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HAS SPENT THE LAST DECADE FOLLOWING THE TRADITIONAL TRAVELING CARNIVALS. HER PROJECT HAS CULMINATED IN A NEW BOOK: *CARNY AMERICANA ON THE MIDWAY*.

Unlike many photographers who seem surprised to find their casual projects turning into long-term projects, Virginia Lee Hunter's explorations tend to start out ambitiously. She usually begins with a question that she doesn't know the answer to. In the case of her American carnival odyssey, she was curious to know what the carnival means in contemporary society, and who the modern carnival worker is. So she dove right in during the summer of 1996, plotting a course with two traveling carnivals through a four-state region. Later, curious about regional differences, she expanded her travels to explore carnivals in other parts of the country.

For many reasons, some of them practical and some emotional, the project took her a decade, far longer to complete than she had ever anticipated. For starters, of course, the work was relegated to the summers—carnival season. She also made the decision to finance the project herself, which meant that

The challenge for Hunter was maintaining a consistent point of view without repeating herself. The other obstacle she faced was gaining the trust of the carnival workers who are suspicious of outsiders. The carnivals and locations are not identified in any of the images.

"A personal project can become more than just the images amassed," says Hunter. "It becomes a part of one's identity, and that can be hard to let go."

some years June would come along and she would have other commitments to honor, or she wouldn't have the funds. She also bumped up against a deeper reluctance at times.

She would go out for three to six weeks at a time, which she describes as an awfully long time to be in the environment. The problem was not that the carnival lost its allure, exactly. But night after night, she would train her lens on exactly the same tents rising against the same night sky, and the same gaudy lights on the same games.

Since the project was drawn out over such a long period, she also faced the challenge of maintaining a consistent point of view without repeating herself. "I think I got better and better at seeing the same kinds of imagery," she says. "There are some variations in the work, but I don't think it looks fragmented." She started out shooting 35mm film, considered switching, to digital some way into the project, but in the end stuck with the purity of the original form.

Winning the trust of the carnival workers and—especially—the owner posed its own challenges. "Carnival people are pretty leery of anyone with a camera," she says. "The family-owned carnivals are diminishing, being re-

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Born in 1960 in St. Louis, Virginia Lee Hunter does what might be termed classic street photography, except that she rarely does it on the street. She has undertaken her own long-term projects, most notably the series "Views from a Boxcar" and her recently published book *Carny: Americana on the Midway*, the culmination of a decade of summers traveling across the country with carnival shows. An accompanying documentary movie called *Carny*, co-directed with Canadian filmmaker Alison Murray, will have its debut on the Sundance Channel this year. Having recently returned to St. Louis after living in L.A., she strings for the *L.A. Times*, does editorial portrait photography and teaches photography at the University of Missouri in St. Louis.

placed by big corporations." As a result, she explains, many show owners are trying to change the image of the carnival. "Although they hire people who may be disenfranchised from mainstream society, they don't necessarily want that in public view in a book." Hunter therefore went out of her way to honor the owners' privacy by never identifying the carnivals in the photos.

Along the way she had to figure out what to do with the huge archive of images and stories she amassed. She realized that only a book would be big enough to hold it all, so in 2003 she began putting out feelers. She felt lucky to find publisher Nan Richardson at Umbrage Editions, who not only accepted the book, but also helped edit it.

Virginia Lee Hunter started the project in 1996, plotting a course with two traveling carnivals. She was curious to find out what the carnival means in contemporary society, and who the modern carnival worker is.

What kept Hunter going all those summers when it would have been so much easier to stay home in L.A. and take on nice, finite, bill-paying assignments? "I spent so much time and effort and these people believed in me," she says. "When I set out and introduced myself and my intentions, I felt like I had a commitment to them, whether they think of it in that manner or even remember me. I also wanted to honor the commitment to myself."

In the later years, Hunter admits to feeling a little sheepish when friends and associates would ask if she was still working on that project, with emphasis on the "still." But she found it wasn't so easy to let the experience go. "Besides the financial aspects that can drag a personal project on longer than perhaps necessary is the wondering if every image or direction has been made... how does one know if one's truly captured the purest essence of that personal project? Has every layer been unveiled and photographed as best it deserves? A personal project can become more than just the images amassed. It becomes a part of one's identity, and that can be difficult to let go of."