

s t r a n g e r s a n d f r i e n d s

ANNE WILKES TUCKER

Small towns are typically closed communities, outwardly friendly, but suspicious of anyone who is not a resident. Carrying a camera escalates those suspicions.¹ Paparazzi journalism and “candid camera” TV have also sensitized people to how easily a photographer can denigrate and caricature his subjects. People want to know what is being photographed and why. Most people would not use the word stereotype, but they understand how they can be typecast with little sympathy or awareness for their particular humanity. Thus, what Dave Anderson has accomplished in his portrayal of the residents of a small East Texas town is all the more remarkable, and attributable to his ability to put people at ease. How else can we explain a man with a poster in his home that says “Shut the Fuck UP!” letting Anderson make that engaging portrait that exposes the subject’s melancholy rather than his bravado.

In the interview published in this book, Dave Anderson mentions the work of Diane Arbus as an influence, which is appropriate for many reasons. Beyond similarities in the work, to be discussed below, they share an important personality trait. When you talk to Anderson, or conversed with Arbus, you feel as though what you have to say is important and really interesting to them personally. You find yourself telling them details about your life that you had no intention of sharing, at least not with someone you know only casually. My interview with Anderson was initially conducted as research for this essay and was not intended for publication. It didn’t occur to me when Anderson turned the tables and began to question me that I was going public with details about my life. There are no shocking revelations, but I generally protect my privacy. Yet, when we decided to publish the interview, I couldn’t cut the passages about myself without removing ideas relevant to Anderson’s work. More important, those passages reveal how he can put people at ease. He and I weren’t strangers, nor are we intimate friends, but then, I’m not sure Anderson separates people into strangers and friends in the way most people do. Strangers are just people he hasn’t gotten to know yet. As he says, “I’m fascinated by other people’s lives. I really want to hear about you, your parents, your brothers, your sisters, where they went, why they went there.... I’m fascinated by all of it. I love that whole concoction that creates a person – the place, the outlook, the experience, the way they approach life.”

Cats and dogs weave throughout his pictures as they do the houses and the bare-dirt yards of his subjects. A woman carries a rabbit as tenderly as she might carry a child and a child caresses a bird. Many of the animals are pets but, as one resident explains, they also have practical purposes, such as cats that kill rats and dogs that offer protection. And animals are food. People in rural settings are clearer about that than those of us who

purchase our meat wrapped in cellophane. Many of Vidor's residents are hunters. Anderson documents a headless plastic deer that has been used for target practice and a homemade deer stand, in which a hunter would wait for deer to come into range. The turkey held by the boy on page 50 might well be next Sunday's main course at dinner. Quite beyond their informational value about life in Vidor, the animals are used by Anderson in more evocative ways. The sickly, wary looking black dog conveys a beaten-down resignation probably felt by some of Vidor's residents but avoided by Anderson in portraying people. The chained dog perched on the car roof has a very similar look of suspicion as the man with his arms protectively crossed. But for me, the remaining fragment of a deer's leg lying above the marsh and trees that surround a drainage ditch is Anderson's more powerful evocation of hard death and fetid darkness. Despite Anderson's capacity to find beauty in the people of Vidor, few would envy their lives. Many of them live too close to a frightening edge beyond which there is only darkness, making all the more admirable their best efforts at a good life.

Anderson's portrayal of hope is best conveyed through the children whose portraits make up a quarter of the photographs. They are generally playing – with pets, on bicycles, or on homemade rope swings. A few are situated protectively next to an adult, but most are alone or with other kids entertaining themselves and each other with games that often involve competitive skills, such as walking on fallen tree trunks and riding a "bucking barrel." Most of the kids flash shy sweet smiles lacking the learned wariness that comes with age.

This book's title, *Rough Beauty*, conveys Anderson's conviction that the hard scuffle lives of most of the residents of Vidor, Texas, are worthy of our attention, but it also conveys that he does not seek to beautify their lives by removing the crude edges. Neither clothes nor bodies are always clean. One gets the impression that recycling has a different meaning here. Old boots become plant containers on a fence. Irreparable cars are sources of spare parts for whatever still functions, resulting in tittering stacks of cannibalized vehicles. The respect Anderson gives their lives and what they manage to achieve reminds me of what Diane Arbus said about freaks. "Most people go through life dreading they'll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They've already passed their test in life." Not that Anderson or I would compare his subjects to Arbus' people who were born with physical and mental disabilities. But both of us understand that many of his subjects have lived with severe economic disadvantages that do continually test and wear people down. Anderson states in the interview that he grew up in a solid middle class environment. His life has not been without pain but this kind of struggle for survival passed from generation to generation is not his world.

