

SLIGHTLY TATTERED DREAMS

BY VICKY GOLDBERG

THE PURITANS THOUGHT THAT GOD HAD INTENDED TO SHED HIS GRACE ON AMERICA: IN FACT, MOST THOUGHT THE LORD HAD ALREADY DELIVERED IT WITH A WARRANT. LONG BEFORE WE WERE A NATION, THE NEW LAND WAS REFERRED TO AS A CITY ON A HILL, A SHINING CITY TO BE WATCHED BY ALL, NOT A UTOPIA BUT A PLACE WHERE A SOCIETY COULD BE CONSTRUCTED ON A PLAN AND HUMANITY COULD STAND A LITTLE NEARER TO THE ANGELS. NO ONE EVER THOUGHT IT WOULD BE PERFECTION HERE, BUT MOST HARBORED THE EXPECTATION THAT WE MIGHT COME CLOSER THAN USUAL . AND THOUGH WE NEVER HAD LACK IN CRITICS AND HAVE PROBABLY THE MOST SELF-ANALYTICAL AND SELF CRITICAL NATION IN THE WORLD, TAKEN ALL IN ALL WE THOUGHT FOR A COUPLE OF CENTURIES THAT THE PROMISE HAD BEEN PROPERLY HELD OUT TO US. IN THIS CENTURY THE DEPRESSION PUT A CRIMP ON THIS BELIEF, BUT VICTORY IN WORLD WAR II BROUGHT IT ROARING BACK.

AND THE SUCCESS SENT US REELING. BEATS AND INTELLECTUALS SET OUT ON THE ROAD IN AMERICA, AND IF THEY LOVED WHAT THEY FOUND THEY HATED IT TOO, AND RAILED AGAINST CONSUMERISM AND CONFORMITY. IN THE SIXTIES , STUDENTS PICKED UP THIS MESSAGE AND RAN WITH IT, WHILE THE CIVIL RIGHTS STRUGGLE AND THE VIETNAM WAR SPREAD DISILLUSION FAR BEYOND THE GATES OF THE UNIVERSITIES . IT WASN'T THAT THE IMAGE OF AMERICA WAS CHANGING IN THE PEOPLE'S MIND. IT WAS CHANGING ON PAPER AND IN THE MEDIA TOO. IT HAD BECOME POSSIBLE TO LOOK AT THE NATION FROM ANOTHER

VANTAGE POINT, WHERE THE PROMISES LOOKED A LITTLE RAGGED AROUND THE EDGES.

AMONG PHOTOGRAPHERS THE TELLING POINT WAS THE PUBLICATION OF ROBERT FRANK'S THE AMERICANS IN 1959. (IT WAS FIRST PUBLISHED IN FRANCE THE PREVIOUS YEAR.) IN THE BEST TRADITION OF THE 1930S FRANK HAD GONE ON THE ROAD IN SEARCH OF AMERICA, BUT THE ONLY CITY HE SAW ON THE HILL WAS DISPIRITED AND MORE THAN A LITTLE BLEAK. HIS ABRUPT OFF-KILTER STYLE WAS UNFAMILIAR, AND HIS ODD AND LIVELY AFFECTION FOR THE LONELINESS, THE MASS PRODUCED TRASH AND FAST-FOOD JOINTS HE SPIED ON HIS JOURNEY WAS NOT ALWAYS SO EVIDENT AND AT ANY RATE HARD TO FATHOM. BUT WHAT STRUCK OBSERVERS HARDEST AND UPSET THEM MOST WAS FRANK'S SENSE OF THE SAD, TOUGH AND TRIED HEART OF AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL.

FRANK ACTUALLY MADE VISIBLE A CULTURAL SHIFT, A SELF IMAGE IN THE PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATION, THAT WAS ALREADY IN THE WORKS, BUT HE GAVE IT SUCH VISUAL FORM THAT HIS INFLUENCE IS STILL BEING FELT. BASTIENNE SCHMIDT TAKES A CUE FROM THE AMERICANS; HER BOOK IS A KIND OF OFF-BEAT COMMENTARY ON THAT CLASSICALLY OFF-BEAT DOCUMENTARY. SHE IS CLEARLY IN TUNE WITH FRANK'S SPIRIT OF BRASH AND SKEPTICAL INQUIRY AND HIS WILLINGNESS TO LOOK DIRECTLY AT THE PEOPLE, THE PLACES AND MOMENTS THAT WILL NEVER WIN TROPHIES IN A COMPETITIVE LAND. OFTEN SHE COME SIN UNCOMFORTABLY CLOSE, CROPPING THE SUBJECT BLUNTLY. OTHER TIMES SHE VIEWS THE WORLD AT AN ANGLE OR CATCHES IT, HAZILY DEFINED ,ON THE WING.

