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BILL OWENS: IN CONVERSATION



## EYEWITNESS

**Bill Owens** was not only the photographer who captured the death of the counter culture dream at the Rolling Stones concert at Altamont, he was also a pioneer in photographing and filming the normality of American suburbia.

*Hungry Eye* US Editor **Sean Samuels** discovers how Bill's approach to photography and his career has neither been conventional or calculated.

It is 1972 in America and 'the Dream' is being sold at a discount and on credit to the masses. All across the nation must-have trends adorn front rooms, couples sport the latest fashions and driveways house the newest cars. Life is good and on track. Step outside, however, and the world is a different place altogether.

President Nixon is caught on tape discussing the

use of the CIA against the FBI in the Watergate scandal. US actress and household name Jane Fonda causes nationwide outrage when she is photographed sitting on a North Vietnamese anti-aircraft gun. Terrorism enters a new phase with the deaths of 11 Israeli athletes in Munich, Germany, and an escalating death toll in the UK and Northern Ireland as violence between the IRA



and British forces increases.

Yet as things fall apart, in Middle America they do so only on the television. Here the suburban security blanket, growing plusher every day, can be pulled over the head to keep out anything frightful. It is this disturbing development that catches the eye of the young news photographer Bill Owens, whose choice to capture this way of life would change the face of documentary photography.

Considered to be pioneering work by many photographers, *Suburbia* is a groundbreaking, elegiac and revealing monograph of community living and materialism. In his opening address for the book, Owens states that the people featured: "... enjoy the lifestyle of the suburbs. They have realised the American Dream. They are proud to be homeowners and to have achieved material success. To me, nothing seemed familiar, yet everything was very, very familiar. At first I suffered from culture shock. I wanted to photograph everything; thousands of photographs. Then slowly I began to put my thoughts and feelings together and to document Americans in suburbia."

Captions accompany the images in the book. They serve to heighten further the human element and add colour to the seemingly repetitive and whitewashed landscape. Take the shot of a couple standing in front of their packed belongings. At first glance they appear happy and excited to be new homeowners. But as the caption reveals, it is a bittersweet moment. "We moved up to a nicer house. We thought we'd do better, but the real estate man got us. Closing costs were supposed to be \$295, but they turned out to be \$750. They have you where they want you: you've already moved into the house."

This is Owens' journalistic approach shining through, and you realise this work was not made by an outsider interested in history looking in, but an insider looking all around him. A suburbanite himself, he was one of them, and they welcomed his company with open arms. His dedication reads: "And to the people of Livermore Amador Valley. It's your book." This work is not a caricature, as some might say, but it does have characters and, as

with any story, their self-awareness, viewpoints and motives vary greatly. Happiness is evident, but you can also be sure that conflict is never far away. Look past the veneer and what lies beneath is all the more frightening.

Soon after seeing *Suburbia* for the first time, I was given a box containing hundreds of photographs of my own childhood taken in the same era. The influence upon me of Owens' work was immediate. Here was a record of the life my parents felt compelled to create. On the people and in the backgrounds I found the trappings of the day: from the clothes to the stereos, the cars to the televisions and the extravagant Christmases and luxurious birthday parties; most of which I know now they could not always afford. I found myself articulating the same social commentary that Owens' photographs captured and which both he and the work continue to exude today.

"I'm a regular person," he says. "I don't photograph prostitutes; I don't photograph the downtrodden. I photograph what the problem is in our culture. And the problem is the middle class consuming all that garbage in a consumer society that gives you no satisfaction. That's how I look at it. I can't go two days without buying something. But all Man is like that. If you're out in the bush, you collect rocks, twigs. People need to gather things, to keep things."

Today, now aged 74, Owens remains a force to be reckoned with. He walks for an hour and a half every day, so he may live to 100. He is so animated on the phone that we talk for hours. I learn that he gives lectures on photography, and that he is the founder and president of the American Distilling Institute; regularly attending industry conferences all across America. He tells me of how he has shot and designed several books for his organisation, and recently completed a fashion story for the Belgian publication, *A Magazine*; while in the same breath he states that he no longer "pretends to be this big photographer any more".

"Yeah well, nobody from *Vogue* magazine is going to look at *A Magazine* and say, 'We've got to hire Bill Owens.' No way. They have people coming to them every day with magnificent



Previous page: Altamont, 1969.  
Opposite: My dad thinks it's a good idea to take all the leaves off the tree and rake up the yard. I think he's crazy, 1971.

Below left: Overview of neighborhood, *Suburbia*, 1973. Below right: Sunday afternoon we get it together. I cook the steaks and my wife makes the salad, 1970.

Following pages: Altamont, 1969.







photos. They have agents showing up at their doors with portfolios of great images by young photographers eager to make their mark, and who are willing to do exactly what they want.

