

## The Boston Globe

### PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

In the zone

A vanished world of sex, squalor, captured in black and white

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The Combat Zone, the adult entertainment district that greasily flourished between Chinatown and what is now Downtown Crossing during the '70s, wasn't exactly unique. Baltimore had the Block; New York, Times Square; San Francisco, North Beach. Human beings have their urges, licit and otherwise, and other human beings monetize those urges. But there was always something a little extra glum and squalid about the Zone. Although a Puritan-founded city cannot avoid Puritan-condemned vices, perhaps it doesn't enjoy their indulgence quite so much.

The Zone, with its porn shops and peep shows and strip joints, was a kind of sexual freedom trail. It even included a nod, of sorts, to local history. Along with such noted establishments as the Naked i Cabaret and Teddy Bare Lounge, there was the Pilgrim Theatre. The distance between Princess Cheyenne and Priscilla Alden might not have been as great as one might think.

Now the Zone, too, belongs to local history, done in by rising real estate values and the less-public options for a good time afforded by home entertainment and the Internet. We'll never know the answer to the question raised by the Naked i's infamous sign "Totally Nude College Girls Revue": Did the booker demand to see transcripts?

Part of the fascination of "Boston: Combat Zone 1969-1978," a photography exhibit at the Howard Yezerski Gallery through March 16, is its ability to capture a very specific time and place in the city's history. The presence of the original neon sign from the Hungry i, which looks out from the gallery for the duration of the show, is a canny touch. But the sign is as much touchstone as collectible. The Zone was "a gold mine of evidence," as one of its habitués remarked once to Roswell Angier. Along with Jerry Berndt and John Goodman, Angier is one of three photographers with work in "Boston: Combat Zone." Evidence? The Zone was a state of mind, really, and the evidence for that was all over.

The excitement of the New Boston of the '60s had passed. The real estate boom of the '80s was as yet a gleam in the eyes of developers. With court-ordered desegregation, the city was turning into a combat zone of a different sort. The collective portrait presented in the 30 black-and-white photographs at Yezerski isn't pretty, but the grimness it speaks to was very much a part of that time - and not just in the immediate vicinity of Jerome's Lounge and the Two O'Clock Club.

It's an injustice to these photographers, who have been doing very good work for a very long time, to see their images simply as documentation. Many of the pictures belong as much to a particular genre, street photography, as to a particular moment. Street photography usually means energy, surprise, an implicit excitement. The street photographs here betray a crucial difference. They often subvert the genre in service to the people they show. Energy, surprise, and excitement (or at least excitement in a positive sense) tended not to be the experience of Zone regulars.

There's a recurring deadness here, a sense of defeat or resignation. Nearly all the people either stare back at the camera or look off into space. Berndt's "The Combat Zone, Washington St., Boston, 1968" is emblematic. The slight reflection from the plate-glass window reminds us of the barrier between the woman sitting in the coffee shop and the rest of the world. Her out-to-there false eyelashes further contribute to the effect. There's no real in between in the Zone, little or no sense of human connection. That's as it should be. The Zone was a place of extremes. Almost all the pictures are big, and properly so. Demure and delicate are not operative words here for either form or content.

We see strippers, hookers, johns, various persons of indeterminate purpose (but they sure don't seem to be up to any good). Almost no one is identified by other than a first name. One of the exceptions is Angier's "Mr. and Mrs. Steve Mills, Pilgrim Theater." Very Diane Arbus, it shows a baggy-pants comic in his 80s with his young wife, who looks like Sarah Vowell in a prom dress. Maybe they would have been better off not being identified.

"Boston: Combat Zone" isn't sexy. It's about as sexy as mud, in fact. But that's the point. The photographic romance of E.J. Bellocq's Storyville or Brassai's "Paris by Night" is nowhere to be seen. Romanticizing the Zone would be as much a disservice to the truth as ignoring the Zone. Angier, Berndt, and Goodman refuse to do either.

The basic premise of the Zone, degradation in the service of profit, is ugly. It's fitting then that the ugliness here is so often through and through: ugly clothes, ugly signage, ugly cars. A lot of that ugliness is a function of period. There's ugly, and then there's '70s ugly. Is it a coincidence that so many of the greatest works from that decade - "The Conformist," "The Godfather" movies, "Gravity's Rainbow," "Music for 18 Musicians" - is set either in the past or outside of time?

So many of the pictures here are sad - or maybe it's just the sadness of the people. There's the occasional smile. But that seems as much a pose as the far more common cocked elbows or come-hither looks. There is one genuine smile, if smile is the right word. It's in Goodman's "The Schlitz Boys," and it's terrifying. The photograph shows a carload of young men carbuncular with a couple of six packs. They're ready for some action. The animal rictus on the face of the blond guy in the backseat is way beyond Arbus. It's like something shot by a war photographer, only there's no war going on. There is a transaction going on, though, or at least the anticipation of one. In the business of sex, as in any other kind, a supply side can't exist without a demand side.