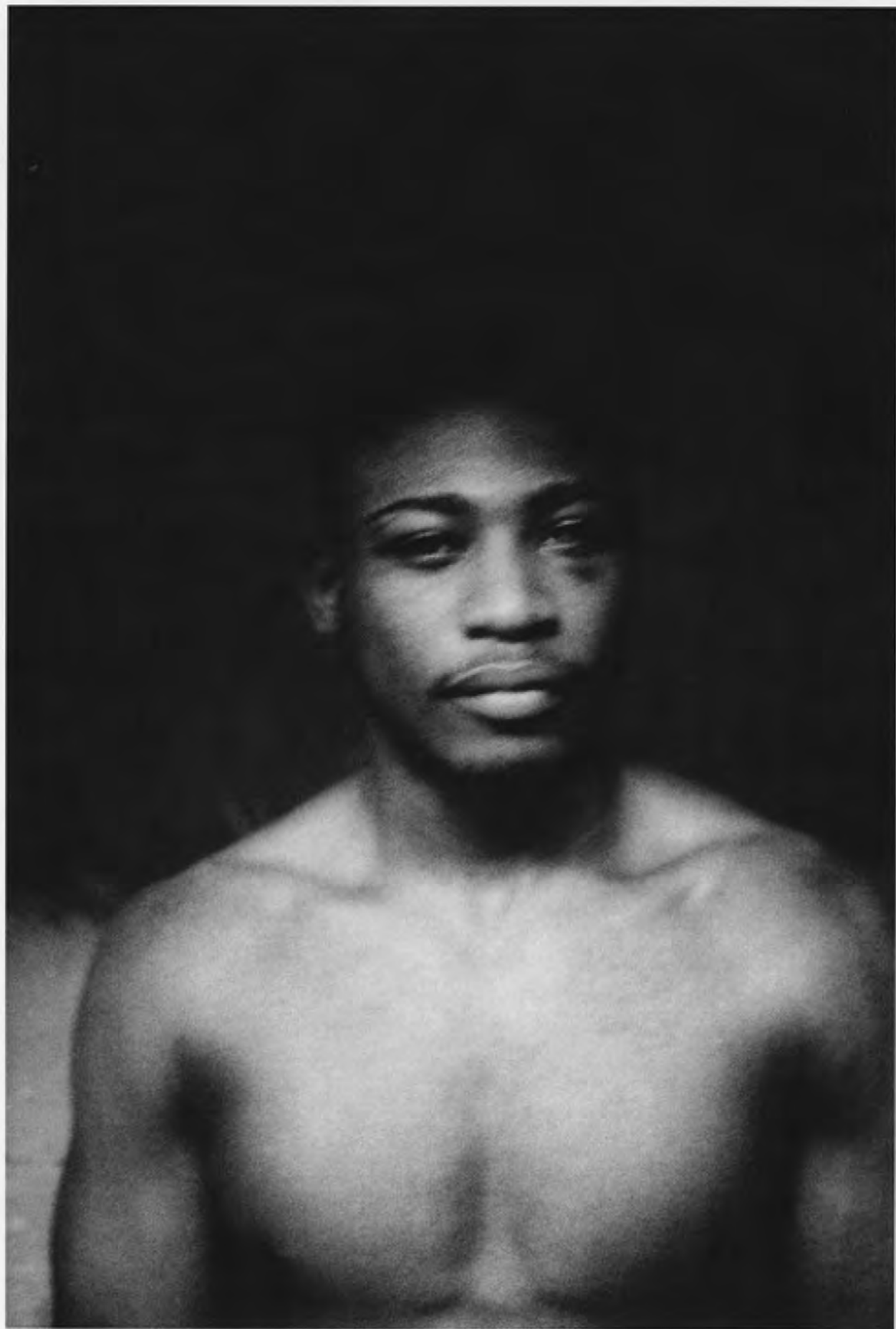
Left: *Headless*, Times Square Gym, 1993.

Page 14: *Indio*, Times Square Gym, 1993.

