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ALL PHOTOS © AMY STEIN AND STACY AREZOU MEHRFAR

SOCIAL STUDIES

PACK MENTALITY

IN THEIR NEW BOOK, PHOTOGRAPHERS AMY STEIN AND STACY AREZOU MEHRFAR INVESTIGATE AN AUSTRALIAN SOCIAL PHENOMENON THAT IS DIFFICULT FOR AMERICANS TO FATHOM. BY CONOR RISCH

THE IDEA OF THE “American Dream” is based on individualism, opportunity and upward mobility. In the United States, the concept that an individual might shy away from success, suppress ambition, or criticize another person for striving to achieve personal or financial goals seems implausible. We even have a popular pejorative for those who might criticize or judge another individual for their successes: hater.

Yet in Australia the act of cutting down to size anyone who is successful is prevalent enough that it has its own term: tall poppy syndrome. Whether the discouragement of success is indeed a problem in Australian society that suppresses the ambition of its citizens is debatable. But the idea that it might

Children in uniform at an elementary school in Weethalle, New South Wales, photographed by Amy Stein and Stacy Arezou Mehrfar during their month-long collaborative project in Australia.



Working with a peer on editing a book challenges a photographer's ideas more intensely than usual, Stein says.

STACY AREZOU MEHRFAR: "WE HAD THESE IDEAS IN OUR MINDS ABOUT WHAT WE WANTED TO PHOTOGRAPH ... BUT AT THE SAME TIME WE TRIED TO KEEP IT OPEN-ENDED."

exist was enough to captivate American photographers Amy Stein and Stacy Arezou Mehrfar, who embarked on a month-long collaborative photography project in New South Wales, Australia's most populous state, in 2010. Their work is gathered in a new book, *Tall Poppy Syndrome* (DECODE Books, 2013), and was exhibited earlier this year at ClampArt in New York City.

The idea for the project emerged from a casual conversation Stein and Mehrfar had in New York City. Mehrfar had moved to Sydney and found the cultural shift "really difficult," she says. In New York City, where she had attended the International Center of Photography (where she and Stein met), participated in artist's residencies and exhibited her work, she found it easy to meet editors or curators, spark discussions and find different ways of working with others. "[In Sydney] it works very differently," she says. "You very much have to wait your turn" and "be careful of stepping on anyone's toes ... It took me a long time to build relationships," Mehrfar adds. It was in describing these cultural differences that she mentioned tall poppy syndrome to Stein, who suggested it would make a great subject for a photography book, something they might collaborate on.

Part of the reason tall poppy syndrome so intrigued the photographers is that, as artists, they are so used to a "singular role. You constantly have to stand out and say: My opinion, my work matters and is unique and worth looking at," Stein says.

When Stein was presented with an opportunity to exhibit her work in Australia,

Tall poppy syndrome is not a photographic topic if you approach it directly, Amy Stein says.

So the photographers looked for ways of representing the phenomenon symbolically.

Poppies, other trees and people in uniforms were among the themes they established in the book.

the "hare-brained" idea of creating a project on tall poppy syndrome became a reality. The pair spent about six months planning their trip, exchanging ideas for how to approach the concept, building a wish list of potential subjects and plotting their course through New South Wales.

"We had these ideas in our mind about what we wanted to photograph and throughout the [trip] we checked off things on our wish list, but at the same time we tried to keep it open-ended and just allow ourselves to experience where we were and what we were doing, and also experience working together," Mehrfar says.

The photographs in the book allude to the idea of tall poppy syndrome rather than attempting to investigate it literally. "It's not that photographic a project if you approach it directly," Stein explains. There are portraits of individuals, and of groups of people that highlight similarities in their appearance. One photograph shows a group of school children in uniform. Several photographs depict workers in uniform. Tree stumps and severely pruned trees are recurring symbols. And photographs of packs of animals and individual animals punctuate the sequence. In one image a group of colorful birds sit together in a tree, while another type of bird sits near

them but clearly separate from the group.

Throughout the trip the photographers also interviewed people and found that tall poppy syndrome was a "topic that people know about and are interested in talking about," Stein recalls. Mehrfar adds that the mayor of one town told her he felt that tall poppy syndrome starts in the schools and that kids don't want to excel in academics or sports for fear that they will be knocked down by their peers. "His fear was that in his town everyone wanted to be mediocre," Mehrfar says, adding, however, that the mayor in another town told her that tall poppy syndrome was a myth.

The photographers edited the images slowly at first, but after Stein presented the work to John Jenkins at DECODE and they got the green light for the book, they had three months to finish the edit. Collaborative editing, Stein says, is "such a learning experience, because when you work alone you might have someone challenging your ideas [occasionally, but] when you are working with someone who is a peer that challenge comes almost daily and it goes back and forth and really hones you."

Somewhat ironically, the photographers have not individually credited the images, but are sharing authorship. Each of them made some of the images, and they collaborated on some as well. "But we just threw them in a big pot and said: We're ... going to lose the ego around individual image-making for this project," Stein explains.

One of their primary goals from the beginning was to show the work in Australia. "It was important that we understand the reaction in Australia to us looking at Australians," Stein says. Later this year the book will be distributed in Australia, and as of this writing the pair were working on exhibitions of the work there.