Going to photograph a forest in France; those are the kinds of assignments I like. I have many like that on my bucket list.”

At first sight Bill Owens’ career is confusing. His biography is 14 pages long. As a photographer he is represented by some of the biggest galleries and agents in the world, including Howard Greenberg, James Cohan and Bill Charles. His work has been repeatedly exhibited and praised the world over, and he forms a part of many a permanent reputable collection. Yet he considers his distilling organisation to be his bread and butter.

“I made \$100,000 one year selling prints; I think even Elton John bought a print that year. But the next year I made \$22,000; so I am sure glad I don’t have to rely on photo sales. If you are an art photographer your job is to get out there and network. You have to push. You have to make friends with the right people. You write them letters. I have failed to push for shows and work, to make it a career. I figured after the books, what else did I have to do? But a book isn’t the answer; you have to get the work. I did photography for 14 years full time, but then I realised the kids needed to go to college, so I got out and into the distilling business.”

The historical and social importance of his work, rather than monetary value, is central to Owens’ process. First and foremost a family man, he shoots how he wants and when he wants; not the way he is supposed to shoot: an attitude that of course has its commercial ramifications.

“I don’t shoot fashion. My agent Bill Charles works with a lot of fashion photographers in New York, and he can’t give me any work because those guys will deliver what they are told to deliver. So it was a surprise to get the fashion gig and I wanted to turn it down. I would prefer to shoot for *National Geographic* magazine, but they’ll never hire me. I did get a commission from *Geo* (magazine) about 30 years ago, to update *Suburbia*,

five or six years after I shot it. That was a lot of fun. I was able to go to tennis matches, golf courses and things like that.”

Following on from *Suburbia*, for which Owens was given a Guggenheim Fellowship Award and \$12,000, he created, among others, three more photobooks in the same vein – *Working (I Do it for the Money)*, *Our Kind of People* and *Leisure* – all of which are set in the same location as *Suburbia*. “*Leisure* took 10 years to make,” he tells me.

“I have other books sitting in boxes too that will never see the light of day.” I wonder why.

“It’s too much work and I made a mistake early on. I would go to New York hustling for commissions when I should have been visiting the museums and hustling for a show. That’s what other photographers did. They knew not to try to get commercial work, but to befriend the galleries. Have lunch with them and hang out so you get a big show, and your stuff magically becomes art. I’m in New York hustling *Newsweek*, *TIME Magazine* and *FORTUNE Magazine* for work so I can support my children. That said, I did get some cherry assignments. *Newsweek* gave me the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of the United States of America. The magazine put five of us on the road to photograph the country. I thought, ‘This is going to make me.’ I went to Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Disney World and Florida. I busted my ass for two weeks to get two images into *Newsweek*. It didn’t change the world.”

To some reading this, it might appear as if Owens is bitter, but far from it. He is too honest for that and more than happy to discuss further the barriers to his photographic career that both he and the industry have constructed over the years.

While working for Livermore’s *The Independent* newspaper he was a stringer for a number of publications. When *Rolling Stone* magazine started, Owens did some work for them but: “Annie Leibovitz came along,” he tells me. “She was single, could go there [New York] every day and work; whereas I had a wife, two kids and lived in suburbia 40 miles away. I just couldn’t compete.”

In 1974 he was asked to cover the Democratic National Convention: a big news event, given the

electoral disaster of the previous gathering two years earlier. But he “... was beat by [Richard] Avedon. I went as a backup; he had the insider credential. I couldn’t get into the floors, so I photographed the TV crews and then just got out of there. In fact, I still have the letter in which Jimmy Carter’s press secretary turned me down to photograph the President. This came via *Newsweek*, but they wouldn’t give me access. I think it was because they looked at my images and thought, ‘This guy is not a friendly photographer. He’s doing images that are sardonic, funny and serious.’ This is not what they wanted. They wanted the studio shot where everyone was smiling and happy. I wanted to show life as it was. That was my goal: to change the world by making people aware of how ludicrous life is. You have to have a little anger in yourself to be a good photographer. I went home from that saying that I wasn’t going to try any more. I wanted to make my images of suburbia where there was no competition.”

Before *Suburbia*, however, there was The Altamont Speedway Free Festival in 1969: an infamous rock concert headlined and organised by The Rolling Stones. Approximately 300,000 people attended the event in Northern California, which is best known for the death of Meredith Hunter at the hands of a Hells Angel. Owens was asked to cover the event for the Associated Press, and today his portfolio of images sells for \$10,000; and his YouTube film on the concert has had more than 950,000 hits.