IN SHORT SHE KEEPS HER ROLLEIFLEX, A MEDIUM FORMAT CAMERA, WITHIN FRANK'S INFLUENCE ON 35MM PHOTOGRAPHY.

SCHMIDT IS MORE CONFRONTATIONAL THAN FRANK; HER SUBJECTS OFTEN SEE HER COMING BUT REGARD WITH NO FEAR. IN BYWAYS AND GATHERING PLACES AND QUIET

CORNERS SHE FASTENS ONTO A DETAIL, A LOOK A GESTURE THAT SPEAKS IN A SCENE THAT WOULD BE OTHERWISE MUTE. CURIOUS ABOUT THE OCCASIONS THAT BRING CROWDS TOGETHER, SHE SEES AMERICA AS A COUNTRY IN SUCH CONSTANT MOTION THAT THE STILL CAMERA CANNOT KEEP UP WITH IT.

HERS IS NOT EVERYONE'S AMERICA BUT AN ALBUM WHAT FEW TOURISTS AND FEWER RESIDENTS HAVE NOTICED, LAND THAT TAKES BOTH ENTERTAINMENT AND DEATH SERIOUSLY, WHERE STRANGERS SMILE WITHOUT CEASE AND WATCHERS OF EVERY SORT, EVEN CAMERA WATCHERS, STARE FIXEDLY. THIS AMERICA, MOURNING SOME OF ITS TATTERED DREAMS, IS INTENT ON HAVING A GOOD TIME BUT NOT ALTOGETHER UP TO THE TASK.

BOTH SCHMIDT AND FRANK WERE FOREIGN BORN-SHE GREW UP IN GERMANY AND GREECE - GIVING THEM THE KIND OF OUTSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE THAT AN ASTUTE OBSERVER WOULD TAKE ADVANTAGE OF. FRANK CAME FROM AN ATMOSPHERE OF POST-WAR EUROPEAN ANTI-AMERICANS, BUT SCHMIDT SAYS SHE WAS LOOKING FOR SOMETHING MORE TANTALIZING, THE MYTH SHE KNEW FROM AMERICAN TV AND AMERICAN EXPORTS. PARTLY BECAUSE FRANK'S IMAGES MARKED A CHANGE IN THE CULTURAL WEATHER, HER VIEW OF GRAVE YOUNG SOULS, CROSS EYED COWBOYS AND RUFFLE SHIRTED BALLYHOO ARTISTS WON'T PROVOKE OUTRAGE, BUT HER BOOK TOO RECORDS A SHARP-EYED FOREIGNER'S GLANCE AT SURPRISES, INCONGRUITIES, DISAPPOINTMENTS, AND A FEW SWEET MOMENTS IN ILL-FITTING JACKETS . MOST TELLINGLY, SCHMIDT HAS A SHARP SENSE OF THE TIMES: SHE BRINGS US SMACK UP AGAINST HER VISION OF THE 1990S,WHEN AMERICA , COMPREHENSIBLE OR NOT, CAN ONLY BE CONSIDERED IN THE LIGHT OF THE CHANGES THAT HAVE RECENTLY OVERTAKEN IT.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO IMAGINE A CHEERY AMERICA AFTER ROBERT FRANK? WELL, THAT RATHER DEPENDS ON WHO YOUR AUDIENCE IS. RONALD REAGAN INSISTED IT WAS MORNING IN AMERICA ALL THE TIME.

