

STEVEN
KASHER
GALLERY

photograph

Photo Books

by Vince Aletti

Two of my favorite recent books are all about the impact of the double-page spread. Stephen Shames's *Bronx Boys* (University of Texas Press) and *Jesus, Make-up and Football* by the Belgian photographer Frederik Buyckx (Lannoo) were made by photographers who immersed themselves in vivid, often violent environments – New York's meanest streets, Rio de Janeiro's "pacified" favelas – and came back with pictures that have the authenticity, immediacy, and serrated edge of cinema vérité. Stretched across two pages, their images give crowded rooms and circumscribed lives wide-screen scope. Shames's Bronx project started in 1977 with an assignment from *Look* magazine and continued for more than 20 years with regular and occasionally extended visits with the kids he'd come to think of as family (two of them contribute autobiographical accounts to the book). That connection – a mix of affection and anxiety – gives the work a complicated tension that takes it well beyond conventional photojournalism. "I'm not here, just be you," he told his subjects, and that fly-on-the-wall approach yields some astonishing pictures of what Shames describes as an "urban moonscape of quick pleasures and false hope." There's love among the ruins, and plenty of rough-housing camaraderie, but this is the real hard-knock life in all its gritty detail: drugs, guns, beat-downs. Bruce Davidson's brilliant *East 100th Street* (1970) provided an early model for the engaged photographer, but Shames's work is considerably more kinetic, with an insider's intimacy that's closer to Larry Clark, Danny Lyon, and the Luis Buñuel of *Los Olvidados*. All this is conveyed in a terrific series of black-and-white photographs that, even when they get swallowed up by the gutter, have a remarkable balance of compression and sprawl.