

Retro Miami Underground in Photographs from the '70s to the '90s

May 1, 2017

by Sandra Hale Schulman

These are the photos the tourist board wouldn't want you to see, then or now.

In the 1950s and '60s, Miami was an odd mix of sleepy South Florida town and Rat Pack oceanfront candy-colored Art Deco. It lagged behind the era's social upheaval in almost every way as the population groaned under the ever changing influx of Cubans, Haitians, and New Yorkers. By the '70s, the pink and blue paint had begun to peel in the searing tropical sun, retired people filled the rundown Deco hotels, and crime and cocaine were the main headlines.

It would take another few decades before the resurgence of South Beach fueled a boom in fashion, art and real estate. But out in the trenches, on the streets and in back alleys, photographers were prowling in search of the vibrant underground, the people and happenings that Miami was harboring all along: the eccentrics, the gay rights activists, the cross dressers, the artists and the hippies.

A new book and a new exhibition at the [HistoryMiami Museum](#) put the spotlight on two photographers who loved the city, warts and all, and took to the streets to make art from what they found.

In "Tropical Wildlife: Portraits of Miamians, 1991-1996" at the HistoryMiami Museum, Brenda Kenneally is exhibiting images she made as a contributor to the "Tropical Wildlife" column of Tropic magazine, a publication of the Miami Herald. Kenneally had been out on the hot streets of Overtown, decidedly unglamorous downtown Miami, and pre-gentrification South Beach, capturing the soul of the people and places she saw at the forgotten edges of the city.

Her astonishing color photos in full formal portrait mode capture drag kings and queens, beehived dames at the counter of the old Wolfie Cohen's Rascal House restaurant, the artist Don Shearer posing nude in his studio, covered only by his painting made from blood.



“Don Shearer” by Brenda Kenneally. Courtesy of the HistoryMiami Museum.

The subjects appear as dandy wild birds, dressed in their white suits and dramatic couture, posed on gilded throne chairs around a pool, a couple cuddling on a bright yellow sofa in a low rent hat making shop. One handsome gent stands in a red brocade smoking jacket in the produce aisle of a grocery store. Did he stumble in after a late night at a swanky lounge or does he always dress like this to shop? In Miami in the '90s, it's hard to tell.



“Claudia and Paul” by Brenda Kenneally. Courtesy of the HistoryMiami Museum.



“Juan Manuel Alonso” by Brenda Kenneally. Courtesy of the HistoryMiami Museum.

The woman pictured with a large beehive hairdo, sitting at Wolfie’s kitschy counter is Azucena Sandoval, a Nicaraguan immigrant who learned English by watching “The Young and the Restless” and picked up her fashion sense at vintage thrift shops.



“Azucena Sandoval” by Brenda Kenneally. Courtesy of HistoryMiami Museum.

This was the Sunshine State, too, a multicultural rainbow of odd ducks and free spirits. Some unpublished photos are being exhibited for the first time in this show. A portrait of the then-unsigned band Marilyn Manson and the Spooky Kids has the group sitting on the steps of a crumbling green and white hotel wearing striped leggings and polka dots. Within a few years the lead singer would be selling millions of dollars worth of albums with his photo on the cover of Rolling Stone magazine, but that day he was just another back alley oddity, looking to break out of the backwater beach town with his songs about drugs and perverted birthday parties.

In contrast to Kenneally’s technicolor formal portraits, Charles Hashim was a full time art teacher

at Miami Dade Community College who plunged into crowds of people on the weekends to take black and white photos (“color is a distraction” he says) of the uninhibited people at rock concerts, marches, and parades. In a talk at the release of his book, “We Are Everywhere and We Shall Be Free: Charles Hashim’s Miami 1977-1983” (Letter16 Press) he said that he was “making art not documenting.” Nonetheless he ended up doing both, capturing such first-ever events as the Gay Pride Parade of 1979 as well as how people looked, dressed and reacted to the city’s life changing events around them.



Photograph by Charles Hashim. Courtesy of the HistoryMiami Museum.

At concerts he chose to shoot everything but the bands, focusing instead on the interaction of the crowds of young people sprawled out on the grass, getting high on the sunshine, music and, in many cases, drugs. Other photos capture couples making out, and trucker capped boys trying to pick up girls in high waisted jeans and jumpsuits.



“The Reactions at Fat Cats Club” by Charles Hashim. Courtesy of the HistoryMiami Museum.

One of his strongest set of photos is of a Ku Klux Klan cross burning rally in Davie in 1978, where a Klan member solicits donations in exchange for souvenir pens on a makeshift table in the middle of a field. A young mother looks on laughing while holding a baby and its bottle. He shot the crowd there too—middle-aged couples tailgating in the back of pickup trucks, smoking cigarettes with their dogs at their feet, waiting on the show. The truck sports bumper stickers that say “I’m Proud to be a Teamster.”

The carnival of life is captured and frozen in time: Pioneering gay rights activists wear gold lamé dresses and heels to rallies, outlaw bikers kiss while giving the photographer the finger, and punk rockers spit on the crowds who worship them because of it. There’s comical stuff, too, such as the shot of the grinning young black couple and their kid standing outside the Grove Cinema screening a John Waters double feature of “Polyester” and “Pink Flamingos.” The double bill caught the negative attention of then Mayor Maurice Ferre, who tried to get the shows shut down.



“Motorcycle Drag Race” by Charles Hashim. Courtesy of the HistoryMiami Museum.

Taken together, the images of Kenneally and Hashim reveal a Miami that was hiding in plain sight on the streets, in back alleys and ballpark fields, and at the deli counters of a complex city growing into its place in the sun. Like the tourist slogan says: “See it like a native.”

BASIC FACTS: “Tropical Wildlife: Portraits of Miamians, 1991-1996,” is on view April 6 through July 2 at HistoryMiami Museum, 101 West Flagler Street, Miami, FL 33130. www.historymiami.org

“We Are Everywhere and We Shall Be Free: Charles Hashim’s Miami 1977-1983” available through Letter16Press.com along with selected prints.

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