TIME MAGAZINE AS RECENTLY AS 1997 HAD A COVER STORY “ THE BACK BONE OF AMERICA “ THAT MENTIONED SOME OF THE DOWN SIDE BUT KEPT THE PICTURES PLEASANT MOST SERIOUS READERS WON’T ACCEPT UNMITIGATED GOOD CHEER AFTER THE CIVIL RIGHT STRUGGLES OF THE 1960s, THE VIETNAM WAR, ASSASSINATIONS, WATERGATE AND SUBSEQUENT REVELATIONS. SOME CONSIDER US A NATION THAT HAS GAINED THE WHOLE WORLD AND LOST ITS SOUL. SERIOUS PHOTOGRAPHY WATCHERS WOULD PROBABLY TAKE ABACK BY A VISION OF HAPPINESS SPREADING FROM COAST TO COAST. PERHAPS BY NOW WE LOOK AT OUR COUNTRY AS IF WE WERE FOREIGNERS TOO.

BOTH “ THE AMERICANS “ AND “AMERICAN DREAM” ARE ROAD BOOKS, RECORDS OF THAT GREAT AMERICAN PLACE, AND DOCUMENTS OF TWENTIETH CENTURY SURVEY EXPEDITIONS. NINETEENTH EXPEDITIONS BROUGHT BACK IMAGES OF UNCHARTERED LANDS AS A PRELUDE TO DEVELOPMENT; TODAY PHOTOGRAPHERS GO IN SEARCH OF SOCIAL AND PSYCHIC DISCOVERIES. WALKER EVAN’S PHOTOGRAPHS OF 1938, WHICH STRONGLY INFLUENCED ROBERT FRANK, IS THE LOCUS CLASSICUS FOR THIS VISUAL DIARY, BUT THE ROAD HAS ALSO DRAWN WRITERS AND REPORTERS FROM JACK KEROUAC TO JOHN STEINBECK TO CHARLES KURALT. FRANK MEMORIALIZED THE ROAD IN IT’S ENDLESSNESS, ISOLATION AND INVITATION OF FATIGUE, AND SCHMIDT IN HER WAY DOES TOO, SOMETIMES CATCHING THE MINDLESS , HALF MELANCHOLY LOOKS OF PASSENGERS WATCHING THE LAND ROLL BY.

SHE REPEATEDLY INVOKES THE AMERICAN FLAG, WHICH FOR FRANK WAS THE ORGANIZING DEVICE. HE SAW IT WORN THIN ON JULY 4TH OR BLOTTING OUT THE FACES OF ITS FOLLOWERS. SHE SEES IT ON A CLOTHES LINE ON JULY 4TH OR BLOWN BY THE WIND TO HIDE THREE MEN IN SUITS: THEIR LEGS HOLD UP BY EMBLEMS OF THE NATION, BUT ONLY ONE LEG OF THE CENTRAL FIGURE IS VISIBLE, AS IF THE COUNTRY'S SUPPORT WERE UNSTEADY, OFF, IRREGULAR AT ITS CENTER.

BOTH PHOTOGRAPHERS ARE UNUSUALLY ALERT TO THE SIGNS OF DEATH. FRANK WENT TO A BLACK FUNERAL, SO DID SHE. HE LOOKED AT CAR ACCIDENTS, GRAVE MARKERS, CEMETERIES; SHE LOOKS AT MOURNERS AND COMMEMORATIONS. HER PHOTOGRAPHS SUGGEST THAT SHE HAS A HIGHLY DEVELOPED SENSE OF SORROW. (SCHMIDT'S FIRST BOOK, "VIVIR LA MUERTE", WAS A MOVING STUDY OF THE RITUALS OF DEATH IN LATIN AMERICA, WHERE THE END OF LIFE IS MORE CLOSELY INTEGRATED INTO THE LIVING CULTURE THAN IT IS IN EITHER EUROPE OR NORTH AMERICA. THE BOOK WAS SCHMIDT'S ATTEMPT TO COME TO TERMS WITH HER OWN FATHER'S DEATH-THE MOURNING PROCESS AS A PHOTOGRAPHIC QUEST FOR UNDERSTANDING.) FRANK PRESENTED THE SIMPLE FACTS, AS BARE AND STARK AS A GRAVE MARKER OR A MOURNER AT A MOMENT OF SADNESS AND PERPLEXITY. SCHMIDT LOOKS AT MOURNERS TOO IN ALL THEIR GRIEF, BUT SHE FOCUSES ON THE CHANGES THAT HAVE OVERTAKEN THE NATURE OF DEATH AND OUR RESPONSE TO IT UNDER THE PRESSURE OF RECENT HISTORY.

