

SEAN PATRICK WATTERS

*Under the same sky*

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Why do we think we are alive? Why do we try to escape from our destiny and seemingly inescapable human condition? Why after killing our mothers and fathers, ridding ourselves of their story and even history itself do we wander like lost orphans, searching despite everything for dreams, hope and justice and if we can't have them, at the very least freedom, equality and fraternity? Why do we want, at any cost, to build new worlds from ashes while the embers are still glowing? *I have a dream...*

The Afro-American photographer Sean Patrick Watters left Louisville, Kentucky for Brooklyn more than twenty years ago. « This neighbourhood was where I started to create. [...] It was exactly what I needed. It was the first time in my adult life that I truly felt at home. » Setting up a makeshift studio on the pavement in front of his apartment building with a sheet of black plastic to give his subjects some privacy, Watters invited people – local legends, fashion celebrities, politicians and unknown passers-by – to pose for him. Other subjects were chance encounters, people he met while walking in parks nearby, especially Central Park and Morningside Park. His powerful and precise black and white images captured their attitudes and expressions, their bodies and faces and above all their « energy », the vibrant presence of life itself. Candid street scenes. Slivers of everyday life. « I believe that we all possess a kind of magic. The idea was to try and reach it. »

Today you can breathe and fill your lungs with the world around you, or you can die because there are people who will prevent you from breathing at all. You can choose to find inspiration and inspire others, to come to life and open your soul, or you can choose to forsake all hope. You can also listen to your heart beating, making it beat in time with your desires, dreams and hopes. Above all, you can make it beat in unison with other people's hearts and make the heart of white New York beat to the rhythm of black Harlem. « *Fires burn, heart beats strong, Sing out loud, the chain gang song.* » (Grace Jones, *Slave to the Rhythm*, 1985)

« Before a photo shoot, I need to talk with my subject about their objectives, the things that annoy or motivate them. I ask questions about their family, their love stories and what they do in life. When you ask people questions like this, they tell you much more than you want to know, » Sean Patrick Watters explains. Which is why he has so many stories to tell. « I have a tale to tell » was the apt title of his 2017 exhibition in Paris and he truly does have numerous stories for us to both hear and see: his images have something to say and they speak to us.

As it is made up solely of instant emotions and feelings, you could even say energies, photography (together with the radio) is one of the mediums that most intensely conveys the pulse of the world. When you pose in front of a camera, you deposit an invaluable little piece of

yourself. Sometimes you drop the mask and lower your defences and sometimes you exalt them. You challenge yourself and others, both for you and us, as if to say: « Look at this image of me – I wanted it, I exist by and through it. I am what you see on the wall in front of you. » Photography is a trial, a test of faith, of faith in yourself and faith in the other. It tests your faith in your own personal history, and the history of the world. « *Hey, what have I got? Why am I alive, anyway? Yeah, what have I got? Nobody can take away?* » (Nina Simone, *Ain't Got No – I Got Life*, 1968)

At the end of the 2010s and the start of the 2020s. Harlem. Brooklyn. Manhattan. New York City. USA. A person is wearing a black mask on which is written « inspire or retire » in white letters. A couple is tenderly embracing one another on the steps in front of their building. Another happy couple is simply standing back-to-back. A man is shouting, his face and body covered with a dark liquid. A young girl is staring straight at the lens. A young man seems to be trying to avoid having his picture taken. Another adopts a threatening attitude. A woman exudes an impression of plenitude. We see the reflection of someone – the photographer himself? – in a shop window displaying a tribute to Georges Floyd, DeAunta Farrow and Eric Reason. *For Which Reason?*

More often than not, will power goes hand in hand with energy and tenacity. Renouncing is the same as abandoning, disavowing your convictions and sacrificing your goals, values and vision of the world. To whose advantage? Don't give an inch! Stand firm. Encouraging others and encouraging yourself is like setting the rhythm of your heart and leaving behind the anger that was submerging you. You are what you do... or what you hope. You are already your own future. You are actually building it right now and the photo knows this. It doesn't just define you, it reinvents you from within by drawing on the beauty you have seen, the emotions you have felt, the discussions you have held, your experiences, the decisions you have taken and the difficulties you have surmounted, the struggles you have won or lost, the hopes you have preserved and the dreams you have had. In short, the life that you have created and fought to preserve at all costs. All of that is revealed in the photo and shared with everyone who sees it. « *Keep it up, keep it up. Never stop the action.* » (Grace Jones, *Slave to the Rhythm*, 1985)

Photography shares something with us that we are not expecting, a truth that belongs just to us, an identity in our image and a family that brings us together. It sometimes provides answers to questions we hadn't even asked and which suddenly seem obvious and essential. « *I've got life, I'm gonna keep it. I've got life, and nobody's gonna take it away.* » (Nina Simone, *Ain't Got No – I Got Life*, 1968)