



Guide to the Max Belcher photographs, 1969-1998

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David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library

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Summary

Collection Title:

Max Belcher photographs, 1969-1998

Source:

Archive of Documentary Arts (Duke University)

Creator:

Belcher, Max

Abstract:

Max Belcher (1944-) is an American-born photographer with interests in portraiture, vernacular architecture, and racial and immigrant identity. This collection of his work comprises black-and-white and color contact sheets, study prints, and fine prints of Belcher's projects based in Canada, Liberia, the Dominican Republic, Israel, Vietnam, and the United States, in particular New York City, Massachusetts, and the Southern States. Three projects are well-represented in this collection: (1) American People: Portraits from the Philadelphia Community in the Dominican Republic, (2) Claiming Place: Biracial American Portraits, and (3) A Land and Life Remembered: Americo-Liberian Folk Architecture. Published catalogs of Belcher's work are also held in this repository and cataloged separately. Acquired as part of the Archive of Documentary Arts at Duke University.

Extent:

10 Linear Feet (48 boxes)

Language:

Materials in English

Collection ID:

RL.00098

Permalink:

<https://idn.duke.edu/ark:/87924/m1401w>

Preferred Citation

[Identification of item], Max Belcher photographs, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

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Background

Scope and Content

The photographs and printed materials in this collection date from 1969 to 1998, and document the work and career of photographer Max Belcher.

The core of the collection is the Photographs series, comprising 1,027 contact sheets (860 black-and-white, 167 color), 381 photographs (239 black-and-white, 142 color), and five color exhibit-quality fine prints, all spanning nearly three decades of Belcher's professional work as a photographer. The series is divided into 11 project-based subseries, which have been arranged in chronological order by the start date of each project. Within each subseries, contact sheets precede photographs, and black-and-white work precedes color. Individual items in the photography series bear specific technical and identifying information, usually marked by Belcher on the backs of contact sheets and photographs.

Topics include vernacular architecture, particularly in Liberia and the Southern U.S.; race identity in the U.S. and abroad; issues around immigrant identity, particularly in the Dominican Republic, Liberia, and the U.S.; and social conditions for African Americans and racially mixed people in the United States.

The smaller Printed Materials series consists of publicity, exhibit literature, and other materials related to Belcher's work as a photographer.

Biographical/Historical

Max Belcher was born in Philadelphia in 1944 to an African American father from North Carolina and a Jewish American mother of Polish/Lithuanian descent, born in rural Pennsylvania. In 1952 his father went to the Gold Coast at the invitation of the couple's wartime friend, Kwame Nkrumah, for what was meant to be an eight-week business trip. His father was to remain in Africa for the next four decades. By 1954, Belcher, Sr. had established himself in neighboring Liberia and had become a naturalized Liberian citizen; Max and his mother and sister then joined him.

At sixteen, Max Belcher began working in broadcasting as a staff announcer for the Liberian Broadcasting Corporation. By the time he left to go to school in the U.S. in 1964, his lived experience in Liberia, French Guinea and Sierra Leone, combined with his growing appreciation of the capacity of radio, television and film to inform and influence, made him aware of the need for the material and techniques required to disseminate practical information in a developing country, particularly on matters of public health, agricultural practice, child rearing, and road safety.

Belcher's plans were quickly thwarted by the escalation of the Vietnam War. Feeling that the draft was inevitable, Belcher enlisted in the U.S. Marines, serving as a radio and television broadcaster in the U.S. and at Armed Forces Radio and Television Service on Okinawa; and as a Marine Corps Combat Correspondent in Vietnam. After his tour of duty he settled in New York City, where he took a full-time job as a production assistant at NBC News and enrolled in college. He began his studies at Columbia University in 1968 but quickly transferred to the New School for Social Research, where a filmmaking instructor encouraged him to grow accustomed to seeing the world through the lens of a still camera. That training, initially intended to develop his skills as a filmmaker, introduced Belcher to the expressive potential of photography.

Continuing his liberal arts studies at the New School, he also enrolled in a photography class at the School of Visual Arts. At the same time he began shooting experimental photographs in and around New York City, often choosing friends, landscapes and local architecture as his subjects. Finishing his studies in 1970, he returned to Liberia in 1971, embarking on what would become his first major project as a professional photographer.