THE SIGNAL EVENT THAT OPENED THE GATES OF DISILLUSION AND DISTRUST IN THIS DEATH WAS A DEATH; THE ASSASSINATION OF JOHN F. KENNEDY ON NOVEMBER 22ND, 1963 SCHMIDT TAKES A PICTURE OF THE MOURNERS

VISITING HIS GRAVE THREE DECADES LATER AND PHOTOGRAPHING IT TO PROVE THAT THEY HAD BEEN THERE.

SHE ALSO SNAPS HIS BROTHER ROBERT'S GRAVE , ANOTHER INDEX OF ASSASSINATION, AND A MORE RECENT MONUMENT, A MURAL OF SELENA, THE BELOVED MEXICAN BORN SINGER WHO WAS MURDERED BY A DISGRUNTLED EMPLOYEE IN 1995. ASSASSINATION AND MURDER AS SIGN POSTS ON WHICH TO STRING THE HISTORY OF A COUNTRY...

THERE IS ONE ASTONISHING PICTURE OF COMMEMORATION HERE: A WAX MUSEUM DISPLAY OF JACKIE KENNEDY, VEILED, AND HER TWO CHILDREN ABOUT TO MARCH IN JFK'S FUNERAL PROCESSION, A THREE DIMENSIONAL RENDERING OF A PHOTOGRAPH. THE AMERICAN FLAG HANGS DOWN BESIDE THE FIGURES, IN CASE WE MISSED THE SIGNIFICANCE. EVERY AMERICAN WHO WAS ALIVE AT THE TIME HAS A PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE OF THESE THREE AT THAT MOMENT INDELIBLY BURNED INTO THEIR BRAIN. JACKIE AND HER CHILDREN WERE ON TV WHICH SEEMED LIKE HOURS THAT DAY, AND THE BLACK-AND WHITE-PHOTOGRAPHS HAVE NEVER ENTIRELY DROPPED FROM VIEW. THEY FIXED THE NATIONAL SENSE OF GRIEF WHILE JACKIE KENNEDY'S SORROW, STOICISM AND IMMENSE DIGNITY RAISED TO HER HEROIC STATURE ACROSS THE LAND. IN THE WAX MUSEUM, IMPROBABLY SHE SMILES. DEATH WHICH COMES EVEN TO PRESIDENTS, NEED NOT TOO BE DISTURBING AFTER ALL.

THOUGH SCHMIDT MAKES NO CLAIM TO DOCUMENT ALL OF AMERICA AND INDEED SAYS SHE DOES NOT EVEN UNDERSTAND IT, HER EYE LIGHTS ON EVIDENCE OF THE MOST TELLING ISSUES OF OUR TIME. THE MEMORY OF ASSASSINATION AND THE POTENTIAL FOR MURDER ARE JOINED BY A PHOTOGRAPH OF THE AIDS QUILT, WITH THE MOURNERS IN AN ANONYMOUS SILHOUETTE IN THE DISTANCE, WHILE A FRAMED PICTURE OF A HANDSOME MAN

WHEN HE WAS STILL IN GOOD HEALTH AND SMILING CASTS A SHADOW OVER THE SIGNATURES OF THE QUILT. ELSEWHERE A DECORATED VETERAN STANDS BY THE VIETNAM WALL: MORE NAMES OF THE DEAD , LEST WE FORGET. AND A BLACK MAN WITH ENORMOUS HAUNTED EYES SITS ON DEATH ROW, WHERE SO MANY MORE BLACKS THAN WHITES WAIT FOR EXECUTION IN A COUNTRY THAT EMBRACES IT MORE AVIDLY THAN ALMOST ANY OTHER IN THE WEST. EVEN THE PRISONER'S SO-CALLED DEATH BED(WHICH MIGHT MORE APTLY BE EXECUTION BED)SITS-LOOMS- FOR ITS PORTRAIT LOOKING LIKE SOME PECULIAR CRUCIFIX REDUNDANTLY BOUND WITH BELTS.

