

Richard Avedon

Some of the most powerful portraits Richard Avedon ever took are those of In the American West, published in 1985. The republication of these masterpiece portraits of working people is important: here are coalminers, drifters with weatherbeaten faces like cracked mud, people with tiny heads and big tits, acne, moles, freckles, a salesman and a gravedigger, blood - spattered slaughterhouse workers, a fat pre -teen with his rifle, migrant workers, pimpled ranch hands and rodeo riders, waitresses, a woman trucker with a slashing belly scar, gamblers and nut cases, roughnecks and teen lovers (the girl with cold-sore lips), a broken-nosed woman, a pot-bellied scientist with a five-pen shirt-pocket, kids with the spark burned out of them, women with crooked drawn-on eyebrows.

Here, too, is the frequently reprinted beekeeper portrait of a naked, bald, very white man on whose body crawl hundreds of honeybees. A teenager pulls the intestines out of a large rattlesnake. And we see Richard Wheatcroft, a young, serious and good-looking Montana farmer whom Avedon photographed two years apart. The portraits of Wheatcroft show little change except for his (very similar) shirts.

Most of the people here are those who do the worst and hardest work, the common labouring hands of the country. They are as they came from work, encrusted with the detritus of their jobs. We see a menu -card of ages and shapes, the subjects' scars, lank, greasy hair, tattoos, fluffy girlie hair. Many are scraped and scratched, one -armed and mangled, if not by job-related accidents, then by tough lives in tough places. One or two give an odd smile, one or two a twisted grimace. The rest do not smile and a few seem to glare with hate. One presumes Avedon asked these subjects not to smile, as a grin is our common response to a lens. At least one man seems on the verge of tears, others look ready to jump and claw their way through the camera lens and, in a way, they do.

Avedon, born in New York in 1923, was a Photographer's Mate Second Class in the merchant marine in 1942. He had the task of taking identification card photographs, and later remarked, "I must have taken pictures of maybe 100,000 baffled faces before it ever occurred to me I was becoming a photographer." By 1979 Avedon had become an internationally famous fashion and celebrity photographer, but in the early 1970s he had also done a Vietnam photo essay.

The gruelling five-year project that started in 1979 documenting the working lives of people in the American west was sponsored by the Amos Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas. The subjects were photographed outside, in shadow, against a large sheet of white paper fastened to a wall. Avedon used an 8in x 10in view camera similar to those of the 19th -century photographers, though with faster shutter and film. He said: "I stand next to the camera, not behind it, several inches to the left of the lens and about four feet from the subject. As I work I must imagine the pictures I am taking because, since I do

not look through the lens, I never see precisely what the film records until the print is made."

He travelled through the west with a small assistant crew photographing 752 people in 17 states. The result was Avedon's west, and, wrote Jane Livingston, "a potent, unsparing photographic exhibition of large, boldly scaled portraits whose moods ranged from the delicately poignant to the aggressively macho".

The reaction of westerners was one of fury. Even now the Rocky Mountain western states see themselves as movie locales populated by handsome cowboys, noble ranchers and brave pioneer women living out lofty family and Christian values. These touchy people did not see the stern beauty in the portraits. They did see the dirt and unsmiling faces. Avedon's work was called vicious, sick, sensational, cruel, by people who did not understand anything beyond photography than that it was representational. They did not get it that they were seeing Avedon's observations rather than likenesses, art rather than tourism photos.

A writer for Arizona's Scottsdale Progress hauled out his cliches and wrote, in an open letter to Avedon: "You have had a great deal of fun slumming in the west and taking full advantage of your carefully selected freaks, attempting thereby to rob them of their dignity and, by extension, ridicule the west. That you have been so handsomely supported in such a cynical, pernicious endeavour is in itself a monument to the oral and cultural decay of our nation."

Very little has changed today. Flames of resentment flare when the region is portrayed as anything but down-home, clean, decent, pioneer-spirited whatever. As one elderly rancher put it a few years ago, "reality has never been much use out here". Avedon's images of the region will be powerful a century after John Wayne has become as quaint as a butter firkin.