

## *Face to Face*

Robert Bonazzi, author of *Maestro of Solitude: Poems and Poetics* and *Man in the Mirror: John Howard Griffin and the Story of Black Like Me*

While it will be impossible to overlook the art of portraiture evident in the fifty large black and white photographs by Michael Nye at the Witte Museum, the photographer is otherwise erased from the subtle naturalness of these powerful images.

Rather, *About Hunger and Resilience* is inhabited by the faces we gaze into while their voices relate their own stories (heard via headphones). Like Nye's last Witte exhibition (*Fine Line: Mental Health/Mental Illness*), this one depends on the viewer's openness and empathy. We enter a dimly-lit spiritual sanctuary with each station presenting a self-contained, unique encounter. The effect of peering into exquisitely detailed portraits and hearing such authentic voices will compel us to forget our socialized preconceptions. The participants do not speak in the cliché of the victim, but document, in human terms, daunting circumstances often beyond their control. Nye writes: "These stories are not intended to summarize or explain anyone's life," since "explanations and solutions are profoundly complex."

One can see why Nye was moved by what he calls "the human presence" in these lives. He traveled around America for more than four years, spending three days with each person, listening with an open mind before making photographs. This astonishing exhibit reveals faces in unselfconscious reflection rather than subjects captured in a dramatic moment. In search of a "longer moment," as Nye puts it, we can witness instants of unfolding illumination into a reality about which we know only slogans. It is not a strategy to win a political argument, but an artistic process that does not judge. "Everyone in this exhibit knows something important and valuable, a wisdom about their experience that only they know," writes Nye, for when it comes to understanding such personal disclosures, he believes they are the teachers and we are their students.

The reasons for hunger are legion, and anxiety has spiked since formerly middleclass workers have lost jobs and homes. How close to food insecurity are more families to the margin of sustainability? A catastrophic illness or serious accident can bring down a family without sufficient health insurance. Natural disasters have created exiled communities of the homeless and hungry, whose situations have been exacerbated by mental illness, alcohol and substance addictions, crime, incarceration, and the loss of dignity. For many, hunger is not only a present reality that carries past baggage, but also a tangible fear of future hunger.

For those who have been malnourished for years—one participant describes hunger as "your belly rubbing against your backbone"—they experience desperation, loss of vitality, and deep depression daily. Many have been supported by food banks, soup kitchens, charities and churches that include the generosity of countless volunteers; but these are stop-gap measures that do not effect the roots of the larger crisis that has expanded with the recession and the phenomenal growth of agribusiness that has moved

small farms off the American map.

There are heart-breaking comments made by the participants in this exhibit, including one recording that is an anthology of voices responding to the question of what do they hunger for beyond food? The responses are varied, telling, and basic: Acceptance, to understand why, for meaning in life, for being heard, for knowledge, for the optimism to keep on living, and for wisdom. "I have felt with even a greater conviction that we all need to speak of the essential needs of our human family," writes Nye. "These stories are about all of us as we live with our uncertainties and the realization that we too could experience hunger." Being confronted face to face with the universality of suffering due to hunger, we cannot dismiss them as "others" who deserve their fate.

"Hunger is an issue of human rights," declares Nye, and we would be human *and* right to agree. While we hear a humane "documentary" in these recorded voices, Nye's magnificent portraits are true works of empathy and art.