

A marcher protests against farm water cuts, Mendota, California



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THE THEMES of agriculture and rural hardship have offered documentary photographers ample scope to explore the current state of modern society. This is particularly true of America, where these themes crop up time and again, each filtered through the eyes of different photographers.

The first significant approach to these concepts appeared in 1935 in the form of the Farm Security Administration, a body set up to tackle rural poverty during the Depression. The administration became famous for its highly influential photography programme that ran from 1935–1944. The FSA hired photographers to document the hardship of struggling farmers and its aim was to ‘introduce America to Americans’. The programme fostered the talents of many of the era’s most significant photographers, including Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans and Gordon Parks. Many of the images that these photographers produced have become staples for great photography. In the following years the Depression lifted and America’s economy stabilised, but rural poverty isn’t a thing of America’s past. It’s simply that it has moved to the peripheral of its vision.

Matt Black’s stark monochrome images remind us that the poverty of America’s fringe communities is still uncomfortably present – something especially true of the dust-bowl landscape of California, one of America’s most profitable states. The communities (consisting largely of migrants)

Forgotten people

California-based photographer **Matt Black** has spent his career charting the impoverished agricultural communities of his native state and those beyond. He talks to **Oliver Atwell** about his personal journey



Top right: The daughter of indigenous migrants outside her home in Kerman, California

Left: A 96-year-old man in his bedroom, Teviston, California

featured in Black’s images all seem to exist on the edges of American society looking in. The American Dream is within sight, but always just out of reach. It’s with this in mind that Black has found himself producing a series of photo essays that combine to form two major projects – *Kingdom of Dust* and *The People of Clouds*.

‘The communities that I document exist on the fringes, both socially and geographically,’ says Black. ‘The images are a journey deeper and deeper into a hidden world, yet it’s a secret place that exists in plain sight. If we look at the *Kingdom of Dust* project, we can see the irony that these people live on the edges of one of the most important parts of the United States. Central Valley in California is the agricultural heartland of the US. It’s the most productive farming region in the nation. That’s actually where I’m from, so there was a major draw for me in that respect.’

The crux of Black’s images is that while these communities are significantly impoverished, these are the same people who are helping to harvest the land and feed the country. Few of them make more than \$10,000 (around £6,000) and, as Black points out, hardly any even know the name of the farmer whose field they tend.

‘I think you can learn so much about a culture through how they produce their food,’ says Black. ‘How they treat the land and the agricultural system they have in place can tell us so much about a society.



THE BLACK OKIES

‘**ONE OF** the major elements of the 1930s FSA images was the Dust Bowl Migration,’ says Black. ‘A big part of the heartland of American farming was hollowed out by migration. These people went to Central Valley, but as it turns out there was a parallel migration that went undocumented. That concerned young African Americans – Black Okies, in fact. The term Okie is simply another word for migrant. It was quite a discovery for me and I managed to document the very tail end of the story. I photographed the last remnants of these people. The original migrants were in their 80s and 90s. All those people are gone now. Many of them died while I was making the project.’

It’s a fundamental indicator. In developed countries, it’s so rare that people have any real connection to where their food comes from and how it’s produced. You can see that disconnection in my photographs. It’s a separate world and echoes through into my second project, *The People of Clouds*, which I shot in Mixteca, a mountain range in southern Mexico. This project is significant in that it traces where a portion of the societies in the *Kingdom of Dust* came from. In this region, it’s a completely different relationship to the land. There’s a harmony present. It’s very revealing and tells you all you need to know.’

MAN AND THE LAND

The most obvious thing to note about Black’s images is his masterful application of monochrome. The tonal range draws out the shadows and textures of the landscape, and communicates the abstract simplicity of the areas and subjects he surveys. The film grain also has its place within this world. It’s difficult not to align it with the dirt and sand carried on the winds of Central Valley. Yet for Black, his use of black & white, and film in particular, is not an idea that had a conceptual genesis. Rather, it was simply a medium that he was comfortable working with.

‘The world is becoming digital and with that in mind using film is almost becoming a unique craft,’ says Black. ‘The simple fact is that film is how

I started in photography. When I was working for a local newspaper as a young guy, that was what I had access to. In fact, mine was one of the last newspapers to still use black & white film. It taught me how to use Kodak Tri-X, the film I still use to this day. Had I started out with my work now and decided to use film, it would be a statement, but as it is it's just something I've stuck with. It fits my way of seeing things.'

If you look closely at Black's images, you can see an interesting interplay between the two distinct genres of photography of documentary and landscape. Through their deceptively simple composition and subtly surreal scenes, the images straddle a grey area that is an investigation into how individuals can function in an often harsh and unforgiving territory. The landscapes seem to be a stage through which these human dramas play out.

