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ART

Town Shows Its Face, if Not Its Reputation



By EVA HAGBERG

VIDOR, TEX.

“THE only thing that’s black and white in the book is the color of the photographs,” said Billy Hartman, a 37-year-old lifelong resident of this small town. “You couldn’t get anything out of the book as being prejudiced.”

Not all of Mr. Hartman’s neighbors are inclined to agree.

The book is “Rough Beauty.” The photographer is Dave Anderson, a former communications aide in the Clinton White House and “MTV (Choose or Lose)” tour manager. And the town is Vidor, population 11,440, whose labyrinthine back roads spread out from Interstate 10, about an hour and a half east of Houston.

The 2000 Census listed eight black residents in Vidor, or one-tenth of 1 percent of the population. It was the scene of a 1993 protest against an attempt to integrate a local housing project, and it is the hometown of James Byrd Jr., a black man who, the day after he moved out of Vidor, was dragged to his death in nearby Jasper. The town has a mystique both nationally and locally as a surviving bastion of the Ku Klux Klan. There hasn’t been a racially motivated incident in Vidor in years, yet when it’s mentioned, many Houston residents still respond with warnings, concern and jokes about white hoods.

Mr. Anderson says the photographs in the book, published in October by Dewi Lewis, came out of the affection he developed for the small town; he considers them largely sympathetic portrayals of the beauty he sees in life “close to the bone,” as he put it.

But many residents have responded with rancor, to Mr. Anderson directly, in online forums, and with phone calls to his Houston gallery. On her MySpace page Ashley Hammonds posted an essay she had written in response to the book. Some residents began using the title of the book as an epithet. On Kim McGriff’s MySpace page, Jessica Jaeger, 20, left a comment, part of which read: “Face it! You just aren’t that smart! You should have been featured in the Rough Beauty book!” James McCullar, a 25-year-old Vidor resident, started a thread on the MySpace “Vidorian” group, where he referred to Mr. Anderson as “a joke just trying to make a dollar off our past.”

The complaints rarely mentioned the photos — many were responding simply to the book’s existence — but reflect what turns out to be a long-standing and complex relationship the town has with the outside world. Vidor, as the sociologist Jim Loewen, author of “Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism,” said, is a town that “takes the beat” for what he found to be many other racially charged towns in Texas and the rest of America.

Vidor is well aware of its reputation. Residents were generally wary of a reporter’s approaches, and asked, invariably, if the resulting article would finally be the one to show Vidor’s good side. They were tired of misrepresentation, they said.

“Rough Beauty” is Mr. Anderson’s first published book of photography. A self-described “upper middle class white boy,” he is 36, and took his first picture only four years ago, after a flier from the International Center for Photography made its way to his New York City apartment. He became smitten with photography, quit his job and moved to Beaumont to study with the Texas photographer Keith Carter.

Mr. Anderson said that his Vidor project grew out of an assignment in Mr. Carter’s class. Each student was asked to write down a secret that had never been told to anyone (Mr. Anderson contends that his was “pretty stupid”), drop the paper in a hat and pick out someone else’s secret to photograph. Mr. Anderson pulled out a piece of paper that read, “I’m more scared than I look.”

A friend suggested that to fulfill the assignment, Mr. Anderson just go up the road to Vidor, the town with the Klan legacy. So in August 2003 he visited, camera in hand.

“I just drove around,” he said in a recent in-



Photographs from ClampART, New York City

What’s wrong with these pictures? Even the photographer himself wonders.

terview, “looking for things I found interesting.” Mr. Anderson photographed children swinging on a barrel, that year’s Little Miss Barbecue Queen and dogs. He took a picture of a woman, Janine Edgell, who had lost custody of her children and who, as he put it, “poured all of her love into her animals.” He photographed a father and son, tattooed with what might be a Klan symbol.

And he shot Mr. Hartman, the maverick inventor and craftsman who provided many of the quotations that appear facing the images in “Rough Beauty.” “The world wasn’t born to owe us anything. It was born for someone to do something on.” “You know what the definition of a brat is? The kid next door just like yours.”

Mr. Anderson has said, “I developed such affection for the town.” It is a line he has offered repeatedly in interviews in New York and Houston, in part to counter the charge that his work is patronizing, touristic and exploitative.

Some residents of Vidor are unhappy that his book focused on the town’s poverty when it has a middle class; others are unhappy that he is bringing attention to their town at all, and assume the book is an expose of Vidor’s racism. Mr. Anderson has been criticized for romanticizing the poor for being lazy, and for becoming enamored of a life that he could never sustain.

