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American beauty

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Last Updated: May 15, 2008 7:23PM UAE / May 15, 2008 3:23PM GMT

If Robert Frank's seminal photobook *The Americans* had a marketing launch in a parallel universe as a cinematic summer blockbuster, the trailer would begin in flat black darkness, the announcer gravely intoning: "In a world where jukeboxes, drive-ins, and automobiles are more than just jukeboxes, drive-ins, and automobiles, Robert Frank drives a stake straight through America's heart, revealing a world of unimaginable sadness, a country you've never known."

Hollywood would sell it to death as a gothic set piece, and Frank would be the one-eyed man pointing to the sky, shouting about the apocalypse.

In a sense, that's what the world has done with *The Americans*.

The book (and Frank, along with it) rode the glass elevator straight to the top, in esteem, legend, and sales. For good reason. *The Americans* isn't just a phenomenal gesture, it's years of serious work forged into a single, unassailable ingot that's completely altered how people (and not just photographers) see and interpret the world around them.

And with Steidl's new, definitive reprinting of this modern classic on the 50th anniversary of its publication, Robert Frank's *American Odyssey* has the capacity to attract, and affect, more than ever. Published with paper, covers, and croppings all selected by Frank, this edition will enhance the myth of both man and manuscript.

I never owned *The Americans* but it was one of those books that lured me away from sports and toward the potential of art in general, and I remember reading it in the public library in my town, in the room with the old wooden table where Robert Frost used to hold court and teach kids, and I'd sit and look at Frank's pictures, and each time I looked, I knew I knew nothing, but I was eager to get out there and find out what a new kind of learning might look like.

Even years later, in my first months in San Francisco, in Lawrence Ferlinghetti's bookshop City Lights, the centre of the still-flickering Beat universe, I'd sit for hours in the rickety chair of the upstairs poetry room and steal another look at *The Americans* while pigeons visited the window, while the clothes lines of cross-the-alley Chinatown fluttered their laundry on a breeze.

All of this has nothing to do with Frank, or his book, really. Writing about *The Americans* is like writing about air: if you try to define it, you end up saying nothing. Better to say nothing and see where you end up.

Perhaps the best starting point is the man himself. Born in Zurich in 1924, Robert Frank learned how to photograph as a young apprentice, shooting stills on film sets, and emigrated to the United States at the age of 23. Fashion photography was a lure, as were Edward Steichen and Walker Evans, heavyweights of the photo world who could help young, talented photographers break into the establishment. Frank started off on his own as a commercial photographer, and was successful, but it was a series of trips to Europe in the early Fifties that pointed his talent in a new direction.

London's coal-soaked fog was a great obscurer, and Frank's pictures from that trip, of City gents wearing top hat and tails, contrasted with his images of blackened Welsh coal miners looking him caddy in the eye. In Frank's pictures, London streets became deliberately grainy and dark, a much more impressionistic stroke than could be seen in LIFE magazine at that time. Schooled in telling a straight, predictable story, Frank was beginning to wonder what might be done if there were fewer rules, and no road map.

After getting married and having two children, Frank leveraged Steichen and Evans's support for his application to the Guggenheim Foundation in 1955. The impossibly dreary pictures of London might have helped as well. Here was a photographer who was going his own way, photographing against the current vogue, trying to say something new with a small, hand-held camera. For a precision instrument, Frank's camera was rebelliously vague. His film, pushed to accommodate low-light shooting, went grainy when developed, yielding images that were slightly out-of-reach, just beyond comprehension.

During the Eisenhower years, the United States billed itself as a Kodachrome Coca-Cola Cinemascope Spectacular. Television had begun to replace the stop, and families were beginning to leave cities for the two car garage pleasures of the suburbs. But having seen Nazis sweep across Europe, Frank knew propaganda when he saw it, and as he wheeled his car into what became a sequence of three massive road trips, he began to capture an entirely different American view.

But the trips weren't without a cost. Frank was briefly jailed in Arkansas in 1955, partly because he spoke with an accent, hadn't taken a bath, and had one-third of a bottle of "foreign" whiskey. And while the pictures themselves describe a country at odds with its own PR, Frank's associative editing style compounded their punch.

Comprising of 83 photographs, each picture in *The Americans* was a nail ripped out of the house of American perfection. By dismantling the dream, page by page, Frank created a new mythology, both of the road and of the people he found, a landscape that was as much about possibility as it was about the deep wrongness of segregation in a place that considered itself the land of opportunity.

What were the pictures? The last eight in the book have been rattling around in my head ever since I saw my first copy of *The Americans* in a library in high school. Those eight pages make me think Frank was a doctor, trying to take America's pulse, attempting to diagnose if America loved anything at all, or if it were only in love with itself.

Frank's America was a country infatuated with the loneliness of an empty picnic ground; the blurred speed with which families have children; the boxed-in comfort of cars and the walled-in comfort of getting old.

It was a country that drove in two different directions when it came to race, a place where religion's power was so strong it needed to be said twice, in case you missed it the first time, in case you missed it the first time, the first time you kissed, when you fell in love beside your car, which was the same thing as falling in love with your car, because your car enabled you to fall in love wherever you needed to, even if you were stuck without a date, holding only your dreams of what your wedding day at City Hall might look like, when your fiancée held you tight, until the day you were together, in balance, on paper, but still very much your own, two as one as two, as well, prepared for speed but looking backward, back at the car that held Frank's own love, and the children he'd regret regretting, his first wife looking toward him and through him, looking at a man standing on the side of the road with a camera, looking back.

