



Staten Island Advance

True 'GRIT' on Staten Island: Photographer Michael Hanulak snaps Gotham in all its sexy, sleazy glory

By [Michael J. Fressola](#)

January 27, 2013 at 7:50 AM, updated January 27, 2013 at 7:51 AM



"Man on the Staten Island Ferry," by Michael Hanulak, is one of the images featured in the "New York GRIT" exhibit.

New York GRIT:

The urban photography of Michael Hanulak

Where: Staten Island Museum Library & Archives, Bldg. H, Snug Harbor Cultural Center & Botanical Garden 1000 Richmond Terr., Livingston; [Snug-Harbor.org](#).

When: Tuesday-Saturday, 1-4 p.m.; Sunday & Monday, closed; through Dec. 31.

How much: Admission is free.

More information: Visit [StatenIslandMuseum.org](#) for additional details.

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. — In his nearly 50-career as a photographer, Michael Hanulak (1937-2011) shot some bold-face names, people like the singer Etta James and the trumpet player Dizzy Gillespie. He liked jazz and spent time in clubs.

But he was even more interested in the unnamed stars of the open-air circus that is New York: Gay marchers in pride parades, Village Halloween revelers, cross-dressers, junkies, AIDS demonstrators, colorful commuters, vagrants, the deranged and the misfortunate.

“New York GRIT,” a small, 15-print selection, finds the Silver Lake-based photographer taking a close look at some pointed juxtapositions.

In one set-up — it can’t have been completely accidental — a bare-breasted, in-your-face young lesbian and a prim little church lady are side-by-side, probably at a pride march. Could two people be more different?

There’s humor and ambiguity in this pairing. And who’s to say, by the way, the old lady isn’t in costume?



Michael Hanulak

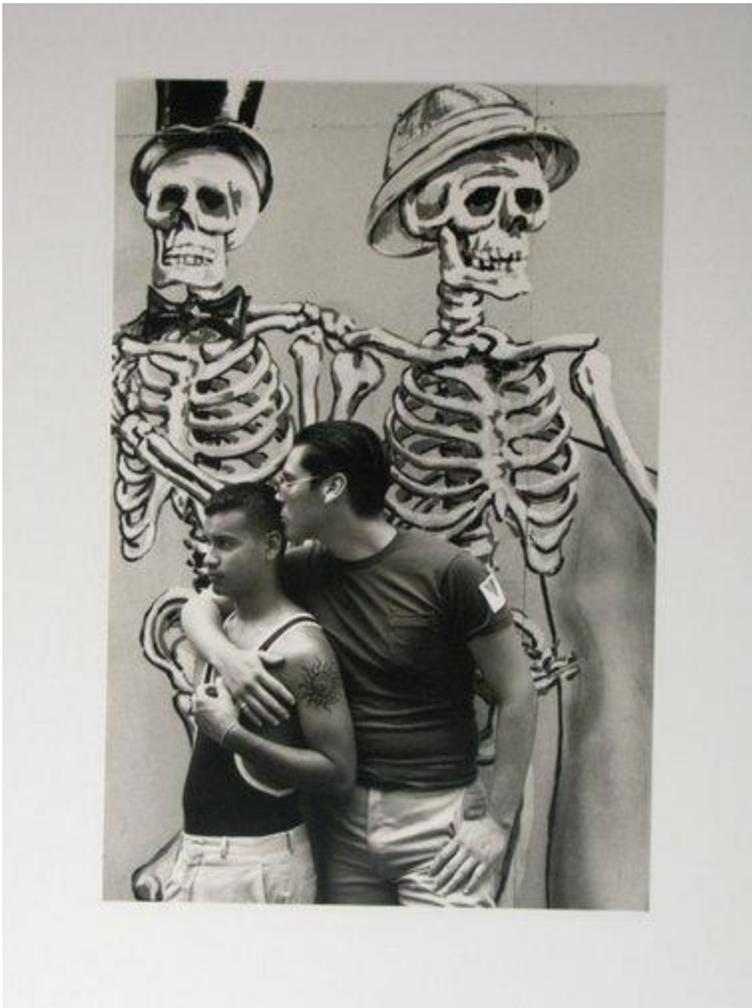
Hanulak had a meticulous eye for effective composition. He knew how to print (all of the “GRIT” photos are silver-gelatin prints) and he was an inveterate storyteller. It’s not surprising to learn that he had a relationship with two celebrated agencies, Magnum and Black Star.

He knew that viewers and editors appreciate a simple story related dramatically. Typically his method involves contrast, like the grandma and the demonstrator.

But subtext-free bravura appealed to him too. A 1992 photograph depicts the drag queen Sybil Bruncheon (a.k.a. John Burke) parading on Fifth Avenue in a gleaming gown crowned with a spiky Miss Liberty-style coronet. This widely reprinted photograph is pure street glamour, without politics.

Like many Islanders, Hanulak rode the ferry a lot. Terrific material presented itself there, as it still does. One afternoon he shot a giddy-looking character in a clerical collar, looking right into the lens, with a ghostly Statue of Liberty in the distance.

Another time, he photographed two riders, a disheveled man and a little fair-haired girl who is resting her head on his knee. An odd, grown up expression plays across the child’s face. Her companion looks hung-over, fried, or ill, perhaps. No matter what, it’s disturbing situation.



Two men with skeleton background. (Photo Courtesy of Michael Hanulak)

Hanulak found a seemingly endless font of material in the city's gay community, which became increasingly loud and proud in the 1970s following the victory at the Stonewall Inn in 1969. But just 15 years later, the party turned furious and grief-wracked with the arrival of AIDS.

He shot the early demonstrations in which the ad-hoc agitators of Act Up railed against the city's too-slow response to the epidemic.

Those are the news aspects of the era. But, on a different level, AIDS represented a perverse collision of love and death: How could a photograph describe that menacing combination?

Hanulak found it — or again, maybe he orchestrated it — in an art gallery, when two affectionate young guys paused under a brash painting (possibly a Basquiat) of Grim Reapers, a pair of grinning, dancing skeletons.

Michael J. Fressola is the arts editor for the Advance. He may be reached fressola@siadvance.com.