



Coffee with Kitty, 1979

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Photographer Larry Racioppo captures the lives (and deaths) of his aunt and uncle in 'Kitty and Lucky'

By MICHAEL J. FRESSOLA / STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

With such photogenic relatives, it's easy to see why Larry Racioppo shoots his family. They are naturals.

Even more useful, they were nearby. Much of the clan — his father's side and his mother's — lived within 20 blocks of each other in south Brooklyn when he was growing up.

He spent a lot of time as a kid, he said last week, "traveling between grandmothers." When he first picked up a camera nearly 40 years ago, in his early 20s, there was built-in material — dramatic, funny, sad, idiosyncratic — in every direction.

There were family dinners and get-togethers, coffee-and-cake nights in the living room, feasts and street festivals, holidays, funerals, christenings, weddings and sidewalk melodramas.

It wasn't until recently that he realized just what was there.

Racioppo, now represented in a dozen local collections (including the Brooklyn Museum, Museum of the City of New York and College of Staten Island), had just finished "The Word on the Street," a big one-man show at the Museum of Biblical Art.



Kitty and Lucky on stoop, 1972.



Kitty and Lucky playing poker, 1973



Kitty and her sisters at a funeral, 1971.

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY LARRY RACIOPPO

He was sorting through cartons of past work — prints, contact sheets and negatives — attempting to catalogue them by subject and time frame. When he stopped, he noticed that a favorite aunt and uncle were unusually well-represented.

That discovery led to "Kitty and Lucky: Photographs of My Aunt Concetta and Uncle Augustine," a love story on several levels, recently opened at the Garibaldi-Meucci Museum in Rosebank.

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'Kitty and Lucky: Photographs of My Aunt Concetta & Uncle Augustine'

When: Tuesday-Sunday, 1-5 p.m. Through Jan. 3, 2010.

Where: Garibaldi-Meucci Museum; 420 Tompkins Ave., Rosebank; 718-442-1608; www.garibaldimeuccimuseum.org

How much: Admission free



Above: Lucky laid to rest, 2001. Below: Kitty and Lucky in the light, 1979.

GARIBALDI

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Larry Racioppo shares the life (and death) of 'Kitty and Lucky'

It opens with a photograph Racioppo did not take: The hand-tinted, oval 1945 wedding portrait. The radiant bride has Hollywood (Hedy Lamarr) hair. She's looking calmly into the lens, but the slim, handsome groom looks ecstatic.

Time is kind to these two. Augustine, aka Lucky, keeps just about every strand of his thick, wavy hair. And dimpled Concetta/Kitty is good looking throughout, even in a shapeless house dress, curlers and no makeup.

Life-and-death occasions alternate with ordinary moments. Here's the camera, catching her through the window, a hand tucked under her chin. Here she is posing like a bathing beauty or mugging in her immaculate kitchen.

There's a great shot of Kitty and her three sisters, dressed for a funeral, lined up like chorus girls. Two look happy, maybe even giddy. The eldest of the four looks short-tempered and displeased.

Racioppo caught the affectionate Kitty and Lucky together at the front door of their house in 1979, holding hands and looking like teenagers (when they were in the late 40s).

He also caught a rare moment in which their customary composure seems slightly frayed. It was their daughter's wedding day in 1978.

Parallel to the family narrative, the photographs also are an informal picture book of working-class Italian-American urban life in the second half of the late 20th century.

There are shots of card playing, New Year's Day dinner and sidewalk life. Even today, in Italian-American sections of Brooklyn, people practically live on their stoops and sidewalks when the weather cooperates.

Racioppo didn't catch all of it though. Lucky and his friends used to sit in someone's parked car, all reading newspapers with the car doors open.



PHOTOS COURTESY LARRY RACIOPPO

"Kitty and Lucky: Photographs of my Aunt Concetta and Uncle Augustine," an exhibit of photographs by Larry Racioppo, is up at the Garibaldi-Meucci Museum through Jan. 3.

"I don't have a photo of it," he said last week. "I don't know why ... but I don't know why they did it either. I mean, they all had houses, living rooms, air conditioning, whatever. The women had the house I guess. The men were outside a lot."

Time moves quickly through the two dozen small photographs of "Kitty and Lucky." One day they are standing close together in the warm light that spills through a window.

There's no sentimentality in the set-up, but their clear-eyed resignation is just shattering: *Que sera sera*.

A shot of Kitty in 1992, with her daughter and newborn granddaughter is hardly recognizable. She's ill and looks skeletal. Shortly thereafter, she died.

Lucky lived another nine years. Racioppo used a panorama at his uncle's open-casket wake, capturing the whole polished width of the ornate parlor in the old-fashioned neighborhood funeral home.

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