Since that time, Belcher's photographic interests in portraiture and vernacular architecture have developed in conjunction with the thematic exploration of racial identity, emigration and history that run through his work in Africa, Asia, North America, the Middle East, and the Caribbean. He has had numerous one-man shows in the eastern United States and has contributed to group exhibits group exhibits across the U.S. and in Canada, Italy, Chile, Vietnam, and Soviet Armenia. Belcher's photography is held both by private collectors and in the permanent collections of galleries and museums in the United States, Canada, and Vietnam. He has received major support from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Fulbright Scholars Program, the LEF Foundation, Massachusetts Cultural Council, the Kenan Charitable Trust, and programs of the National Endowment for the Arts. His publications include *House and Home: Spirits of the South* (1994), and *A Land and Life Remembered: Americo-Liberian Folk Architecture* (1988), both held by the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library. He has also taught black-and-white photography to beginning, intermediate and advanced students in Massachusetts, and has lectured on his work. He currently resides in Cambridge, Massachusetts with his wife.

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Arrangement

The collection is organized into two series: Photographs and Printed Materials. Project subseries in the Photography series are arranged by the start date of each project.

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Administrative Information

Publication Statement

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Access Restrictions

Five exhibition-quality prints from the project "American People: Portraits of the Philadelphia Community in the Dominican Republic" are restricted; there are photocopies of these prints available in box 41 for viewing purposes.

Exhibition and reproduction restrictions for all photographic components are outlined in the Conditions Governing Use section, as requested by the photographer.

Use Restrictions

The copyright interests in this collection have not been transferred to Duke University. For more information, consult the copyright section of the Regulations and Procedures of the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

Publishing requests should be directed to Mr. Belcher, who retains the copyright on all materials in this collection. Stipulations regarding the exhibition and reproduction of materials in the photography series vary according to the type of image in question, and are summarized below. The designation of specific images as professional, exhibition, study, reading-room-only or undesignated

images may be determined by consulting Mr. Belcher's notes on individual photographs and contact sheets.

Professional and Exhibition Images

Exhibition: Request permission from Mr. Belcher.

Reproduction: The Library may make viewing copies, photocopies or slides for the purposes of research, teaching, private study or scholarly illustration.

Study Images

Exhibition: May be used in exhibitions only within the Library itself, and only when appropriate language is used to describe the place of these study images within Mr. Belcher's oeuvre.

Reproduction: The Library may make viewing copies, photocopies or slides for the purposes of research, teaching, private study or scholarly illustration.

Reading-Room-Only and Undesignated Images

Exhibition: These images may not be exhibited within or beyond the Library at any time whatsoever.

Reproduction: Pen and ink renditions of images so marked are the only allowable form of reproduction. Reading-room-only and undesignated images may not be reproduced in any photographic, electronic or digital form, or by other means for any purpose whatsoever.

Contact Sheets

Specific images on contact sheets have been identified as professional, study, or reading-room-only images, or remain undesignated. Stipulations on exhibition and reproduction of individual contact sheet images are dependent on the specific designation of the images in question.

Exhibition-Quality, Fine Prints

Exhibition: These prints may be displayed within or beyond the Library, at the Library's discretion.

Reproduction: Selected fine prints in this collection are restricted from general research use and thus are not to be reproduced. However, these images are duplicated in the collection as exhibition images, which may be reproduced according to the stipulations above. Requests for fine prints not in the Library's possession for use in exhibition, as well as requests for reproductions of fine prints for publication, should be directed to Mr. Belcher.

Acquisition Information

The Max Belcher photographs were received by the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library as a purchase from Max Belcher in 1995, 1997, and 2008.

Processing Information

Processed and described by Lisa Gayle Hazirjian with Alexander X. Byrd, Don Sechler, Karen Jefferson, and Diane Sutton, 1998.

Updated by Meghan Lyon, January 2009.

Updated by Paula Jeannet, 2014 and 2022.

