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Author, Rachel Ward, 20th Century Encyclopedia of Photography, (Fitzroy-Dearborn, 2002).

## **Encyclopedia of Twentieth Century Photography**

### **Bill Owens**

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Bill Owens' photographs consist largely of portraiture of middle class Americans living on the west coast during the late twentieth century. He spotlights anonymous individuals in casual, real life activities through the use of formally advanced, largely black and white, photographs. His work is a significant contribution to portrait, documentary, and lifestyle photography of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Owens was born in California and raised in a rural area in the northern region of the state. He was interested in photography at an early age, but had a sardonic reaction to formal training and as a result, he is largely self-taught. Following college, where he had explored his potential as a poet, he was married and left California with his wife to serve in the Peace Corps in Jamaica. Upon returning to California three years later, he studied photography briefly at San Francisco State University and acquired a position working as a photographer for a local newspaper, the Livermore Independent.

Owens' work with the newspaper satisfied his interest in reality as a subject matter. He worked as a documentary photographer and recorded a diverse amount of subjects and locations. He took note of the increase in suburban life, both in physical space and as a dominating ideology. Not only were natural, undeveloped spaces being taken over by planned building projects, but materialism and the pursuit of the American dream was dominating the lifestyle of the mainstream.

Owens' most accomplished work, now best known in its finished version as the photography book *Suburbia* (1972), began as a grant funded project on area citizens in his community. After receiving the grant in the late 1960's, Owens created a shooting script for a series of stereotypical events that characterized suburban life in his area. He utilized his neighborhood as a resource for events such as a Tupperware party, a parade, and casual recreation. He also documented a significant number of his neighbors posing with their most valued possessions, such as cars, motor homes, or furniture. The result was an anthrop/sociological collection of photographically exquisite images of individuals displaying sincere pride in their homes, families, possessions, and community rituals.

The photographs are formally advanced in that most appear finely focused and balanced in lighting. There is a consistent use of black and white film and a dominance of objective compositions. There are a great number of straight on shots that aim at individuals posed and smiling. Owens however, also occasionally includes odd angles and strange distances that add an evocative perspective on the seemingly ordinary suburban life. For example, a close-up on a pantry that overflows with preserved and canned foods, seems to be using the formal properties of the photograph to suggest the shocking confrontational view one obtains when opening a cabinet, which becomes intensified by gluttonous contents. Owens also employs use of color for certain images. His images of a kitchen and party are intensified by color, as is one of a child in a costume.

Walker Evans is an important predecessor to Owens. Like Evans, Owens captures the domestic and social life of America. Some of Owens' vacant images also compare to work by Evans. Another important predecessor to Owens is Robert Frank, whose increased use of the human subject in the western United States pairs more closely to Owens' portraits. In the genre of portrait photography, Owens had numerous contemporaries such as Garry Winogrand, Bruce Davidson, and Danny Lyons. This is particularly noted in Winogrand's images of middle class America in Texas. In general, Owens can be considered with Davidson, Lyons, and Winogrand as part of a movement of social realist photography.

Following the photographic documentation and completion of the grant-funded project, Owens had the opportunity to make the book *Suburbia*. When the printing of the book was in place, he returned to the subjects of the photographs for releases and to provide quotes. The photographs had been taken almost a year earlier and as a result, many of the quotes seem out of place. In general the comments indicate a naïve generation, content to live in the suburbs and seemingly unaware of the world on an international level. For example, one individual describes, "The best way to have fun ... is to come out on a Saturday morning and pull weeds in a median strip," implying that fun is a priority and that pleasure is derived by maintaining the local community. The black and Asian families are paired with comments that imply they feel as though the suburbs deprive them of a certain cultural interaction. Other comments indicative of the suburban mind frame include, "we're not doing too badly," and a couple who comments on the joy of being able to sit in front of their home and "watch the traffic go by." The inhabitants of the neighborhoods are secure in their claim of a space and of possessions, and Owens documents what they offer to him willfully.