It's a perfect blur: a rush of images, each one bleeding into the next, very much in the mode of bebop, so popular with Frank's contemporaries. To Frank's eyes, eyes that had witnessed the Second World War, America was a place of sameness, silence, and suppression, but most important, soul.

It's the kind of work that could only have been made by an outsider, someone as engaged with humanism as he was "against indifference," as Frank used to like to say. Initially, *The Americans* was not even published in the United States. In Paris, Robert Despire backed the first edition in 1958, and it was another year before Grove Press, a literary imprint aligned with the Beats, published it in the States.

A chance meeting with Jack Kerouac single-handedly jump-started interest in *The Americans*; Frank showed him prints from the book, and Kerouac agreed to write a foreword. Ironically, *The Americans* followed the crest of Kerouac's triumph as spontaneous-poet-prophet, preceding Kerouac's drunken disintegration and failure to change the world in the way that he might have had he had more discipline. And *The Americans* came years before Dylan changed the world in a way that could never have been achieved without discipline. Frank's work was a bridge between beat hipster idealism, and getting things done.

Which is one reason why it's lasted. Because it was capital-W Work. While Frank's actual journeys may have contained whim and the arbitrary, the selected photographs that comprise the edit are rock solid. Only the captions hint at a great scattering, a shutter blinking in Butte, Boise, Baton Rouge and beyond.

When facing the reflection of its own content, the book doesn't turn away, and it never coasts. Frank's pictures squarely confront power, the misuse of power, the failings of power, what power looks like when it's been drained from the faces of men, how power can be contained by silence, how quiet jukeboxes can be when they contain all the great songs you've never heard, and how loud they are when they play all the bad songs you'll never forget.

Two days ago, I left Atlanta on a trip to find an old cheap chair. I was heading to a town far enough away to be country, but close enough to still be a day trip, and as I left the skyline behind I realised I was smiling, and had been, for about 20 minutes, because there was a road ahead, and I knew where the map said it was going, but I didn't know what it looked like there, and hell yeah, I was excited to find out.

On the way there, I pulled over in a small town called Between, because if a small town called Between is an actual town between where you live and the place that sells old cheap chairs, you're required to pull over and see what it looks like and find out what it all might mean.

Robert Frank's explorations didn't just try to find out what America might mean, it's as if each picture had its own double-strand DNA of American Meaning built-in, and the nucleotides came and did their work, and the cell split to form a new page with a new picture wholly unlike the last, each page a generational rebellion, but with papa's eyes, and mama's voice. Pure visual fidelity, the perfect sound.

It's simple, really. Reading Steidl's reprinting of *The Americans*, where the plates themselves have a true and tangible depth to their murkiness, I'm glad Frank didn't do anything to clear the water. Sight is rarely well-lit and pin-sharp, and when it is, it doesn't last. When we see, our retinas rarely hold foregrounds and backgrounds together as one. It's mechanically impossible, the eye's failing, and it's another reason why the camera has succeeded as a way of seeing. A bigger lens can see what we cannot. Which says nothing of our attention, and what we choose to focus on.

Much can be made of what Frank chooses to see, and what he puts into his frames. The overriding arc in *The Americans* is that the pictures feel as if they were made by a feeling, thinking human, rather than someone trying to make photographs that look like art for the Christie's auction. There's a quick mind behind the book's main equation, which is this: how we see is less important than what is seen. The former are questions for a machine: which lens? Which film? Which speed? The latter includes the most severe and gut-wrenching choices for a dedicated, free-thinking artist.

For a Swiss on an American odyssey, Frank's imperfectly odd way of seeing is the book's best asset. It's both Frank's way and the highway, with the roads of America yielding an infinite riff of possibilities, regardless of where the end is, and what the air sounds like there. Though the Great American Road Trip is quickly becoming a petroleum-based impossibility, when you look at *The Americans* you get the sense that there's a wealth of pictures still out there.

Unlike many photographers, Frank's vision wasn't exclusive – it isn't cheeky, selfish, or desperate to please. Its inclusiveness makes you think America is a place where looking and seeing deeply is still allowed, even now, in this parking lot era of strip malls, Wal-Mart, Chik-Fil-A and Homeland Security.

Which means even though Christie's tells us Trolley – New Orleans, 1955 is worth over \$600,000, its real worth is far beyond what it costs to be caught with your auction paddle in the air last October. The *Americans* may have been the result of a man with a Leica and a Guggenheim, or it may have been something larger, a piece of art that asks more questions than it answers, that reveals less than it implies, that suggests more than it establishes, that loves more than it can.

Frank's book reminds me to hope for more of what can't be easily described. For art that's less didactic, less like advertising. For a world where artists spend years risking whatever they have to risk (careers, marriages, relationships) to see what might be down the creative wellspring. It reminds me that someone's always willing to go further to see what might be seen, and they'll report back, and we'll all be better for it.

There's always a place between where you started and where you'll finish. That place may be where you're sitting right now, or it may encompass everything you'll ever know. Robert Frank had a hunch, and he went out with his camera to track it down. Many have followed. The truth is that while this edition of *The Americans* is the last, and the printing was presided over by Frank himself, it may be his definitive work, but it needn't be America's, and it needn't be yours.

If I glean one thing from the pages of *The Americans*, it's the suggestion that the road is still there, and it doesn't belong to Robert Frank. The road's mine and it's yours, and we're the only ones who'll know what's on it, so let's go quickly, and soon, before our thoughts slow and stop wondering what the light looks like on an evening when anything seems possible, before the movie's last reel and the credits unspool, before all the ideas are the same ideas, and especially before we start asking ourselves, "What if...?"

The Americans, 50th Anniversary Edition, is out this week.
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