PHOTOREVIEW

The Fat Baby: Stories by Eugene Richards

Mary Shaw

This book contains a collection of social documentary photographs taken over a number of years by the photojournalist Eugene Richards. Most of the topics are overwhelmingly grim, covering the lives and conditions of Honduran coffee growers, doctors working in a Bosnian hospital, a mental hospital in Mexico, and the birth of a first child.

All of them are hard-hitting, gritty, and uncompromising portrayals of the lives of particular people in particular places, their conditions and challenges. The photographs are accompanied by Richards’ text—equally compelling as the images. This excerpt comes from ‘A little war’, about a Kansas city street gang:

All I knew about the short, skinny kid with the hint of a mustache was that, unlike other members of the gang, he was sure I wasn’t a cop. As everyone out the back of the house looked on, the kid took a hit from a dank stick, an oversize joint soaked in a mixture of PCP and formaldehyde. His eyes rolled back, he started shaking. Just when I thought he might fall, he snatched the swollen, smelly thing from his mouth and pushed it into mine. As a dare, I suppose, a kind of test.

Whenever Lori and Sarah had the money, they’d shut themselves up in the bedroom on the second floor and smoke pot. Huffing on a large glass pipe, inhaling in a frightening rush, they’d feel less angry, they’d tell me, a little less depressed, for a few minutes, anyway.

The title story, ‘The fat baby’, refers not to an overfed bonny baby in the obese-ridden West as we might expect, but instead to the setting of arid, desolate and poverty-stricken Niger, where Richards had visited to report on village health conditions; he writes:

The United Nations magazine I’m working for has asked me to ask a person living here, in what has to be one of the most impoverished places on earth, what it means to him or her to be poor. But I’m not sure whether it’s appropriate to do this.

And as if she’s reading my mind, Leslie can’t recall the Hausa word for poverty, nor find it in her Hausa dictionary.
There are Hausa expressions for possessing things, for having food and clothing, but apparently few ways to express being without.

Richards describes the harsh and harrowing conditions of village life, and the death of a young child, Bilia, probably because of AIDS (see photograph). He also lays bare his own reflections and responses:

From the day we arrived in Safo, Leslie did her job as a reporter while also helping people: lancing pustular sores, cleaning cuts and burns, handing out precious aspirin to villagers who were running fevers. Now it isn’t appropriate to take any more pictures. I stand in the very back of the crowd. It grows quiet. Suddenly Rahamou motions for me to step forward with my camera. Recalling that the photographs I took earlier in the week were of her and the emaciated, dying Bilia, she asks if I will please make a different picture of her, one that speaks of the future of her village, of a happier time. ‘One with a fat baby’, she says.

Rahamou carefully adjusts her head cloth and her dress and lifts what has to be the plumpest infant in the compound onto her lap. The baby squirms and gurgles. The old woman looks straight at me. I take the picture.

Here the fat baby is a symbol of hope, the act of photography making the child a talisman for the future.

Reference