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“...one of the year’s shooting stars in the American photo scene.”



ROUGH BEAUTY

The small town of Vidor, Texas, has a widely-held reputation as one of the most racist places in America. A brand of poverty and unemployment marks the lives of many in of this community, which can be reminiscent of the depression. Dave Anderson visited Vidor and has created intense, emotion-laden portraits that evoke comparisons with legendary photographers like Diane Arbus and Dorothea Lange.

"Vidor is a place that people like to connect with the term "white trash", says Dave Anderson. "The town is poverty-stricken. People have problems coming up with enough money to live. There are a lot of day laborers and construction workers." The Texas community, population 11,000, is also known as a Klan town — the racist Ku Klux Klan is still active here. Not as aggressively as in earlier eras, but the men in the white hooded capes organized a parade through the city as recently as last year. "People understand that the city's reputation is what brought me here," says Anderson about his encounters with local citizens, but the New York-based photographer didn't come to document the Klan — he was interested in the everyday lives of these Texans who seem to hate blacks and whites equally. For three months, he leisurely drove through the area in his Ford Thunderbird.

One day he ended up in a remote plot now depicted in the image "Depression Modern". A couple of cats sleeping in the wheel well of an old truck attracted Dave's attention. As he shot the scenery with his Hasselblad, he noticed a ghostly silhouette in the entryway of a nearby home. It was 7:20am. Someone was watching him. "With my car, I may have seemed like an alien that had just landed," says Dave of the man he ultimately photographed. "I think we both seemed a bit exotic to each other." The day laborer's skepticism remained even when the communicative photographer chatted him up a bit. Later, in the lab, Dave was startled when he studied the look with which his subject observed him. "There's a real anger there. But it could be that that's how he goes through life." Anderson's images of the early-morning encounter feed on this emotional tension. The locality, the obvious poverty of the people here, even the sustainability of this introspective look, is a bit reminiscent of Dorothea Lange's photographs for the Farm Security Administration. The gestures and facial expressions of the lost-looking person in "Depression Modern", on the other hand, evoke associations with Diane Arbus portraits.

Anderson didn't come to Vidor to confirm preconceptions. He wanted to meet people. His images expose his subjects' psyches and take us on a trip into the past to a place where economic depression appears to be a permanent condition. They all tell us something about the state of societal isolation. "I have often felt lonely in my life. Maybe that's why I react so strongly to people on the periphery of society," explains the 34-year-old photographer. "For Texans, Vidor is the last stop. For most people, ending up here would be terrible," says Anderson, whose works reveals a certain ambivalence about the town.

"A View from the Drain" shows us a mysterious landscape at a drainage ditch. Something here wrecks the continuity of the natural idyll. "When I arrived, I first thought that someone had been killed here," says Anderson. "Down at the water there were two plastic bags filled with blood, bones and innards. Someone had poached outside of hunting season. They had cut up a deer and ditched the parts by the water." Anderson later discovered a lost deer leg in the almost-romantic

ambience. The motif could now symbolize the “Rough Beauty” series. For atmosphere, the most positive motif is “Royalty,” a portrait of a well-kept lady with a small dog on Thanksgiving. The photographer still likes to remember the proud, almost aristocratic facial expression of the lady, who seems perfectly groomed to prepare a private grill party — as if she had known the photographer would be present. Even the dog seems groomed for the portrait session. “BBQ Queen” shows us a child beauty queen the moment before a public appearance; beside her is a very bored brother. Her look indicates dissatisfaction; she seems embarrassed that her mother has allowed her to appear in tasteless shoes. In “Her Public Face” a proud mother presents us an equally sad and estranged small child with a penetrating gaze.

Anderson sympathizes with the subjects, shows interest in their lives. And the economic pressure, the living situation of this infamous town. Our knowledge of the Klan’s presence in this environment resonates while observing these images. While some subjects might approve of the group’s hateful tirades, others would judge it. It’s never completely forgotten in our interpretation of the photos’ inherent tensions. An exhausted baby may represent the spiritual condition of a place. We search beneath the surface of these photos — all of which project a certain reticence — for deep truths.

Anderson came to photography circuitously. The son of two economists, he was born in East Lansing, Michigan. After university, he first worked as an in-house TV producer for the Clinton White House; jobs as an MTV producer and in the film industry followed before he discovered his calling for black and white photography. After attending workshops with photographers like Michael Kenna, Anderson ultimately found a mentor in photo artist Keith Carter. With the master of the poetic-narrative photo composition, Anderson learned the fine points of printing and sharpened his eye for selecting perfect motifs. Outside of photography, he cites such artists as Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski (“Red”) as inspiration: “I admire his respect for people. In his films, he really found the characters of the people he tried to portray.” The intense visual language Anderson has found in the short year and a half he has dedicated himself to the medium is astonishing — his images have already found their way into collections like that of the Houston Museum of Fine Arts. And he continues his work in Vidor, where he’d like to shoot additional landscape images and more. For us, he is the most promising discovery of the American Fotofest 2004, the world’s best photography festival.

-Manfred Zollner

The Artist

The 34-year-old transplanted New Yorker is the biggest discovery of this year’s Fotofest in Houston. Five galleries in the USA presently represent Anderson; in the fall his first solo show will be installed in a Texas museum. Once an employee of

Bill Clinton's White House and an MTV producer, Anderson is, for us, one of the year's shooting stars in the American photo scene. Fashion designer Todd Oldham recently acquired seven of his photos, four from the "Rough Beauty" series. Anderson's very unique style unites influences of Diane Arbus, FSA photographers and, to a certain degree, Keith Carter in the powerful portraiture that exposes important facets of the subjects' psyche. Our fine art print "Janine" symbolizes feelings like vulnerability, affection and isolation in a woman marked by life.