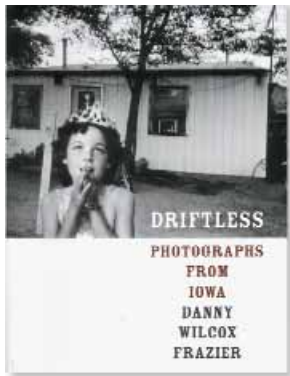


DRIFTLESS

In an interview with MARY ANNE REDDING, Iowa photographer DANNY WILCOX FRAZIER reveals the very personal impetus behind his prize-winning photographic project about the land of his birth.



BY WRITING THE POETIC FOREWORD to *Driftless*, Robert Frank is doing for Danny Wilcox Frazier what Jack Kerouac did for him 50 years ago when Kerouac wrote the introduction to *The Americans*. As the juror for the 2006 Center for Documentary Studies/Honickman First Book Prize in Photography, Robert Frank selected Frazier's work from 400 entries to receive \$3,000 in cash, the publication of his first book, and inclusion in the biennial prize-winner's exhibition.

Frank was an outsider and an immigrant when he traveled across America on a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1955/56. On the road in a secondhand car, Frank looked with one skeptical eye and one romantic eye at his new country. The work he produced was out of focus, coolly removed and all jangled angles. This displaced itinerant photographer was also moved by what he saw; there is a gentleness in the gritty melancholy of his images.

In contrast to Frank, Frazier is an insider. He grew up in Le Claire, Iowa, a small Mississippi River town. A freelance photographer who now travels the world, Frazier maintains his American roots. Married with two young children, he lives in Iowa City, where he has taught at the University of Iowa. Frazier is, admittedly, influenced by Frank's tentative and imperfect imagery. When he first saw *The Americans*, he recognized his world: "I was blown away by it. Not necessarily because I understood the photography completely, but because I had lived it—it reflected how I felt about the world around me. I connected to the emotion of the photographs. And I was completely hooked."

Making pictures in rural Iowa for four years, Frazier knows firsthand the economic and cultural struggles currently playing out in the Midwest. The black-and-white images poignantly capture the tension of lives in transition. There are lots of guns, dead animals, and, similar to Frank's imagery, parades and American flags permeate the pictures. The seemingly careless framing of Frazier's photographs shares the same poetic grittiness of Frank's in that it sets up a sub-conscious tension in the viewer.

A BRIEF CONVERSATION WITH DANNY WILCOX FRAZIER

Mary Anne Redding: I find one of the most intriguing images in the book to be the image of the toy farmyard. It is the only image where you are not observing "real life"; rather the child's toys are a simulacrum or stand-in for Iowa's farms. What were your motivations for taking this image and including it in the book?

Danny Wilcox Frazier: Iowa, and all of the Midwest, occupies a sentimental and symbolic part of our nation's consciousness. The iconic images of Iowa painted on canvas or projected on screens show us a place that no longer exists, if it ever did—a fantasy of tranquility, of simpler times, a settled landscape full of passive people. Life in Iowa can be punishing. Many Iowans expend their lives sweating over soil and spilling the blood of livestock; they endure the hardships associated with a life inextricably bound to the ups and downs of nature. With my work I am trying to say, here is real life, dilapidated and



Plastic farm scene, Fort Dodge, 2003

unpolished. The photo you mention [above] is my one reference to that fairy-tale notion of rural life, and like the plastic figures in the image, it is a fiction.

MAR: How important to you is it that these images are made in Iowa, in communities that are in close proximity to you both physically and emotionally? Could they be taken in any other place? Does place matter? Since you are a part of these places, would you say your images are a part of your responsibility to the places and people you take pictures of, that you, and by extension your viewers, are responsible for these places?

DWF: This is a very personal body of work, it's true. But even though I am connected to Iowa both physically and emotionally, I feel I could make these images elsewhere. Photography allows me to give testimony to what matters to me. I have worked to study the class divide within America, to photograph the people and places stranded on the margins. These are troubled times for America—we're a nation in which self-indulgence has overtaken our humanity. I think it is the responsibility of those who reap the rewards of our economic system, who prosper so much, to extend a safety net to those struggling to merely get by. I want my work to bring attention to the people who are trying to hold

on to a vital part of our collective history. As "community" continues to be homogenized in zones of urban sprawl, we must consider all that we are losing—development should not come at the expense of more fragile communities.

