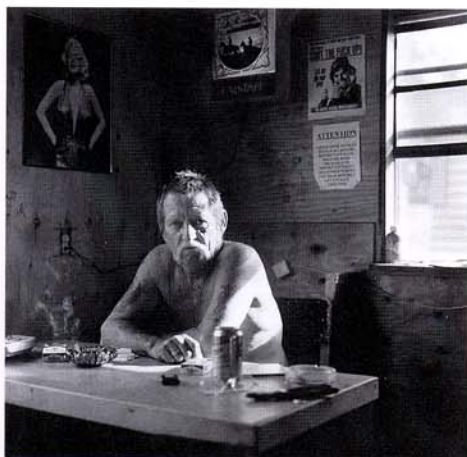


## Dave Anderson: Rough Beauty: Photographs from Vidor, Texas

Galveston Arts Center

Marisa C. Sánchez



Dave Anderson, *Ray Wilson*, 2004  
Selenium toned gelatin silver photograph  
15 x 15 inches  
Courtesy Vickie Bassetti Fine Art Photography,  
New Orleans



Dave Anderson, *A Quiet Death*, 2004  
Selenium toned gelatin silver photograph  
15 x 15 inches  
Courtesy Vickie Bassetti Fine Art Photography,  
New Orleans



Dave Anderson, *Raking*, 2004  
Selenium toned gelatin silver photograph  
15 x 15 inches  
Courtesy Vickie Bassetti Fine Art Photography,  
New Orleans

Offering a picture of a rural, isolated and poor community that seems to exist in a different time and place, Dave Anderson's photographs at the Galveston Arts Center are not easy to view; they confront us with the hard edge of reality. *Rough Beauty*, Anderson's first solo show, is a series begun in the summer of 2003 and completed in 2004. It is a sensitive and engaging portrait of Vidor, Texas—a place many passersby prefer not to stop. While Anderson's photographs of worn landscapes contain the signs of a struggling community and heighten the impression of a secluded and sleepy town, the faces of Vidor look back at you, untrusting and confrontational, demanding a return gaze. Anderson captures a land filled with such strange imbalances subtly revealed in the routines and residue of daily life.

The sense of place in these images is defined through patience. Anderson traveled to Vidor on more than forty occasions to complete the project. His distanced, unbiased eye echoes what Lincoln Kerstein called a "tender cruelty" in Walker Evans' photographs, though Anderson's work does not overtly mirror Evans' style. Like something out of *Twin Peaks*, Anderson's images are eerie—an effect occasionally heightened by the quality and use of light in each print.

Take *Ray Wilson*, for example—the portrait of a shirtless, tattooed man seated at a table, surrounded by a beer bottle and packs of cigarettes;

a poster of Marilyn Monroe is pinned to the wall. From the poorly maintained surroundings, it is difficult to discern whether Anderson photographed this weathered man in his own dilapidated house or encountered him at a seedy local bar. Light streams in through a window, its source unclear; still, it's intrusion into this man's shabby domain is obvious. In *A Quiet Death*, a limp goat lies collapsed on the ground as if sinking back into the earth, its neck tied to a tree in someone's backyard. Implications of neglect are obvious; the owners were not aware their animal was dead until Anderson discovered and photographed the carcass. Both *Ray Wilson* and *A Quiet Death* memorialize the passing of time, exposing broader themes of loss and neglect.

Although his encounters with the sites and people of Vidor are not staged or coerced, Anderson's compositions are extremely calculated, structured in a highly ordered manner around a central subject. In *Raking*, an aged woman stands in front of a pile of burning compost. Barely able to stand, she leans into her rake. Anderson captures the fleeting moment in which the rake functions as a place for his subject to rest her body. Tender and intuitive, the image is the reward for a patient hand.

There is a consistence of vision in Anderson's selective subject matter. He appears to work intuitively—an approach that cannot be taught but must be sharpened by practice and inclination.

Yet, I get the overall impression that Anderson is still developing his practice, gradually solidifying his style beyond that of his mentors. The techniques he employs—particularly in regards to composition, dramatic lighting and the handling of space—reveal him to be a student of Keith Carter and Michael Kenna. One also sees shades of Diane Arbus in Anderson's approach to subject matter and light like in *BBQ Queen*, for example. In it, a young girl wearing a gown, crown and sash that reads "Little Miss" emerges from a dark background. Her expression overshadows what could have been a moment of victory, now replaced by the self-recognition of vanishing youth, fading beauty and uncertainty.

At a time when photographers are desperate to achieve lasting impact through monumentality, producing large-scale, color and digitally manipulated works, Anderson's modestly scaled black and white prints are in no way limited in their ability to communicate. Each photograph has a tremendous presence. It's unfortunate, therefore, that the works were not installed in the Center's main gallery. As powerful images, they need ample room to breath, and the exhibition felt cramped in the space's upper-level gallery. Nevertheless, these photographs are telling portraits of isolation. They maintain a gravity that captures a harsh reality and reveals an inquiring eye.