

**BEST
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Rough Beauty
Dave Anderson
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"It's a nice cute little town, but life sucks when you're living hand to mouth." Dave Anderson's three-year photographic project of Vidor, east Texas is a look into the lives of residents of a backyard town in the middle of nowhere. It's a place renowned for its KKK membership and for a grinding poverty that the oil industry never alleviated. Ninety-four per cent of the population of Vidor are white – the classic demographic of a sundown town.

Anderson went to Vidor to document a side of American life that effectively bypassed the civil rights movement and survives today in a permanent economic depression. He's a romantic, able to capture the formal beauty in the ordinary detritus of everyday life – white Americans, living in a modern kind of poverty, struggling to keep alive the dream that is always elsewhere.

The quotes dotted throughout the book are as telling as the images themselves ("Come to find out that my wife been married to another man the whole time. Our whole marriage don't amount to nothing"). They give us an insight into the mindset behind the sometimes impassive faces captured in Anderson's natural yet forensic photographs. They also suggest how open the inhabitants were to his presence and his genuine interest in them. Shooting in black and white, his references may be Diane Arbus and Keith Carter, but to me Anderson's vision of the beauty of his subjects is uniquely his own. His occasionally subtle print vignetting serves to draw the focus towards what he believes is most important in the image – and removes any distraction that may bring into question his version of the story.

Vidor may be seen as an outpost of disappointment, rather than a reflection of a nation in crisis, but the urge of the children to play and the desire of the adults to keep striving is clearly evident.



Anderson's eye is genuinely compassionate and curious, and there is enough distance between him and the subject for us to believe he's no Schrödinger – it's not his opening the box that makes things happen.

We see a few of what you might call middle-class Christian folk, but in the main photographs find those living on the poverty line with little hope of alleviation. Anderson picks up on the ephemera of town life – the swamps, rusted redneck signs, the dirt backyards, garages of hub caps and dumps full of busted cars that tell of time passing, families moving on and loves that lived and died ... and these are as important to the book as the people for the sense of place. He sees the elegance of the continual circle of birth and decay both in place and person: the free joy, imagination and hope of the children of Vidor in the dirt yards with their numerous pets, running in the eerie woods; the blue collar workers still believing the land of the free is unsullied and hard work will always overcome; the destitute, with sorrow and distrust scarring everything, and then the old, with their history drawn hard on their faces.

Anderson is affectionate and while one can see the references to the FSA photographers of the depression, his images portray a softer humanity and, yes, a definite beauty that has the depth of the human condition at its heart. Rough beauty, indeed.

Mike Trow

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