MAR: So much of what is written about your works speaks to the harshness of life in the rural Midwest and to the heart of America being emptied. However, I don't see these images as being empty; I see them as revealing the process of transformation. America has always been transformed. It's true that small towns are losing their populations as many young people move away from the withering farmlands to larger cities with more options and as older generations return to the earth. There is a certain amount of pathos in your imagery, but there is also a certain amount of just plain old life, as most of us who aren't super-rich know it. The images remind me of visiting my grandparents (second generation Irish and German immigrants) every summer in Dubuque, Iowa, when we were kids. I guess in that sense I relate to your images on a very personal level. How do you want your viewers, who will live all across America and come from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, to relate to your images?

DWF: As many of the images show, life here goes on much as it does elsewhere, with all the mundane tasks that require so



Snow storm, Hills, Iowa, 2004

much time and attention, with the same kinds of social events and diversions. But that said, these images also represent a segment of society that is increasingly challenged by economic pressures, and that at present seems destined to fail in many places. If out-migration continues to depopulate communities, and immigration is stalled or suspended, it will become nearly impossible to maintain small towns and family farms throughout rural America. Consolidation of services is one aspect of our nation's economy that seems to be speeding up that decline, though this trend could be reversed through financial incentives—many of the presidential candidates have plans that include economic support for individuals and businesses that are located in rural areas. And then, maybe, the rural culture I document will be maintained.

I hope my photographs help viewers relate to those willing to stay behind in these forgotten places and, if I'm successful, feel a real connection to them and their circumstances. At the moment, only the most faithful have the strength to stay—Amish, Mennonite and those connected to the land through work. We forget, however, that we are truly a country of immigrants. As many Iowans leave the state, an influx of immigrants are filling the labor short-

age. Latinos are finding jobs in Iowa's slaughterhouses and vegetable fields, bone-breaking work that most locals turn down. The Hispanic population grew 153 percent in Iowa during the 1990s, a sign some communities are redefining themselves in an almost all-white state.

MAR: In interviews you have said: "The feeling of openness that so defines the Midwest's rural landscape is being replaced by one of emptiness, as the economies of rural communities across America continue to fail, abandonment is becoming commonplace; these photographs document the human effect of this economic shift. What I hope they do is to force people to think about the decline of these rural places and start thinking of solutions. And I think the best solution is immigration. The anti-immigration debate in the U.S. is nothing more than political kowtowing. The argument that immigrants take American jobs is a complete farce and people are missing the real issue: immigration is probably the only thing that can save small-town America. People always say that something has to be done because they're taking our jobs, but that's completely misguided; we're keeping people out who just want to come here and make a living—often doing jobs we don't want anyway. And they're filling the void left by the old people who are retiring



Crossroads Grill and Bar, South English, 2006

and the young people who are fleeing. Without immigration, small, rural towns will inevitably die out.” Can you speak further to your politics on issues of immigration?

DWF: To be honest, the statement you quoted pretty much sums up my feelings on immigration. I think the immigration question has been co-opted by those in politics looking to divide the electorate. Our economy depends on the labor of immigrants, legal or illegal. I have family members who have worked inside Iowa’s slaughterhouses, and their stories and scars are testament to what I consider the hardest, most bone-breaking form of manual labor. Immigrants now do the jobs no one else is willing to do. They perform extreme labors while being grossly underpaid; they do the thankless jobs, in the slaughterhouse and in the fields. If we really want to slow or stop illegal immigration, we need to target those who profit in the equation, and we Americans must also be prepared to pay much more for that beautiful cut of beef we throw on the grill each weekend. The truth is, the vast majority of us are descendants of immigrants whose ancestors came here for the same reason that Hispanics are immigrating—opportunity. The perilous journey illegal immigrants take should be enough testimony to their desire for a better life economically. Human traffickers and their

fees, as well as an unforgiving desert loaded with law enforcement all make the journey one of life and death. I am not naive, and I understand that we cannot open the border completely, but I also recognize the contributions Hispanic immigrants make in rural communities across the country.

MAR: There is a certain amount of voyeurism in your imagery, both in the landscapes and in the environmental portraiture. Your vantage point often seems to be looking through dirty windows, straining to see around the body blocking the view, peering through the rain or the gathering dusk, through a fence or around some other barrier. Do you feel like a voyeur or do you feel like a participant when you are looking through the viewfinder? How conscious are you of the viewer’s thwarted desire to see more?

