

**Phil Bergerson**  
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I have been crisscrossing the United States for over twenty years now, traveling through hundreds of its smallest towns and largest cities, photographically investigating the American social landscape.

I usually go out on the road shooting for 2 or 3 weeks at a time, [and] I drive in endless circles all day long, the driving being broken up by hours of walking up and down countless numbers of streets ...looking ...and searching.

I'm looking beneath the surface of things to find some personal expression of someone's life experience in America: a shard they have left behind, either knowingly or not.

My photographs have no people in them, but they are all about people! They are about the people who have made or altered or collected those things I photograph. They speak about the human condition.

Because I'm often driving somewhat erratically through towns, I'm often pulled over by the police....I just say, " Um, ah, I'm a Canadian!" and for some reason that seems to calm them, and they let me go....

When I finally find something exceptional to shoot — especially when it's been two days or so since my last discovery — euphoria takes over and I want to share my experience with those people immediately around me.

Some of those around me will engage with interesting conversation about seeing for the first time what they had walked by for years.

But others seem to be scared off because all they see is a crazy man with a strange glow in his eyes and a large black cloth covering who knows what.

During my travels, I interact with a lot of "street people" ....people who live or work on the street. Those who live there seem warmed by our conversation, seemingly because it was simply a real human interaction they longed for.....a conversation about something other than themselves. And those who work there ... well, after they try to sell me drugs, or a companion .... or a gun ... seem relieved to take a break from all that, and seem happy enough to help me hold the large black cloth I use to cut out window reflections.

I learned much from these encounters about the human condition.

I have called my latest book “American Artifacts” because I wanted to reference the idea of an archaeological dig.

Of course I know I’m not an archaeologist and am lacking their skill set and training....but I take on the persona of one while working...I find it gives me a certain intellectual edge which helps me with the process of looking....helping me push forward the act of *looking*towards the more important act of *seeing*.

While working, I visualize what I am doing as sifting through the remains of some exotic, extinct civilization .... sifting through the remains of the United States of America, photographically picking up shards from its streets.

Like the archaeologist with her pottery shards, I try to piece together my shards, placing one against the other, trying to make sense of them, the one in relation to the other.

The most important process in my methodology is the act of sequencing, constructing fragments into meaningful relationships through extended sequences.

After selecting representatives of the various themes, I weave them into the fabric of the overall sequence, producing a complex representation of this vibrant, troubled society.

My interest in sequencing is why I asked the master of sequencing Nathan Lyons to contribute an essay on the topic to my latest book.

I was about 8 years into this project before specific themes began to emerge. In broad strokes they were:

LOSS, HOPE, FEAR and DESIRE ...those involved in the pursuit of the American Dream bounce back and forth between these emotional and psychological states.

Larger, more generalized themes intertwine within the fabric of the various sequences occurring throughout my exhibition and book.

They are:

Traditional family values, relationships between men and women, religious and community standards, patriotism, consumerism, censorship, a simmering violence; and a nostalgia for a simpler past.

The words of the historian Joseph J. Ellis still ring true today about the America I have found. He stated that the founding of America was rooted in the coexistence of “grace and sin, grandeur and failure, brilliance and blindness.”

Over the past 20 years, my photographic archive has grown and developed into a significant portrait of America, created by an empathetic Canadian neighbour.

Recently I have begun to realize more fully that I am now using the subject of America as a vehicle through which to explore and express more about the human condition in general.

The best of my photographs present several layers of meaning – starting with a directly readable message projected by some unknown author. This is often followed by an ironic twist that leads to a revised secondary reading.

Although one can often read within the photographs themselves, something about what provoked the expression of a particular conflict or stress, I have always thought that it is the deeper issues of human experience that led my message makers to these expressions.

My book, also includes the writing of Margaret Atwood.

Atwood's ideas about how debt, (of various kinds), has affected the lives of people throughout the centuries, put words to what I had been feeling about the reasons behind the personal expressions of struggle and conflict I have found in the streets of America. This is why I asked her to collaborate with me on this project.

In his essay in *American Artifacts*, Nathan Lyons has tried to reconnect us with the basic importance of visual thinking. The implication is that we have lost or at least are losing that ability. In the days of rapid-fire tweeting, the act of contemplating a picture for a considerable time seems distant, a foreign idea, and the act of doing it without the intrusion of verbal articulation and explanation is almost unheard of.

I understand that in order to share our experiences with each other we need to put words to our experiences. But first we need to give ourselves the "visual thinking" time necessary to create an internal experience worth sharing.

I hope you will have enough time to approach my work in this way.

*Phil Bergerson*