

## Review

### Divided States: A Review of Jim Goldberg's *Rich and Poor*

#### Abstract

Exhibited as part of the *States of America* collection by the Nottingham Contemporary are selected works from Jim Goldberg's *Rich and Poor*, a photography series which aimed to capture portraits of Americans from a variety of backgrounds during the period between 1977 and 1985. Using both black and white photography and captions handwritten by the images' subjects, this review argues that Goldberg succeeded in not only the lives of the subjects individually, but also a wider image of the economic and social disparity of the country at the time, a divide which is arguably equally present today.

"The income disparity is greater now than ever before"<sup>1</sup>, remarks Jim Goldberg, reflecting back on his series *Rich and Poor*. Exhibited as part of the Nottingham Contemporary's *States of America* collection are selected works from the photography series by the self-described "documentary storyteller"<sup>2</sup> – several black and white photographs accompanied by captions handwritten by the subjects. Outside of the surroundings they depict, which span from a world of graffitied walls adorned with tattered posters to a disparate world of elegant chandeliers hung above dining tables, the portraits illustrate an America divided not just in culture or capital but in closeness.

In spite of the disturbing contrast of living conditions amongst wealthy and poor subjects, the starkest of divides is made evident when comparing their writings. In sharing their thoughts about their photograph, subjects are able bring an intimacy and insight to the series that the photographs alone would be lacking, and help to dispel the inevitable argument that Goldberg has carefully curated a series which manufactures divisions where none exist. Certainly, money is mentioned by rich and poor alike, but in those photographs of poorer subjects it is their open emotion that stands out - their situation is shared, and their struggle unites them. One pictured family of three, comparing themselves to the "three musketeers", write that "poverty sucks, but it brings us closer together".<sup>3</sup> Photographed embracing, their caption celebrates their emotionality and tight-knit nature – their poverty self evident, they choose to focus on what cannot be captured on film.

"My wife is acceptable. Our relationship is satisfactory",<sup>4</sup> writes Edgar above a

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<sup>1</sup> Jim Goldberg, 'Looking at 'Rich and Poor,' 37 Years Later', *Time: The Photo Bank* <<http://time.com/money/3055901/jim-goldberg-rich-poor-income-inequality/>> [accessed 18-01-2018].

<sup>2</sup> Jim Goldberg, *Jim Goldberg: Open See* <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/nov/01/jim-goldberg-open-see-review>> [accessed 18-01-2018].

<sup>3</sup> Jim Goldberg, *NC32192* (1979), <<https://www.magnumphotos.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/cortex/nyc32192-teaser-story-big.jpg>> [accessed 18-01-2018].

<sup>4</sup> Jim Goldberg, *NYC30010* (1981), <<https://www.magnumphotos.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/cortex/nyc30010-teaser-story-big.jpg>> [accessed 18-01-2018].

photograph of the couple. Pictured physically separated his caption betrays nothing beyond what was photographed, the polar opposite of the “musketees” reveling in their closeness. This window into affluent America is an austere one, as rigid formality replaces the relaxed openness of their poorer contemporaries. Those who do offer some insight into their lives only serve to widen the social divide, as their concerns are out of an individualistic need not to “be part of the masses” and instead to “live with style”;<sup>5</sup> as one family, pictured in a tastefully minimalist bedroom, write. Dwarfed by the far weightier issues of other subjects, it is hard not to see this young family and their pictured compeers as focused on petty trivialities, oblivious to their own privilege.

Snapshots of an America now four decades old, the grainy picture quality and dated fashion may place these images in our past, but one gets the impression that a 21<sup>st</sup> century project of the same nature would yield much the same results, both in photographs and captions. The series not only functions as an intimate window into the pain and turmoil of these Americans of the past, but also exemplifies that beneath all the superficial changes to the face of America, four decades have done nothing to close the divide that Goldberg set out to document.

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<sup>5</sup> Jim Goldberg, *NYC32196* (1980), <[http://www.americansuburbx.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Steidl\\_Goldberg\\_Rich\\_Poor-91-web.jpg](http://www.americansuburbx.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Steidl_Goldberg_Rich_Poor-91-web.jpg)> [accessed 18-01-2018].

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