

# Cruel And Tender

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**Bringing together the work of 23 of the world's most famous photographers, living and dead, Cruel And Tender is the Tate's first major photographic exhibition, and so the most historically important show the gallery has staged in recent times.**

Tate director Nicholas Serota makes a grand claim that it marks an acceptance that photography is an art form and should be celebrated in public galleries as a key element of contemporary visual culture.

On a basic level this massive exhibition is a success. Subtitled *The Real In The Twentieth-Century Photograph*, it focuses on work that is documentary and objective in style and deliberately mundane in content. The title *Cruel And Tender* comes from a critic's description of American photographer Walker Evans' revealing yet distanced depiction of human subjects. The show does not derive its power from the aesthetic impact or historic stature of the images but from their cumulative emotional effect.

These often subtle images of day-today life communicate something of the sublime magnitude of the modern world and the presence of beauty in the everyday, tempered by reminders of human weakness, social inequality and the disfiguring ugliness of commercial culture.

From Evans' America with its cottonpickers we are transported to Weimar Germany by August Sander's portraits of ordinary people, to the dole offices of Eighties Britain captured by Paul Graham, and to the wastelands of modern-day Ukraine where controversial artist Boris Mikhailov takes his degrading images of local down-and-outs. Similarly Robert Adams' images of the desecration of the American landscape by urban sprawl find their contemporary equivalent in Thomas Struth's records of the spectacular growth of new cities in the ascendant Far East.

The arresting images of Andreas Gursky, the world's most expensive contemporary photographer, which depict the order and beauty to be found in the rhythms of our capitalist world, have their intellectual antecedence in the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher and their odd, life-long homage to industrial buildings.

Despite all this, the exhibition is a mark of the Tate's tendency to play safe. It maintains the hypocrisy with which the art world treats photography, accepting its importance while ignoring its radical nature.

More than 60 billion photographs are taken each year. Vast quantities are created for commercial purposes but still more are made in a warped fulfilment of old revolutionary dreams about the creation of a democratic art form, by, of and for the people. It is in this monstrous ocean of holiday snaps and mementos that the "real" in contemporary photography can be found. Truly to celebrate this popular art form, perhaps instead of promoting a handful of artistic geniuses, the Tate should institute an annual photographic equivalent of the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition, where the public could submit work. Then we could all wallow, together and equitably, in the pathos of the human condition. ■