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Names and Subjects

- African Americans -- Portraits
- African Americans -- Dominican Republic -- Photographs
- Architecture -- Liberia -- Photographs
- Architectural photography
- Documentary Photography -- United States
- Documentary Photography -- Liberia
- Education -- Massachusetts -- Photographs
- Emigration and immigration -- Social aspects
- Photographers -- United States
- Portrait photography
- Racially mixed people -- United States -- Portraits
- Vernacular architecture -- Liberia -- Photographs
- Vernacular architecture -- Southern States -- Photographs
- Canada -- Photographs
- Dominican Republic -- Photographs
- Israel -- Photographs
- Liberia -- Photographs
- Liberia -- Social life and customs
- Massachusetts -- Photographs
- New York (N.Y.) -- Photographs
- Southern States -- Photographs
- United States -- Race relations
- Vietnam -- Photographs
- Black-and-white photographs
- Color photographs

- Contact sheets
- Archive of Documentary Arts (Duke University)
- Belcher, Max

Collection Inventory

Printed Materials, 1994-1998

Physical Description: 6 items

Scope and Contents note

Series includes Belcher's curriculum vitae, a summary of his "American People" project in the Dominican Republic, an exhibition brochure and three news articles related to his photography. Additional exhibit literature catalogued separately in the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library includes *A Land and Life Remembered: Americo-Liberian Folk Architecture*, *House and Home: Spirits of the South*, and *Claiming Place: Biracial American People*.

Printed materials

Box 1

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Photographs, 1969-1996 and undated

Physical Description: 1413 items

Scope and Contents note

The photography in this collection represents Belcher's work from his first forays into photography in New York City between 1969 and 1971, up to his most recent projects in Vietnam, the Dominican Republic and the United States. This series is organized by project subseries, which are arranged chronologically by the beginning date of each project. Within each subseries, black-and-white work precedes color work, and contact sheets precede photographic prints.

For information about specific contact sheets and photographs, researchers are advised to consult Belcher's own notes on his work, usually found on the back of individual contact sheets or photographs.

Access Restrictions:

Access note: All materials are open for general research use with the exception of five fine prints indicated in the "American People: Portraits from the

Philadelphia Community in the Dominican Republic" series. Photocopies are available in box 41 for viewing purposes.

Use Restrictions:

Use note: Photographer holds all copyright.

There are specific exhibition and reproduction restrictions on all photographic components of this collection; these are outlined in full in the Conditions Governing Use in the collection overview (introductory information in the collection guide). Please contact the Director of the Archive of Documentary Arts for more details.

In and Around New York City, 1969-1971

Physical Description: 104 items

Scope and Contents note

This subseries includes 104 contact sheets (97 black-and-white, 7 color) from Belcher's photographic work in New York City streets and neighborhoods. Many shots are from Belcher's days as a student at the New School for Social Research and as a production assistant at NBC News in New York. Images include portraits, landscapes, still lifes, cityscapes, and architecture; there are a variety of experimental images as well.

Black-and-white contact sheets	Box 2
Black-and-white contact sheets	Box 3
Color contact sheets	Box 4

Liberia, 1971-1973, 1977-1978, 1982-1983 (331 items)

Scope and Contents note

This body of work explores the relationships between migration, identity and history in the American Liberian experience. Belcher's interest in this topic derived from his upbringing as a Philadelphia-born American who was raised in Liberia for ten years beginning in 1954. The subseries includes 210 black-and-white contact sheets, 89 black-and-white photographs, 22 color contact sheets and 10 color photographs. The earliest work, completed between 1971 and 1973, represents some of Belcher's first professional work as a photographer. There is also additional fieldwork done in the years 1977-1978 and 1982-1983, featuring American Liberian architecture and portraiture of indigenous Liberians and American Liberians. The exhibit catalog, *A Land and Life Remembered: Americo-Liberian Folk Architecture*, available in the Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, provides more information about these projects.

Belcher's subsequent work on Southern architecture (located in a separate subseries) took him back to the origins of Liberian architecture in the vernacular architecture of the American South. These examples of cultural memory and historical continuity are discussed in both *A Land and Life Remembered* and *House and Home: Spirits of the South*, also held by the Rubenstein Library. Belcher returned to the themes of migration, identity and history in his later work in Samaná, Dominican Republic (also located in a separate subseries).

