

Profile

Mike Dvorak: The Amish - One God, One Family

Words:  
Tim White

Mike Dvorak has built a reputation for highly empathetic portraits of the common people that he meets at county fairs, rim shops, tractor-pulls and elsewhere off the beaten path. He has a practiced capacity to capture moments that conflate the somber and the sweet, such as the smile of a tattooed man carrying a winged little girl on his shoulders, or a Midway princess in a plastic tiara against a backdrop of flacid balloons. When asked his criteria for choosing subjects, Dvorak says that he “likes to find people that are flying their own spaceship.”

The prospects of finding such people among the rigidly conformist Amish would seem scant, yet somehow he has. Even communities as self-reliant as the Amish have not been immune to the nation’s economic downturn.

As prices and demand for their agricultural products diminish, more and more members must turn to outsiders for alternative revenue sources and opportunities, be that tourism, manufacture or selling their skilled trades to “the English.” This has brought them into greater contact with ways that have the



Mike Dvorak (photo: Tom Arndt)

potential to undermine the piety they tenaciously cling to.

After encountering the Amish in travels throughout Southern Minnesota and Northern Iowa, Dvorak became interested in documenting this group of Anabaptist Christians, and conceived what has grown into a two-year, ongoing project. While intrigued by the apparent simplicity of their lives, what he learned was more nuanced. He came to know men whose intersection with the world outside their community had led them down dark roads, and women who were strained by the patriarchal structure of Amish society. While such tensions are an undercurrent of what Dvorak depicts, what he foregrounds is a family merely providing for itself while facing shifting realities: religious, economic and personal.

To initiate his project, Dvorak approached a man who conducted tours of a particular settlement. He asked to be introduced to someone the guide thought might be receptive to the idea of meeting a photographer to discuss a project. He soon met Dennis and Levi of the Schwartzentruber Amish, and the three found a currency common between a broad spectrum of Midwestern men-fishing. The following week they were on the ice over an augered hole. While becoming better acquainted with his companions’ culture, images of the idyllic life that Dvorak expected



Dennis’ daughter

with “no television, no radio, no phone, no insurance payments, etc.” slowly receded.

The Schwartzentruber Amish are an austere sect, even by Amish standards. As is common to many Amish *ordnung* (the prescriptions by which each church lives), Schwartzentruber Amish circumscribe what technologies members can licitly employ, what dress is acceptable, and proper behaviors between men, women and children — often down to the minutest detail. Schwartzentruber Amish are distinct in that they may be even less tolerant of technology, and less inclined to consider other Amish churches to be truly Christian. However, the welcome afforded to Dvorak by the people of this particular family speaks to the fact that they are far more tolerant, even by Schwartzentruber standards.

“Everyone seems to believe that [the Amish] lead this simple life without the hassle of the outside world,” Dvorak states. To amend such misapprehensions he will ask, “When was the last time you had to hook up a horse and buggy to run an errand in town, wake up at 4:30 to milk your cow and do your chores before breakfast, have to run outside to use the outhouse when it’s minus 10 degrees, run a furniture shop without electricity, or cook a meal on a wood-burning stove for your family of eleven?”

Dvorak places many instances of these domestic routines against a backdrop of changing seasons that can be highly pronounced. In spring, when the wash can be hung outside without shattering, seeds are sown, calves need tending and horses are shod. Crappies are active when summer rains fall, though this makes a slurry of paths to

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chores. Fall means harvest, and stowing wood for another coming winter, because life literally depends upon this.

Among Dvorak’s more moving images is a view from a window overlooking a farmstead being lain-in by a heavy winter storm. It’s a sight that Midwesterners both urban and rural look upon with a stoic mix of resignation and dread, when the fields are fallow and the larder is filled. There’s little to do but pull the parkas, woolens and quilts from storage and hunker down.

Dvorak has captured a sense of the intimate, day-to-day texture of Amish life, seldom seen since fellow Minnesotan William Albert



Mary and daughter

Allard’s 1965 series “Amish Folk: Plainest of Pennsylvania’s Plain People.” Dvorak has merited remarkable trust, but realizes that the glimpses he has been afforded into such insular lives are cursory. There is, however, tangible evidence of lasting friendships made in that he might just have the most finely crafted garage in Minneapolis.

Raised in rural Montana, Dvorak, like his current subjects, “in a sense grew up pretty

isolated. My family maintained a half-acre garden, my mom canned, we hunted and fished for most of our meat, we picked berries and had our own well, and I loved it.”

And like the Amish, Dvorak was not unfamiliar with structures that demand a stern adherence to discipline and protocol. After a brief, aimless stint in state college, he joined the Air Force. He once had aspirations to be a war correspondent, but after witnessing war during Desert Storm he “realized that [he] didn’t need to see that side of humanity, anymore.” The military had been a means to pay for his intention to attend the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, where he enjoyed a far more libertine environment.

In a like way, Amish youths prior to their baptism are sanctioned to take part in a period of freedom from the church’s conventions called *rumspringa* (derived from the German word for running/jumping around). Dvorak’s time in art school must have seemed like the secular equivalent, but to earn a living in photography requires discipline, and Dvorak fully committed to a faith in the medium.

He apprenticed in several commercial studios, and interned with *National Geographic* photographer Jim Brandenburg. He took assignments for a local weekly and other publications. In time, he pursued more self-assigned work, and has found a receptive audience. Dvorak currently shares a darkroom with venerable Minnesota photographer Tom Arndt, whose work, like Robert Frank’s, has crossed the threshold from being marginalized as journalistic and is now esteemed as high art.

However artfully rendered Dvorak’s Amish series is, contemporary curators and collectors tend to view documentary photography as having little current merit, or of having passed into history. While experts are reluctant to consecrate the genre, Dvorak addresses the matter this way: “The difference as I understand it is that in fine art photography one has a vision and manipulates the outcome to fit that vision ... one places themselves in a situation and seemingly documents what is happening around them.

“Yet just by being there they are manipulating the outcome in looking for specific things that will help reveal what they are trying to say. I think a better question is, ‘Can documentary photography be fine art, and vice versa?’ The answer being, absolutely,

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Making sense out of light and form is hard enough, but adding the element of timing and predicting human nature is almost magic. Being hyper aware and feeling things before they happen; to do all this and to do it consistently is art.”

To have done such things as rigorously and persistently as Dvorak has should satisfy any sound definition of an art.

Photography has frequently shown us what is enduring as well as what is imperiled. Given America’s current struggles, would that it had invested even a modest amount in the country’s artistic capital, rather than limiting its vision to bolstering banks and fortifying Wall Street.

Fortunately, a few stalwart traditionalists believe that it remains a relevant endeavor to better acquaint us with the experiences of our

fellow citizens. Mike Dvorak is among this dwindling, committed group: still shooting film, still staining his fingers in Dektol, and still bringing the public accomplished, thoughtfully witnessed results.

Fact File

In addition to his work with the Amish, Dvorak has made equally compelling photographic explorations of Cuba, Mexico City, Cambodia and the world of jazz. Take a trip with him at: [www.dvorakphotography.com](http://www.dvorakphotography.com).



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