

## **The ghost of Cabbagetown**

For *Smoke*, Michael Ackerman pulled out the photos he took in the late 1990s in Cabbagetown near Atlanta, the hometown of Robert Dickerson, or Benjamin, front man of the band Smoke.

### **Stefan Vanthuyne**

"Cabbagetown was beautiful," writes Jem Cohen in *Smoke*, Michael Ackerman's photo book, a selection of images of which is currently on display at Brussels-based L'Enfant Sauvage. "Little clapboard or plank wood houses, the dead factory, very sodium yellow street lamps, and wild dogs and flowers." A place with history, a hidden and perhaps even dangerous history, but there was no need to elaborate on that here now, Cohen said.

The New York filmmaker had come to live in Atlanta for a few months, wanted to explore the area and so ended up rather by accident in the rundown industrial suburb, haven for hustlers and eccentrics. Benjamin appeared out of nowhere that day, "floated by like sunlit dust," had a chat with Cohen and disappeared again. Only to later become the equally strange and wondrous subject of Cohen's raw, intimate and poetic-documentary portrait *Benjamin Smoke* (2000, co-written with Peter Sillen).

Benjamin, born Robert Dickerson in 1960, lived in Cabbagetown in a house where in another part lived a family working on go-kart engines, Cohen writes. The room was filled with roaring noise and children. Those children play a starring role in the images Ackerman shot in Cabbagetown in 1997 and 1998, following Cohen and his documentary. They tumble over a sofa on the sidewalk or over each other, raise dust in their go-karts or tease the neighborhood dogs. Ackerman captured their energy and teeming bodies in grainy, out-of-focus because stirred black-and-white photographs.

It is specific to the work of Ackerman, who is as underground and obscure within photography as Cohen is within film, as Benjamin is within music. His images often have something visceral, something animalistic even. Like the photograph of the girl stepping up the muddy road, photographed from the back and from below, hunched over like a feline, with her distinctive socks and the bruise on her arm, the ribbon of her short jumpsuit dangling like a tail. In a series of prints on a contact sheet, a challenging playfulness still emanates from the way she hops around and poses, but in that one, isolated image, she suddenly becomes menacing and dangerous.

Teenage girls then seemed rather bored, in Cabbagetown; Ackerman's vignette-rich images illuminate them angelically as they procrastinate on porches and on hoods. Or

at the counter of a snack bar, gazing dreamily ahead, like that one blond girl, surrounded by dejected older men.

And then there was Benjamin. Poet, songwriter, occasional drag queen, junkie, rebel, outsider. Immortalized by Ackerman in a perfect blur, with his stuffed vulture with wings spread wide on his shoulder, lighting a cigarette, as a kind of morose savior for all those who ended up on that seamy side of society called Cabbagetown.

Ackerman met him in the summer of 1995 at a club in New York, where the Tel Aviv-born photographer then lived. The singer with a growl like Tom Waits was performing there with his band Smoke, along with Cat Power. Cohen had invited Ackerman; the two became friends. Benjamin first fronted Opal Foxx Quartet, an experimental, many-member band in Atlanta's alternative milieu, whose debut album was co-produced by R.E.M. singer Michael Stipe. Next came Smoke. Patti Smith saw Benjamin perform, became a fan and penned the song "Death singing" for him.

In Ackerman's photographs, Benjamin is all charisma and enigma. A large, open and warm gaze, but also a fragile, already somewhat emaciated appearance. They are tender images. Benjamin was addicted to amphetamines, had AIDS and died of liver failure from hepatitis C in 1999, the day after his 39th birthday.

Ackerman does not judge, Cohen writes. That may stem from his family history, which he shares remarkably extensively on his website. With moving from Israel to the United States as a child. He is drawn to people and places in which he sees himself and which make him feel less foreign, he says. "These connections are my home. Photography is an act of profound recognition. When I take a picture I have the brief illusion to belong." Cabbagetown was such a place; Benjamin was such a person.

*Smoke* by Michael Ackerman is on view through March 10 at L'Enfant Sauvage in Brussels, as part of Photo Brussels Festival. Box Galerie is additionally showing a broader selection of his work. The book *Smoke* is published by L'axolotl.