

A review of Bill Owen's 'Suburbia' (1972)

Abstract

Exhibited as part of the 'States of America' collection at the Nottingham Contemporary are pieces from Bill Owen's collection 'Suburbia' a photography series aimed at taking a subversive look at the middle class.
Photography from the Civil Rights Movement to the Reagan Era.
16 Sep 2017 - 26 Nov 2017.

States of America focuses on a generation of photography that stretches from the 1960s to the early 1990s. Drawn from works by a wide collection of photographers, it presents an overview of the social and political context that is still relevant today.

Shortly after finding a career in photography, the suburban life in California caught Bill Owen's attention: 'the people I met enjoy the lifestyle of the suburbs, [...] they are proud to [have] achieved material success.'¹ *Suburbia*, first published in 1972, is described as a 'subversive look at an inward-looking middle class'² who were oblivious to the 'racial and cultural strife'³ that gripped America.

Exhibited amongst the large collection titled 'States of America', Owen's work consists of a number of black and white photographs accompanied with a description which articulates, in the subject's own words, what they were thinking or what was happening in their photograph. The two images that caught my attention share similarities in the context and message behind the photo yet show a difference in age and class. The sense of care free enjoyment and obliviousness to the struggling world around them and the 'Vietnam War half a world away'⁴ is evident in both.

'We feel most people have the wrong attitude when it comes to sex, that it's nasty and to be done only in the dark. With us sex takes care of itself'⁵ reads the black and white image of a naked young woman and a young man in only underwear⁶. Sitting on their bed, relaxed and comfortable, 'they have realised the American Dream'⁷ they are happy and content with what they have and emit acceptance of sexuality and the normality of humanity and its needs. The quote displays their inward-looking attitude as they are uninterested in others' opinions on sex or what is acceptable.

'For my husband's 84th birthday I bought him the girl in the cake. He was thrilled to death and we were afraid he might have another heart attack'⁸ reads the next photo, a black and white shot featuring a woman in a bikini emerging from a cake amongst a room full of people laughing and smiling. Sharing the theme of expressing sexuality in a way that others may find shocking or inappropriate, it puts forth a sense of happiness that should follow the expression of humanity that sexuality represents.

¹ Bill, Owens, 'Suburbia', *art2art circulating exhibition*, < <https://www.art2art.org/bill-owens-suburbia.html>> [accessed 18 January 2018].

² Owens, 'Suburbia,' < <https://www.art2art.org/bill-owens-suburbia.html>>.

³ Owens, 'Suburbia,' < <https://www.art2art.org/bill-owens-suburbia.html>>.

⁴ Owens, 'Suburbia,' < <https://www.art2art.org/bill-owens-suburbia.html>>.

⁵ Owens, 'Suburbia,' < <https://www.art2art.org/bill-owens-suburbia.html>>.

⁶ Owens, 'Suburbia,' < <https://www.art2art.org/bill-owens-suburbia.html>>.

⁷ Owens, 'Suburbia,' < <https://www.art2art.org/bill-owens-suburbia.html>>.

⁸ Owens, Bill, 'Leisure', < <http://www.billowens.com/photographs/leisure/gallery-16>>.

The exhibition attracted an audience of all ages. The layout of the exhibition was easy to navigate. Those like myself who find it hard to connect with photography without some background information will find it very beneficial to find that the exhibit provides just that, large writing or a small plaque outline the time period, a little about the artist and his or her motivation for taking the particular shots. Knowing this gave me a deeper understanding of the images I was looking at. Visiting the Nottingham Contemporary was a really moving and educational experience, one which I thoroughly enjoyed.

Bibliography

Owens, Bill, 'Suburbia', *art2art circulating exhibition*, < <https://www.art2art.org/bill-owens-suburbia.html>> [accessed 18 January 2018]

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Owens, Edwards, 'Shooting the American Dream in Suburbia' *Smithsonian Magazine*, (2010) < <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/shooting-the-american-dream-in-suburbia-60871887/>> [accessed 18 January 2018]