

ANTHONY REYNOLDS GALLERY

60 GREAT MARLBOROUGH STREET
LONDON
W1F 7BG

TELEPHONE +44 20 7 439 2201
FAX +44 20 7 439 1869
EMAIL INFO@ANTHONYREYNOLDS.COM

PAUL GRAHAM AN ANTHOLOGY

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Paul Graham (b.1956) is from that remarkable generation of photographers born in the 1950's that have come to international prominence in art photography today. From Nan Goldin through Thomas Struth, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff, Rineke Dijkstra, Philip Lorca di Corcia, Beat Streuli, etc, there is a grouping whose formative creative years coincided with the great flowering of the photographic scene of the 1970's. Whilst later generations reference 'artists who use photography' among a spectrum of artistic activity, this generation committed to the medium at a time when photography was not embraced by the art world, nor found in contemporary art collections. The work of Robert Adams, William Eggleston, Stephen Shore, Garry Winogrand or Diane Arbus was only located in small print run books or magazines, and dedicated photo spaces. More importantly, that work came directly from a tumultuous period of questioning the world and our place within it - the 1960's/ 70's - and as such was firmly rooted in expressing itself directly through what could be observed, and trusting only what you could see with your own eyes. This is where this generation of photographers learned their craft and established their artistic values.

Whilst Graham's work belongs firmly in this grouping, he has consistently been amongst the most innovative, using and abusing the traditional genres of photographic practice, mixing Landscape and War photography (Troubled Land) or Reportage and Colour (Beyond Caring), and has pushed the boundaries of what we even register as an image (American Night), or a portrait (End of an Age). Though this is plenty to merit attention, what also distinguishes his work is how it has embraced the powerful tradition of social documentary photography (one that is particularly strong in Britain - Bill Brandt, Chris Killip, John Davies, Richard Billingham) to update and expand it in profound ways. Graham's photography has been instrumental in revitalising this essential area of photographic discourse - both formally by broadening the visual language used, and essentially in questioning our notions of what documentary photography could say, be, and look like.

At a time where Art Photography has increasingly been staged, manipulated or realised in the studio (Jeff Wall, Thomas Demand, Gregory Crewdson, etc) or held the world at a cool conceptualized distant view (Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth, Berndt and Hilla Becher) Graham's work distinguishes itself by retaining a firm and full commitment to life as it is, to an understanding that the core of photography begins with an unblinking engagement with the world.

Paul Graham is the winner of the 2009 Deutsche Boerse Photography Prize. A retrospective survey of his work is currently at the Folkwang Museum in Essen. There will be a further retrospective exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in March 2011