

Review

State of Identity: A Review of Jim Goldberg's *Rich and Poor* (1977-85)

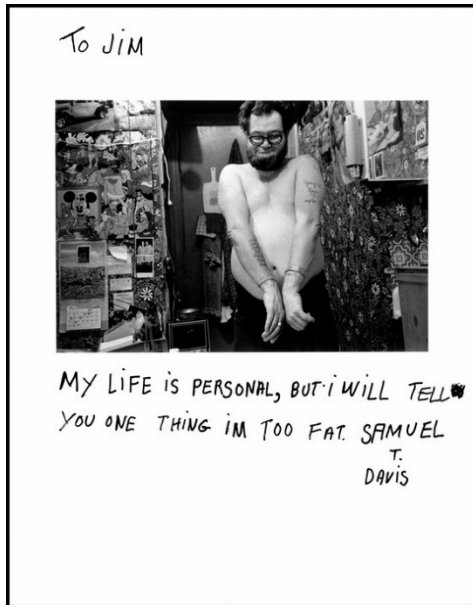
Abstract

In collaboration with the Wilson Centre for Photography, Nottingham Contemporary exhibited a month-long display based on the work of seventeen photographers all experimenting with innovative and documentary forms. Involved in this were the likes of Ming Smith, Lee Friedlander and Diane Arbus. Titled *States of America*, the synecdoche of the exhibition established a simple connection between America's economy and the plight of the working class from 1960-1990. However, one individual artist who included their own unique, documentary technique within this oppressive topic was Jim Goldberg. Whilst evoking a series of heart-wrenching yet thought-provoking emotions, *Rich and Poor* uses the collaborative media of monochromatic images and handwritten notes to allow its audience to see the art through a subjective and realistic lens. The revealing form strips away the potential of misunderstanding and acknowledges the truth behind unachievable 'American Dream'. Upon first glimpse, I believed this would only be demonstrated through the lives of the working class; however, the loneliness and missed opportunities of the rich are also exemplified, allowing myself and the audience to view *States of America* from an alternative perspective.

Picture this. You're in Gallery 3, examining strangers all soundlessly construing their own interpretation of the exhibited photography. Nothing is explained, everything is objective. But then you spot it. *Rich and Poor* by Jim Goldberg. Your eyes are immediately drawn to the collection of monochromatic images accompanied by brief handwritten notes. From a distance, you can only imagine the illusory annotations from yet another documentary artist. But upon closer inspection, you are incredibly mistaken:

'My life is personal, but I will tell you one thing. I'm too fat.'¹

¹ Jim Goldberg, *NYC46965* (1977), <<http://pro.magnumphotos.com/C.aspx?VP3=SearchResult&VBID=2K1HZO42VU3322&SMLS=1&RW=1366&RH=637>> [Accessed: 02/11/2017].



(Goldberg, 1977)

In collaboration with the Wilson Centre for Photography, Nottingham Contemporary exhibited a month-long display based on the work of seventeen photographers experimenting with innovative forms. Their collective piece, *States of America*, presents an overview of the USA from the 1960s to the early 1990s, highlighting a time of social and political unrest. Designed to focus on the three decades that preceded Trump's America, the photography ranges from influential events such as the Civil Rights Movement to the era of Ronald Reagan's presidency.

All the artists, including Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander and Ming Smith, captured the plight of American citizens within the twentieth century. However, as the 'most emotive collection in the exhibition',² the one perspective that stood out to me was the vivid and personal tribute of Jim Goldberg. Through the combination of both documentary photography and intimate messages, Goldberg's *Rich and Poor* succeeds in portraying the struggles (as well as the luxuries) of those he captured, mimicking the concept of the idealised 'American Dream'.

Apparent within fictional worlds such as *The Great Gatsby* and *Of Mice and Men*, many literary writers depict the idea of a romanticised future filled with success, fortune and happiness. However, there's inevitable fault within this ideology. People are born into different circumstances, and whether we like it or not, 'the American Dream' isn't always attainable. Photographer Jim Goldberg understands this, and through the medium of photography, his viewers can comprehend this too.

Contextually, *Rich and Poor* is a series of subjectively annotated photography that '[juxtaposes] the tenants of welfare hotel rooms with the upper classes in their elegantly furnished homes'.³ Each individual piece shows a monochromatic image accompanied by a brief handwritten note authored by the subjects within the photo. The notes range from a

² Emily Thursfield, *Photography Exhibition States of America at Nottingham Contemporary* (2017) <<https://www.leftlion.co.uk/read/2017/october/photography-exhibition-states-of-america-at-nottingham-contemporary>> [Accessed: 21/11/2017].