Black-and-white contact sheets	Box 5
Black-and-white contact sheets	Box 6
Black-and-white contact sheets	Box 7
Black-and-white contact sheets	Box 8
Black-and-white contact sheets	Box 9
Black-and-white photographs	Box 10
Black-and-white photographs	Box 11
Black-and-white photographs	Box 12
Color contact sheets	Box 13
Color photograph	Box 14

Other Photographic Work, 1973, 1975-1982, 1984-1985, 1988 and undated,

Physical Description: 186 items

Scope and Contents note

The 165 contact sheets and 21 photographs in this subseries, all in black-and-white, include experimental shots documenting Belcher's early and continuing work with various grades and makes of film, paper and photographic equipment. The images document a range of Belcher's photographic improvisations and studies, as well as attempts at capturing various textures, scapes, and light; and at composing with different angles and in varied photographic settings. Thus, the subseries documents the development of Belcher's photographic signature and style. The images include portraiture, architecture, landscapes and cityscapes, and were shot in Massachusetts, Florida, and Michigan.

Unspecified

Box 15

Black-and-white contact sheets	Box 15
Black-and-white contact sheets	Box 16
Black-and-white photographs	Box 17

Massachusetts: Work in Schools, 1979-1986

Physical Description: 196 items

Scope and Contents note

The materials in this subseries include extensive portraiture work completed during three public schools residencies in the environs of Boston, Massachusetts. There are three subgroups, each based on the school or project where the residency took place: Washington Community School (1979-1981), Somerville Media Action Project (1984), and Jamaica Plain (1984-1986).

Washington Community School
Scope and Contents note

The Massachusetts Council on the Arts sponsored Belcher's work as artist-in-residence from 1979-1981 at the Washington Community School in Lynn. The images taken by Belcher primarily consist of portraits of elementary- and upper-school students, with a handful of shots of architecture, landscapes and other subject matter. The subseries includes 80 black-and-white contact sheets, nine black-and-white photographs and one color contact sheet.

Black-and-white contact sheets	Box 18
Black-and-white contact sheets and photographs	Box 19
Color contact sheets	Box 20

Somerville Media Action Project (SMAP), 1984	Box 21
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Scope and Contents note

In 1984, Belcher received support for his work on the Somerville Media Action Project (SMAP), in Somerville, Massachusetts, through a one-month artist-in-residence program sponsored by the Massachusetts Cultural Council. These selections from his SMAP work feature portraits of local teenagers, as well as a variety of other city images. This subseries contains 18 contact sheets and 9 photographs, all in black-and-white.

Black-and-white contact sheets	Box 21
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Black-and-white contact sheets and photographs	Box 22
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Jamaica Plain High School, 1984-1986	Box 23
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Scope and Contents note

Sponsored by the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities and by the National Endowment for the Arts, Belcher was artist-in-residence from 1984-1986 at Jamaica Plain High School in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts. The 73 black-and-white contact sheets, 12 black-and-white photographs, and 3 color contact sheets consist overwhelmingly of portraits of teenagers, with a few contact sheets with images of buildings and landscapes.

Black-and-white contact sheets and photographs	Box 23
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Black-and-white contact sheets and photographs	Box 24
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Color contact sheets	Box 25
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Israel, 1983

Physical Description: 98 items

Scope and Contents note

Images in this body of work include street scenes, portraiture, architecture, and town and landscapes made during Belcher's 1983 study in Israeli cities and communities. It contains 86 contact sheets and 12 photographs, all in black-and-white.

Black-and-white contact sheets	Box 26
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Black-and-white contact sheets	Box 27
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Black-and-white contact sheets and photographs	Box 28
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Black-and-white photographs	Box 29
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Southern United States, 1985-1992 and undated

Physical Description: 41 items

Scope and Contents note

This study of culture and community in the Southern U.S. comprises street scenes, architecture, and landscapes shot in New Orleans, Louisiana, West

Palm Beach, Florida, and several locations in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. It includes 14 black-and-white contact sheets, 12 black-and-white photographs, eight color contact sheets, and seven color photographs.