Page 15: *Karl LeShore*, Times Square Gym, 1993.

Caponigro: I think we make secret wishes, secret even to ourselves. They have a curious way of coming true, in the most unexpected ways. I know this is true for me. In the late '70s I saw Scitex machines at Acme Printing, when Mom was overseeing the production of Eliot Porter's landscape book. I saw them and knew instantly that was the way I wanted to work. Mom called them 'million dollar coloring books'. I thought, "How am I going to get a million dollars? Maybe if I'm really lucky. Maybe when I'm much older." In the late '80s I moved to Maine. A few years later Kodak started The Center for Creative Imaging and I became an artist in residence there. I got my million dollar coloring book. It's from Apple. It cost a





Gene, Times Square Gym, 1993.





Goodbye, Times Square Gym, 1993.

few thousand dollars. I didn't have to wait as long as I thought. I'd put that wish aside but it found me. Recently I read Henry Wolf's *Visual Thinking*. He related a story from his childhood. His family got out of Nazi Germany and went to France, Morocco and finally New York. His uncle visited them in France and left an *Esquire* magazine behind. He loved it. He saw the pictures and was entranced by their promise of a wonderful life. He took it with him. Fifteen years later he became the art director for *Esquire*. "Life sometimes plays wonderful tricks," he said.

GOODMAN: I think so, too.

CAPONIGRO: Harry Callahan said, "A picture is like a prayer." A prayer is like a wish. Maybe every picture we make is a wish.

GOODMAN: That's a lot of wishes.

CAPONIGRO: I ask everybody this—it's wonderful to hear so many responses to it, some similar, some different. What is it about photographic vision that fascinates you so much you decided to fill your life with it?

GOODMAN: I think it's the process of connecting. Making a picture reconfirms your existence. There is a certain feeling that I get when I'm making a picture. I know that I'm there. This works. This is right. I'm going to love this. This is valid. I'm not sure what it is, but it feels very, very good. It feels very honest and very right. It's uplifting and spiritual and powerful and validating. It's all of those things and it's elusive, very elusive, very fragile. Does that kind of answer it?

CAPONIGRO: Sure. I like that sense of validation that you're talking about. I often think this is not just an echo from the world, confirmation. There also seems to be a healthy sense of self-validation, declaration and discovery, without ego being involved.

GOODMAN: No, it's not ego. It's, "This is right." It's like breathing air. It's like taking a breath and the breath is so full and so right that it fills your lungs and your body with light. It's perfect. It's a very strong force and I believe in it very much.

CAPONIGRO: I talked about this with Barbara Bordnick in New York recently. She was trying to come up with a title for her workshop, she's doing T'ai Chi and photography. She had a number of words. Among them was breathing

and light. So I said, "Why don't you strip it down to 'breathing light'?"

GOODMAN: That's nice. Breathing light is perfect. Everybody should breathe light.

CAPONIGRO: Tell me how you came to the Times Square Gym project and what it became for you.

GOODMAN: I found the Times Square Gym on a whim one day. I saw the sign on a second story window of this old building and was compelled to see what it was all about. My dad was a fight fan and I had done a little training with an old boxer in Boston when I was 12 years old. After an initial confrontational coolness—"What the @#! do you want?"—I became welcomed after bringing back some photographs to the boxers. I would stop by the gym every couple of weeks when I was in New York and do a few rounds of photography in half-hour bursts so I wouldn't get in anybody's way. I loved the mentoring. The Times Square Gym was a 'home' for

"The Times Square Gym was a 'home' for many young boxers. There is almost a genetic connection between the older trainers and younger boxers. It's beautiful to watch all the wisdom and love, which probably sounds surprising. That is what I was interested in, not necessarily the combat."

many young boxers. There is almost a genetic connection between the older trainers and younger boxers. It's beautiful to watch all the wisdom and love, which probably sounds surprising. That is what I was interested in, not necessarily the combat. These kids come in swearing, get their heads spun around a little bit, and learn respect—respect for others and eventually respect for themselves. It's primal. It's so raw. It's a great place to see life. I loved the singularity of the experience. It's just you and the bag, you and your trainer,

you and you. And being a photographer is the same thing. You have that same kind of singularity of experience.

