



AMERICAN

**FOCUS  
ON BOOKS**

**LENS  
TUTORIAL**

# **PHOTO ONCAMPUS**

**MARCH  
2004**

**JEFFREY  
AARONSON:  
WINDOWS  
ON URBAN  
CULTURE**

**SHOOTING IRAQ:  
THE DIGITAL  
PHOTOJOURNALIST**





# JEFFREY AARONSON

MASTER





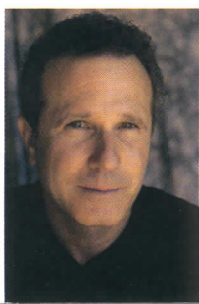
"Ta Bom Ties,"  
2003, one  
of Aaronson's  
40x60  
inkjet prints.

From Eugene Atget to Lee Friedlander, shooting through store windows is an abiding tradition among photographers. You might therefore conclude that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to create something new from such well-mined content. But Jeffrey Aaronson has done just that. His richly detailed photographs of New York City window displays and their myriad reflections—ready-made collages of “commerce, poverty, and patriotism,” as the photographer puts it—bring a new vividness and visual sophistication to the subject.

“I’ve taken pictures all over the world, in Beijing, Moscow, Tokyo, Johannesburg,” says the photographer, who shoots for *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Travel & Leisure*, and *Vanity Fair* magazines. “But the photographs I’ve been assigned to make never really conveyed how densely layered and complex these environments are.” Determined to capture that quality, Aaronson gave himself an assignment: to shoot the ever-changing storefronts of the world’s second-largest metropolis. His project quickly turned into an “obsession.”

To feed it, Aaronson, who lives in Aspen, Colorado, would plan his international assignments with long stopovers in New York, then wander its streets for days, camera in hand. “Everyone wondered why I was spending so much time in the city,” says the photographer, who actually rented a Manhattan apartment as a base for his shooting sprees. Aaronson kept the project secret for a year, never showing the work to anyone and owning up to it only when his colleagues began to doubt that he was really spending all that time visiting art directors and picture editors. Even when he was on paying assignments, his mind was often in New York. “*Smithsonian* would send me to Peru for ten days, and the whole time I was there I’d be thinking about getting

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When he isn't on assignment in faraway places, this *Time* photojournalist walks the streets of New York City making pictures that vividly reflect urban culture. **By Russell Hart**