THEN THERE'S THE AMERICAN PREOCCUPATION WITH GUNS, WHICH ACCOUNT FOR TOO MANY OF OUR DEATH STATISTICS. HER IS A GUN SHOP, HER A GUN CLUB WHERE THE RIFLES ARE LAID OUT ACROSS THE BED SPREADS WITH LOVING CARE AND ORDERLINESS, AND THERE THREE TOUGH, PRETTY AND CONFIDENT TEENAGE GIRLS POSING WITH THEIR RIFLES AT A SHOOTING CAMP, NOT EVERY PARENT'S NOTION OF A SUMMER CAMP FOR GIRLS.

THE RACE ISSUE THAT FRANK TRACED THROUGH AMERICA SCHMIDT TRACES TOO. BUT NOW IT HAS A NEW SLANT, IN LINE WITH HISTORICAL SHIFTS, BLACK HISTORY IS TODAY A SUBJECT OF WIDE STUDY, BLACK ANCESTRY NEWLY VENERATED. A WOMAN IN AFRICAN GARB, KNEE DEEP IN THE SEA, PERFORMS A COMMEMORATIVE SERVICE FOR SLAVES WHO LOST THEIR LIVES.

IF THIS EXISTED IN THE 1950S AND 1960S, MOST WHITE DIDN'T KNOW ABOUT IT.

AND RACE IS NO LONGER MERELY A QUESTION OF BLACK AND WHITE BUT OF MANY CULTURES AND ETHNICITIES IN A

SOCIETY TRANSFORMED BY SHIFTS IN IMMIGRATION PATTERNS AND ETHNIC AWARENESS. A YOUNG LATIN AMERICAN WOMAN STANDS BENEATH TWO PORTRAITS OF ELVIS IN A NEW YORK BEAUTY SALON. A MAN WITH THE PROFILE OF AN SOUTH AMERICAN INDIAN RIDES A BUS, OR A TRAIN, ACROSS THE WEST. AN ASIATIC SINGER GREETES HIS FANS IN A TOWN MADE FAMOUS BY COUNTRY MUSIC. SCHMIDT'S CAMERA COMES RIGHT UP ON THE TORSO OF THE BORDER PATROL OFFICER, BULLETS GLEAMING AT HIS BELT, AS HE SURVEYS THE FENCE BUILT ON THIS SIDE TO KEEP PEOPLE ON THE OTHER SIDE FROM CROSSING. WE ARE MUCH MORE VARIOUS NOW, AND MUCH MORE CONSCIOUS OF BEING SO, AND STILL RATTLED ABOUT HOW TO DEAL WITH DIFFERENCE.

THEN THERE IS MONEY. A YOUNG BLACK MAN ON SPRING BRAKE IN FLORIDA IS CUT OFF BY THE FRAME AT NOSE AND WAIST SO THAT THE DOLLAR SIGN ON A CHAIN LIES IN THE CENTER OF THE PICTURE. AN EAST LOS ANGELES MURAL IS PICTURED AT SUCH A SLANT THAT THE DOLLAR BILLS FLOATING DOWN ON ONE SIDE OF THE A PRINTED IMAGE FLY RIGHT OUT TOWARD US. A BEVERLY HILLS REAL ESTATE AGENT IN TIGHT BEIGE CLOTHES WORKS TWO PHONES AT ONCE; BEHIND HER ARE PICTURES OF CLASSICAL RUINS THAT NOT EVEN HOLLYWOOD AGENTS COULD SELL.

FOR ALL HER REFERENCES TO FRANK AND HIS STYLE, SCHMIDT'S EYE IS ALL HER OWN. SHE VIEWS AMERICAN ODDITIES AND PREOCCUPATIONS WITH UNCONVENTIONAL INTENSITY: YOUNG CHILDREN PLAYING VIDEO GAMES AS DETERMINEDLY AS IF THERE WERE ADULT GAMBLERS. THE WIGWAM MOTEL'S DISPLAY OF IMITATION TEEPEES TOPPED BY ELECTRIC LIGHTS. GRAVELY AWKWARD CHILDREN GOT UP LIKE LAMP SHADES AND CANDY BOXES FOR A CHRISTENING. OBESE OLDER WOMEN ISOLATED LIKE

MONUMENTS IN THE OCEAN SWALLOWS. BLACK BOYS ON A JUNGLE GYM, AS GRIMLY SERIOUS AS MEN WORN DOWN BY CENTURIES OF INJUSTICE. A BLACK WOMAN HAVING HER HAIR BRAIDED IN WHAT MIGHT BE A SACRIFICIAL RITUAL.

