



Don Kizsy and Leddie '93

AN ENDLESS JOURNEY HOME

SHELBY L

For over 30 years Shelby Lee Adams has returned to Eastern Kentucky to photograph the native mountain people of the region where he was also born. Most writers describe Adams's work as documentary. But his work stretches and redefines the idea of documentation. What do Adams's photographs document? People of Appalachia, yes, but much more than that. Adams's photographs document - and invite - relationship. They record vulnerability and intimacy; a naked trust and openness that make demands of the viewer not all have been willing to meet.

In 1976, at the opening of his first one-person show, a woman spat on Adams. "I didn't take it well," he says, "I was shocked." The woman, who had relatives in Eastern Kentucky, but who lived across the river from the University of Cincinnati where the exhibition was hanging, went on to berate Adams loudly and later wrote a letter of protest to a Cincinnati newspaper. The whole incident left Adams with many questions about his work, his intentions and ambitions, and in retrospect he says, "It was probably a good thing in that it turned me into a serious artist. After that I began to question everything," Adams recalls. "I asked myself, 'Do I have a right to do this? This is my culture, but do I have the right to make these pictures?' I looked at it from the woman's point of view and every other point of view I could think of." In the end, Adams says, "I thought, 'I need to do more of this work to explain myself: I realized, as I hadn't really before, that something very powerful was going on with these pictures.' Disequilibrium and resistance often build strength and balance, and this upsetting incident built them in Adams. He left Eastern Kentucky resolved to be a painter when he went off to the Cleveland Art Institute for undergraduate work where he encountered and embraced photography.

He had generous teachers who responded to some early photographs from Kentucky and encouraged him to keep exploring that vision. At that time, though, Adams never imagined that photographs made in Appalachia would become his life's work. In graduate school at the University of Iowa in the 1970s, Adams had done a master's thesis on Ralph Eugene Meatyard, who had recently died. That was a dry, critical, academic project, but Adams returned to Kentucky and spent hours taping interviews with Meatyard's widow for a multimedia thesis presentation. Even at an academic level, the pull of home proved central. But it wasn't just the Kentucky connection that drew him to Meatyard's work; he also felt an affinity of vision, the strangeness of the strange.

At the time of the opening in Cincinnati, Adams worked for a greeting card company in the area. The job paid well and included a car and a travel budget, so when he set out to make nature pictures, pictures of fog in valleys or flowers or running creeks, he headed back to the area around Hazard, Kentucky, where he was born. But still, the intimate connection between the mountain people and his life's work remained unclear to Adams. Like many young photographers, his ambitions ranged farther afield. In 1978, in the midst of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Adams thought he wanted to be a photojournalist. He went off to New York looking for press credentials. When the head of the Black Star Agency, looking at his photographs from Eastern Kentucky, asked him why he wanted to go to the Middle East to photograph, Adams felt dumbstruck. He hadn't put it in words before. Finally, he said, "I think it's important to photograph common people over there just like my people in Kentucky." The next day he had the credentials and was off to Israel and later Egypt. His Middle East photographs sold well enough and allowed him to stay and work there for

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JAMES RHEM



Natesha '03



six months. But Adams became disillusioned with the world of photojournalists. "For the most part, they were a jaded bunch who drank too much, and I thought there was something strange about riding out to a location in the desert in an air-conditioned Mercedes-Benz bus equipped with a bar." The politics also bothered him. When he speaks about his teachers in Cleveland, he emphasizes that they weren't political. They encouraged him to return to Kentucky, not to help the "war on poverty" - a phrase and a period regarded with some disgust in Appalachia - but because they saw a vision emerging in his work, a vision that needed exploring and expanding.

Robert Frank once said that a photograph is a portrait of the photographer at the moment he made the photograph. Frank's idea rings true for Adams's work. Because Adams's work focuses entirely on people and their stories, their appreciation of his work expands when viewed through the lattice of his own life story. Location, family, acceptance, and groundedness figure so importantly in his photographs because all of these were uncertain in his youth. In his second book, *Appalachian Legacy*, Adams recounts how his father disdained mountain folk as lower class and kept Adams from associating with them.

Later, in a consolidated high school, because he came from the rural part of the county, Adams found himself lumped with the mountain folk as part of the shunned class.

