



Viewpoint Mike Smith

Is there an overlap between legendary bodies of work and the banality of contemporary photography?

I bought *The Americans* (Robert Frank, 1958) because I'd seen one or two shots in a number of anthologies of photography and wanted to view the whole thing for myself. By looking at the giants of photography, you can begin to see a direction of travel for what was once considered contemporary.

Of course, any anthology is a curated presentation that restricts the reader to a limited range of work. Nonetheless, there had been a growing restlessness in purely artistic and abstract works, with the likes of Lewis Hine, Paul Strand, Eugène Atget, Brassai, André Kertész, Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans and Henri Cartier-Bresson capturing images that focused principally on the person and his/her context.

Of course, not every photographer pursued art for the sake of it. Hine was an activist documenting American immigrants, while Lange worked for the Resettlement Administration on rural poverty, something Evans returned to in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941).

This theme of reality and shock in reportage continued – for example, Nick Hedges' stark exhibition *Make Life Worth Living*, about 1960s urban poverty in the UK, or Daniel Berehulak's coverage of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa.

Contemporary photography moved on. Bresson often removed meaning from his (artistic) photos, generating thought around a transitory moment. *The Americans* drew the artistic and documentary threads together to create

a photo essay on American culture; meaningless in the moment but building an understanding of society.

After Frank I often think of Garry Winogrand. At his death he left 2,500 undeveloped rolls of film. He was known for non-stop shooting, capturing moments on the street. Unlike Frank, there is a tension that moves the genre beyond meaninglessness towards banality.

Like Winogrand, Mark Cohen shot wideangle, close-up, choosing to avoid composition. These lack both meaning and visual poeticism. However, they are most certainly contemporary and pushed the boundaries of what had gone before.

Both Roger Hicks (AP 9 April) and Jon Bentley (AP 21 May) touched upon these opposing themes. Roger presented the banal – Pavel Baňka developing Cohen's work through intentional blurring – commenting that, 'Thirty years ago, or even ten, I might have paid little attention to this picture.' Jon focused on Strand's portraits from South Uist, noting that all the pictures speak on their own, without commentary. What I find interesting is the connoisseurship Roger notes is different, but is there an overlap?

Recently, I have found Malcolm Craig Gilbert's *Flashbacks* provocative (www.malcolmraigilbert.co.uk). It is intentionally banal – they are snapshots but need to be read within the author's context. With the image, 'A Report of a Man Approaching Children in an Alleyway' (below left), Malcolm notes (*After the Agreement*, Tuck, 2015) a 'flashback of my service in Newry when they were trying to shoot down helicopters. And then with it being a toy... there's this temptation to go forward and pick it up, that sense of going forward on trust that could leave you open to being murdered.'

It is intentionally ordinary but triggers a memory in the photographer – the text allows the viewer to access that memory and generate their own reactions to it. Ultimately, can photographs affect us at an emotional level, both consciously and subconsciously?



Gilbert's 'A Report of a Man Approaching Children in an Alleyway' accesses memory

Mike Smith is a London-based wedding and portrait photographer. Visit www.focali.co.uk

Do you have something you'd like to get off your chest? Send us your thoughts in around 500 words to the address on page 18 and win a year's digital subscription to AP, worth £79.99

New Books

The latest and best books from the world of photography. By Oliver Atwell



Anderson & Low: On the Set of James Bond's Spectre

By Jonathan Anderson and Edwin Low, with foreword by Sam Mendes, Hatje Cantz, £35, hardback, 64 pages, 978-3-77574-1-989



WHILE the character of James Bond has never disappeared from our screens, gone are the days of cringe-worthy puns and cartoonish gadgets to be replaced by a more vulnerable and recognisable hero. The uncomfortable shades of rampant misogyny and queasy colonialism are still present, but in the hands of director Sam Mendes unwelcome thematic interpretation is circumvented by proficient visuals and set pieces. In this book from Jonathan Anderson and Edwin Low we find a series of images taken on the set of *Spectre* (2015). They reveal exquisite attention to detail on the part of the designers. The images have been taken in such a way as to allow you to immerse yourself in the locations. As a record of the exhaustive work that goes into the illusion of cinema, it's impressive. ★★★★★

The Traveller

By Harvey Bengé, Dewi Lewis, £25, hardback, 96 pages, 978-1-91130-602-3



OVER a period of 15 years, Harvey Bengé journeyed from the South Pacific through Asia to Paris. A first look reveals a series of images that seem to be disparate; nothing more than snapshots of the kind most of us would delete. There is no qualifying essay; in fact, there's a distinct absence of text of any kind, meaning readers are faced simply with a series of images, page after page. However, the lack of context means we are free to make associations between images, interpret them, lose ourselves in them. Further, the book's title perhaps gives us all the context we need. We're seeing the world through one man's eyes, but then ambiguity sets in and we bring our own experiences and ideas to the fold. So often a series of images is supplementary to an artist's immovable statement, but this is a book from which to learn something. ★★★★★