Owens has explained that he admires a quote by an unnamed individual, which states, "The main thing in life is to live it your way."<sup>1</sup> Owens' photographs document the many ways in which people were living and spending their time and money during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. He documents people, places, and their possessions. He shows the relationship between way of life and income, represented by the diverse ways of spending i(i.e. boats, cars, motor homes, parties). Owens' also documented scenes of the times such as both domestic and liberated women in various manners implying the metamorphosis of feminism during the era. Images also show important events such as the space walk of Apollo 15. The shot of the "swimming pool that Hockney painted" implies a relationship between Owens' photographs and the fine art of the period, and the importance of status to an affluent community. Some of Owens' images have become more significant with time such as a television broadcast of Ronald Regan or a child playing with a toy gun.

It should be noted that Owens was working to document his environment in a realist manner. *Suburbia* is a largely objective collection of images created out of a sense of responsibility to the community. Owens even included his own family as one of the closing shots of the book. His family proved so important to him, that he left photography to create a prosperous brewing company.

Owens also created photographs for books *Our Kind of People*, about social groups and *Working: I do it for the Money*, about occupations. His book *Suburbia* was re-published in 1999. He now works with digital photography for fashion magazines such as *Flaunt* and is developing a new book of photographs about leisure.

Rachel Ward

## American

### Capsule Biography

Bill Owens was born in San Jose, California, September 25, 1938. He received a B.A. in Industrial Arts from California State University, Chico, California in 1963. Following college, Owens traveled extensively through Central America, Europe, and the Middle East. He served in the Peace Corps from 1964-66 in Jamaica, West Indies. He entered San Francisco State College in 1966 to study photography. Worked as a photographer for the Livermore Independent, California from 1968-78. In 1971, Owens obtained \$2000 grant from Alfred Heller, publisher of Cry California magazine to begin work on photographs of suburban life. A Guggenheim fellowship and two NEA grants followed. From 1972-1979, he published three collections of his photographs in the form of books. From 1978-1982, he worked as a freelance photographer. In 1982, Owens founded Buffalo Bill's Brewery in Hayward, California where he presently resides and publishes two magazines: American Brewer and Beer. His photographs are included in the collections of Museum of Modern Art, New York, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Los Angeles County Art Museum, Museum of Modern Art, Stockholm, and Harvard University, among many other private and public collectors. He is currently developing a photography project on leisure that was originally started during the 1970's.

### Individual Exhibitions

- 1994 American Fine Arts, New York, Photographs from Suburbia, Our Kind of People and Working, September 17-October 15
- 1995 City of Brisbane, California (City Offices), Bill Owens, Photographs of Brisbane, California  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Bill Owens Suburban Selections (1970-71)
- 1996 Robert Koch Gallery, San Francisco, Suburbia Vintage Prints December 5, 1996-January 25, 1997  
Blum and Poe Gallery, Los Angeles, Bill Owens, July 3-August 3
- 1998 Centre Photographique d'Ile-de-France, Bill Owens December 17, 1998-February 28, 1999  
Stephen Bugler Gallery, Toronto, Bill Owens March 28-April 25  
Galerie Gabrielle Maubrie, Paris, Bill Owens' Suburbia January 17-February 28.
- 1999 Greg Kucera Gallery, Seattle, Bill Owens April 1, 1999
- 2000 UCR /California Museum of Photography, Riverside, Ca , Suburbia; Photographs by Bill Owens, September 15 - November 25, 2000  
Art and Photographs, London England, "Images From Suburbia" May 5-June 30, 2000
- 2001 Jack Hanley Gallery, 1960s Photographs, November, 2001  
Galleria Civica Modena, Italy, Bill Owens September 29, 2001-October, 2001  
St Louis Art Museum, Photographs from the 1960s and 1970s from the permanent collection. July 10-September 30, 2001  
Paul Morris Gallery, Bill Owens Suburbia Color Photographs, January 27-March 10 , 2001