“Sure, I am really proud to have photographed some violence. I tell you, I didn’t want anything to do with the Hells Angels, and didn’t publish my name for 40 years on that. At the time I didn’t even know who The Rolling Stones were; I didn’t follow rock ’n’ roll. But I knew to position myself in the sound tower where I had a view of everything; and not to be down on stage, where you can’t see anything. So I’m sitting up there in the crow’s nest and that’s where I made all my images. At first there was a little rope there to keep people back by about 20ft, but you had the crush of all those people. They’re all pushing forward and those at

the front were pressed up against the stage like cattle. No one could move. And then you have these crazies taking off their clothes and climbing up on the stage. By one o’clock I was out of there. I shot 13 rolls of film and had to meet the deadline for the newspaper at four o’clock that afternoon. That meant I had to get back to the office, process the film and print it wet, so I could get home by six o’clock to have dinner with my wife and kids. Today, I think if I had shot the concert as film that I would have made thousands of dollars, because the world now is totally about film. We are wired 24/7. I am always connected to the internet and to a website of some kind. If I was a young documentary photographer again, I would be shooting film and making films of the things I shot for *Suburbia*.”

Self-taught, Owens’ first introduction to photography was during the time he and his wife spent in the Peace Corps. Following John F. Kennedy’s assassination in 1963, a photographer visited their village in Jamaica to document their life as volunteer schoolteachers. “I thought, ‘I would love to be able to do that.’ So I went out and bought myself a camera and two books: *The Family of Man* and *The History of Photography*. I was learning from looking at photographs and to this day I think *The Family of Man* is the greatest book on photography ever published. I also knew I had to shoot all the time, so I wanted to become a newspaper photographer. I had read enough to realise that many fine photographers came out of journalism because they have to shoot every day. That was what was so great about working for Livermore’s *The Independent*. Each day I was going into businesses, going to manufacturing companies and going into people’s homes. The newspaper opened up the world to me and things started to happen.”

Shooting constantly is just one facet of the meticulous regime Owens imposed upon himself when creating all of his books. He would write a mission statement and make a shooting script. He would list exactly what he wanted to do. Even now he thoroughly researches first, he tells me. “I will go to the chamber of commerce, City Hall

and look around. I don't just wander around the streets shooting nonsensically. Unfortunately a lot of photographers don't want to work. They are lazy and just want it to come to them. There is the great shot by serendipity sure – I have had that happen – but the more you know, the better a job you can do. I research my subjects so I have some idea of what is going on and, depending on the project, my research might take a couple of months. I will look in the phone book, I will go to the shopping malls, and just try to be aware of the community and what the people are about.”

Seven years ago Owens went digital and has never looked back. He is also making films. The technology perfectly complements his voracious shooting style. As someone that wants to capture everyday life there is a never-ending supply of opportunities. As he puts it, he loves to “shoot nothing”. And this may explain why he has more than 30,000 images he wants to post up in The Cloud.

“Digital is just so much more fun. I don't have to diddle with the darkroom any more, or the camera. I can just point and shoot. I do not even put the camera to my face and look at the world through a straw with one eye closed. This is how I describe taking photos the old way. By closing one eye your depth perception goes away. I hold the camera out in front of me now, so I can look left and right and compose the shot instantly. I tell people, ‘What you are doing is hiding behind the camera. It covers half your face; and the bigger the camera is, the more intimidating it is to your subject.’ I am shooting everything on the iPhone from now on. I can capture colour and sound and post up to the internet within seconds.”

This embrace of new technology and ceaseless drive to document greatly endears Owens to me.

His career may appear to be patchwork, but that is simply because he could not be ‘that’ kind of photographer; and he is the first to admit it. In this aspect of his life he chose to be an outsider.

For him other, more important matters came first: from the welfare of his family to his own work demands and beliefs. Consider also that the vicissitudes of the photographic industry can be devilish at the best of times; and no more so than now.

Bear this all in mind and Owens has achieved immortality; if not fortune and glory. Occasionally, at one of his distilling conferences, somebody will walk up to him to say they studied his work at school. I have no doubt this will continue.

His work is memorable and *Suburbia* is now returning to the front of influential people's minds. His love of reality and a passion for the moments he captured in between were ahead of their time and, in many ways, stood as an ominous warning that sadly went unheeded by the new Middle America for whom ‘the Dream’ shattered and splintered not so long ago. How many photographers working today will be able to say the same about their work 40 years from now?

**Opposite above left:** I bought the lawn in six foot rolls. It's easy to handle. I prepare the ground and my wife and son helped roll out the grass. In one day you have a front yard, 1972.

**Opposite above right:** When I was a child I learned to play Mah Jongg from my mother and her two sisters. They had a beautiful boxed set with tiles made of ivory that I liked to use as building blocks. In those days, every Jewish mother played. Now all the players are middle-aged or old like me.

Coney Island, New York 1976.

**Opposite:** Two girls Hurst shifter sign, *Leisure*, 2004.

