

FFOTO

Ruth Kaplan: Bathers

"Bathers" explores the social theatre of communal bathing, a ritual that is both private and public. Ruth Kaplan's journey began in the nudist hot springs of California in 1991. By participating in the baths, she gradually became accepted and could make photographs of fellow bathers, occupying the dual roles of voyeur and participant.

From California, she travelled to eastern Europe seeking a more traditional form of the practice in the spa towns of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, and Romania. Later, Kaplan ventured to higher-tech spas in Germany, France, Italy, and Denmark, completing the series in 2002 at Moroccan hamams and Icelandic hot springs.

Hedonism, decadence, sensuality, innocence, and social bonding were some of the underlying themes that emerged, but what drew Kaplan to the baths was the powerful physicality, the way in which people manifested themselves through their bodies, and the psychological presence they evoked. The waters became a backdrop to this exploration.

With the migration from analog to digital that took hold during the 1990s, and escalating concerns surrounding individual privacy, these photographs have come to stand as a unique document of a subject difficult to photograph at the best of times, but nearly impossible to achieve currently without staging them. Along with the bizarre juxtapositions of body and place that sometimes occurred, these images reveal and celebrate the experience of immersion, physicality, and transcendence.

Ruth Kaplan is a documentary-based photographer whose work explores a variety of themes such as the social behaviour of bathers in communal hot springs, congregants participating in rituals of spirituality, and most recently refugees living in shelters along the Canadian-American border as they await decisions on their pending status. Her work integrates still photographs and video. She has exhibited internationally and is represented by the Stephen Bulger Gallery. Her editorial work can be found in Canadian and international publications. She has received numerous grants and awards, and is currently a photography instructor in Toronto, Canada.