

PHOTOGRAPHY: Step Right Up

by Brooke Chroman

Jimmy and Dena Katz, *World of Wonders* (Powerhouse Books, 2009)

Wonder is the fluorescent promise of a peepshow; it is the Metropolitan Museum's formal tumble of stairs; it is the vault-like entrance to the Mary Boone Gallery; it is stage lights, circus tents, and velvet ropes. Wonder is the result of all that distances us from ourselves by the "otherness" that awaits us behind the curtain, the display glass, our clothing and our skin. These visual façades deliver the promise of the freak through suspension of the familiar. Wonder is often a world meticulously edited, where strippers don't make trips to Whole Foods and where the labyrinth of a backstage is a myth.

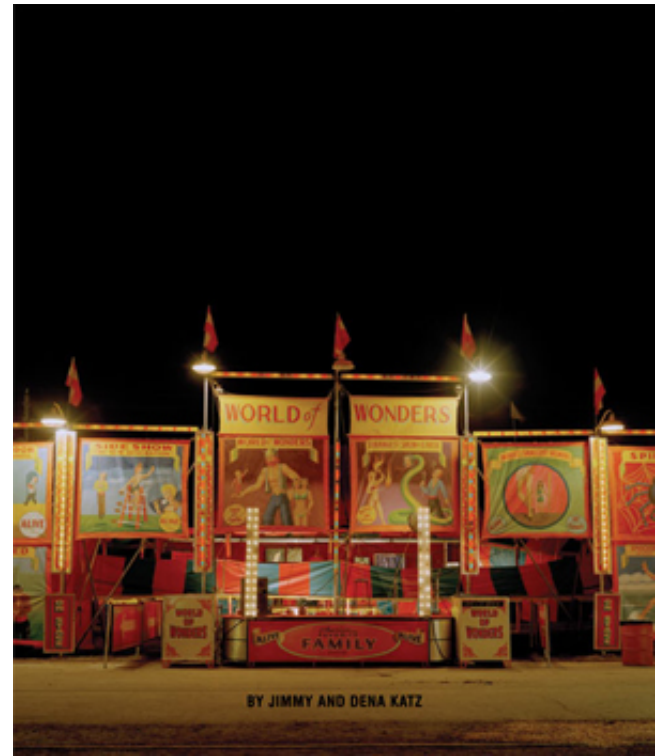
World of Wonders, the subject and title of Dena and Jimmy Katz's book of color photographs, embodies a desire for wonder that persists across the cities and towns in this country. In the couple's latest work, the longest-running, currently playing American sideshow and its troupers are revealed amidst carnivalesque façades that have kept on trucking, long past their historical era. The Katzs' portraits document a hodgepodge troupe of weathered performers against the background of primary-colored circus tents, inviting us to stare at the near extinction of an American subculture—and, on occasion, reflect on our changing and unmoving notions of wonder.

The Katzs' succeed less in the artfulness of their photographs than in the humanity they conjure from their subjects. For example, Ward, the sideshow's seventy-nine-year-old proprietor, struggles to appear invincible behind the shield of a glittering costume, yet is foiled by his physical surrender to the gravity of time. Inversely, other photos in the collection promote a flat-footed reading of their sequined subjects. Many performers are centered in quasi-formal portrait scenarios (a sideshow trouper's equivalent to an actor's headshot), where playing up to the camera comes off as an extension of the show, rather than a window into its human components.

Autobiographical quotes from the performers, which appear adjacent to many of the portraits, would be more effective in a preface or epilogue. Intentionally or not, the excerpts function as instructions for reading the photographs, discouraging narrative wonder at the figures portrayed, at their imagined lives and struggles. As the book transforms a sideshow into a

documentary, what is most compelling—more than the oral acrobatics of flame-spitting and sword-swallowing—are the banal subtleties captured: the razor burn in the armpit of a tattooed woman, her hands behind her head, her chin defiant, wearing a bra seemingly made from Dorothy’s ruby slippers, looking down onto the camera with a red-lipped sneer; the childlike sleep of Poobah, an elderly midget still making his living off the roads of America. These relaxed exceptions remind the viewer of Nan Goldin’s ability not only to document subcultures through photography, but to impart an experiential intimacy that transcends the “otherness” of a drag queen’s aura or a strange couple’s lovemaking.

The Katzs’ photographs speak to our yearning for immediate wonder directly rendered by our fellow alien humans. In contrast to today’s ubiquitous yet solitary channels of entertainment, these portraits evoke a primitive, crude, yet intimate connection between performer and audience. The marvelous individuals featured in *World of Wonders* give us pause to consider the makeshift magic that can be made with a curtain, some paint, a little gumption and no shame.



CONTRIBUTOR

Brooke Chroman

Brooke Chroman is a contemporary artist.
