



## Stacy Kranitz on the flaws of documentary photography

Words by Ayla Angelos, Wednesday 23 October 2019

Photography: Stacy Kranitz

Stacy Kranitz, a photographer born in Kentucky and currently based in east Tennessee, has spent the past ten years photographing Appalachia – a highly mountainous region stretching across a vast segment of the United States. Having grown up in the South, she admits how she wasn't at first familiar with Appalachia "as a concept", nor would she consider herself Appalachian. "I really didn't intend to go to Appalachia, I just happened to go to the region to work on a project that was about violence and catharsis," she tells *It's Nice That*. Originally intending to produce a body of work on the topic of epilepsy, she was taken aback by the region and thus began her ten-year venture, a series titled *As it was Give(n) to Me*. "I had this experience in 2009 where I became very disenfranchised with the documentary tradition," she says. "I began to question the honesty of it."

Appalachia, in particular, has a longstanding history with photography, "specifically photojournalists coming into the region believing that they were doing good by trying to illuminate poverty," says Stacy. "But they had caused a lot of harm for the people in the region many years later, for decades." Back then, she explains, photography and the arts in general were even more elitist than they are today – camera equipment was relatively more expensive and, before the internet,

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there were only a handful of gatekeepers who controlled much of what the public would see in limited exhibition spaces and galleries. Stacy describes this as a “legacy”, which she believes can be traced back to the “weird relationship” between colonialism and photography, “where outsiders would come in and document the culture of a place and assert a right and a wrong into the imagery.” It’s an unsettling prospect; one that was prevalent across the globe, and which continues to linger in the background in Appalachia.







Stretching from the south of New York to northern Alabama and Georgia, Appalachia has been marked as a distinctive region since the late 19th Century and has suffered ongoing stereotypes and myths throughout the years. The early 20th Century brought logging and coal-mining firms, jobs and various modern technologies to the region. However, as the demand for lumber dramatically increased, the firms took to the virgin forests and devastated the natural land. Therefore, the government took to controlling timber harvesting in order to preserve the forests, in turn precipitating a dramatic loss of jobs in the 1950s that left most of central and southern Appalachia in poverty. In the 1960s, a War on Poverty was declared.

Stacy refers to the history of Appalachia as a “great divide”, and one that’s been “devastated and abused by a capitalist extraction industry”. When the industry made its appearance, it “stole all the land” from the original inhabitants. “They wrought havoc on the ability of the people who lived there to survive,” she says. “They ruined the physical landscape, blew up the mountains and poisoned the waters – then they left when there were no more resources left.”



This impact on the landscape and its people was just one motivation for Stacy’s project; the other is her growing frustration with the misrepresentation of Appalachia found among the work of documentary photographers who came to the region. These photographers came with a plan to create imagery that would alleviate the county’s image and thus improve the lives of those in peril, but the outcome was superficial and has since hung over the area like a fog. “So when I ended up here, kind of by accident, it became clear that this was the place where I could not only make a body of work, but also talk about how I didn’t any longer want to make work that didn’t address the flaws of the documentary tradition.” A tricky task indeed, and one that caused much self-doubt over the course of a decade.







Upon commencing *As it was Give(n) to Me*, Stacy took to the region to fully immerse herself in her surroundings. She lived out of her car – “I couldn’t go and hide in a motel or something” – and would take advantage of the warm summer days, find internet refuge in a McDonald’s, surviving off little money at the time. “But even when you’re in McDonald’s you meet people,” she says. This was all part of her plan to force herself, even uncomfortably, to build long-term relationships with her subjects.

Throughout the series, these long-term relationships become noticeable through the candid nature of her subjects. We see scenes of an elderly shopkeeper standing in front of her tinned goods, a coal miner, a couple embracing on the sofa with cigarettes in hand, and a man posing in front of his property with beer can remnants littered on the floor. Each portrait is varied but each has one thing in common – that is, a level of intimacy achieved through Stacy’s immersive photography process.

“I couldn’t really foresee it,” she says. “Every one of the relationships that I’ve built has been really different and they’ve all had different hurdles. One of the reasons why it’s so important to have these long-term relationships is that they keep me honest, and I have to constantly share the work with the people I’ve met.” Stacy would have face-to-face meetings with her subjects to observe their reactions to the way they were represented – and usually, she was pleasantly surprised at their responses. “I found it really helpful towards making the work deeper and better.”

In an effort to enhance her understanding of the region, Stacy turned to Appalachian literature. As a diligent researcher, she was often nose-deep in the archives. “By doing so, I would gain this new understanding that I would feed back into the work,” she explains. During her studies, she came across a newspaper column, titled *Speak Your Piece*, that published the thoughts of its local people once a week in the more rural lands of Whitesburg, Kentucky. “It’s this incredible record of the voice of the people, but it’s anonymous.” Within an instant she became fascinated, and soon enough these texts became a catalyst for making more deeply felt work.



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 Hey, black lung committee. Jerry breathed more dust in one week than a certain other man did in 22 years, but the other man draws black lung. Jerry worked 15 years more than the other man but Jerry doesn't draw it. What is wrong here? I think our government has screwed Jerry.



“Why do people leave their Christmas decorations out all year? I think it looks so gross. Please take it down,” writes one townspeople. “I think our government screwed Jerry,” writes another. Filled with heartache, loneliness, love, political opinion and the issues that directly affect the inhabitants of the area, these texts are inescapably honest. “The first day I started shooting in Appalachia, that’s when I started to pull from the *Speak Your Piece* archive,” says Stacy, combining these texts with intimate photography, collected images, drawings and pressed flowers.

“The pressed flowers forced their way into the project without me being able to stop them,” she says. Symbolic of the anxiety she felt about intruding into peoples’ lives and trying to tell someone else’s story, there were times that she felt “paralysed” and unable to shoot, all without the added luxury of being able to break away to a motel room or “binge-watch TV”. Instead, she started pressing flowers on the side of the road to calm herself down. “I made this book that was like a cure for depression,” she says. “So now, I continue to press flowers and I often do it when I’m feeling stuck. It keeps me engaged in the landscape.”





All of these elements amount to an impactful and highly personal project. Art is subjective, and photography is a medium that's unavoidably linked with emotion and a critical eye on the subject at hand. "I believe we're in this post-documentary era, where you can't really make documentary work without commenting on the problems of the documentary tradition," says Stacy. "And so the flowers, the *Speak Your Piece* texts, and also the series of self-portraits are my attempt to say that you can easily get swept up in these images and start to think that they're helping you understand this place, and in some ways, they are. But please do not forget that you are seeing this completely filtered through my fantasy of it."

*As it was Give(n) to Me* is currently on show at [Tracey Morgan Gallery](http://TraceyMorganGallery.com), Asheville, from October 25-December 7.

[www.stacykranitz.com](http://www.stacykranitz.com)

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