

LARRY FINK

THE SOCIAL GRACES OF BOXING

There is much to be said for having feet simultaneously in several camps, and all of it good: academia, fashion, magazines and the art world. Larry Fink has been doing just that for well on 35 years now, and his enthusiasm for teaching, working on assignment and making photographs for show has never waned..

The American liberal arts college system, with its emphasis on real practitioners who teach while also being free to take time off on their own work, is a major factor. Fink teaches at Bard College in the vicinity of legendary steel towns Allentown and Bethlehem in the state of Philadelphia, the blue collar rust belt brought to the big screen by *The Deerhunter* and to photographic notoriety by Walker Evans during his wanderings across the American landscape during the Depression for the federal government's Resettlement Administration, whose documentary projects through the 30s formed the way we think of that era.

Given his working class roots and affiliation, it comes as no surprise that the one sport Fink has chosen to photograph is the most blue collar of them all: boxing. As eloquent a writer as he is opinionated a speaker, in his essay for his latest book *Boxing* Fink states that "the excessive opposites active in and latent within the sport drew me in."

"I found a world so rife with anecdote and pathos, so full of contradictions as to be a world within itself," he writes, then quotes Katherine Dunn from an article in leftist

magazine *Mother Jones*, "A boxing gym is a place where men are allowed to be kind to one another. Anyone there will gently wipe any other man's face with a towel, fix his helmet straps, tie his shoes, massage his tense shoulders.... This tender, respectful nurturing is absolutely necessary because of one magical ingredient of the game: the gloves."

"Without that being said there is only bloodshed and brutality," Fink concludes. These are potent images residing within words and photographs, boxers pummeling each other mercilessly with hands bound into softly padded clubs until bone breaks or spirit is broken. *Pumpf, pumpf, pumpf... craaaack*. The victor's club-fisted arms are raised by the ref as the sweat pours and glistens, and the defeated slinks off to double over in his corner. Brian damage, broken noses, cauliflower ears and sometimes death, these are the workaday wages of the toilers in the ring.

Such are the contradictions inherent in boxing, the 'sweet science,' the 'artful art' of enthusiasts like the Marquess of Queensberry, Wilde's persecutor. Fink more frequently photographs other subjects, the backstage world of high fashion, the people of his homeplace Martin's Creek, artists over 65 and still working, the antics of the upper classes.

Whoever his client, whatever his subject, Fink casts upon it a sensibility formed by the triumphalism then disillusion of the American left, now transformed into a dualism accepting of the existence of pure evil but seeking the good that outweighs it. 🧠