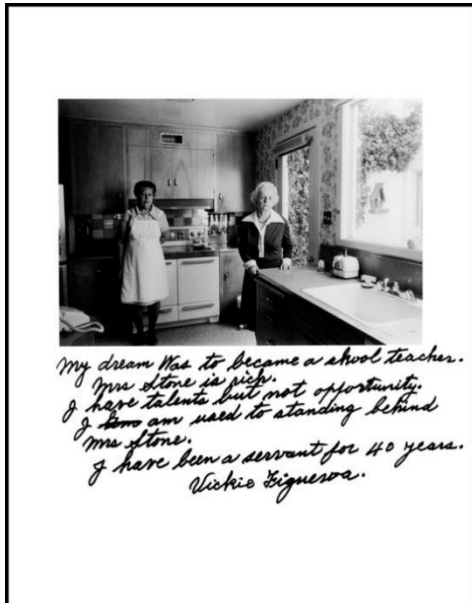
³ Nicola Guy, Angelica Sule, 'Jim Goldberg', *States of America* (Nottingham: Nottingham Contemporary, 2017), p.12.

series of humorous comments to upsetting truths regarding life's missed opportunities. By including these within the pictures, Goldberg clearly depicts each distinct identity. The inclusion of the protagonists' voices 'represents not just the polarity of class but the particularity of human experience'.⁴ To me, this emphasises the idea of portraying a sense of identity, demonstrating how the viewers can comprehend and empathise with the art from a more supplementary, personal perspective.

The broad socio-economic spectrum included within this exhibition also allows for the photography to reflect on the 'realities and illusions of the American Dream',⁵ exemplifying how each extreme of the social hierarchy failed to achieve their idealistic lifestyles. For the lower class, an inferior income and education led to a series of missed opportunities regarding a successful career; whereas a remote yet luxury existence was given to the wealthy, encouraging a life of conformity and recognition of factions.

This can be exemplified within a 1982 addition to *Rich and Poor*, expressing:

'My dream was to become a school teacher. Mrs Stone is rich. I have talents but not opportunity. I am used to standing behind Mrs Stone. I have been a servant for forty years'⁶.



(Goldberg, 1982)

Through Vickie's interpretation of human experience, the audience can identify with Goldberg's representation of the synecdochal struggle of the working class. A woman with dreams and aspirations, ultimately stripped of opportunity due to her position in society, further emphasises the inadequacy of the 'American Dream' and its ability to contribute towards a facade of ambitions. Furthermore, the way in which Vickie alternates between the subject of herself and 'Mrs Stone' also depicts the idea of a remote existence for the wealthy. This is exemplified through her inability to be seen on an equal level to her

⁴ Magnum Photos, *Jim Goldberg: Rich and Poor* (2009),

<<http://pro.magnumphotos.com/C.aspx?VP3=SearchResult&ALID=2K1HRGB96V>> [Accessed: 07/11/2017].

⁵ Irene Aristizabal, 'Introduction', *States of America* (Nottingham: Nottingham Contemporary, 2017), p.4.

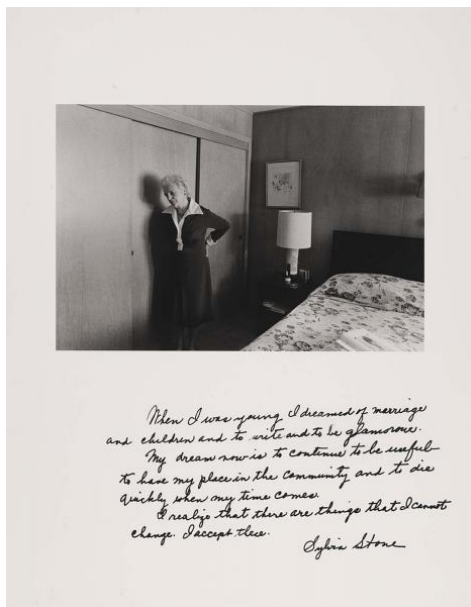
⁶ Jim Goldberg, *NYC32202* (1982),

<<http://pro.magnumphotos.com/C.aspx?VP3=SearchResult&VBID=2K1HZO42VH7FDS&SMLS=1&RW=1366&RH=637>> [Accessed: 02/11/2017].

‘servant’, demonstrating that despite coming from an advantageous and comfortable background, her life doesn’t seem absolutely fulfilled, especially through close, personal relationships outside of her class.

