

American Dreams: a terrible beauty

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I'm really not a fan of ironic titles for art exhibitions. Frankly, it's just too easy to get a cheap laugh from some kind of witty 'in-joke'. When it comes to *American Dreams*, the photography exhibition of 20th century American greats at Bendigo Art Gallery, while the title is almost certainly intended as some kind of ironic comment about its content, there's nothing 'laugh-out-loud' about it. Beautiful, hideous, beguiling, horrifying, yes. But other than a wry grin here and there, funny? No. 'American Nightmares' more like, or maybe 'When Good Times Turn Bad'.

Poverty, perversion, struggle, satire, death, mutation, harsh reality, stark landscapes ... No apple pie and picket fences are to be found within the eighty-odd photographs on BAG's walls, unless shrouded in some kind of catastrophe or an episode of fallen grace. 'Difficult and beautiful' might be a better way of describing this collection. Certainly poetic.

Considering the photographers in this line-up, could it be any other way? Walker 'Hungry Eye' Evans: so stark were his pictures of 1930s Depression-era American heartland (which he was commissioned to take by *Fortune* magazine), they were refused publication. Too damn depressing. Diane Arbus, only inches away from madness herself, photographed 'the mad', the disabled, the depressed and the profane. Her medium-format pictures startle us into submission, equal-parts compassionate and dispassionate towards her 'subjects'. Weegee, aka Arthur Fellig: men in hats in the 1940s; death scenes, and drunks passed out in the street; destitute families sweating on boarding house mattresses. So grotesque you can't look away. The circus is in town.

They're just three of the thirty-five photographers included. Their work speaks volumes about the 'American Dream' – crumbling, falling, crashing to earth with a resounding, noisy 'thud'. But it's not all bad news. And it really is a beautiful exhibition.



The pictures in *American Dreams* are unified by a number of inspiring traits: the aforementioned poetics, where opposing fragments of life and existence somehow find harmony within the one picture. Resting on remarkable composition and/or palpable empathy, they move us to tears, to fear, to smile (occasionally), certainly to feel something intense and unifying.

Some of the 'softest' images in the show are by Edward Weston (1886-1958), the man who loved to eroticise vegetables (for example, peppers), his camera resting provocatively upon their curves and crevices, folding into themselves like fleshy sex creatures. To complement those he turned female nudes into pure form, through shadows and light to become sexy, grey-scale sculptures. Beautiful both.

Same for Harry Callahan (1912-99) – his lifelong obsession with wife Eleanor makes it an absolute pleasure to view the photo *Chicago* (c. 1952); she with their young daughter Barbara, almost lost to a bleak urban corner. This might also be read as an exercise in form: 'two humans dwarfed by a sea of harsh concrete'. But there is a softness in his gaze. Perhaps they represent one man's connection with life, love and meaning; their distant faces happy to pose for his camera in a world that might otherwise be indifferent to his presence.

Curator Tansy Curtin spent hundreds of hours going through thousands of photographs for *American Dreams*, drawn entirely from the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film. Bunkered down for two weeks in the Eastman Museum in upstate New York, Curtin neatly grouped the pictures she chose into themed strands, to show the evolution and iconic power of this uniquely 20th century artform. One idea was to show how photography became 'democratised', a tool of the people, 'no longer ... merely [in] the realm of the wealthy elite or the professional', Curtin explained. While her agenda was also to 'create a very broad exhibition highlighting some of the iconic images of the 20th century' (Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*, *Nipoma, California*, 1936, and Lewis Wickes Hine's *Powerhouse mechanic*, 1920, being two of the most recognisable), she also chose to reveal 'lesser known works'.

Those who consider themselves pundits of 20th century photography might dismiss *American Dreams* as a seen-it-all-before kind of show, where 'the usual suspects' are wheeled out for yet another airing. Were it not for the fact Curtin includes work by a good number of lesser-known photographers, many of whom are female, this might be the case. Imogen Cunningham (1883-1976) was one such artist I was grateful to discover in *American Dreams*. Like her more famous contemporary Weston, she also shot erotic still lives of nudes and 'botanicals', but she also took aim at the street. Taken later in her career, *Subway, NY* (1956) documents a woman in apparent shock. Immaculately dressed and paused on stairs, she has just emerged from a subway station. Ice-cream in hand, she appears slightly terrified, like she's just realised she has left her soul behind on the train.

Curtin chose this work by Cunningham to highlight the potential difference between the male



and female gaze. 'Women have played such an important role, and they have different interpretations of similar subjects', she says. 'You look at the photos Cunningham took of the street compared to, say, Garry Winogrand's' [another photographer in *American Dreams* working across the same period]. With Winogrand you get the sense that he is on outside looking in. With Cunningham it's the opposite; she's on the inside looking out. It's important to see that.'

Joining the dots between Cunningham and, say, Mary Ellen Mark, whose documentary street work from a later generation is also on show, is much easier. Though their work is very different – Mark's is far more confronting and visceral – surely Cunningham has been some kind of influence? Survey exhibitions such as this, the result of rigorous and passionate curatorship, are all the more valuable for enabling these connections.

American Dreams is showing at Bendigo Art Gallery, Bendigo, 16 April to 10 July 2011. www.bendigoartgallery.com.au The exhibition is the first in Australia entirely drawn from the collection of the Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film, New York.

Megan Spencer is an arts writer based in Central Victoria. Formerly a film critic with Triple J and SBS TV's *The Movie Show*, she is also an artist and filmmaker. She also curates the El Gordo Art Space in Chancery Lane, Bendigo. Brief excerpts of this review were previously published in the *Bendigo Weekly*.



P42: 1/ Walker Evans, *Torn Poster*, Truro, Massachusetts, 1930, gelatin silver contact print.
Purchased with funds from National Endowment for the Arts.

2/ Edward Weston, *Nude from the 50th Anniversary Portfolio 1902-1952*, 1936, gelatin silver print. Purchased from Brett Weston.

3/ Weegee (Arthur Fellig), *[Drunks]*, c. 1940, gelatin silver print. Gift of Daniel Wolf.

THIS PAGE: 1/ Harry Callahan, *Chicago*, c. 1952, dye transfer print.
Purchased with funds from Charina Foundation.
2/ Imogen Cunningham, *Subway, NY*, 1956, gelatin silver print. Purchased from the photographer.

All images of work from the Collection of George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film, New York.



Image: *Made on the Kitchen Table* Collective 2011, Digital Photograph dimensions variable

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