Joyce Carol Oates wrote a really interesting review of my book. I've never had anybody of that stature write about my pictures. What's interesting is she is interested in boxing. She used to go to boxing matches with her dad. She loved boxing and she has written a book, *On Boxing*. She's such a great writer and incredibly perceptive. Isn't that what a great writer, artist, is? She actually says some things about specific pictures that were my precise thoughts when I was making them. It just blew my mind. It's like she just crawled right into my brain. This body of work has brought together everything that I had been working on as a photographer for 25 years.

Right: *Solitaire*, Times Square Gym, 1993.

I've shot a lot of portraits, a decent amount of fashion. I have continually worked with motion, been interested in abstraction and equivalence. All of that appears somehow in the work.

CAPONIGRO: That seems natural. We were talking earlier about photography as a transaction, that it's an encounter with the other and it's an encounter with yourself, all at the same time. It's also a transaction between being and becoming. Some tend to look at photographs as being static, frozen eternal moments. When you said you were interested in the contact sheets, in cinema, that made sense. There's a palpable sense of process, of becoming, in your work. And there's nostalgia and history—a sense of what has gone before. If we want to get Zen, there's only now, the past is gone, the future is not here yet; we leave a wake in the past and we're always pushing toward the future. Pretty soon, the future is now.

GOODMAN: I feel these pictures have history. But, I also feel that they're modern. The work comes out of me being a student of photography for thirty years. They have a history that I feel. I was a history major in college. Why was I interested? I was always interested. But I never thought I would see it in my pictures. The Times Square Gym is a place that no longer exists. When I took these pictures to Julia VanHaften, the curator at the New York Public Library, she said to me, "Why is it that someone has to come from Boston to do these photographs of New York? These pictures are New York."

CAPONIGRO: You talked about teaching and helping students to open up to who they are. We have so much hardwired into our architecture, some of it hidden. Visible or invisible you've got to deal with it. That's what you bring to the moment. You bring yourself to the world.

GOODMAN: Whatever it is, whoever you are, that's it. You can't change it. You have to find it and you have to explore it. You have to take your own pictures. Those are the pictures you are going to make. And if you want to make some other pictures, you're in trouble. If that's who you really are, work with who. Explore yourself. Be honest. It's too easy to be safe. You've got to be brave. What that really means is being totally honest with yourself so you're free to find who you are and start making your photographs. Minor told us something in November that I finally felt in April. It was about feeling a picture not just with your head but, you know, about with your whole body. When you feel a picture with your whole body you know it is valid. There are gifts, too. Speaking of gifts, Minor always said, "The photograph waits for the photographer its chosen."

CAPONIGRO: To receive you have to be awake. So, why do we call it a gift?

GOODMAN: Why do we call it a gift? Well, maybe because it feels so good. What we're talking about is the greatest moments in life. So you call it a gift. It's a joy, because it's a connection, because it's an epiphany. Maybe those are

the only real true moments as a photographer; maybe those are the only true moments as a human being.

CAPONIGRO: Nice. I think of these moments as locating the sacred in our lives. In humility, which is good, we tend to honor that by not taking credit for it. Something higher than us did it. And it may actually be, in fact, a higher self, which is probably not so separable from the rest of the world. It, too, is part of the process. Alan Watts says, "The apple tree apples and the earth peoples." That statement contains the true spirit of ecology.

GOODMAN: I just love the process. Making photographs is simply about being alive, recognizing life and connecting with it. What is so great about photography is that you can't fake it. It's dead on.

I'm really interested in seeing where I'm going. What's going to be next? I'm not pushing it because I don't believe in pushing it. I believe in letting it present itself. That's what it takes for me to get it to work. It would be easier to become a little more surreal, a little bit more abstract. I don't want to repeat myself with these boxers, make the same picture with a different guy. These new ones are different. They extend the work. I'm very interested in doing abstract gestural portraits. The whole notion of gestures and parts of the body, ambiguity is interesting to me.