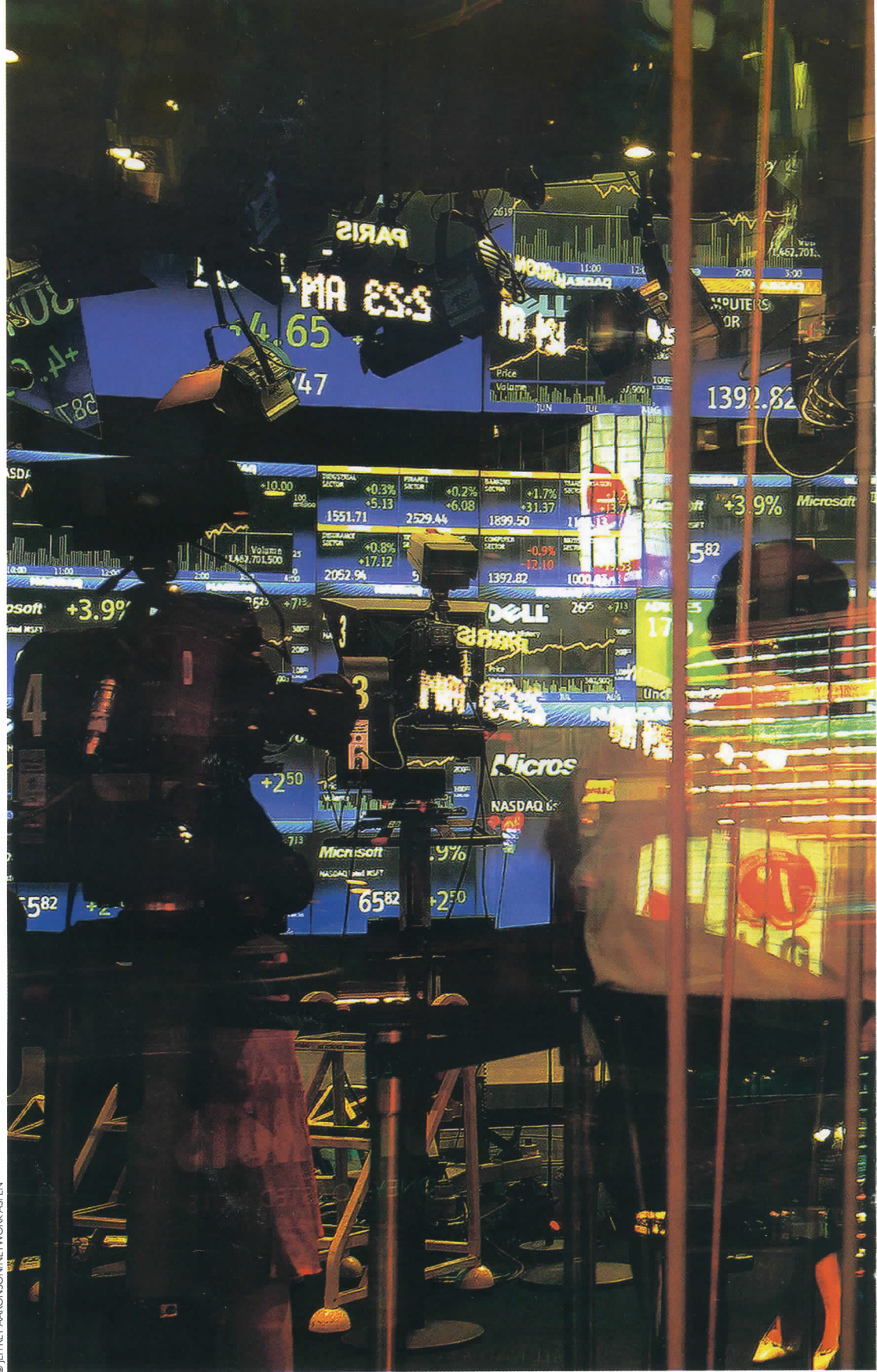


back to the city," he says. "My friends would scold me: 'Here you are in this exotic place and you're bummed out you're not doing your thing in New York.'"

Though the complex layering of Aaronson's urban photographs makes them look like they must have been digitally composited, they are in fact totally "straight." When Aaronson finally showed the work last fall at New York's Kashya Hildebrand Gallery (visit [kashyahildebrand.org](http://kashyahildebrand.org) to see more), some viewers refused to believe the pictures weren't manipulated. (The show still sold briskly, with three prints purchased by the CEO of Louis Vuitton.) But in Aaronson's breathtaking images, a carefully chosen point of view and the right lighting conditions do everything Photoshop might have done, and more. The photographer says he used image-editing software only for such time-honored techniques as dodging and burning in.

The pictures' acute detail comes not from large-format film but from the eleven million pixels of Canon's top-of-the-line digital SLR, the EOS-1Ds. The camera has double the resolution of most D-SLRs, and that image quality is all the more important because Aaronson makes his own 40x60-inch inkjet prints. (To get the most detailed "digital negative" possible, he shoots RAW files.) Viewers of the gallery show (which has since moved on to Geneva, where 19 prints were sold in the first week) were so dazzled by the prints' sharpness and brilliance that they often asked what camera the photographer had used, as if that were the secret.

In fact the main benefit of shooting digitally was that Aaronson could see his results on the spot, adjusting his angle and composition accordingly. Unlike Lee Friedlander, who usually managed to get his reflection or shadow in the picture, Aaronson wanted no trace of himself. "By reviewing the pictures right away on the camera's LCD screen I could make sure I wasn't in the shot," he says. "And sometimes a tiny shift in the camera position changed the whole relationship between the



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window and the reflections." (Aaronson often used a tripod so he would have that precise control.) Says Aaronson, with a bit of hesitation in his voice, "I probably never could

The complex layering of Aaronson's photographs makes them look digitally composited, but they are totally "straight."





have done this work with film.”

Aaronson recounts that he was shooting the windows of Bergdorf Goodman, a venerable Fifth Avenue department store, when the door-

man offered him some photographic advice. “He told me that a well-known Japanese photographer comes to shoot the windows each year, and that he knew from watching him

that I was doing it all wrong,” says Aaronson. “He told me I could only shoot at dusk, and I had to poke my lens through a big sheet of black board to cut out the reflections.” ■

“Nasdaq,”  
2002,  
another of  
Aaronson’s  
New York  
City window  
shots.