



**ARTIST**

James Williams

**TITLE**

Untitled portrait from the series 'Steeltown, Western New York'

**DATE**

1991 – 1992

**DIMENSIONS**

7 in H x 9 in W

**MEDIUM**

Gelatin Silver Print

**CATALOGUE NUMBER**

1998.089

**CURRENT LOCATION**

1114-20B

---

**JAMES WILLIAMS**

**BORN**

1955

**BIRTHPLACE**

Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

**GENDER**

Male

**CITIZENSHIP**

Canada

**CULTURAL HERITAGE**

European

**LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP**

Artist-in-Residence, 1997

**LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS**

## ESSAYS

For James Williams his ongoing series Steeltown is more than just his current project, it is an insiders look into the lives of steelworkers who trade sweat for wages. Williams' inside knowledge of the steel industry comes from his father's 40 years as a steelworker and his own 14 years of experience working in the industry. In the communities where Williams has photographed it is not unusual for the steel industry to have supported several generations of the same family. The steel industry, particularly in North America, has been greatly affected by changing methods of production, stricter environmental regulations, free trade agreements, corporate greed, and mismanagement. The steel industry has in some regions experienced new growth, however in older established steel producing regions the industry has shown a steep decline, employing half of its original work force. Steel plants which have supported communities for generations are now reducing their work force, moving to new locations for cheaper labor, or closing entirely. Williams presents the steel industry in these communities at this transitional point, with images of closed factories, or those working at a greatly reduced capacity, as well as photographs of the individuals affected. Williams' installations consist of large photo murals of factory buildings that are overlaid with individual portraits of workers. By positioning the portraits on top of the factory buildings Williams puts the workers first and creates vast mosaics that allude to the fragmented state of the steel industry. The mosaics are held together by the portraits of the workers. The portraits have a directness that Williams is able to achieve as someone from inside their community. The subjects of the photographs do not put on any airs about having their portraits taken -- awkwardly posturing for the camera to conceal their discomfort over being photographed by an outsider -- they are confident and at ease, as if they are momentarily pausing to talk with one of their coworkers. Because of his background, Williams is able to achieve a level of rapport with his subjects that would be difficult for another photographer to accomplish in the same situation. Even the photographs of workers taken in Steeltown, the Mexico Chapter share that same connection, unencumbered by the barrier of language. Accompanying these photo installations, are videotaped interviews of steelworkers, their employers, and union representatives. Williams sees these taped interviews and portraits as a entry into this industry from the perspective of the worker, further empowering them with a voice to express their own their fears of loss, and hopes that the industry will find the means to rebound. Steeltown is an ongoing body of work. To date Williams has photographed communities in Southern Ontario, Western New York, and Mexico, and most recently in Germany. The installations for Steeltown have been presented in a number of alternative spaces and non-traditional exhibition sites like union halls in many of the same cities where these photographs were taken. In this series Williams gives his subjects the vehicle to inform a larger audience of their own concerns. By increasing awareness these communities may find the strength and support to rebuild or reinvent themselves, a task which will once again fall on the shoulders of the laborers who built Steeltown. Gary Hesse (c)1997A Just Image As it plays out in the headlines, justice means equality, fairness, and the rule of law. Yet beyond the events broadcast on television and the news alerts flashed instantly to laptops and PDAs, there is a large realm of justice that eludes reporters. Throughout daily life - at home, in school, doing errands, tending children, making dinner, playing sports - perceptions of justice often float just below the radar. The Light Work Collection offered plentiful proof that photographers frequently make images of routine daily life and its relationship to a sense of justice. However, as members of the Fine Arts 395 "Art and Identity" class noticed, scholars seldom extend the concept of justice into aspects of living that are legal, but sometimes ethically questionable. Counselors, social workers, and therapists seem to take over where the justice system stops. Nevertheless, the line between the legal system's purview and personal life is not fixed. Class members were careful to insist that the law is often less subtle in its grasp of situations and unaware of complexities than are the images included in this show. Nowhere in the law is it written that by embracing a stereotype one can sometimes achieve influence skin to contesting the mold. Thoughts and feelings such as these coalesced as the subject of this exhibition. Work and family emerged as sites where what is fair is not always what is equal. , and what is equal is not always fair. However fair or unfair, the triumphs and annoyances one experiences at work mostly fall below the threshold of the law. It is conventional wisdom, not the IRS, which suggests that wealth carries no guarantee of happiness. Creating this nuanced exhibition about justice in everyday life led the class into hearty and un-nuanced discussions about the slights, snubs, and rebuffs of an ordinary day. The students chose the title A Just Image for this exhibition before they read about the expression in Roland Barthes' Camera Lucida. With the phrase, he and they recognize that art coaxes the world of appearances to create symbols signifying ideas for which there are no words. Just an image becomes A Just Image. Mary Warner MarienA Just Image: Selections from the Light Work Collection is the result of a collaborative effort by thirty-one Syracuse University students enrolled in Professor Mary Warner Marien's "Art and Identity" course. The exhibition examines the Fall 2007 Syracuse Symposium theme of justice. The students chose images from the Light Work Collection, considering the personal and societal meanings of justice. They have created an interactive exhibition, where, as the students write in the exhibition catalogue, "ironically... the viewer is still judging."A Just Image invites viewers to explore the photographs and rethink their definition of justice. As the students of the "Art and Identity" course discovered, though justice is a universal concept, it does not necessarily carry the same meaning for everyone. This can be seen in the different perceptions of stereotypes, families, occupations, and leisure activities, which are some of the topics examined by the class. According to the students, " The Pictures we have chosen require more than just superficial judgment; they require the viewer to acknowledge their own stereotyped projections." Roslyn Esperon