

IS THE NOTTINGHAM CONTEMPORARY EXHIBITION STATES OF AMERICA ANY GOOD?

By Sarah Hyde, September 20, 2017



The title of Nottingham's First Full Scale Group Photography show, States of America, is a clever play on words; inviting us to explore our own anxiety about the current political situation.

It is also a wonderful opportunity to explore some of the most famous names in American photography; including Diane Arbus, Dawoud Bey, Bruce Davidson, William Eggleston, Lee Friedlander, Jim Goldberg, Stephen Shore, Ming Smith, Gary Winogrand.

The photographs in the exhibition are on loan from the Wilson Collection, London, with some additions from the Steven Kasher Gallery, Howard Greenberg in New York and Stephen Daiter in Chicago.

As there are almost 250 pieces, allow plenty of time and remember you can dip in and out as entry is free.

STEVEN KASHER GALLERY

The images are presented thematically over the four main rooms and within each gallery individual photographers works are shown as series. One of the many joys of this exhibition is the opportunity to compare the works of different artists.

In gallery one, for example, two of the greatest American female photographers, Diane Arbus, and Mary Ellen Mark, are shown in close proximity. Both women were expert in using the camera for maximum impact, however their style was completely different.

Mary Ellen Mark brings our attention to the people she describes as “unfamous”, in fact, she uses her skill to make them appear famous, asking us to look at the people that society would rather forget. Amanda and her cousin Amy is particularly powerful because it is so troubling.

The prepubescent girls are smoking cigarettes in the paddling pool. The unspoken narrative of the work is the question it asks the viewer: What else have these painfully young, worldly children, been up to?

The Arbus works, which are perhaps more famous, tend to focus on exposing the wierder aspects of human nature. Most of the pictures are taken from the series "Couples", but look out for Mrs T. Charlton Henry, she is certainly quite a character.

Moving through the gallery to the next room, Changing Landscapes, there are some wonderful images here, in particular the works of William Eggleston. In 1976, in his groundbreaking exhibition at MOMA, Colour Photographs, Eggleston took ownership of the photographic image of the South and he has held onto it ever since.

“Egg” has had an interesting life, and among these wonderful works, there is a portrait of one of his closest male friends, TC Boring. A Memphis dentist and perhaps Egg’s “Dr Feelgood”, TC was later shot to death and incinerated in his own home. Later this month, having recently celebrated his 78th birthday, Egg is releasing his first album of 'Lounge Music', a perfect accompaniment for the afternoon cocktails he enjoys, calling them "noonies".

Bruce Davidson's series Subways is also in this room, In these pictures, Bruce Davidson, took everyday people from the subway in New York and through the magic of his camera elevated them into apparent urban legends. These works show exactly how a talented photographer can create an image. Sharp-eyed visitors will be able to spot the Twin Towers in the background of one of the images and here and throughout the show there is some great street fashion.

There is also rare opportunity to see Jim Goldberg's fascinating series "Rich and Poor". The inclusion of the subjects' handwriting under the image with a commentary about how they feel about their life adds an interesting dimension to these portraits.

All the works are fascinating and worthy of serious contemplation.

Gary Winogrand's series “All Women are Beautiful” is a stunning documentary of American life. Finnaly look out for the way that Ming Smith's works are printed: the inclusion of the negative edge frames really makes them stand out.