'Fundamentally, my projects are about man's relationship with the land,' says Black. 'One of the questions I ask myself is, what connection is there? In Mexico, it's a deep connection. In the factory farms of California, it's the opposite, being pure alienation. The images deal with that connection or lack of it.'

Contained within the two major projects are a series of individual photo essays that communicate different facets of the overall story. For example, within the *Kingdom of Dust* project, Black presents us with the story of the Black Okies, a dwindling group



A brother and sister play near their home in Teviston, California

of black sharecroppers (see page 35). This is where Black's training as a newspaper photojournalist comes to the fore.

'I think photo essays are a really interesting format to work with,' says Black. 'It's essentially a series of images that work as a story. The layering of meaning that streams through the individual frames brings them together. The whole is greater than

its parts. You can accomplish a great deal with a series, but each image needs to carry its weight. There can't be any excess or fat. Each one needs to work by itself and say something unique.'

GAINING TRUST

Among many of the striking things about Black's projects is the seemingly

unprecedented access that he has to his subjects. In each image, more is revealed about the people and the communities that surround them. It's clear that much time is spent gaining the trust of these groups, which is surely no easy task considering the level of exploitation that these people have endured.

'I'm very upfront about what I'm doing,' says Black. 'I simply explain that I'm interested in doing this story because I think it's important. I tell them what to expect and how long I'll be there, which can vary from six months to two years. It's just about talking and being honest. You should also realise that people want to be heard. It's a basic human need. I'm offering to hear them. That's not to say they're not sceptical, but over time you can overcome that.'

By virtue of the amount of time that Black spends with these people, it's inevitable that he will make every effort to embed himself within the community. In this way, he is able to gain a true understanding of the lives these people lead.

'I have to go deep,' says Black. 'That's the key to my work. I have to see things that would never normally be seen. However, I'm very clear that this is a professional endeavour. I'm there to tell a story. As a photographer, you have to maintain some level of emotional distance. It can be too easy to lose perspective of why you're there in the first place. I'm producing this work for public consumption.'

Black's reasons for producing his images should be clear from the outset. Like any true photojournalist, the sole aim is to highlight an issue in order to draw attention to it. Through the act of capturing his subjects through his camera, Black yanks these communities from the peripheral and forces them into crystal-clear focus.

'I really believe that photojournalism can inspire a shift in perspective,' says Black. 'Through my work being published, I've seen direct results. People have been inspired to get involved and help in any way they can. These changes are small, but they're real. The harder thing to pin down is raising awareness on a larger scale.'



Left: Homeless man near a railyard, Fresno, California

That's the Holy Grail – making people understand that these things are happening right in the heart of California. Hopefully, the next time they go to the grocery store, they'll think about where their food has come from.'

THE FUTURE

When faced with the stark realities of Black's work, the question that often comes to mind is, where can he go from here? Of course, the answer lies in just how much more there is to reveal about the worlds that Black has spent his career infiltrating. Each project feeds into the next investigation and Black's journey is unlikely to end any time soon.

'Every one of these projects led to the next one,' says Black. 'There was no break. I completed one thing, and while working on that found another thing I was interested in. It was an organic process and not much thought went into it.'

'In Mexico it was the same. The reason I was there was because I traced these communities back to where they came from and found they were being ravaged by migration. They were ghost towns. People are leaving these places in the hope that they can find the dream over the border.'

I have two or three new projects that I've discovered that are the next logical step from that project. I have to do them.'

Black's process of discovering man's relationship to the land is an exhaustive process that is likely to carry him into unexpected territories. And while these projects may serve as a reminder of the power of photography, they also serve a sad indicator that hardship and poverty are likely to be concepts that trouble photographers for years to come. **AP**

Bottom left: Plum harvest, Kingsburg, California



Weeding cotton, Allensworth, California



SAROYAN'S GHOST

'WILLIAM Saroyan was a great Armenian American author,' says Black. 'He produced a number of short stories, plays and novels. He really captured the immigrant experience that was very human and realistic. He would write a lot about his childhood in Fresno in Central California, which is where this project was shot. It used to be known as "Armenian Town" and was a thriving place, but these days something is missing. It's not quite the place it was. The image above is of a recent Armenian immigrant who was a well-known artist in Armenia. When he came to the US, all that disappeared. I thought this was a beautiful moment of him, particularly because the picture behind him is of his granddaughter. It's a quiet portrait. It doesn't say much, but says just enough.'

You can see more of Matt Black's images at www.mattblack.com