THIS BEING THE 1990S , SCHMIDT PLAYS WITH RECURRENT IMAGES OF SPECTATORSHIP IN SMALL TOWNS AND LARGE. PEOPLE WATCH PARADES OR STARE OUT WINDOWS AT NOTHING PARTICULAR JUST BECAUSE IT IS THERE. THE PHOTOGRAPHER HERSELF IS A SPECTATOR , OF COURSE AND WE , LOOKING AT WHAT SHE OFFERS US, ARE THE AUDIENCE FOR A FOREIGN PRODUCTION OF AMERICAN FOLLIES, OR PERHAPS OF AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY, OR MAYBE AMERICA THE BEAUTIFUL WITHOUT QUITE AS MUCH GRACE AS PROMISED. FRANK SHOWED US A HOLLYWOOD STARLET OGLED BY ENVIOUS FANS, SCHMIDT GOES TO A OLYMPIA BODYBUILDING CONTEST, WHERE THE GOAL OF BLONDE AND LISSOME HAS BEEN REPLACED BY STRENUOUS EFFORTS TO LOOK LIKE HULK HOGAN IN A BIKINI. A TOURIST IN MONUMENT VALLEY TRAINS HIS CAMERA ON THE SKY, OTHERS TOUR THE VALLEY WITH THEIR LUNCHES IN PLASTIC BAGS AND UNWRAP THEM BY THE UNLIKELY OUTCROPPINGS , WHERE JOHN WAYNE USED TO RIDE. THE STARS AND THEIR FANS BRING THEIR SMILES, THEIR GUITARS AND THEIR PATIENCE TO BRANSON, MISSOURI FOR A BIG TIME COUNTRY MUSIC YEAR AFTER YEAR.

SCHMIDT TAKES A FRONT ROW OF THE SPECTACLE, SO CLOSE SHE SOMETIMES SEES FRAGMENTS OR COMES UP AGAINST COMPLEXITIES THAT CROWD IN WHEN BACKGROUNDS ARE CUT OUT. THE PERFORMERS ON STAGE- US- ARE OFTEN IN MOTION, OR THE WORLD IS WHIRLING PAST THEM FASTER THAN THEY KNOW IN BLURS AND STREAKS OF LIGHT. MINOR PLAYERS, WANTING A CHANCE IN THE LIMELIGHT, THRUST A HAND OR AN ARM PAST THE

EDGE OF THE FRAME. OCCASIONALLY SCHMIDT BEARS WITNESS TO THE ALMOST EMPTY STAGE OF THE AMERICAN LANDSCAPE, OCCASIONALLY CATCHES AN ACTOR OFF GUARD, WAITING, WATCHING: SAD, WARY, RESIGNED, QUIETLY ALERT FOR WHATEVER COMES NEXT. THE DRAMA ERRATICALLY UNFOLDING BEFORE HER CAMERA IS A SOBER ONE. EMOTIONS AT HIGH PITCH (OR MAYBE JUST A HIGH SMOLDER) CROP UP THREE OR FOUR TIMES WHERE YOU MIGHT THINK THEY BELONGED.

SHE CAME TO THE SPECTACLE AS FOREIGNERS DO, ON A SHIP PASSING THE STATUE OF LIBERTY IN THE BOOK'S FIRST PICTURE. AS THE CURTAIN COMES DOWN ON HER VERSIONS OF AMERICAN DREAMS SHE IS STILL LOOKING AT AMERICA, PHOTOGRAPHING HERSELF NOW THIS TIME WITH THE STATUE OF LIBERTY BEHIND HER. AND AS SHE SNAPS THE PICTURE OF BASTIENNE SCHMIDT WITH A CAMERA TO HER EYE, THE CAMERA FACING OUT OF THE PICTURE, SHE LOOKS FOR ALL THE WORLD AS IF SHE WERE PHOTOGRAPHING US.

WRITTEN FOR "AMERICAN DREAMS", 1997