Black-and-white contact sheets and photographs Box 30

Black-and-white photographs Box 31

Color contact sheets and photographs Box 32

Southern Architecture, 1986-1987

Physical Description: 89 items

Scope and Contents note

The Southern architecture photographs in this body of work were made to complement Belcher's project on Americo-Liberian architecture. They include images of churches, grave markers, houses, plantations and other 19th and 20th century architecture. The shots were taken in Lowndes County, Georgia; Bourbon, Clark, Fayette, Logan and Woodford counties, Kentucky; Alamance, Bertie, Chowan, Gates, Northampton, and Perquimans Counties, N.C.; Williamsburg and York Counties, S.C.; and Isle of Wight and Southampton Counties, Virginia. Photographic materials consist of 29 black-and-white contact sheets, 59 black-and-white photographs, and one color print.

The Rubenstein Library also holds a copy of the exhibit catalogs, *House and Home: Spirits of the South* and *A Land and Life Remembered*, which feature work from this project.

Black-and-white contact sheets Box 33

Black-and-white and color photographs Box 34

Canada, 1990

Physical Description: 32 items

Scope and Contents note

These images of vernacular architecture in New Brunswick and Quebec, Canada were taken during two trips in June and August 1990, supported by a Summer Research Grant from the Kenan Charitable Trust at Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, where Belcher taught. Materials consist of seven black-and-white contact sheets, one black-and-white photograph, 18 color contact sheets, and six color photographs.

Black-and-white contact sheets and photographs Box 35

Color contact sheets and photographs

Box 36

American People: Portraits from the Philadelphia Community in the Dominican Republic, 1991-1992, 1995-1996, and undated

Physical Description: 254 items

Scope and Contents note

Returning to the major themes of Belcher's earlier work in Liberia , this work explores the relationships between migration, identity and history by documenting African American emigration to and life in Samaná, Dominican Republic. Specifically, the photographs portray the descendants of U.S. slave- and free-born blacks who emigrated from Philadelphia to Samaná in 1824 and 1825 as part of a migration organized by the Haitian Emigration Society. For a fuller description of this project, see Belcher's one-page description of his work in Samaná, included in the printed materials series. The subseries includes 51 black-and-white contact sheets, 4 black-and-white photographs, 96 color contact sheets, 98 color photographs, and 5 exhibition-quality, fine color prints.

Access Restrictions:

This subseries contains five exhibition-quality, fine prints that are restricted to general access. Photocopies of each of these prints have been placed with the color photographs in box 41.

Black-and-white contact sheets Box 37

Black-and-white photographs Box 38

Color contact sheets Box 39

Color contact sheets Box 40

Viewing use photocopies for five exhibit prints,
and color photographs Box 41

Scope and Contents

The color photocopies in this box of five exhibit-quality fine prints were made for viewing purposes for the five prints, which are closed to general use.

Color photographs Box 42

Exhibition-quality color prints Box 43

Access Restrictions:

Access note. The color exhibit prints in this series are closed to general research access by donor request. Photocopies of these prints are located at the beginning of Box 41 for viewing purposes.

Vietnam, 1994

Physical Description: 41 items

Scope and Contents note

This group of images derives from Max Belcher's field work in Vietnam during January, 1994. The 30 contact sheets and 11 photographs, all black-and-white, include architecture and portraits, primarily of female veterans of the Northern Vietnamese Army who served during the period of conflict with France and the United States.

Black-and-white contact sheets and
photographs

Box 44

Black-and-white photographs

Box 45

Claiming Place: Biracial American Portraits, 1994-1995 and undated

Physical Description: 32 items

Scope and Contents note

The photographs in this subseries explore biracial and multiracial identity among young American adults born in the 1960s. This work was exhibited as part of a larger project on racial identity undertaken in conjunction with social anthropologist Marion Kilson and professor of art Theresa Monaco, and supported by grants from the Massachusetts Cultural Council, Learning Society Inc., Salem State College and Emmanuel College. The subseries includes 12 contact sheets and 20 photographs, all color. For more on this project, researchers are encouraged to consult the exhibit brochure, *Claiming Place: Biracial American People*, available in the David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library.

Color contact sheets

Box 46

Color photographs

Box 47

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Accession (2008-0304), 1975-1978

Physical Description: 1 box

Scope and Contents note

The addition (2008-0304) includes six matted prints that appear to be from Belcher's Americo-Liberian series, taken in the mid-1970s.

Liberia, black-and-white photographs

Box 48

Physical Description: 6 items

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