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John Chiara's Uncanny City

New York has rarely looked as grand and otherworldly as it does in these photographs.

Photographs by JOHN CHIARA | Text by LUC SANTE
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The titanic architecture of what may be the world's second-most-photographed city (if Paris still holds the top spot) has been shot again and again, with steadily diminishing returns. It will never again be possible to match the awe that attended the sight of the Flatiron Building upon its construction in 1902, as shown in the many pictures taken of it then by Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen, Alvin Langdon Coburn and dozens of others. Nor will anyone ever again capture the time when high-rises first began to multiply, as Berenice Abbott did in the 1930s, shooting the resultant canyons, the competing spires, the first night scenes from above. It has become ever more difficult to evoke the shock of the new, especially now that there are so many skyscrapers that nothing short of a hundred stories can command much attention. These days they can just look like walls or hedges, and the skyline looks like a toothbrush.

A radical approach is called for, and John Chiara has supplied one. He built a custom 50-by-40 camera equipped with a precision barrel lens and resting in the bed of a pickup truck, which he drives around town looking for locations. The camera shoots directly onto color paper, making negative, inverted images on Fujiflex Crystal Archive paper. Each print is unique and cannot be duplicated. Chiara filters the light to control its temperature and alter the color spectrum. As he says, "I have been particularly interested in negatives that also display qualities of a positive photograph even though the light and shadow is reversed."

The results are startling. Black-and-white negatives have a certain consistency — we can imagine what they will look like as positives, and vice versa. But we are not always attuned to where colors stand in relation to one another on the spectrum, in particular their oppositions, so that color negatives can be disorienting. They set us down in what can seem at first like alien terrain, where our expectations dissolve.

That suggestion of other worlds runs through Chiara's photographs. The skies are red, yellow, green or impenetrably black. The more Modernist and unadorned the architecture, the more it appears like a setting in a comic book; you fully expect to see a caped figure zooming by. The conjunction of the skies and the high-rises can at times look full-on apocalyptic. How often have we seen red skies on science-fiction paperback covers? And how many times did filmmakers of the black-and-white era employ a rapid flicker from positive to negative and back as a shorthand way of conveying the impact of an atomic blast? That the images are depopulated does not help to deter that sort of anxiety.

But there is a great deal more to these pictures than speculative musings. They also show the architecture of Manhattan in a literally new light, allowing the viewer to appreciate things often taken for granted. The shots of Midtown display to full advantage the effects of the 1916 Zoning Resolution, which mandated setbacks every so many stories to allow light to penetrate the street. That makes the buildings appear like Cyclopean staircases, or, as Rem Koolhaas put it, "a gigantic enlargement of the original Dutch gable house." The tenement backsides of East Houston Street — exposed when the street was widened in the 1930s and the buildings on the north side were demolished — are ennobled, their fire escapes converted into lacy balconies. Here, as elsewhere, the vegetation, which in this case consists of London plane trees, becomes a misty, reflective tangle.

New Yorkers often give scant notice to the many aspirational Greeces and Romes that lurk overhead, because they are now shouted by taller, shinier things behind them and to the sides. The impact of the Beaux-Arts style resonates in New York buildings from the 1880s to at least 1920, when ornamentation abounded, aiming to instill lofty classical ideals in the passer-by (the Modernist style that came after was strictly business, whether designed by Communists or capitalists). In Chiara's photos, the ambitious facades of the late-19th and early-20th centuries are fully delineated, with every cornice, pillar, portico, archway, turret, capital and entablature brought into relief. He also emphasizes the solidity of the city's infrastructure, not just the silhouette of the Manhattan Bridge supports but the pedestrian overpass on West Street leading to Stuyvesant High School, as serious as a railroad trestle, and the abutment of the Manhattan Bridge, which looks like the gateway to Babylon or Lyonesse.

Chiara's lens is invariably pointed up, taking in the tops of his subjects. His is an unabashed admirer's stance, in thrall to size and hubris, although he imparts that sense of wonder even to five-story working-class apartment buildings more than a century old. Not so many years ago you could see small knots of tourists in Midtown, their heads tilted back, their mouths open, agape at the splendor of the skyscrapers. That feeling of awe has now become scarce, as every crossroads on the planet has built its own glass-and-steel business district, and today's consumers are often too jaded or too absorbed in their phones to take a look around. Chiara, renewing our appreciation for the architectural fantasies that lie far above our customary line of sight, may inspire us to once again cast our gazes upward.

John Chiara is a photographer based in San Francisco. He has a solo exhibition at Yossi Milo Gallery opening on Sept. 6. Luc Sante is an author, most recently of "The Other Paris." His last article for the magazine was a First Words column about "random."

