

## **GRAPEVINE: Photographs by Susan Lipper**

by Susan Harris-Edwards

Susan Lipper's photographs of Grapevine Hollow, West Virginia, are at once sumptuous and discordant. In a photographic tradition that owes much to the methodology of Walker Evans or Doris Ulmann, Lipper lived among her subjects intermittently over a five-year period. Her knowledge of these Appalachian mountaineers is intensely personal: her photographs are, in her words, her 'journal'. The expressive power of the formal elements in Lipper's photographs are considerable, but artful framing, dramatic perspective and intense values never destabilize the balance between intention and effect. In Lipper's photographs the gap between the photographer and those photographed is narrow. She has not fetishized a remote American sub-culture especially hard-hit by social neglect but rather unearthed the instinctual drives of eros/thanatos, instincts that defy class or privilege and which preserve, destroy and passionately connect all human beings.

Lipper's photographs are published in *Grapevine*, a stunning and elegantly paced book which includes 55 reproductions and an edited conversation between Lipper and Grapevine residents. The photographs, made with a Hasselblad camera, square in format and printed with black borders, are cinematically sequenced in a manner that exchanges photography's slow detachment for the greater immediacy usually reserved for film and television. In a similar vein Lipper does not shy away from the primal violence or earthy sexuality often addressed in the popular media. In her photographs it is possible for family feuds and pedestrian objects to occupy the same visual domain without the integrity of either, being compromised.

A compelling photograph of a slain female deer hanging from the backboard of a basketball hoop announces the opening of the deer season and portends the coming of winter, the season of arduous survival. To be poor in a nation where most people believe they will one day be rich is embittering; Lipper poignantly captures the rage that disempowered men wield against women, children and nature. Lipper's work cannot be seen outside the context of documentary and social photography. Yet one must bear in mind that this lineage, which includes the work of Gardner, Riis, Hine, Evans, the RA/FSA photographers, Frank, and Weegee also claims the psychologically disturbing images of Diane Arbus.

Lipper's work is straightforward yet never simplistic. On the contrary, it points to the complex and contradictory impulses of self-preservation and self-destruction. She records the underlying tensions in a world where violence could erupt at any moment. Unabashed residents of Grapevine reveal their barefeet, bare midriffs, bare chests and bare breasts for the camera, but the narrative remains speculative. In a photograph of a domestic interior a young man sits in a reclining chair reading a tabloid paper and virtually ignoring the barefoot, young woman crouched at his side. The perfunctory scene defines destiny more than a single moment; for according to Lipper, this photograph was made on the couple's wedding night. Grapevine Hollow takes its name from the mountain passes that curl like grapevines in and out of the coal mining region of West Virginia, but a grapevine is also an informal means of transmitting information from person to person. Lipper's photographs tell us much about the people of Grapevine and even more about our common fears.

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