

MORE THAN HUMAN



ROBERT BERGMAN HAS BEEN QUIETLY CAPTURING THE SOUL OF AMERICA FOR HALF A CENTURY. ONLY NOW HAILED AS ONE OF OUR ERA'S GREATEST ART PHOTOGRAPHERS, HE TALKS TO SARAH FAKRAY IN HIS FIRST EVER UK INTERVIEW

Robert Bergman struggled for recognition among art and photography institutions for most of his life, becoming widely known to the American public just last year, when he held his first three almost-simultaneous solo shows at the age of 65. While only recently hailed by many as one of the 20th century's most significant art photographers, he was nevertheless championed early on by Nobel and Pulitzer Prize-winning author Toni Morrison, who wrote in the foreword to his book: "Occasionally there arises an event or a moment that one knows immediately will forever mark a place in the history of artistic endeavour. Robert Bergman's portraits represent such a moment, such an event."

Ignoring photography trends, Bergman has a way of extracting the character and intense depth of his subjects – men, women and children he finds in the streets – in a way that makes us want to discover these people and the emotions that have taken their faces hostage. With his compassionate gaze, he brings us to a realisation: that we rarely pause long enough to truly observe the individuality of strangers. We might spot the elderly lady, the wary child or the street corner hustler, but if we are not careful, that is all we see. They are different, and in their otherness they may be immediately reducible to a type. We move on, searching for those we like to believe are more like us.

Born in New Orleans, Bergman's photographic career began at the age of five, when his older cousin taught him how to develop film and print pictures. His mother was a Shakespearian actress at Le Petit Théâtre de Vieux Carré, and his father an

eye, ear, nose and throat specialist who spent his last eight years, between the ages of 38 and 45, fighting cancer. "He kept saying he'd only last six months. So we sold the house and went to Florida, because he wanted to die where he came from, near the Gulf of Mexico," he says over the phone. "But he didn't die. So we went back and got another house. It was really a tragic childhood to spend from two to ten years old losing your father. I have no doubt that my interest in the 'mind-body problem' derived from that experience of: Where did Daddy go when he died? What's consciousness versus a body that decays?"

During three two-hour interviews, Bergman spontaneously recites poetry, quotes Ludwig Wittgenstein or John Lennon, or tells lengthy off-the-record anecdotes which reveal an intellect that might have been intimidating if it weren't for his wry sense of humour. He explains that he read his way through his teenage years, investing most of his time and energy in psychoanalytic theory, poetry and philosophy, and was obsessed with the idea that he, despite no one in the history of philosophical discourse having done so, could solve the mind-body problem (which is really an impossible jumble of problems concerning the relationship of the mind to the physical body) by reading and reading, and thinking and thinking. But by the time he met Danny Seymour, who was a year younger than him at 19, Bergman had realised he wasn't going to better Descartes. Both he and Seymour had decided that they wanted to become "visionary photographers", and in Bergman's final year at the University of Minnesota, they agreed to quit together to pursue their dream. "I felt that I was really





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making myself crazy in academia. As artists, we must resist academia, we really must. I quit, and Danny quit, and it's a lovely thing to look back on – these two young guys who were deadly serious about wanting to be geniuses. When you grow up, you don't use that word. It's nothing I'm claiming for myself at this point," he laughs. "There's nothing like a life filled with struggle and disappointment and financial problems to make you modest."

Danny Seymour was a member of the eminent Gardner family, and stood to inherit \$4 million, huge money in the 60s that would be comparable to around \$50 million today. After quitting university, he "aggressively implored" Bergman to take the first half-million of his trust fund, saying that he thought the money would destroy him if he kept it. Bergman was uncomfortable with the idea of accepting that kind of sum from his friend, and declined, even though he would later have to take odd jobs as a lawn-mower or snow-shoveller to survive. Seymour, the talented young filmmaker and photographer, moved to New York and became the great documentary photographer Robert Frank's best friend, and the two of them directed the debauched Rolling Stones 1972 tour film *Cocksucker Blues* around the same time that Seymour's heroin habit became serious.

"It's a sad movie because you see my friend shooting up with The Stones. After it was edited, Danny went on a boat and it is said that he may have been involved in a drug deal. It's almost certain that he was murdered by two Frenchmen, though anything we know about Danny's disappearance is based on rumour and conjecture. It is said that they were found and brought to court and acquitted, because you can't prove a homicide without a body, but the Frenchmen were gunned down as they left the courtroom."

At that time, Bergman was working on black-and-white abstracts of objects that he constructed and painted, photographed, and then destroyed. The idea was to create huge, mural-sized prints from the negatives, but he could only afford to make prototypes. "I made those in the worst years of poverty that I ever had," he says, "in a room in a house that didn't even have a shower that worked. I had to go to some nearby rich lawyer's house so I could shower." More recently, he has been able to create two of the prints, but at a crippling cost of \$15,000 each.

In 1976, Bergman began an on-and-off eight-year project – an intimate series of black-and-white portraits of elderly Americans in nursing homes. With his archivist's nature, Bergman is interested in the preservation of a photograph, and part of his reason for working in monochrome was that at the time, black-and-white photographs had a much longer lifespan than colour. Although Bergman's situation was not totally hopeless – several museum luminaries had supported him since he was 21 – it was

widely recognised that only MoMA had the power to change history. John Szarkowski, Director of Photography at MoMA between 1962 and 1991, held a preference for minimalist formalism that closed the doors on his work, and Bergman began to feel his photographs would never be displayed in an influential gallery. In what he defines as an act of self-destruction, he began working in colour.

"When I felt that my work would never be known, because the power structure at the time was doing some other kind of work, I thought, 'Well, I may as well shoot colour because who the hell cares?' It was that kind of innocent act, but also a disappointed act, that led me to colour film. I right away learned that I could do something in colour that I didn't expect that I could do. It was at the same moment that I was attempting to find out what a portrait was for me. I also felt impelled to find out *who* was out there in America."