## Group Exhibitions

- 1965 Institute of Jamaica, Jamaica , West Indies -Bill Owens Village Life
- 1972 Focus Galley, San Francisco, Critic's Choice October 10-November 4, 1972
- 1973 Oakland Art Museum  
De Young Museum, San Francisco New Bay Area Photographers
- 1975 Mills College, Western Art Association, Oakland, Ca (travelled for 2 years)  
Mary Porter Sesnon Gallery UC Santa Cruz Guggenheim Fellow photographs Sept 20-Oct 20, 1976  
Newport School of Photography, Newport Beach, Ca, May 17-June 7, 1975
- 1976 Dalhousie University Art Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Bill Owens: Suburbia  
Philadelphia Museum of Art, You Ought to Be in Pictures: American Family Portraits, 1730-1976 March-December, 1976  
Infinite Eye Studio/Gallery, Milwaukee May 22-June 27 Suburbia  
Smithsonian Bicentennial Exhibition group show  
Renwick Gallery Washington D.C. Signs of Life: symbols in the American City Feb 26-Sept 26, 1976
- 1977 Neikrug Gallery, America Photographic Statements 12 photographers-Sept 6-Oct 8 Showa, Tokyo, Japan, Suburbia  
Open Air Gallery, Estonia, Russia, Suburbia  
Columbia Gallery of Photography, Columbia, Missouri: Suburbia Aug 29-Sept 14  
John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco Suburbia July-16-August 13  
La Photo Galeria, Madrid, Spain , Suburbia Sept 6-26  
City of Kingston Upon Hull Ferens Art Gallery 1977
- 1978 Museum of Modern Art , New York, Mirrors and windows: American Photography Since 1960, July 28-October 2 (toured to Cleveland Museum of Art Nov 13, 1978-Jan 1, 1979; Walker Art Museum, Minneapolis, Mn , Jan 29 March 11, 1979, J.B. Speed Art Museum Louisville, Ky April 1-May 15, 1979, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art May 29-July 29, 1979, University of Illinois/Krannert Art Museum, Champaign, Il Aug 19-Sept 23, 1979, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, Virginia Nov 12-Dec 23, Milwaukee Art Center Jjan 10-March 2. 1980, Musee d'Art de La Ville de Paris Nov 5, 1980 Jan 4, 1981, The Louisiana Museum, Humlebaek, Denmark Jan 16-Feb 27, 1981, Sonja Henie-Niels onstad Foundations, Hovikodden, Norway March 16 April 20, 1981, Fundacion Juan march Madrid, Spain May 22-July 1, 1981, City Art Center Edinburgh, Scotland, Aug 13-Sept 13, Douglas Hyde Gallery/Trinity College University of Dublin Sept 20-Oct 31, 1981, Mole Antonelliana, Turin, Italy, Nov 21, 1981-Jan 24, 1982)  
Amarillo Art Center Association, Approaches to Photography  
University of Oregon Museum of Art, Portland -Feb 19 Suburbia  
Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden, Tusen och En Bild/The Thousand and One Pictures  
M.H.De Young Memorial Museum San Francisco, The Work Show September 4 November 11  
Galerie Breiting, Berlin ,Germany, Bill Owens: Amerikanische Gruppen, Leben in Vorstadten Oct 3-28  
Western Carolina University Oct 1-29  
Clemson University Nov 6-27  
Il diaframma, Milan , Bill Owens/Jan Saudek March 21-April 8  
Libreria & Galleria Pan , Rome Bill Owens immagini da 'Suburbia' e 'Our Kind of People' April 13-May 3  
Genevieve and Donald Gilmore Art Center Kalamazoo Institute of Arts May  
The Halstead 831 Gallery, Birmingham, Michigan : Suburbia

