

Book Review Abstract

This review critiques Jonathan Day's *Postcards From the Road: Robert Frank's The Americans*. Day's account, equal parts visual project and textual exploration of Frank's work, offers the reader a unique interpretation of Frank's *The Americans* as the author ventures on a cross-country road trip. Day, akin to a performative artist or an obsessed fan, visits the same locations featured in *The Americans* creating content from the 'happenings' his lens crosses, and in a naive vein, aspiring to become a modern day version of Frank. The review will evaluate the author's visual approach, as well as the effectiveness of his combining image with varying types of text (historical and narrative-based).

Review

Robert Frank's *The Americans* is arguably one of the most influential photography projects of the 20th century. The project—citing its publication frequency as a show of cultural prominence—was first published in Paris in 1958. This edition, and some say of masterpiece of American visual iconography, included essays from renowned writers John Steinbeck and William Faulkner. The following year an American edition was published and dispensed with the original cast of writers instead opting for the contemporary voice of Jack Kerouac. In conjunction with its numerous reprints, the book spines of Frank's work has been dawned by two of photography's most reputable publishing houses: Aperture/ Grossman Publishers (1969) and Steidl (2008). Through these publications and numerous other works that comment on the project, *The Americans* has become quintessential to understanding mid-century America. Jonathan Day looks to build upon Frank's commanding narrative of America in *Postcards From the Road: Robert Frank's The Americans*.

An extensive publishing record alone is not enough to establish a works prominence in the visual field; further explanation is required to set the scene for Frank's *The Americans*. Frank had the ability to "see what is invisible" (Maloney 115). This concept of 'hidden in plain sight' is about seeing hope and sadness in America in a way that challenged visual accounts dominant at the time. To reiterate this point, Frank's images deal with speaking "of the things that are there—easily found, [but] not easily interpreted (Greenough 362). Beat writer Jack Kerouac reiterates this point when he writes, "Frank's ability to photograph scenes that have never been seen before on film" (Day I). Frank was interested in photographing 'everything-ness', who when he clicked his shutter would suck "a sad poem right out of America onto film" (Day VI). Much of *The Americans* is a direct play on Walker Evan's work and Edward Steichen's monumental exhibition Family of Man. Frank was interested in speaking to an America as he saw it changing: cars, coffins, jukeboxes, gas stations, sorrows, regret, race, age and death all played a new role.

Postcards From The Road is more than an exploration of a classical American photographic text. Through the marriage of text and image, Day subtly explores topics relevant to Frank's work, as well as exploring his own conception of contemporary

American influences (mobility studies, nostalgia, legacy, American visual culture, road culture, and the Beat Generation). Day's *Postcards* is hard to describe because it operates at different levels and in different modes, making its approach diverse and refreshingly unique. Day's book is sequenced to mirror Frank's and each image Day produces is influenced in some way by Frank's original image. Day relies on text and image as equal forms of expression. His use of text is sectioned into that which is poetic (lyrical) and that which is informative.

Day's poetic approach, reminiscent of Andrew Abbot's lyrical sociology, places paramount importance on eliciting an emotive response as opposed to creating a traditional narrative. This approach is evident in the language used in his 'diary' section: mimosas, Mulholland Drive, Cherokee mountains, steel rails dancing, Zephyr, Venice Beach, Ozymandias, Death Valley, Elvis's tomb, American Spirit cigarettes. Projects that draw on the poetic and free form descriptions can be reflexive, showing promising (auto) ethnographic thought and process, a notable example of this type of execution being Doug Harper's *Good Company: A Tramps Life*. It remains unseen as to how effective Day is in achieving this end. The Beats influenced Day and he self labels himself a rubber tramp, which is a gross misappropriation of the term when it is used in its purest sense. Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise were rubber tramps; Day, a middle-aged Englishman who rents a car and drives around America for a few weeks is not. Being a beat writer and a rubber tramp is about embodying a lifestyle than anything else and this is perhaps why his poetic writings fail to amuse, vaguely adding another successful dimension to the book. Day's poetic sections read more as imitation than emulation of Beat writing. Some lines are cliché "Life is beautiful, but not safe: at least I am able to fight" (Day 92), or "Are we ever as free as when we are lost?" (Day 98). Others express bad poetics "Her skin was as black as night and her eyes sparkled like stars" (Day 144).

