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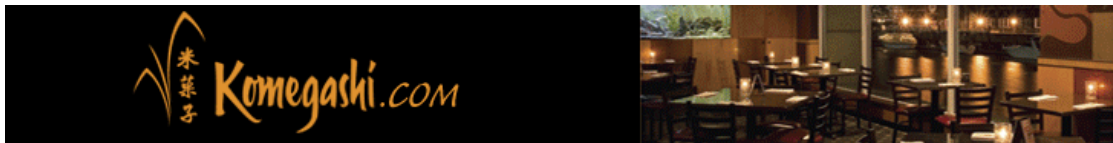


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Airing laundry

Artist asks residents to recount memories of changing Jersey City landscape

by E. Assata Wright | Aug 21, 2011 | 615 views | 0 | 2 | [|](#) [|](#) [|](#) [|](#) [|](#)

Reporter staff writer



Every Jersey City street – and perhaps even every city block – has a story to tell. Or perhaps *stories* would be more accurate. And, naturally, those stories depend on who is telling them.

Hamilton Park resident and professional photographer Karina Aguilera Skvirsky is currently engaged in a community art project, the goal of which is to collect the stories and reflections of downtown residents, both old and new.

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'I wanted the project to be this intersection between archival history and public history.' – Karina Aguilera Skvirsky

Skvirsky received an artist's residency through a Brooklyn-based organization called The Laundromat Project. The project encourages artists throughout the area to see and use public Laundromats as community art spaces from which they can develop a creative work of art.

For her project, Skvirsky is collecting the oral histories of downtown Jersey City residents who wash their clothes at the Luck Laundromat at 577 Jersey Ave.

She records her interviews with the residents, but also encourages them to try to document their experiences and memories of the neighborhood on their own as well. Skvirsky's interviews and photographs will be combined with images collected by the residents for a final art installation that will be exhibited next month.

"I conceptualized this as a dual project," said Skvirsky. "A lot of my work has to do with either personal memory or historical memory, collective memory. Being new to Jersey City, I wanted to understand where I was. So, I really liked the idea of finding out about the history of the neighborhood."

She emphasized that as a community-based art project, "The community plays a vital role in its production and its completion, and in its existence."

Skvirsky's Lucky Laundromat project is, she noted, partly an archival work, but more personal than that sounds.

She has spent hours in the Jersey City and Hudson County deeds and records rooms looking up old maps of Jersey City, gathering information about the city's early years as an industrial port.

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But this cold data is, for her project, combined with stories, quotes, drawings, and photos of people Skvirsky approaches.

“I was interested in bridging the gap between historical archive and personal memory,” she said. “I was interested in engaging the community with their memories of what this place is, or what it has been. I wanted the project to be this intersection between archival history and public history.”

Memory meets history

The Lucky Laundromat is located at the intersection of Jersey Avenue and Third Street. In the mid-1990s the area was home to many Latino families who had been in the community for decades. During that period, it was common to hear salsa and meringue music drifting from cars on warm summer days, or Caribbean spices wafting from apartment windows at dinnertime in the fall.

The neighborhood continues to be ethnically and racially diverse more than a decade later. But the sights and smells of the community have changed subtly in the years since then. Now, it's a bit more common to hear Tamil spoken by a mother reprimanding her kids, or to find an acoustic guitar player doing his rendition of “Eleanor Rigby” on a brownstone doorstep.

These are some of the types of memories Skvirsky hopes to collect through her community art project.

‘Everything is changing’

“Many of the stories that I’m hearing have to do with gentrification and changing demographics, or the changing landscape in Jersey City,” said Skvirsky, who began her Laundry Project artist residency in late May. She added that she typically asks her subjects how the city has changed for them, if at all, and what do they see in the city’s future.

In one of Skvirsky’s interviews, resident and actor Lisa Strum reflects:

“There’s a different feeling in Jersey City than there used to be. My block is somewhat the same but it’s definitely going through slow changes.

“Love, love, love the farmer’s market.

“I never felt unsafe in Jersey City. I’ve had friends who have been mugged, but I’ve never had that problem.

“Sometimes I really feel like it’s my home here but I think it’s still finding its identity.

“The people who have been here for years aren’t selling their property; they’re staying.

“Every now and then, depending on the day, you’re like, ‘It feels like my home; it doesn’t feel like my home.’

“Everything is going up.

“The neighborhood is changing. Everything is changing.

“My block is changing. Now right across there is this whole condominium complex.

“Jersey City has always had that personality of being unpredictable.”

For Skvirsky’s installation, Strum’s words run across photos taken during her interview inside the Lucky. The artist estimates she has so far interviewed 12 to 15 people thus far.

Skvirsky said her project will be on display locally in late September.

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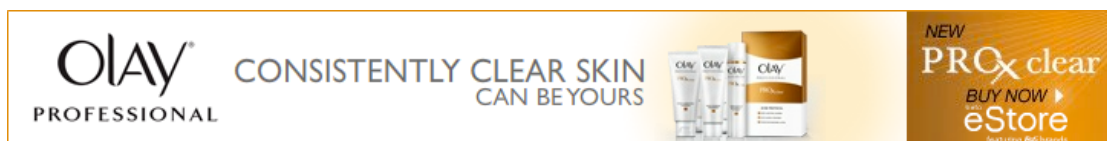
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