- 1979 The Art Center/San Luis Obispo art Association Sept 16-Oct 14  
Oregon Gallery, Museum of Art, Eugene, Oregon: Working  
Hippolyte Gallery, Helsinki  
Drew University, Madison N.J Nov-Dec 1979  
Santa Barbara Museum of Art: Attitudes: Photography in the 1970's May 12 August 5,  
1979  
Amarillo Art Center Association, Approaches to Photography April 18-May 20, 1979;  
Walnut Creek Civic Arts Gallery, Diablo Valley in Focus Contemporary Photographs by  
Ted Orland and Bill Owens, April 12-June 10, 1979
- 1980 La Photo galeria, Madrid, Bill Owens traveled to:Cannon Photo Gallery,  
Amsterdam, Munich, Geneva and London, galerie Breting, Berlin, Contre Jour, Paris, Il  
D'Aframma, Milan, Colegio de Arcultectos, La Coruna, Spain, Cajas de Attornos,  
Navarra, Spain, Photogalbreit, Olso, Norway, Fotomania, Barcelona, Spain, John  
Hansard Gallery, the University , Southampton, England  
DeCordova Museum-Photography/recent Directions March 31-July 1980  
Temple University-Conference on Visual anthropology March 12-15  
Los Angeles Museum of Natural History April 1-May 31  
Colorado Photographic Arts Center Jan 11-  
Harbor College Art Gallery, Ca Oct 13-31  
1981 Biennale of Venezie,Italy, Home=Family?  
Cannon Photo Gallery, Amsterdam, Munich and London, Bill Owens  
Photographic Center of Athens , Athens Greece April 26-May 14  
G Ray Hawkins Gallery, Los Angeles California Suburbia
- 1982 University of New Mexico, Bill Owens-traveling exhibition (1982-3) Venues: The  
Photo Gallery, Portland School of Art, Popular Photography Photo Gallery, New  
York; Cotton Memorial Gallery, El Paso,Texas; University Galleries,Columbus Ohio.  
Rice University Media Center, Houston, Tx, Kline Commons Gallery Bard College,  
Annandale, N.Y., Photography Gallery, Bristol, Va.,Goodbody Auditorium Gallery,  
Portland, Maine, Bry Art Gallery, Monroe, La, Department of Art, Durango, Colorado  
International Center of Photography, New York, Photography in the 60's and 70's (South  
American Exhibition) Sept 15, 1982-April 30, 1983  
Cameravision, Los Angeles- Suburbia, 10th Anniversary Exhibition June 30 August 1  
Corporate Art Department Blue Cross of Northern California, California Documentary  
Photographs, Feb 22-April 2; Tokyo Institute of Polytechnics, Shadai Gallery, Tokyo,  
Japan, "Surburbia" October, 1982; Gallery kiek inb de KoK, Tallinn, Astonia- "Surburbia",  
fall and winter 1982, traveling to Haapsalu, Kohtla-Jarve, and Rakvere; Hanover, West  
Germany, Galerie Oktogon, August, 1982; Buenos Aires and La Plata, Argentina-  
"Surburbia" July, 1982; Album Gallery in San Paulo and Buenos Aires for Suburbia July,  
1982; Compendium Bookstore, Sydney, Australia - Surburbia- Basement Gallery, 1982
- 1983 Cameravision, Suburbia, The Art Museum Association San Francisco  
Best of Bill Owens (traveled 1983-85) Virginia Intermount college, Colorado State  
University, Ft Collins November 14-December 12. 1983, University of Minnesota,  
Minneapolis April 5-May 3, 1985, Rencontres internationales de la Photographie, Arles,  
France April 28-May 26, 1983; The White Gallery, Tel-Aviv, Israel-"Surburbia", January  
1983; The Lloyd Gallery, Spokane, Washington- Suburbia- 1983
- 1996 Florida State University Museum of Fine Arts, The Gun as Image, October 12  
November 18  
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Commonplace Mysteries, October 10, 1996-  
February 4, 1997  
Contemporary Art Center of Capitou, France, Symbols, Summer,1996
- 1998 Denver Art Museum, Merge Photo Gallery, A Fine and Private Place: Mortality,

