

A Poverty of Desire: An Introduction

Australia, in comparison with other predominantly English-speaking democracies, is a relatively young nation, and this youth of just over a hundred years carries in its collective consciousness a load of psycho-cultural baggage still in dire need of exorcism.

Besides the running sore of the plight of its original inhabitants the Aborigines, who were only granted status as human beings and citizens of their own land in the late sixties, there is some reluctance on the part of the Anglo-Celtic (English, Scots and Irish) section of the population to allow non-Anglo-Celts the right to lay full claim to the name of Australian.

Thus a fifth-generation native-born citizen of predominantly non-Anglo descent can find his right to be called Australian constantly challenged by people of far more recent British descent or birth. If such an Australian insists on retaining pride in his heritage, finding himself outside the Anglocentric cultural mainstream he will be lumped in with those whom he has little else in common, more recent arrivals from non-English speaking nations, under the blanket term "ethnic".

When used as an adjective this word becomes pejorative, signifying the perceivedly quaint and second-rate, the folk dancing and decorative handicrafts trotted out at fringe festivals to symbolize a diversity of origins and cultures soon about to be subsumed into the acceptably normal.

Unlike in America there is no official recognition of hyphenate Australians, so the internal divisions continue under the banner of a unified nationhood. The benefit of being an artist placed in this position is that one is permanently an outsider on the inside, privy to the mindset of one's fellow citizens but not to be counted amongst them. You are always at one remove and able to see the whole picture at a glance, each human being part of a larger dance of clans and families and allegiances and tongues, swirling around a centre invisible only to them and that is rooted in the myths of historical origins.

The outsider on the inside is in the most powerful position to describe his society with less blinkers than most, and few photographers have proved this more potently than Robert Frank in the United States and William Klein in

France. Due to its lack of any real tradition of the self-directed social documentary, Australia has suffered from an unwillingness to look at itself with impunity, however, preferring to substitute instead the soporific paradigm of "Australia the Beautiful", fuelled by dozens of coffee table colour landscape books of stultifying sameness.

It took an American photographer/publisher named Rick Smolan and his *A Day In The Life Of...* projects to break the back of this self-delusion in the early 1980s with *A Day In The Life Of Australia*. I well remember the controversy the arrival of his teams of great, good, famous and foreign photojournalists on Australian soil generated, given the local photographers' received wisdom that Australian society itself was just too boring, too mundane in comparison with the Australian landscape to bother oneself in photographing.

If you wanted pictures of people, this prejudice went, go where they were at least interesting as in India or South-East Asia, as a couple of Western Australian photographers had spectacularly shown.

After Smolan's *A Day In The Life Of Australia* and subsequent books in the series (including two excellent ones on Ireland and London actually done by a Sydney publisher in collaboration with English photographers) vindicated the view that every culture is worth photographing, social documentary lived a brief life in Australia to die at the hands of Baudrillard-illustrating art careerists who sprang up to take advantage of new MA and PhD degree programs in photography within university fine arts departments.

The social documentarians who continued to make any mark were the same tourists of the exotic as before, or an Aboriginal handful who began using photography as a weapon in pressing for recognition and eventual change in the condition of their own people.

Given the futility of subscribing to a non-existent and barely understood photographic tradition, those few left like myself pursued more private concerns, turning to a metaphysical, poetic approach to portraying a whole society, or at least the part of it I found myself in at the time. 