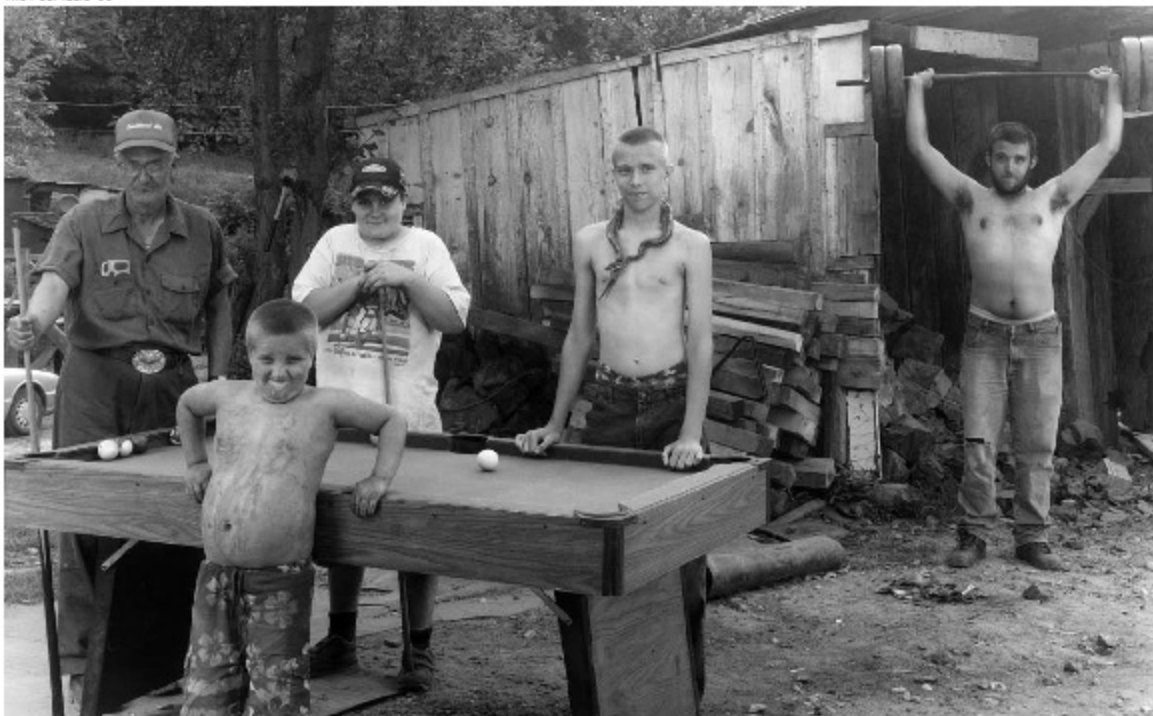
Other kinds of dislocation and disconnection drew Adams to mountain folk as well. His father's work caused the family to live half of each year in a different city and the remaining half in Kentucky. Moreover, tension at home between parents caused Adams to seek refuge with his grandmother and his aunts. The aunts and his grandmother, though not poor, were mountain folk, and they essentially raised him. His uncle, Dr. Lundy Adams, an old-fashioned family doctor who knew and made house calls to families all over the hollers, later took on a similar parental role. Through "Doc" Adams, he saw a web of connection and compassion that he would later emulate through his art. Thus, Appalachia, real Appalachia, felt like home to Adams, not only as a physical location, but also an emotional one. Gradually, he accepted the fact that things made sense there, and photographing there made sense, too.

A number of dichotomies have fueled Adams's creative history. If dislocation and connection form one, the tension between what seems strange and what seems not

simply sensible, but intimate and revealing, form another. During college Adams took a summer job as an attendant-on-call at the Northampton State Mental Institution in Massachusetts. "It was a way to leave the mountains and see new worlds," Adams recalls.

Those new worlds, though, turned out to be alternate realities, mental worlds only the patients knew from the inside out. Their strangeness made a kind of sense in a way that an air-conditioned bus equipped with a bar in a war zone did not. Adams's acceptance of the strange and acceptance by the strange has proven an exciting and problematic path in his artistic career. In 1976, photographer Wendy Ewald introduced him to the Childers family, and almost immediately he felt accepted and at home. Rather than consign their three mentally and physically handicapped children - Homer, James, and Selina - to an institution, the whole family pulled together to keep and care for them at home. After long talks with the family, Adams began to photograph them.

