

Elegant to Edgy: Purtell and Rosenfeld in Black and White

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By **Catherine Kirkpatrick**



©Sergio Purtell

Born in Santiago, Chile, **Sergio Purtell** came to the United States in 1973. In recent years, he has trained his lens on the changing postindustrial neighborhoods of the Northeast, going beyond disruption to capture the lingering poetry of decay. His silver prints, recently featured in a solo show at **Art 3 Gallery**, have tremendous tonal range; even without color, you feel the temperature of the light and the photographer responding to it like a flower to the sun.



Real, Greenpoint Ave. and Provost St., Greenpoint, Brooklyn, NY
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It is the pure light of classic landscape painting: revealing and ennobling, yet not quite of this world. In it, factories assume the air of ancient ruins; an ordinary Brooklyn road becomes as grand as the Appian Way. By raising these sites to the monumental, Purtell underscores their link to our own heritage and the remains of other

civilizations. Similar to Shelley's *Ozymandias*, structures thought to be permanent, are in fact in decay and disappearing fast. Attention should be paid.

In Purtell's work are many ideas and echoes of art history. A canoe floating on the Gowanus Canal recalls *Thomas Eakins' painting* of Max Schmitt on the Schuylkill River. Both are set against industrial-era bridges, and both have a quality of stillness that makes us pause a moment to consider progress, retreating nature, and man's place in the scheme of things. In his quiet way, Purtell is provocative and makes us think.



Real, 3rd St., Gowanus, Brooklyn, NY, 2008 ©Sergio Purtell

Purtell has a BFA in photography from the *Rhode Island School of Design*, and an MFA from *Yale*, where he studied with *Tod Papageorge*. In the 1990s, he began to print for prominent

photographers, first in SoHo, now at his high-end lab, [Black and White on White](#), on Ingraham Street. Though he produces digital prints and celebrates the many choices available to photographers, Purtell has a special reverence for tradition. “Silver sits behind gelatin,” he said “which gives it a subtle three-dimensional quality.” For him, B&W is the way he sees and thinks, conceptualizing and “abstracting the world.” It is also a connection to history, the way photography began and continues to evolve.

But sometimes B&W produces the equivalent of a psychotic break. I saw the first image to produce such a reaction on Knickerbocker Avenue and was so stunned I had to cross over for a closer look. It seemed like a photograph—the face full of realistic detail—yet it popped off the wall with a three-dimensional, larger-than-life quality, melting at the edges into swirls of graffiti. I noticed others around Bushwick, all black and white, all with the same harsh light and looming shadow. Close-up and claustrophobic, they were like stills from a B-grade film, the faces startled, as if responding to something ominous just outside the frame.

Sergio Purtell is represented by [Art 3 Gallery](#). Luis Rosenfeld participated in Bushwick Open Studios 2015 with [street photography, street art, and polypasting](#)

This article is Part 2 of “Elegant to Edgy,” an ongoing series featuring artists and photographers who work in B&W; for Part 1, see [Elegant to Edgy: Visions in Black and White](#)