- Monuments and Memory November 14, 1998-January 31, 1999  
 Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona Tuscon, Coming of Age. August 20-October 4, 1998  
 San Jose Museum, Photographic Highlights from the Permanent Collection, August 12-November 15, 1998  
 Lombard/Freid Gallery, Ground Control June 18-July 31  
 Galerie Gabrielle Maubrie, Paris, Rendez-Vous Manques March 7-April 30
- 1999 Robert Koch Gallery, Domestic Artifacts: Ken Botto, Dale Kistemaker, Bill Owens, December 4, 1999-January 31, 2000.  
 Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York Suburban Folk Tales: October 29 December 4, 1999.  
 Matthew Marks Gallery, New York, "Pure Products of America : Photographs 1968-1978 by Robert Adams, Bill Owens and Henry Wessel" May 22, 1999 July 16, 1999.  
 Robert Koch Gallery, San Francisco, "Insiders-Intimate Images" February 25 April 17, 1999
- 2000 Photographic Recourse Center, "Urban Sprawl" Boston, November, 2000  
 Centre d'Arc en Reve d'Architecture, Bordeaux, France, "Mutations" Fall 2000  
 Rebecca Camhi Gallery, Athens Greece , Bill Owens, Fall, 2000  
 Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Made in California: Art. Image and Identity, 1900-2000 October 22, 2000-February 25, 2001  
 Musee d'Art contemporain de Bordeaux, Bordeaux, France, Presumes Innocents June 8-October 1, 2000  
 UCR /California Museum of Photography, Riverside, Ca "Reirview Mirror: Automobile Images and American Identities" -August 13, 2000  
 Stephen Bulger gallery, Toronto, "Laundry" January 15-February 19, 2000  
 Gallerie gabrielle Maubrie , Paris Ni jeunes, ni vieux, mais bons (Neither young, nor old, but good)February 5, 2000
- 2001 Smithsonian Institution, 'Game Face-What Does a Woman Athlete Look Like?' July. 2000  
 L.A. Galerie Lothar Albrecht, Frankfort, Germany, 'Places and People' March 31-May 12, 2001  
 Oakland Museum of California, Capturing Light: Masterpieces of California Photography 1850-2000, March 3-May 27, 2001  
 San Jose Museum of Art, "The Suburban Seventies: Photographs by Bill Owens" (Retrospective) January 22 2000

### **Selected Works**

Suburbia. San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1972  
 Our Kind of People. San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1974  
 Working: I Do It For The Money; Simon and Schuster, 1976

### **Further Reading**

Owens, Bill, *Suburbia*, Fotofolio, New York, 1999  
 Smith, Roberta, 'Suburban Folk Tales', *New York Times*, November 12, 1999  
 Boxer, Sarah, 'Shades of Suburban Blues', *New York Times*, July 2, 1999  
*The Photo Book*, Phaidon Press, London, 1997  
 Documentary Photography, a personal view by Bill Owens: Addison House Publishers, Danbury, New Hampshire, 1978  
 "Photography/Bill Owens" *The New Yorker*, November 22, 1999  
 "In Living-Room Color" Sam Whiting, *San Francisco Chronicle* October 6, 1996

Newsweek, June 18, 1973 Dreaming in America

New Times, May 9, 1973. Suburbia by Danial Foote

Mutations: Sanford Kwinter, Rem Koolhaas and Stefano Boeri (Exhibition catalogue) Actar, Spain 2000

The Book of 101 Books: Seminal Photographic Books of the Twentieth Century. Roth Horowitz (2001)

The Photo Book, Phaidon Press, London, 1997

Sociology, Exploring the Architecture of Everyday Life (Second Edition), David M. Newman, Pine Forge Press, Thousand Oaks, California 1997

Mirrors and Windows: American Photography Since 1960; John Szarkowski, New York 1978

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<sup>1</sup> This is the comment provided to the author in a conversation with the photographer. Owens says the quote may be from someone named Christopher Morley.