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Rogues' Gallery: Another Kind of Life: Photography on the Margins

The purpose of this exhibition, according to its press release, is to explore "the continuing fascination of artists with those on the margins of society". The curators imagine a force - "the mainstream" - against which various communities swim; these are flexibly described as "countercultures, subcultures and minorities of all kinds". The language of centres and edges in the exhibition literature pegs out spatial distances between points of view. "Artistic" portrayals of "the outsider" are positioned as alternatives to "mainstream depictions"; the artists exhibited are often described as "insiders", immersed in the worlds they picture. To stand outside society, in these terms, is highly valorised; to look at such communities from beyond their own perimeters is not held in such esteem. The oscillations between such oppositions shift in uneasy ways in the exhibition's ambitions, but the material on the ground is, fortunately, much easier to navigate.

The Barbican's gallery organisation, over two floors, with convenient three-sided spaces plotted around a circular walk-way on the upper level, and an interlocking circuit of small rooms below, enables an artist-by-artist route. Twenty photographers, from the 1950s to the present day, are presented individually. Diane Arbus, the mother of them all, is first in line. Spot-lit prints of tattooed figures, circus performers, cross-dressers and nudists set the scene for the subject matter to follow, and also highlight the exhibition's first challenge. All the photographers selected, according to Jane Alison, Head of Visual Arts at the Barbican, "approach their subjects with a humanity and empathy that is both empowering and inclusive". Perhaps in retrospect, for this framing, the compassionate and celebratory aspects of Arbus' project can be allowed to stand, but the curatorial claims sit uncomfortably with the origins of some of the material.

The burden of maintaining the interpretation of inclusivity is spelled out in the exhibition's language, which is cautious if not pained. Arbus' subjects are notably not the "freaks" they once were; Bruce Davidson's photographs of Jimmy "Little Man" Armstrong from the late 1950s are described as a study of "a person of small stature". Even the joyous personal snapshots of and by members of the 1960s *Transvestia* community, showing men dressed as showgirls, nurses, geishas and pin-ups in pantsuits, fur stoles, ball gowns and boas, are retrospectively retitled. Casa Susanna in New York, the group's private gathering point, becomes a "safe space" in 2018 parlance. Transvestite – the term by which the members once proudly identified themselves - is now considered to be a slur, as stated in the apologetic text

on the gallery wall. While care is commendable, in some cases reinterpretation becomes decontextualisation.

Particularly in terms of gender exploration, given the prominence of current challenges to dominant binaries, subjects in the exhibition who push at norms are cast as cultural pioneers. What we might now describe as male-to-female queer subjects feature prominently throughout the show, in the work of artists from Arbus and Daido Moriyama through to Walter Pfeiffer. Similar rebel glamour is communicated through the studies of subcultures, such as Teddy Boys (seen twice, in the work of Philip Chancel and of Chris Steele-Perkins), or bikers, in Danny Lyon's documentation of motorcycle gangs of the late 1960s. Replayed in generations of cultural texts from *Easy Rider* onwards, these images have enshrined a set of romantic associations between leather jackets and motorbikes and anti-establishment freedoms. All the photographic subjects in the exhibition are claimed, in one way or another, to be engaged in acts of cultural resistance, yet quite what is being resisted is never quite clear, in part because of the enormous flexibility of "the marginal" as a category. In Larry Clark's famous *Tulsa* series, for example, elegantly wasted youth abuse themselves rather than the state.

It was in the Clark room that a particular image caught me. A baby, plump and cherubic, lies among crumpled bedding across the body of a young man, perhaps his father, who drags furiously and distractedly on a cigarette. Photographed from above, the infant looks out of the frame, into the viewer's eye, with a bewildered expression. It echoed an image in the Danny Lyon room that had ensnared me in a similar way. At a "Rogues' Picnic" in Chicago, 1966, grubby bikers, adorned with tattoos and the Iron Cross, ignore the toddlers arranged between them and their beer bottles. Perhaps these images tore at me because a child was crying insistently in the gallery at the time of my visit (the content was not recommended for under-14s, but this presumably did not apply to babes-in-arms). The plaintive sound reinforced the disjuncture between the celebratory frame of the show and the dismal state of some children's experiences in the communities depicted. Whose freedom was being enacted? Who is really marginalised here? These questions resonated further as the exhibition moved upstairs.

The gallery text acknowledged the artistic inspiration that Arbus, Moriyama and Davidson had provided Clark, Lyon and Seiji Kurata. In the upper rooms, in the work of more recent photographers, the influences continued, but were more than aesthetic. Jim Goldberg's subjects - teens living on Hollywood streets, photographed in the 1990s - could have been the offspring of the parents depicted by Lyon and Clark. One young man, showing a gunshot wound to his stomach, inflicted by his father when he was 12 years old, described his mother and father, in unmoderated language, as "a junkie slut" and "a biker from hell". The rebel performances of the next generation, told by Goldberg through annotated maps, ephemera, poetry and clothing as well as photographs, were also reiterations of cultural myths from

earlier times. Teens described themselves as street beatniks, and dreamed of dying young as doomed lovers like Sid and Nancy.

The subjects dwelling at the margins in *Another Kind of Life's* categorisation are wildly diverse and do not sit together easily. Addicts and prostitutes abut hippies and the homeless. Criminal gangs and nationalists mingle with sexual libertines. All are undoubtedly spectacular choices. In each case, there is a bodily performance of marginality, often through a repetitive repertoire of rebellious motifs, from tattoos and tobacco, necking and fucking, to lipstick and bared flesh. Whether the intended purpose of the photographs was sensationalist or humanist, when brought together the net result is testament to the persistence of a romantic fantasy about cultural outsiders. It left a nasty taste in my mouth.