The work had two problems, both of which worked against Adams's larger ambitions. First, whether he liked it or not, viewers didn't bring his personal experience of the Childers children or of the mental



patients in Massachusetts to their experience of the photographs. Little in the images helped viewers blanket their shock with empathy. Second, on the face of it, the photographs seemed to support all the worst stereotypes about Appalachian inbreeding. But Adams's affection for the family and his belief that the images were important and should be seen got the better of him. "I was rather pigheaded in submitting that work," he says. "After about ten years, I realized that the Childers photographs, if anything, had probably held me back. But I'm still doing work with the family today, and eventually there will be a book on the Childers, and it will have nothing to do with Appalachia per se, but simply their human story." All of Adams's work stands defiantly in the face of stereotypes about Appalachia. All of it asks viewers to forget those stereotypes and to look into, not at, the photographs, to view them not only with a critical eye, but also with an eye open both to emotion and to imaginative relation.

Take the photograph of *Amanda with Dolls under the Gun Rack*, for example. For some viewers, the presence of a shotgun on the wall trumps everything else. It blinds them to the little girl who wanted to show off her "babies" and whose innocence lives happily in a world

where, from time to time, a raccoon that won't stay out of the attic is just asking to be shot. Adams poses all his work. He stages very little.

Take the image of the pool table, for example. At the end of a hot day, Lloyd Deane Noble and his grandsons pull the table out into the shade to play and relax. When Adams set up to make the picture he laughed, "This is like something out of Fellini." And things only got more bizarre when one of the boys went to get his pet snake to show, just as Amanda had gone to get her dolls. Another boy was already lifting weights. In Adams, as in Meatyrd, the strange appears comfortably at home in the ordinary.

Adams has worked now in 22 counties in Eastern Kentucky and his photographs cover a wide range. The old, young, rough, soft, sexy, virile and plain all appear in his expanding portrait of home. It has been suggested more than once that Adams's subjects don't know what they're doing in posing for him. Angela and Gourd Bird Houses puts the lie to that notion. While Adams knows most families well and has often photographed several generations as they have grown up, sometimes he encounters an interesting face he senses will make a telling photograph. He didn't know Angela,

but asked someone he did if they thought she would agree to pose. She agreed, and while Adams was setting up, she started talking. "I've studied your work. I like the pictures where people don't smile. I think they're more real. I've been thinking about how you make pictures." Adams continued with the setup. Angela's grandfather strolled about behind him. When the session was over, her grandfather said, "Now, this is it. This is really the way it is today, the old and the new. She's a beautiful young girl in modern dress, and look at those old gourds. You got both worlds in one picture."

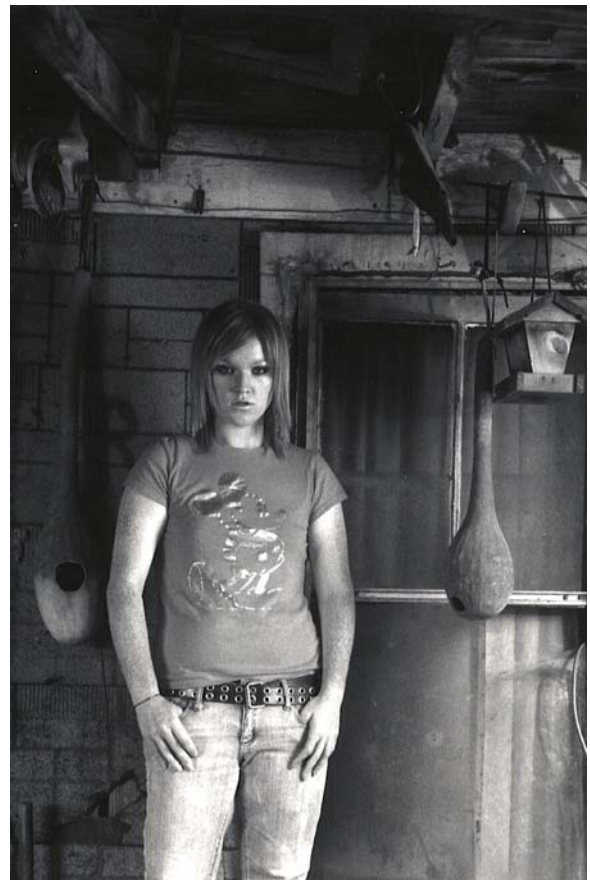
"My subjects are a lot more hip than most people think," Adams chuckles. In his photographs, they join him in a quest for revelation and acceptance, a deeply human quest most make at one time or another. No one here seeks pity. Nobody apologizes for how they look or how they live. It's the challenge of openness and honesty Adams takes on in his photographs, and it's that challenge they invite viewers to embrace.

James Rhen is the author of *Ralph Eugene Meatyrd: The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater & Other Figurative Photographs* (D.A.P. 2002) and the *Phaidon 55 Series* on Aaron Siskind.



Amanda with dolls - 2002

Photographs discussed
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