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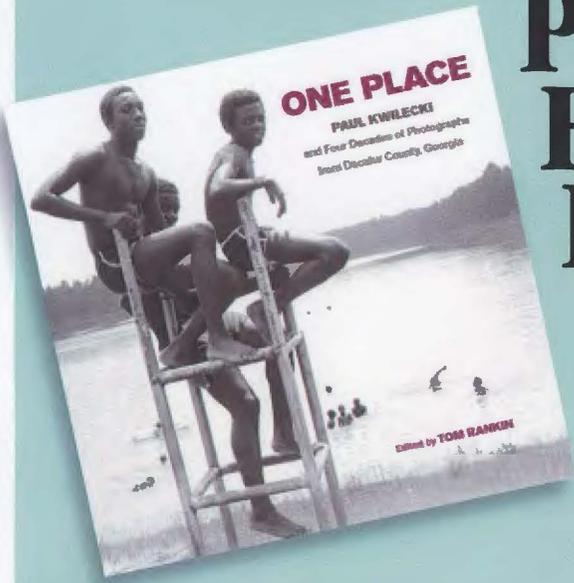
ONE PLACE:

PAUL KWILECKI AND FOUR DECADES OF PHOTOGRAPHS FROM DECATUR COUNTY, GEORGIA

book talk by

Tom Rankin

Center for Documentary Studies
Duke University



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About One Place: Paul Kwilecki and Four Decades of Photographs from Decatur County, Georgia

I know of no single body of images with a reach, resonance, and singular community focus to match what Paul Kwilecki accomplished with his photographs of Decatur County, Georgia. Within his broad, but still narrow, sweep of time, Kwilecki photographed spaces and activities of ordinary southern life that few photographers have found alluring—shopping, mundane goings-on at the courthouse, rituals of the junior-senior prom, and leisure-time activities like fishing—but he also made many more expected, yet profound, images of baptisms along the Flint River and laborers in the field at harvest time. For all of Paul’s near-academic study and forethought in his work as a documentary photographer, his approach was passionate, instinctive, and personal. He strived toward a coherent aesthetic and a cultural document even as he was fully aware that photographers are driven first by their own inclinations and interests, their own hearts. Kwilecki’s brilliance, ultimately, was his ability to blend these varying impulses together as he fixed the content of home within his photographic frame.

Paul and I talked long and often about the best way to present his life’s work, always returning to the idea and need for a relatively big book. The story always called for a structure that emphasized time, charting his course from beginning to the end. The photographs, then, are organized (loosely) in the order they were taken, revealing the gradual transition of both the place that is Decatur County and also the natural evolution of both Paul’s artistic vision and his own understanding of his goals as a photographer. I adhered to this concept in editing *One Place*. I wanted to create a sense of chronology while also keeping some of Paul’s series on particular subjects intact. Despite any slight disruptions in “actual” time, the book begins in the earliest years of the 1960s, when Paul’s documentary work really began, and ends in the first year of the twenty-first century, when he essentially stopped making photographs.

Writing about Decatur County and about thoughts, and the context of his images, to paper, editing and re-editing his words over and over. Paul and I were in complete accord that his words should accompany his photographs, but it wasn’t until after his death in 2009 that Iris Tillman Hill and I really began to read his writing with the book in mind. We drew on a variety of sources—from early letters he wrote to people such as David Vestal in the 1960s to excerpts from his Guggenheim Fellowship grant proposals to entries from a darkroom data journal he kept from the mid-1960s through 1973. The language Paul uses in the journal, which was not written with publication in mind, is Paul Kwilecki was a collector of many things—photographs, poetry, art books, music, movies, and a lot of nonfiction literature—but at the core of his “collection” were his own writings. He was meticulous in saving all of his correspondence, including his own letters. In the early years,

he made carbon copies; later on, photocopies. Even when he contributed his voluminous correspondence with David Vestal to his collection at the Archive of Documentary Arts at Duke, he had the library make a duplicate set, which he kept at his Bainbridge office. This comprehensive archive is a cherished gem—akin to having a set of audio recordings that capture his changing voice through the years. Just as his photographs chart the gradual shifts of the place he chose to live—and by extension changes in the American South—his writings map his journey as a photographer, husband, father, and the evolution of his thoughts, aspirations, and interpretations of his own photography.

“I confine myself to the place I was born and raised,” Kwilecki once said, “not as an arbitrary discipline or to prove that subjects worthy of photographs exist everywhere and in abundance, though it is true that they do, but because Decatur County is home, and I know it from my special warp, having been both nourished and wounded by it.” The sentiments in this complex statement guide my treatment of the shape and story of his work, always with the hope of revealing Paul’s “special warp,” what he saw and felt and thought, in time, in one small yet infinite space.

While Kwilecki never left home as so many artists and documentarians have, he sought ways around the constraints and repetitions of his own house and yard, the family he was born into, the hardware store he was destined to run. He was an eternally curious adventurer in a small place, however restless and reluctant he may have been about his choice to stay close to home. “There’s no such thing as a simple life,” he said. “Everyone wakes up in the morning not knowing what’s going to happen to him. Everyone has anxieties. It’s the fate of human beings. That’s what I’m interested in—how they cope with it.” of its time and place, and also changed with the times—still, there are moments, amid all of Paul’s elegant phrases, that may seem awkward and dated, part of a now-cold and unchangeable past. I chose to include excerpts from this journal because they so clearly reveal Paul’s growth and development as a documentary artist.

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