

Jim and Charlee: Our Collaboration

For over a dozen years, photographer Charlee Brodsky and poet Jim Daniels have worked together to document post-industrial landscapes in Western Pennsylvania. Many of these photo/poem combinations have been published in literary journals, and they have been collected in two books. One collaboration titled *Street* (Bottom Dog Press, 2005) won the Tillie Olsen Prize from the Working-Class Studies Association. The other, *From Milltown to Malltown*, (Marick Press, 2011) with writer Jane McCafferty, juxtaposed photos and poems of the massive shopping center that now stands on the site of the U.S. Steel Mill Homestead Works and 8th Street, Homestead's main street during the heyday of the mill. Some work from this project was exhibited at the Westmoreland Museum of American Art in 2005, and is also part of this exhibit (now being displayed on the 4th floor). In 2015 Brodsky and Daniels had a retrospective of their five collaborations (59 photographs/poems) in the Robert Morris University Art Gallery.

This exhibition here at Michigan State University College of Law also includes *The Rocks* (displayed on the 3rd floor) that continues exploring post-industrial Pittsburgh. Daniels wrote these poems in response to Brodsky's photographs, which were made in McKees Rocks, a small industrial town across the Ohio River from Pittsburgh. McKees Rocks fits neither the story of decay and ruin, nor the story of economic recovery relying on high-tech start-ups—two easy narratives latched onto by mainstream media when it gives any coverage at all to the “rust belt.” In communities across America, the working-class continues to live quiet, ordinary lives while their stories remain untold. While we are not propagandists for the revival of the rust belt, we are also not interested in creating beautiful obituaries. These communities are more complex and nuanced, like any true story of survival—small defeats, small victories, but always carrying on.

Their new collaboration, *American Patriot* (displayed in the 4th floor atrium) explores the American flag within the context of Pittsburgh working-class neighborhoods. Knowing that a divisive election year was approaching, Charlee was drawn to photographing the flag, the most esteemed symbol of America. As she traveled through the neighborhoods, photographed and talked to residents, she began to see the flag as a complicated vessel of American values. Always respecting how words work with photographs, Charlee invited Jim to join her exploration, and the results are presented here.

The novelist, Ian McEwan wrote, “Imagining what it is like to be someone other than oneself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality.” We try to create empathy through the interplay of image and text in a way that would be difficult to achieve in a single medium. The interplay of words and images allows us to tell a deeper, more complex story through the imaginative leaps that take place in the process. Feeding off of the creative energy and inspiration of each other's work is what drives us.