As pictures, this work is strongly situated in a tradition that Anderson recognizes and admires. In the interview, he reaches back into the nineteenth century to cite the great European portraitist Julia Margaret Cameron and Nadar, and the American daguerreotypists Albert Sands Southworth and Josiah Johnson Hawes. He admires their talents as portraitists, although their styles are to work in studios not posing the subject in their own environment. He then names many of the men and women whose works

founded and shaped the 20th century Modernist canons: Paul Strand, Walker Evans, August Sander, Robert Frank and Arbus. But his praise for them is qualified. He admires their picture-making skills and their crystalline visions of the world, achieved by working quickly with strangers in unfamiliar settings as he does. His own approach is more engaged than their deliberate, and at times distant, observations. He admires Arbus “for her sense of adventure and her willingness to throw herself in these foreign situations,” but her vision is too cool, despite her “professed warmth for people.” He gravitates instead to the Dorothea Lange’s palpable sympathy for her subjects and her ability to capture their lives and feelings in body gestures. He also admires Lange’s contemporary Russell Lee and the dry wit that prevails throughout Lee’s wide ranging photographic essays. Lee was also known for his ability to gain his subjects’ trust.

One major influence that Anderson did not mention in his interview is his love of cinema. He cites three filmmakers who would each quickly recognize Anderson’s choice of *Rough Beauty* as a title as they are each known for their gritty, human tales that are visually stunning and morally complex. Of Terence Malick’s *Days of Heaven*, Krystof Kieslowski’s *Decalogue* series, and Kenneth Lonergan’s *You Can Count on Me*, Anderson says, “All of them tell fairly simple, nuanced moral tales with true humanity... All films are contrived, but in trying to find something truly real and humane, I think Kieslowski and Lonergan are quite masterful and it’s something I think about when I try to tell stories through my photographs. Malick, for me, is about natural beauty and mood. It is a mythical quiet, which is very Quakerly and taps into the dreaminess I use and infer in my work.”

It is this dreamy quality that most sets Anderson’s work apart from the Modernist masters cited above and reveals the influence of his mentor and friend Keith Carter. To emphasize one component of the picture over others, Anderson sometimes darkens the pictures edges. For instance, he heightens the isolation of “BBQ Queen” such that she might be a dream of the boy leaning against the nearby car or she might be trying to dream herself away, in the way that every fairytale lifts its heroine out of her mundane situation. He similarly focuses our attention on the family in their Sunday clothes and details of the home and truck behind them slip into dark tonalities. While Anderson knows how to use asymmetrical compositions to lyrical advantage, he favors a central placement of the main character and he freely interprets what he captured when he is printing to heighten what he wants us to perceive and to feel about his characters.

As he explains in the interview, Dave Anderson first traveled to Vidor because of its reputation as a racist town deep with membership in the Ku Klux Klan. East Texas DJ’s joke about Vidor with humor that depends on that reputation and other stereotypes of poor whites. What he carried away instead were piercing but compassionate portraits of people living in rural poverty. He gives contemporary visual reality to hard-scrabble and often lonely lives eloquently described in the first half of the twentieth century in novels by Eudora Welty and William Faulkner and in the photographs of the Farm Security Administration. Unlike the FSA photographers, Anderson’s intent is not to use his pictures to campaign to improve the subject’s lives. Anderson’s father, who is an economic historian, noted that for many of these people, change is unlikely “because for

many who lived that way, there never really had been a Great Depression. They lived like that before the Depression, they lived like that during the Depression, and when the Depression ended, they still lived like that.”ⁱⁱⁱ In the best artistic tradition, Anderson has shown us their specific faces and given them a little immortality.

Anne Wilkes Tucker is the founding Curator of Photography at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, where she has worked since 1976. The museum's collection now includes over 20,000 photographs and the prestigious Manfred Heiting Collection. Tucker has curated over forty exhibitions, including retrospectives for Robert Frank, Ray K. Metzker, Louis Faurer, Richard Misrach and Brassai and the landmark exhibition 'The History of Japanese Photography,' most of which have been accompanied by a publication. Her essays have introduced the debut monographs of photographers from Joel Sternfeld to Alec Soth. She has lectured throughout the U.S., Europe, Asia and Latin America and has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. In 2001, TIME magazine honored her as "America's Best Curator."

ⁱ The destruction of the World Trade Towers on September 11, 2001, has only sharpened and complicated wariness to strangers in the U.S. But suspicion of photographers is not new. In 1940, the photographer Sid Grossman was in Oklahoma photographing folk singers, but was reported to the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation as suspicious because he was photographing “poor people and oil wells.” Similarly, on his legendary trek across the United States photographing for what became the book *The Americans*, Robert Frank was arrested in Arkansas because the arresting officer noticed “he was shabbily dressed, needed a shave and a haircut, also a bath and talked with a foreign accent.”

ⁱⁱ “Dave Anderson” Interview by Russell Joslin, *Shots* 85 (Fall 2004) 3-9.