

The Other Side of Christmas

Barry Salzman is an award-winning contemporary artist who currently works in photography, video and mixed media and whose projects have been shown widely around the world. Acutely relevant and brave in its willingness to confront, Salzman's photography garnered the 2018 International Photographer of the Year Award in the Deeper Perspective category at the International Photography Awards (IPA). His exhibition *The Other Side of Christmas* is open at Deepest Darkest Gallery in Cape Town until 29 December 2019.



Barry Salzman, *Third Street and Avenue A*, 2014. Archival
Giclee Print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag

As an uneasily naturalised American, Barry Salzman responds to the US with something of an outsider's regard. In his photographic series *The Other Side of Christmas*, he has turned his lens on the southern states of the US – which have some of the lowest household median incomes in the country – and the result is a Zen-like meditation on neglect and attrition.

The Zimbabwean-born artist, who is most interested in themes of community, heritage and identity, shot the images that came to comprise this body of work during a series of road-trips taken before and during the festive season in 2014 – around the time of the United States midterm elections, the precursor to the divisive 2016 presidential elections.

One reading of this series reveals that he is at pains to show that there's little festivity here. The American Dream has bypassed these towns, leaving a sad, stripped-down sense of life just as it is, with grubby or kitsch Christmas decorations offering ambivalent cheer. For some, the twinkling fairy lights glimpsed through a trailer-home window can represent the vanity of hopes not lost, each blinking bulb the detritus of unfulfilled aspirations. For others, such cynicism might be too much of a bitter pill – for the failing of the American Dream is perhaps taken as an inward indictment, a failing of self, rather than as a rejection of an outmoded paradigm that no longer fits the America of the present day.

'As I traversed the country, it was blatantly apparent that for many Americans, perhaps even the majority, the life they live has little bearing on the promise of that often romanticised dream held by so many who seek to be "American". This was particularly poignant through the holiday season, hence the title of the exhibition,' says Salzman.

'The American Dream is predicated on a certain ethos – democracy, liberty, equality, opportunity. In order for its historical notion to prevail, you need a sense of economic prosperity and upward social mobility through hard work, without barriers constraining it. I am not convinced that this exists in the US today.'

As Salzman's first project after graduating from art school in 2014, *The Other Side of Christmas* was something of a personal project that allowed the New Yorker to find his voice. The images reveal a deep sense of longing rather than belonging: this is no grand *On the Road* quest à la Jack Kerouac; rather, it is a contemplative reflection on identity in 21st century America.

Not overtly political, these images nevertheless comment ironically on the role of immigration in the country – a building is ostensibly 'Open 24 Hours' but sports a 'No Entry' sign, and Abdalla's store is deserted and up for lease. The derelict properties, empty chairs, abandoned swimming pool and encroachment of nature reveal suburbs that are not so much in flux as in torpor – the result is a sense of resignation rather than hope. Yet as Salzman points out, 'There is life in the bleakness.'



Barry Salzman, *The Swimming Pool*, 2014. Archival Giclee Print
on Hahnemühle Photo Rag

His carefully framed images may hint at how people survive in these poignant, refractory landscapes, but he doesn't tell the viewer what to make of them. 'I am neither a photojournalist nor a documentarian – it is not my place to force a point of view on the viewer,' he explains. 'I am inspired to make the work and would like to give the viewer just enough to find their own meaning and place within it.'

For South Africans coming to the show in Cape Town, this might entail the realisation that the grass is not always greener on the other side. 'People are so quick to assume that life is better elsewhere,' says Salzman.

With six major projects under his belt, a global award, as well as various commissions for publications like

Vanity Fair, Harper's Bazaar, Vogue Travel + Entertaining, Design Boom and *Australian Geographic*, Salzman is proving to be a significant artistic talent. Yet he remains adamant that people should interpret his work as they see fit. 'The main thing is to get people to think; to give them permission to let their minds roam and wander. Then I have done my job as an artist,' he asserts. 'As a photographer, I want to give you a way in – you don't have to like the work, as long as there's that moment of engagement, shifting your mindset from where it was a moment before. You can't really ask more from an artist.'

The Other Side of Christmas is on at the Deepest Darkest Gallery in Cape Town between 7 November and 29 December 2019. For more info, visit www.deepestdarkest.com

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