

Interview by Paul Kranzler

Andrew Phelps and his newest publication HIGLEY

In the studio of Andrew Phelps, Salzburg Austria. August 9, 2007

PK:

Hey Andrew, I came by yesterday to make some prints and found a brand new copy of HIGLEY, which is going to be launched two days from now in Fotohof in Salzburg. Thanks for taking the time to chat a bit about the book.

It is interesting for me to hold this project in my hands because I have seen the entire process of the making of this book. From your first trip to Higley, Arizona almost 3 years ago up to the editing process in the last months. I especially remember when you returned from that first trip with what was obviously a very personal set of images of a place from your childhood, a landscape you once called home. Now, after living in Europe for so many years, can you say how much of this project is about a farming community losing an ugly battle of globalization, and how much is really a story about you and your past?

AP:

Distance to a place, both geographically and especially time-wise, always creates a filter, usually one tinted with a bit of a nostalgic haze. I left the East Valley, as this part of Phoenix is collectively called, 16 years ago with no intention of ever turning back. The Higley that has played such a pivotal role in my work over the last 3 years is a place I would never have dreamed of photographing 10 years ago. My return to Higley was marked by the simple fact that my sisters both bought track homes on converted Higley farmland, land my grandparents came to settle, farm and call home in the 50's. In Higley I found a sort of metaphor for the phenomenon that seems to be happening everywhere. Globalization is the catch-phrase you use, but that always seemed too big for me to take on in a photographic project. I decided that Higley would become my little microcosm. I could conceal my interests in issues of "progress" and the "homogenization" of the American West in a little collection of family photographs. Obviously not everyone photographed is part of my family, but it is closeness to my family, and yes even a nostalgic tint, that made me want to do a work about the place I am from. Years ago, Bernard Plossu told me that I would someday get around to making a work about the place I was from, everyone eventually does, in one way or another.

PK:

A reoccurring theme is the representation of "family". Family snap-shots are abandoned in empty living rooms in single-family homes. Simultaneously there is an entire era of family history that is being taken out to provide space for a new wave of young, middle-class people looking for cheap land for the sole purpose of making a better life for their families. It's interesting that your second child was born during the making of this book; can you understand the longing for a house and home the way this new generation seems to be settling into Higley?

AP:

I think at first glance one wants to understand this book as a social documentary of a changing landscape; a farming community becomes a metropolitan suburb. It's the easiest take and its already being sold under that pretense. But I don't think it takes long to realize that it is actually about the shifting of the American Dream, family histories and the challenge of keeping families together when the actual geographic location where the family was originally rooted simply doesn't exist anymore. No, I don't have a longing to move into a new Higley home, but I understand that a lot of people do. By no means am I being judgmental.

PK:

There are so many projects out there that document the changing of the landscape, both a social and a physical landscape. Why do you keep it a sort of a secret that this is all about you.

AP:

I guess I want it to also be about someone else. I don't pretend to think that anyone really cares about my family, but I think that the issues here go beyond my family history. I'm just not a political artist and can't bring myself to address them in any other way besides telling my personal story. There are no titles under the images. I purposefully want it to read a bit universal, yet the viewer who digs deeper will realize that the girl by the pool is my sister and the man in the goofy Elmo hat is my father.

PK:

Do you ever find this whole thing sad?

AP:

The word "sad" is tricky because it tends to be too nostalgic. I am not interested in living in the past. I'm as disinterested in the Higley of 20 years ago as I am in the Higley 20 years from now. I'm interested in telling the story of the collision that has occurred in the last 5 years.

PK:

You say you are interested in “telling the story” but this is much too personal for a photo-journalistic project. It’s personal yet you embrace a photographic style that often creates a distance between you as the photographer and the places or people you are photographing. I know your book collection, so I know whose images you like to look at, but do any certain photographers directly influence you?

AP:

This body of work is definitely crying out to be called documentary, but that is just the style of photography I am interested in. I think I was and am still most influenced by two very contrasting circles. On one hand the New Topographics crowd. Geographically, in the American West, I was in a place to witness first-hand the vision that these photographers were getting at; Bill Jenkins was a professor of mine, and no-one could sell it better than he. I am in awe of, and have a complete faith in the simplistic photographic image, yet I struggle to keep interested in a project where I don’t feel something coming from the gut, some kind of magic. This is where the contrast arises; I’m fascinated in the language of pure documentary photography, yet I am interested in twisting it to tell my own story, maybe even a few lies. This I have from people like Tamarra Kaida, Nicholas Nixon...

PK:

You went back and forth to Higley several times. I think 5 trips in almost 3 years. When did you know it was finished? When did you know that you wouldn’t go back to photograph again?

AP:

I decided to let the end be defined by the ironic fact that Higley lost its name in May of 2007. It is now simply a part of Phoenix. This, plus the fact that Higley was not very big geographically and it only took about 3 years for what I was interested in witnessing to actually occur. Higley, in its transitional phase, is gone. I would have been content if this project had ended as a box of prints to leave for my daughters. The fact that it has become a book is just a blessing made possible by a handful of people to who cared and to whom I owe so much.

PK:

Tell me about the lame attempt at a family portrait in the back of the book?

AP:

I had this grand vision of ending with a classical family portrait of everyone in my family who is living in and around Higley. I gathered them together: grandma and nephews, my daughters and wife who were with me on that trip, sisters, aunts and uncles. I waited for the perfect light

and had the big camera set up. Everything was in place but somehow, as fate would have it, the self-timer released too early and all I have is a picture of myself running to join my family, who are barely visible behind the blur that is me trying to get into the picture. It's all about trying to keep the family together in a preconceived form, and of course it just doesn't work.