Epitomised through this example, I was able to understand the circumstances represented within the photography, leaving behind any objective opinions and unknown truths. However, upon ordering the full collection of Goldberg’s *Rich and Poor*, I found a compelling example of underlying tales that needed to be expressed. Displayed on the page next to Vickie’s story, ‘Mrs Stone’ or ‘Sylvia’ as she addresses herself, is exposed to the audience in a more personal and vulnerable way. Focused towards the failure of the ‘American Dream’, she states:

‘When I was young I dreamed of marriage and children and to write and to be glamorous. My dream now is to continue to be useful – to have my place in the community and to die quickly when my time comes.’⁷



(Goldberg, 1977-82)

Through the portrayal of one situation from two alternative perspectives, Goldberg exemplifies the development of a stern, aristocratic woman within Vickie’s image, into a vulnerable lady forced to conform to societal standards due to her wealth. Ostensibly, by illustrating the lives of two contrasting individuals, Goldberg creates a sense of community between the paralleled oppression, ultimately allowing for the true identities of the ‘rich and poor’ to shine. This contributes to Goldberg’s photography being such a heart-warming and reflective experience, as he ultimately allows his subjects, and consequently the art, to speak for itself. Not only does this create a more unique artistic encounter, but it emphasises the importance of recognising both the plight of the working lower class as well as the rich.

Another element of *Rich and Poor* that I personally admire is the choice in which the

⁷ SAAM, *Untitled- When I Was Young I Dreamed of Marriage and Children* (1977-1982), <<https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/untitled-when-i-was-young-i-dreamed-marriage-and-children-9227>> [Accessed: 04/11/2017] .

subjects were given to express themselves within his work. To his audience, it is clear that Goldberg valued expressing sensitivity and thoughtfulness over his own success within the photography industry, meaning if his subjects wished not to share their intimate stories, then he respected that decision. Not only does this approach encourage an empathetic response from his audience, but he also allows for his work to stand out from the other artists displayed within the *States of America* exhibition.

The written words of all involved allow for each individual identity and personality to become apparent, thus highlighting the extent in which Goldberg went to form a relationship with his subjects for the sake of expressing their autobiographical narratives. This is particularly emphasised throughout the responses received from his upper-class lieges similar to the likes of 'Sylvia Stone'. 'Countess Vivianna de Blonville' and her life of luxury yet loneliness is an impeccable example of this, articulating:

'I keep thinking where we went wrong. We have no one to talk to now however, I will not allow this loneliness to destroy me – I STILL HAVE MY DREAMS. I would like an elegant home, a loving husband and the wealth I am used to.'⁸



(Goldberg, 1982)

By emphasising a loneliness strong enough to 'destroy [her]', Vivianna allows for the artistic audience to recognise a crippling disadvantage to possessing wealth. This can be interpreted as a lack of community among those belonging to the higher end of the social hierarchy, highlighting that due to their resources, they rarely require support, or even company from their peers. Additionally, by stating 'I still have my dreams', she is reiterating the ideology of failed aspirations, leaving even those with money and opportunity the inability to achieve their 'American Dream'.

Despite the intended outcome for all of those involved, one negative aspect that shone through the emotions and truth regards the inability to read some participant's handwriting. To the audience, the significance and uniqueness of Goldberg's photography is

⁸ Jim Goldberg, *NYC46979* (1982), <<http://pro.magnumphotos.com/C.aspx?VP3=SearchResult&VBID=2K1HZO42VDJ4EQ&SMLS=1&RW=1366&RH=637>> [Accessed: 25/11/2017].

the involvement between the artist and his subjects. However, this is diminished if we are unable to understand the subjective interpretations that the individuals are attempting to convey. Without the personality and sentiment, what are Goldberg's images but strangers standing in a room open to the scrutiny of objective, oblivious viewers?

Conclusively, Jim Goldberg's *Rich and Poor* illustrates the plight of the working class, as well as the struggles of those belonging to the higher ranks within society, ultimately creating a connection parallel to the contrasting stereotypical class divide of the late twentieth century. Furthermore, by allowing the subjects of his photography to express their voices and identity, Goldberg allows for their opinions on this parallel to be stated, demonstrating how, despite their social positioning, 'the myth of the American Dream'⁹ remains unattainable for all.

⁹ Magnum Photos, *Jim Goldberg: Rich and Poor* (2009), <<http://pro.magnumphotos.com/C.aspx?VP3=SearchResult&ALID=2K1HRGB96V>> [Accessed: 07/11/2017].

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