Day discusses the importance of each of Frank's images, both in a historical American setting while also alluding to its contemporary counterpart he himself authored. This is the other half of Day's text. It is informative and structured to follow the chronological nature of Frank's book. Day also discusses the depth of sequencing used by Frank and the implied meanings between the images and their present iconography. The informative nature of these sections comes out in the content and subject matter: (Flatness, Alienation, American Dream, ironic juxtaposition, iconography of the car, caesura, interrelationships, gender play, chimera, manifest destiny).

Building upon his earlier work on Robert Frank (*Robert Frank's The Americans: The Art of Documentary Photography*), Day elaborates on key topics with great success. His exploration of Kerouac, The American Dream and the American Flag is particularly strong (*Postcards* pg. 12 & 54), as well as his writings on the auto, car culture, and road journeying and romanticism (*Postcards* pg. 22, 86 and 196). Day explores connections that are as important to understanding Frank's work as they are for understanding what is America today. His exploration of religion, jukeboxes and the cultural crossover between the two (*Postcards* pg. 74) is particularly succinct.

Day's synergy of text and image is a growing trend in photography for images-makers to offer more than 'just a book of photos'. The power of this approach is that each image can be read on its own, as a counterpart to the two textual elements (poetic and informative), as well as its relation to Frank's images, to which inspired the visual account present in *Postcards*. A drawback to the book is that it contains none of Frank's images only written sections briefly describing them. Day addresses this early in the book stating that the images can be found online or viewed if one purchases a copy from Steidl. It can be speculated that Steidl would not grant rights to reprint the images, or the rights were too expensive for the publisher Intellect to secure. For the viewer to fully engage with the content a copy of *The Americans* must be at hand. Constant referencing is required and online searches for each image (85 of them) is a hassle, the other option, purchasing a copy, is not a credible option.

Day has taken on a very ambitious visual project. Seeking out images to connect and weave into Frank's narrative would be a challenge to any image-maker. Day is not only attempting to photograph a wide geographical area, he must also photograph to Frank's beat. Therefore the project's written and visual components are prone to suffer from 'idea drop off'. This can occur when the author of the story feels he has completed the work but must continue because there are still pages left to fill. Day is only finished when he arrives at the end of Frank's sequence of images. You cannot continue to discuss the importance of the American flag or the American road over and over again with refreshing clarity and brilliance.

Perhaps some would decline to take up a project with such a complex scope based on the potential it may not be properly executed, while others would continue to photograph until they 'felt they got it right'. As a visualist, I question if Day was working with a deadline and I wonder if he would say he 'got it right'. Numerous images from *Postcards* lack visual strength. Some of Day's images appear amateurish (*Postcards* pages: 13, 17, 23, 29, 33, 35, 37, 39, 47, 77, 129, 133, 137, 143, 163, 195, and 201). These are not the typical images one is used to seeing authored by an individual who we assume has institutional training. Some images are unfocused; others break visual conventions, are un-engaging, or compositionally weak. This is not a critique of Day's photography in general, rather just the execution of this project, where deadlines may have affected the quality of the output. It is also important to note that this critique is not based on Day's images in relation to Frank's, which would be unjust. Day and Frank are two completely different photographers, working within different contexts at different times. Day's images are evaluated against the backdrop of current travel-based photography. Not all of Day's images are unappealing; his cover image being particularly dynamic and engaging.

Day's book *Postcards* is an interesting take on Robert Frank's *The Americans*. It is also thought provoking as it deals with 'modes of knowing' and knowledge creation. It is easy to problematize the very nature of a British photographer attempting to contextualize America. The same way we can find it problematic when a Canadian critiques a British photographer who is commenting on a specific time period in America, as viewed through the lens of a prolific American photographer, who himself was Swiss

(as takes place in these paragraphs). This is the gestalt nature of America and American culture. Because of its influence, its cultural imperialism, the concepts of 'what is America' and 'what is American' are bigger than America itself. Its hopes, fears and iconography are widely negotiated, by long time natives, new comers and individuals from the international community. What is America is a global affair. This is what Frank's *The Americans* helped explore and this is what Day's *Postcards* attempts to renegotiate and make visible once again.

Works Cited

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