

The Times Square Gym

Photographs by John Goodman

Text by Pete Hamill

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Photograph by John Goodman from
The Times Square Gym

have long been drawn to boxing for, of all sports, perhaps all ritualized human activities, none is so iconographic as boxing. Its spare, dramatic, often beautiful images seem to spring out of primeval human emotions: mankind stripped bare of all subterfuge as of the facades and rhetorical strategies of "civilization." (Among classic American artists drawn to the depiction of sports, Thomas Eakins and George Bellows are outstanding. Bellows's most frequently reproduced works are his four boxing canvases, and his fifteen boxing lithographs are among the most popular lithographs in the history of American art.) John Goodman's camera, however, is not an instrument of detachment, analysis, or judgment, but an iris of an eye that is our own, dissolving ostensible barriers between object and subject. His intention is to

make us *feel*, and not merely *see*, the world of the Times Square Gym.

Boxing is about being in motion, and about stillness. It's about reflectiveness, inwardness, trancelike states as much, or more, than it is about action. These photographs capture not boxing per se, but the relentless, repetitive, compulsive, and in its way monastic training that precedes public performance. For some of the unknown hopefuls of the Times Square Gym, training in the gym, sparring with one or another partner, will be as close as they come to the profession. (For boxing demands a willingness to endure pain in the pursuit of victory and it's a sport that cruelly, sometimes fatally, punishes its second-rate practitioners.) Goodman's sympathy for these young athletes is apparent, and his skill at capturing what might be called *aesthetic sympathy* is riveting. Yes, the viewer thinks, this is what distinguishes the artist from the photojournalist: the latter is determined to capture surfaces that convey instant recognition to the eye; the former is fascinated by what medieval theologians called the *quidditas*, or

Boxing gets in your blood." This remark by photographer John Goodman is a lyric understatement to set beside the haunting tone poem of sixty photographs assembled in *The Times Square Gym*. Taken over a period of eighteen months in the waning years of a small, battered, but revered Manhattan gym opened in 1976 by a boxing man named Jimmy Glenn, the photographs depict mostly unknown boxers in an atmosphere so unspecified as to seem archetypal. A thick-bodied Muhammad Ali, already an aging boxer in his early thirties (who would persist in fighting, with tragic consequences, for another decade) is both frontispiece and memento mori to the portfolio; the onetime heavyweight contender Carl "The Truth" Williams appears to be squatting in a sparring ring, his sweat-streaked face nearly obscured in shadow, menacing shapes above and below his nobly proportioned head; there are portraits of Charley "White Lightning" Brown shadowboxing, and with his trainer. But the remainder of the boxers are unknown, even where names are supplied. In this strange, compelling blood sport in

which, as Jimmy Glenn says, young men (and, occasionally, young women) learn to respect themselves in the "discipline of the self," there is a curious sort of democracy. In the starkness of the gym, in the ring, at the heavy bag, photographed against peeling walls that suggest the walls of tunnels or caves, the habitués of the Times Square Gym are clearly kin to one another.

John Goodman acknowledges Minor White as his great photographer-mentor: "[Minor White] taught me the difference between seeing and looking. Without him not only would this book not exist, but I would not be a photographer." Goodman's intimate, sympathetic portraits of boxers in their milieu suggest the work of the classic boxing photographer James A. Fox (born in Belgium in 1935, long a resident of Paris) and, in his attentiveness to atmosphere and synecdoche, the diverse work of the American photographers John Ranard, Toby Old, Larry Fink, and Arlene Schulman—whose *The Prizefighters* (1994) contains one hundred photographs and a highly personal text. Talented photographers and artists

mystical essence, of a thing. Appropriately, Goodman's photographs show men—and one young woman, self-consciously smiling, named Francine—nearly always in isolation. We see not wholes, but parts of striving bodies: muscular backs, blurred profiles, shadowed legs and feet on a scarified floor. A faceless boxer is glimpsed doing push-ups against this same floor, his head dreamlike in motion; we see anonymous sweating torsos, swinging heavy bags, eyes glaring out of shadows, faces like Goyaesque chiaroscuros. One of the most haunting photographs shows a literally headless shadowboxer, his rapidly moving head and boxing gloves obscured by light and overwhelmed by a poster-peeling wall behind him. Another shows the gleaming, muscular, carved-looking head and torso of a boxer named Anthony Greene—so superb a physical specimen, we wonder, What has come of him? What has been his career? The most surrealist photograph shows two boxers sparring so silhouetted by light that they are hardly more than dreamlike distorted shapes. There is a similarly distorted shape, a male figure arriving, or departing, the gym, at the bottom of a flight of stairs. TIMES SQUARE GYM is seen in reverse on a grimy window overlooking a dreary and supremely indifferent Forty-second Street below.

Why does boxing, the most violent and the most frequently impugned of sports, exude such an air of romance and "dark glamor"? (The term is Pete Hamill's.) To speak of boxing is for many admirers of the sport to speak nostalgically, like Pete Hamill does in his tough-tender introduction, an overview of American boxing with a focus on reminiscence: "I grew up in blue-collar America in the years after the Second World War. There were institutions where I lived: the factory, the church, the police station, the saloon, and the gym. I have lived long enough now to see them slip into an irretrievable past." Hamill celebrates the passing of the Times Square Gym as indicative of the "dying art" of boxing, and his enthusiasm for John Goodman's photographs is rooted in this sentiment. One might object that Jimmy Glenn's gym represents a phase of boxing, and not its demise; to focus upon the past in so obsessive a manner, though it makes for a

mythopoetizing of its subject, is to ignore the fact that boxing thrives in other, less personalized, high-tech settings—the glitzy casinos of Las Vegas and Atlantic City, the sleekly modernized, state-of-the-art contemporary gyms in which champions like Evander Holyfield and Oscar de la Hoya train. One might object, too, that boxing, like all sports requiring physical prowess and ingenuity, is about exuberance as much as reverie, the ecstatic joy in winning as well as the solitary meditation of the loser. Animal vigor is celebrated rather more than grim and dogged determinism. The sport is, after all, a charismatic public spectacle that often draws large crowds, evokes tumultuous emotions. The tired, aging Ali was once the irrepressible, irresistible Cassius Clay.

But all art is by necessity selective. It is, in a sense, "unfair." Unlike journalism or history, it does not purport to be a recording of a communal, impersonal, and quantifiable truth, but a highly personal, even idiosyncratic subjective vision. 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.