CAPONIGRO: The surfaces of your images are already quite abstract—blurred, gritty, distressed surfaces with a strong sense of geometry—I was wondering if that's what you meant. In portraiture, do you think we find ourselves in others or do we come in contact with something other than ourselves which impresses itself on us?

GOODMAN: I believe in trying not to impose yourself on a portrait. I think it's important that the validity of the picture comes from the subject. That's so important. There's a balance. Yes, I'm interested in doing my take on this person, in some way using a part to equal the whole. We're so interested in how each of us sees things. When we see purple for the first time it's something that consumes us—it's fresh.

CAPONIGRO: A photograph is a handshake. I'm wondering if abstraction allows greater entrance for the viewer? As something becomes more abstract it asks for more interpretation. It allows us to project that much more easily and simultaneously to be aware of our projection. Aware of our own projections, our interpretive processes we might be able to find the other that much more clearly as a result.

GOODMAN: I think that's exactly what it does. It makes it a more universal image. To project, for everyone to have a take on that, is valid or that they feel they can connect with. Sometimes I'll make pictures of people and we'll see who they are. Then I'll start abstracting them, moving toward ambiguity. The images start becoming more universal. And, at that point, are they less of a portrait of that person? Maybe. Are they more of a portrait of uni-



The Universe, Times Square Gym, 1993.

versality? Probably. That's a great thing to be working toward.

I just read this review of Robert Frank's new work. It's in yesterday's *New York Times*. Do you have it? In 1955, he traveled across the country. We know him from these unbelievable pictures.

CAPONIGRO: The visual Steinbeck.

GOODMAN: Yes. Now his new pictures are so intense, so

complicated. They're like he is. It's been forty-five years. A lot has happened to him. We all change right? It's interesting to see. One of the things that I would like to do very much is to take an art history course. This history major wants to get the art historical overview I somehow missed. I want to learn things I never learned. I want to understand what's going on. If you were to draw a picture of me, this side of me, photography, would be small, and I want to make another side of me bigger just to see what would happen, just to see if that's going to make



Lonnie Davis, Times Square Gym, 1993.

me think and see differently. I want to know. Photography comes out of your whole persona. I remember a bunch of us used to sleep at Minor's house on Friday and Saturday night. We'd have these breakfasts. Saturday mornings were dead silence and Minor would initiate some kind of activity. I remember once cutting the grass with this little hand mower. One part of the grass was really scraggly, just barely clinging onto life. I cut it. It didn't look better. It just looked horrible. And then, in the back, on this little rise, there was this other grass that was green, velvety, smooth. It was just perfect. I said to Minor, "Both these grasses live next to the house and one is barely clinging onto life and the other is so healthy. I want to put myself in a place where I can grow like this good green grass."

John Paul Caponigro's work is exhibited and collected, and he teaches workshops internationally. His conversations with photographers have been appearing in CameraArts and View Camera since 1995 and will be collected, along with portraits of the artists, in a forthcoming book. Extended versions are published on the internet at www.Caponigroarts.com.

Notes on Goodman's Technique

BY GEORGE DEWOLFE—John Goodman's photographs of boxers have an unexpected dynamic that is a combination of his way of working and seeing. He responds to events in a gestural, intuitive way and doesn't think too much. He says thinking slows you down.

His technical method consists of several 35mm cameras with 35mm and 50mm lenses. "It doesn't make any difference which one you use," he says. Goodman's film and printing scheme is another thing, however. He photographs with Polaroid PolaPan black-and-white film (which tends to compress values) at 1/8 to 1/15 sec. and transfers it to a black-and-white internegative. He then prints on Ilford Multigrade IV fiberbase. Most of his portraits are 4x5 with Polaroid 55P/N because of "the presence" they elicit.

Goodman prefers a kind of "minimalist" approach to composition and his photographs are simple in design and dynamic in movement.

John Goodman is represented commercially by Marcia Pinkstaff, (212) 799-1500. ■