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Behind the dream

Photographer Barry Salzman is showcasing a body of work entitled *The Other Side of Christmas*, offering a new perspective on the USA, at Deepest Darkest Gallery in Cape Town



The Other Side of Christmas exhibition runs from 7 November to 28 December 2019. For more information, go to deepestdarkest.com.

You've said that the words we attach to ourselves can become our labels. As a photographer, how powerful do you think pictures are in defining a brand (a person, a thing, or in this case, a country) – specifically when the images are not accompanied by explanations of context and observers are left to draw their own conclusions? Where is this a positive process, and where a negative one?

Barry Salzman Despite the clichéd phrase, 'a picture is worth a thousand words,' words and pictures are not the same and are hardly interchangeable. While they both have distinct singular applications, they work best as complementary communication tools. While we are living in a visually abundant world – every two minutes humans take more pictures today than the total number in existence since photography was invented over 150 years ago – our visual literacy is still in its infancy relative to our linguistic literacy. Together, our visual language and spoken or written language are fusing into a new, holistic definition of language, which helps prolong audience engagement, even momentarily, beyond the fleeting thumb-swipe.

In my photographic work, I rarely use images without text, even if it's just the project title. This show is called *The Other Side of Christmas*. While the individual works have fairly literal titles, the project title guides the viewer toward my intent. In my project *The Day I Became Another Genocide Victim*, which addresses the Rwandan genocide, I use a text statement in the first person as an integral part of each of the 100 images in the series. To me, it is the text that transforms those images from still lives of objects to intimate portraits of genocide victims.

America, as portrayed through the 'American Dream' filter, is arguably the strongest brand on the planet. How did your perception of the country change, stage by stage, as you went from distant observer to visitor to resident, and then to citizen?

My vantage point for my critique of the American Dream in *The Other Side of Christmas* was from a place of

privilege – a white male immigrant who arrived in the US in the mid-1980s, during a period of relative acceptance, and went on to achieve 'success' by most conventional metrics. While earning my way in New York City, I had little capacity for critique, but instead was intently focused on building life's foundations and establishing my sense of place – personally, economically and socially. Along the road from faraway 'wannabe' to American citizen, the refrains of *Only in America* and "If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere", played on auto-replay in my mind. As the new arrival, intent on proving myself in an intensely competitive environment, that's what I did.

The truth is that our perception of time and place is inextricably intertwined with both our personal condition and our public context at any point – with the micro and the macro. Over the last decade, both my personal circumstances and the macro political and environmental issues that envelope us, conspired to move me from belief in, to critique of, the American Dream.

As a photographer, observing your surroundings is obviously part of the job description. How important is it, then, to change your surroundings from time to time to keep perspective? The road trip you went on to create this work is one of the most satisfying ways of doing this, but how do you make sure that you don't end up seeking something specific (rather than simply reflecting or reporting what is there), and so imposing on your observations a narrative that doesn't necessarily exist?

Breaking my established patterns and moving outside of a predictable comfort zone are critical to fuelling my creative process. Sometimes it's as simple as a shift in my daily routine, and other times it requires physically uprooting myself to change environments. I find frequent change is critical. And the road trip, by definition, is a great way of achieving that. Avoiding seeking something specific carries with it the implicit conundrum that exists at the heart of what photography is all about. Is it fact or fiction? What part is life versus art?

Most photographs are neither and both. As with all continua, by definition, an infinitesimal number of data points relative to the total universe, exist at either extreme, or precisely at the midpoint. Most exist somewhere in between, falling on one side or the other of the midpoint. I believe photography and all photographs fit this same distribution between fiction and non-fiction. The photographer, as visual editor, is always imposing an element of subjectivity on the narrative in every image.

At the pure non-fiction extreme, the photograph never escapes at least some element of subjectivity and manipulation, even if it is simply where the photographer chooses to place the camera. The photographer is making



decisions at every moment that affect the aesthetics, composition and information contained in the image (or excluded from it). At the pure fiction extreme, there remains an element, however slight, of indexicality; the thing that the image refers to is still at least partially recognisable. In instances where there is no referent, where the image has been digitally manipulated to such an extent that nothing visible looks like anything we know or can relate to, I would argue that we have moved from photography into another digital art form or communication medium.

What message do you hope *The Other Side of Christmas* will convey to viewers?

The intent of all my work always is to give the audience a moment of pause for reflection or consideration. I want

to challenge people to think differently, even if just for a fleeting moment. I consider the success or failure of a project not to be whether it is well-liked or not, but instead to be whether it opens up an avenue in the viewer for new thinking. In *The Other Side of Christmas*, my intent is in no way to adjudicate upon the truthfulness of the American Dream. Instead, for a South African audience and the visitor to South Africa, it is to caution against the perennial trap laid out by the idiom “the grass is greener on the other side”. Many South Africans have asked me, upon learning that I was back living in South Africa, “Why would you give up on America for this?” To them, I hope the exhibition is a reminder that, in truth, the grass on the other side is often browner.

Barry Salzman's work highlights the less glamorous side of the US.

Text | **Bruce Dennill** Photography | **Barry Salzman**