

The Big Picture

By Fran Ward

This exhibition of photographs is called "Corapeake: A Small Community on the Verge of Change." It has big pictures. At the entrance to the Hampton University Museum, a larger than life photograph of a person invites us to see Corapeake. It is Aunt Sarah, we learn, as we set foot in the gallery. Her close-up enlargement (4' x 4') shows every physical detail. We see facial features and feel a depth of compassion evoked. This woman has seen it all, heard it all, and has felt it all to the core of her being. Looking at Aunt Sarah, we feel we are in the presence of an archetype. She is not old but ageless. She is an elder of elegance, grace and wisdom.

She is our first contact with Corapeake, North Carolina, near the Great Dismal Swamp. She is the hostess inviting us to see her world. And we are given a close look of lasting impressions of a place where life was not easy, yet is remembered fondly: "Those were the golden days."

We tour the Gates County village through 50 masterful photographs captured by artist Kendall Messick who first visited Corapeake in 1995 with his friend Brenda Parker Hunt who lived there until she was seven. Messick, inspired by the locals, developed a project to retell their stories. For seven years he collected facts and memories through pictures and interviews, compiled journals and embellished them with their autographs and personal mementoes.

The first photo he took was a clothesline with a background of crops and a rustic building. He took thousands of 35mm film images since. Every picture is artful. The magic is that his photographic gift is not featured. There is no ego in the exhibi-

tion. There is only the purity of the subjects photographed. Messick became so familiar to everyone, the subjects are not self-conscious. Even sitting to have their picture taken, they are not posing. They are living. Through his lens, we catapult into the heart of Corapeake. And we see its soul.

As we walk from picture to picture, we see rural life. Moving from one section to

the next, we see a common denominator of humanity progressing from one stage of life to the next. The details in every culture will vary. It is the big picture that makes what we see universal. Corapeake is representative of all places of all times.


The black and white still photographs (silver gelatin fiber prints) are beautiful com-

positions on handmade rag paper with a collage border of newspaper (from 1912-1956) found in an abandoned Corapeake home where they had been used for wallpaper. He selected each newspaper border to match the subject of the photo.

Accompanying the photographs, Messick's creative documentary film "Corapeake" (DVD) dovetails color video clips, still photographs and voices of the residents as they reminisce:

"My first Sunday shoes were black patent leather dress shoes and they cost 98 cents. I thought so much of them. I shined them so much, I rubbed the skin off."

"Daddy would say, 'Boys, I got to keep you out of school. We got some plowing to do.'"

Leaving the gallery, we acknowledge that the exhibition contains details of one community, but we recognize that there is "The Big Picture." The people of Corapeake have lived their lives determined to do their best. They are the personification of dignity. 



*"Corapeake:
A Small Community on the
Verge of Change"*
Through November 23
Hampton University
Museum
727-5308