DWF: I don’t think of my work as voyeuristic, but as stemming instead from a personal space where participation and connection would better describe my relationship to these people and places. But there is a level of discomfort in the photographs that relates to conflicting emotions I have for this place. I am from Iowa, and I belong here, but I have never felt at ease, and that often plays out in my photographs. Like so many young people that have fled rural



communities across the Midwest, I too wrestled with an unrelenting desire to escape the oppressive tranquility of my sleepy small town while growing up there. My feelings for this place are mixed, but I always find myself drawn to the rough landscape that seems to stretch beyond the horizon and to the humility of Iowans. Those who are willing to stay behind, who work to maintain their rural lifestyle, sometimes seem entombed in obscurity, forgotten by an economy that is too fast and fickle for lengthy growing seasons. I am committed to these people, and am slowly becoming more comfortable with my role and place here. As the concentration of wealth in America approaches levels not seen since Franklin Roosevelt took the oath of office, those living in the shadows of an unjust economic system have become further disenfranchised. With my work, I hope to draw any amount of awareness for those beyond America's attention.

MAR: Why do you think Robert Frank picked your work? And, what does it mean to you that he did?

DWF: Maybe, someday, I will have the chance to ask Robert Frank why he selected my work. I have always felt a deep connection to his photographs, to that sad poem that played out the first time I saw *The Americans*. It clarified a feeling I often had, a feeling of being alone even when surrounded by others. Frank's photographs give voice to subject and photographer alike, and through that collaboration, a personal reflection is brought to light. I am both humbled and challenged by Mr. Frank's selection of my work. It gives me confidence to continue no matter the difficulties ahead.

MAR: You acknowledged musician and fellow Iowan Greg Brown for his company on your travels in your book. How do Greg Brown's music and stories relate to your imagery?

DWF: This is hard, but I guess it just comes down to the fact that Greg Brown's music helped me find comfort in my own skin. While growing up in Le Claire, a small Iowa town that sat idle as the current of the Mississippi passed by, my most vivid wish was to escape. I think this emotion is often reflected in my work—a tension created, or found, in looking through a window and photographing teenagers who are laughing while playing a religious card game, their joy obstructed and distant but still warm and sincere. Greg Brown's songs find joy in the endless gravel roads of Iowa, in the berry patches that line creeks surrounded by cornfields. When I was young, my dream of escape and my unhappiness played out in clichéd ways. It wasn't until I lived in Africa, at the age of 25, that I began to look outside of myself. So much of my time as a photographer is spent alone, and while driving roads that seemed to go on forever, Greg Brown's music gave me company. The book's title, *Driftless*, is a reference to both the Driftless Area and a song by Greg Brown by the same title; it conveys the sense of melancholy I feel when I hear Brown's music or think of David Lynch's film *The Straight Story*.

MAR: You often go on assignment to other places, other countries to report visually on life in those places. How do you think your images made at home differ from those made in distant lands; or do they?

(top) *Sale Barn Cafe, Kalona, 2005*
(bottom) *Members of VFW Post 6414, Memorial Day, Riverside, 2003*

DWF: *Driftless* is my first major body of work, and it makes sense that it is of my home—I started taking photographs in the same towns and along the same gravel roads found in the book. I am excited about committing myself to the next project, but I realize it will probably take me away from home and that there will be new challenges in terms of access and in the level of intimacy I strive to have with my subjects.

In Iowa, though not an outsider, I've never felt like a true insider. If I can find that same in-between place for myself when working abroad, I hopefully will be able to communicate the emotion and complexities of the place.

MAR: Who are the image makers that have most influenced your image making? What advice do you give your students about making images? Are there any books you recommend reading?

DWF: In *Ghost Image*, Hervé Guibert writes in his essay, "Advice," that a young photographer questioning his approach should "photograph only those closest to you, your parents, your brothers and sisters, your lover. The emotional antecedent will carry the picture along with it. . . ."

I am drawn to photography that reveals not only the emotion of the situation and the subjects, but also the photographer's connection to and feelings for the people and places documented. It is within that relationship, between photographer and subject, that images develop their voice—an ability to evoke a response, even an attachment, in viewers.

Since starting in photography, I have been drawn to work that plays on this dynamic. *The Americans* by Robert Frank, *Exiles* by Josef Koudelka, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* by Nan Goldin, and *Tulsa* by Larry Clark—these are all bodies of work that reveal both subject and photographer. After buying *The Silence*, Gilles Peress's devastating document of the genocide in Rwanda, I read Philip Gourevitch's *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families*. Both books revealed the horror of that time and place with such clarity, with such raw emotion, that I felt connected to the subjects of a situation I could never fully comprehend, and to the commitment and compassion of the people who showed it to me.

Driftless: Photographs From Iowa. Photographs by Danny Wilcox Frazier. Foreword by Robert Frank. Duke University Press in association with the Center for Documentary Studies, Durham, 2007. Hardbound with printed dustjacket. 120 pp., 80 duotone, 9 x 12 \$39.95

(top) *View of farm fields, Johnson County, 2003*
(bottom) *A storm over Interstate 80, 2006*

