

Photographs by
Janet Delaney

Words by
Lisa O'Kelly



Three Young Women, 1985
'I focused my camera quite often on the young women of the Mission district. They stood out with all of their plumage. The style of the 1980s was flamboyant in both colour and scale; big hair and big, colourful clothes. It was not uncommon to see young women just this age, dressed in high heels pushing baby strollers.'

A people's parade on the streets of San Francisco

When a spirit of protest took hold of the Golden Gate city in 1981, Janet Delaney was there to capture it. Today, as her images are collected in a book – and with civil liberties once again under fire in the US – she talks about her work

In 1981, at the start of the Reagan years, photographer Janet Delaney decamped from the South of Market – or SoMa – neighbourhood in her beloved San Francisco, where she had lived since her teens, to a new home in the Mission district. Aged just 29, she had spent the previous few years documenting social change and gentrification in SoMa. "I was using a large format camera on a tripod, so I had to put my head under a black cloth to take a photograph, which made me feel very conspicuous," she says. "It was kind of formal."

She wanted a more "fluid" experience of street life, and in Mission that is exactly what she

got. It was a turbulent time and protests and parades were playing an increasingly important part in the daily life of the primarily Latino district, which was also home to sizeable gay and African American communities.

"We were responding to a radical change in political perspective not unlike what we are feeling now," says Delaney, speaking from her home in Berkeley, California, just across San Francisco bay. "Anyone who, like me, came of age during the age of Aquarius, the summer of love, the ever hopeful 70s, was just thrown off balance by the 180-degree political shift that happened as the Reagan era came in. In San Francisco there was

a really strong backlash against the invasion of countries such as Nicaragua and Grenada. People were angry that Star Wars was using up a huge amount of money, abortion rights were being cut back and Reagan was refusing to provide funds towards finding a cure for Aids. So it was not dissimilar to the rollback of civil liberties we are experiencing again under Trump. There was plenty to talk about and parading, marching and protesting was one of the main ways to do it. We didn't have the internet then."

Delaney, who began her career taking photographs in war-torn Central America, found herself

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All images
courtesy Janet
Delaney/MACK

Young Men With Beer and Music, 1986

'These guys had probably just been out, strolling through one of those street fairs. It looks like they are preparing for an evening out, with their six-packs. What was so wonderful about boomboxes then was that while you might be annoyed by other people's music blasting out, at least you would be sharing an experience, as opposed to everyone being siloed in their own curated stream.'



Dancers on Stage, 1984

'This was a summer street fair on 24th Street. Local people would put stages up and musicians would play, poets would read and dancers would dance. This couple were presenting their dance. There would be food, burritos, and churches would hold their fundraisers. People would be registered to vote and political issues would be aired – Aids, anti-nuclear issues and so on would come up for debate.'



Crowd Waiting, 1986

'These people are waiting for a parade. I wasn't a press photographer but I'd go out with the press pack – I could do that then. Now you can't do anything without

security clearance. Notice how no one has a camera. Today everybody would have a cellphone. I don't make photographs in that context any more – they don't need me.'



Boy With Transformer, 1986

'This was taken at the Martin Luther King parade. That transformer is a nice metaphor for the transformation that was happening all around us. The fact that he has it on his head is so childlike – he's

saying, I want to be bigger, make me bigger, transform me. And the slightly older boys in the background add a touch of menace. Having said that, there was an incredible sense of optimism and enthusiasm that day. It was a particularly powerful moment.'



Two Schoolgirls, Mission Street, 1985

'This would have been taken after school, judging by the light. These girls are in Catholic school uniform. I think the shadow has such a powerful, ominous feeling to it. I always find it interesting when girls

are just turning. They are not kids any more, they are adolescents, but they are still wearing their uniform. They have socks on. It's how they manage their uniform that is so interesting. The girl with the makeup and the earrings is really into that transitional phase.'

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taking to the streets of Mission whenever she had a spare moment, with a smaller, less conspicuous camera slung around her neck. This allowed her to move almost invisibly through the crowds. "I was really enamoured of the parades and protests and the spirit they encapsulated. And with the smaller camera – it was a twin-lens reflex like the one Diane Arbus used – I could just sidle up to people and take a photograph. It was an exercise in relaxing a bit, just recording what was going on around me and taking it in," Delaney says.

Now published together for the first time, her photographs lead us in and out of crowds, through demonstrators, street parties, dancers, cross-dressers, union organisers, beauty contestants and Bible-toting Christian children. Gay men in girl scout uniforms protest against the contras. Mothers and children march for "Peace, Jobs and Justice". Among them, Delaney finds intimate moments as well as collective voices.

Surprisingly, Delaney never intended the photographs to be published. "I was really just taking them as an act of love for

my neighbourhood, as you might document a family, and then putting them away," she says. For two decades, during which she married, raised two children and pursued other projects, they lay in a box, which ended up in the attic of her Berkeley home. They were rescued only recently, alongside her SoMa photographs – now also published in book form – when she bought a state-of-the-art scanner capable of turning them into digital files.

Why publish now? "It seems to me that the concerns of the Reagan era have returned," she says. "The parallels are remarkable. Here we are, post-Obama, which was probably one of the more hopeful periods in our history, once again feeling as if the rug has been pulled out from under our feet."

As the anger has returned, so too have the protests and parades. But do they make a difference? Delaney thinks so. "I can't run the numbers but I think the purpose of protests is manifold, not least of which is to enervate the people who are in them and to generate a collective sense of responsibility so that we are not just isolated in our own worlds."

Public Matters by Janet Delaney is published by Mack, £30