The following body of work was deeply influenced by the photographers Edward Weston, with his extraordinary feeling for form, and especially Robert Frank, whose essential photo book *The Americans*, while formalist in one sense, spearheaded a new, subjective approach that took the viewer inside the experience, and was markedly different from the documentary-style photography that had come before it. As in Frank's work, the revelations in Bergman's photographs are profound. The inner complexities of individuals are revealed to us through these portraits, while at the same time, we recognise in the spectrum of emotions written on their faces a common humanity that reflects our gaze back on ourselves, forcing us to contemplate our way of treating others. Perhaps the leading American photography critic David Levi Strauss said it best in his incisive essay in Bergman's P.S.1 catalogue: "It is really an admixture of emotions that most attracts Bergman: menace mixed with affection, fear with curiosity, clarity with dejection, sorrow with delight, and many other combinations for which I have no words, which can only be *seen*."

The photographs are not titled, ensuring that the purity of the viewer's experience remains untainted by details such as occupation or social standing. As an artist, Bergman is searching not only to draw forth and reveal the depth of the human in front of the camera; he is looking for expressivity of colour, and a harmony or tension of shapes and forms. He sets the figure closely within the confines of the frame, and we can usually see just enough of the background to determine the setting. Locations are always urban, an environment in which he feels there are more opportunities for chance encounters, or "accidents" to occur.

Bergman chooses subjects for whom he gets a feeling for the individuality of the person. "I wouldn't have that same feeling if it weren't also for what they're wearing, for the light, for the background elements," he says. "In other words, the same person



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with the same personality in a park wearing a pink Mickey Mouse t-shirt against the backdrop of a bright blue sky might not cause me to stop, because I, as an artist, have only one language and that is the visual language." Taken using a handheld 35mm camera, and always with available light, Bergman will usually spend a short time with each "collaborator", and will simply approach them to ask if he can take their picture. "I've had very few refusals. But at least half of the time, the person says, 'Why?' And then I say the simplest thing and the most honest thing. I say, 'I'm an artist and I like your face.' They could be what the world calls ugly, but I have to like their face."

Recognised by the few as one of art photography's great visionaries when he published these colour photographs in his book *A Kind Of Rapture* in 1998, the cumulative effect of the pictures as a statement reveals Bergman's authorial presence as a poet of America's people. Before it was published, Bergman sent one photograph to the author Toni Morrison (famously asked for a written endorsement by President Obama, such is her status), who was moved, but turned down his request for her to write the introduction because she wanted to concentrate on her own work. A year later, a friend of Morrison's brought her to Bergman to look at the original prints, at which point she was motivated to write a story for the book – if he would be prepared to wait until she finished her novel. Her story *The Fisherwoman* was worth the delay. It is a reflective piece about how people relate to strangers, which is usually to deny them the same individual consideration we allow ourselves. The photographs also impressed the late, great art historian Meyer Schapiro, who came out of retirement to write the afterword.

As tightly and meaningfully sequenced as Frank's *The Americans*, the book is intended to be read like a poem from first line to last. The frontispiece is of a man who appears to be looking into the book as if the action is about to start; a short night-time passage opens up into bright sunshine in the book; and so on, until you realise that the whole book is a universe of discourse between subjects, open to interpretation. People have had strong reactions to the cumulative effect of the photographs: once Bergman was phoned by a Buddhist monk, despite attempts to keep his private life private (he travelled to a friend's house to do each of these telephone interviews), who had found *A Kind Of Rapture* in his student's possession. The monk said, "I think you're showing that the cumulative effect of your pictures, not any one, is a Dharma talk in visual language. The effect of looking at the whole book is that you induce the 'no-mind' and reveal the Buddha nature better sometimes even than scripture..."

The book would be the only exhibition space granted to his work for the next 11 years. It wasn't down to a lack of effort on Bergman's part; in 2001, he even started approaching commercial galleries, but without success. Still, things weren't all bleak. Six years previously, Sarah Greenough of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC had begun her mission to collect a huge portion of the Robert Bergman archive, with a view to housing a core collection of works and holding Bergman's debut show. At this point, the Gallery did not show living artists, only the established pantheon, with the exception of Robert Frank and three fine artists; yet she refused to let the fact that the gallery had no department of photography stop her – she simply developed her own department. Bergman's first sale came in 2007, followed by a debut solo exhibition at the prestigious National Gallery of Art in Washington in 2009, where he was only the fifth living photographer ever to have been exhibited, his debut New York show at MoMA affiliate P.S.1, and a third exhibition at the Yossi Milo Gallery. "Maybe the times are changing, I don't know," he says. "Or maybe it's just an anomaly and I'll fade away instantly."

Currently working on a personal narrative made up of pictures, family snapshots, newspaper clippings and words, Bergman divides his time between Minneapolis and New York City, where paying the bills is still something of a struggle when he has three apartments' worth of archives to consider. "I need to compress or destroy a lot of the photographs, but it takes a lot of time to figure out what to destroy," he says. "As a photographer who works a lot, and who takes many bad pictures, I really need now to come to grips with trying to define an oeuvre." One could argue that even with the small selection of pictures we've seen, he already has. Perhaps Robert Bergman has also, in his own way, solved that philosophical problem he laboured over all those years ago: not with words, but by unveiling the inextricable relationship that exists between the minds of these Americans and their creased, blemished, radiant and proud faces.

A Kind Of Rapture by Robert Bergman is published by Pantheon Books. To see an online gallery of Robert Bergman's photographs, including early black-and-white work and a portrait of Danny Seymour, go to DazedDigital.com

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