When he scheduled a book signing in Houston, Lisa Finlay, posting a comment on Ms. McGriff’s page, wrote: “I say we protest it! How FUN!!!”

So Mr. Anderson expected a protest when an exhibition of “Rough Beauty” photographs opened in Houston last month. So did the gallery owners, Kathleen and Andrew Clark of Watermark Fine Arts. “We’ve received threatening phone calls,” Ms. Clark said, minutes before a private collectors’ opening and panel discussion on Feb. 16. “We’ve hired security.”

During the public opening the next evening everyone was nervous. But Mr. Anderson didn’t let it show as he signed books and chatted with photographers who had come to support his work, art enthusiasts who had come to admire it and collectors who had come to buy.

Reactions to the show were mixed. Photography enthusiasts unfamiliar with Vidor praised Mr. Anderson for the formal composition of his pictures, while those familiar with the town tended to focus on the location. “They’re nice,” said Jonathan Meadows, 26, a painter who grew up in nearby Fredericksburg, when initially asked what he thought. When told that the photographs had been taken in Vidor, Mr. Meadows laughed and clarified his reaction. “A few are beautiful,” he said. “But they’re not beautiful in the true sense of the word.”

Michael Kennaugh, 42, said he liked Mr. Anderson’s projects but could not avoid some pointed advice on hearing about a reporter’s trip to Vidor the next morning: “Make sure you have a full tank of gas.”

But in the end protesters did not materialize.

When Vidorian residents began responding to the book, Mr. Anderson said, he was surprised that many of them mentioned that their town is not racist. He said that race was never his focus, and that of the book’s 119 photographs, only one — a picture of a burned-out cross — explicitly ad-

ressed Vidor’s reputation as a Klan-friendly town.

Nevertheless the response keeps returning to the issue of race. When his photographs were shown in New York last fall, a visitor asked if the image of a white cat and a black cat, separated by a garden hose, was a coded indictment of Vidor’s racial politics. Three months later, at a slideshow at the University of Houston during which he explained all the other pictures shown, Mr. Anderson skipped over that one without comment. He was expecting, as he had at the gallery opening, Vidor residents to attend.

The fallout from Mr. Anderson’s project shows that photographic representation — particularly of race, poverty or class — remains a hot topic. The problem focuses on intention. Angry Vidorian residents have largely viewed Mr. Anderson’s work as a documentary and criticized him for his laziness as a journalist, while Mr. Anderson points out that his is an “ethereal portrait of a place,” an “essay” about a “floating state of mind.”

Which isn’t the easiest way to assuage people who think they have been maligned.

“These things are constantly under acrimonious debate,” said Laurie Dahlberg, a professor at Bard College who specializes in the history of photography. She described two camps of photographers: those who focus on the aesthetic of a

picture, and those who have a political or humanitarian aim. “The photographer is in an intractable bind,” she said, citing Walker Evans and Diane Arbus as artists who had been similarly criticized for exploiting those they photographed. “You can’t possibly please everyone.”

Coincidentally the hate speech incident of the comedian Michael Richards brought Mr. Anderson’s work back into the fray late last year. The CNN program “Paula Zahn Now” showed a report intended to take the temperature of American racial politics today. With Mr. Anderson’s book a factor in the decision, the segment’s producers focused on Vidor.

The correspondent Keith Oppenheim interviewed a white woman from Vidor who said of black people, “I don’t mind being friends with them, talking and stuff like that, but as far as mingling and eating with them, all that kind of stuff, that’s where I draw the line.” That comment was subsequently used as a starting point for a discussion on race in America on the National Public Radio program “News and Notes.”

Mr. Anderson said he was surprised by the storm his project started. His curiosity, and his willingness to represent Vidor in a new light, have not been rewarded, he concluded.

“I think artistically it’s problematic,” he said. “There have been so many strong reactions that I don’t want to overcompensate on future projects.” Yet Mr. Anderson seems undaunted. For his next series he finds himself once again drawn to difficult subjects like race and poverty: He is currently searching for beauty in New Orleans.



Some images from Dave Anderson’s book, “Rough Beauty.” Far left, Little Miss Barbecue Queen of 2003 and Janine Edgell with her pet rabbit; at left “Relaxing With the Guidrys,” and at bottom, “Jug Riding.”