



The Interview

DCE: I have really enjoyed looking at your photographs and the way you've photographed the Great Plains. How did your project start?

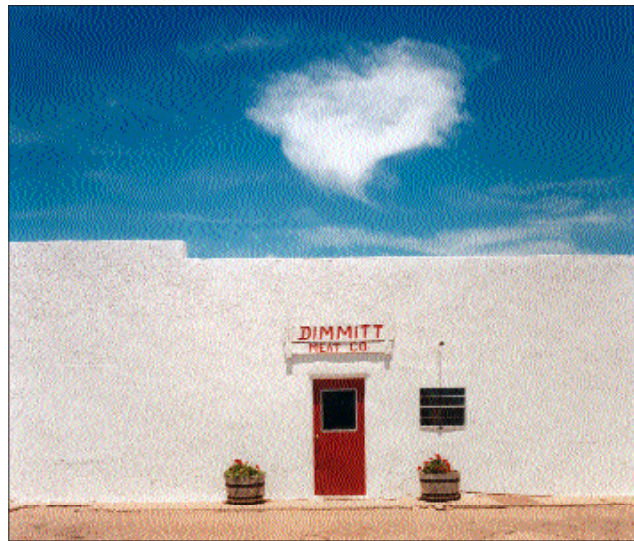
PB: In a way my interest began on the east coast when I was a kid. My family had a summer place in the mountains of western Massachusetts with a view that went on forever – mountain range after mountain range. And it looked to the West – open and never ending, with a strongly Western feel to it, and I just got used to that sort of space. As a kid, growing up in the 50s with popular culture revolving around pioneers, I always dreamed of moving west. And we finally did move to California when I was twelve. We took cross country trips every summer, back and forth from California to Massachusetts – and my parents were explorers, and drove a different way each time.

For an odd set of reasons, the Plains and those little towns appealed to me. At the time, I was just a city kid with rural dreams and an interest in frontier life and the Plains seemed vast and exotic – everything that I wanted. Then later, in high school, influenced by Kerouac and others, I hit the road with friends, hitch-hiking and driving all over. I worked a couple of summers on a cattle ranch in Wyoming in the early 70s and that kind of nailed it.

DCE: That kicked off your interest, when did you begin the photography?

PB: I did some of this work in the early 70s, but the bulk of it started after I came to Texas in 1978. Before that time my work had been heavily influenced by painters, and was mainly of interior spaces, initially in black and white and then in color, and right on the edge of abstraction. By the time I got down to Texas I had begun to rethink my interest in photography, and knew that I wanted a greater connection to the real world, and a break to the outside. So I started taking these trips from Texas to California, shooting in color with a couple of

Hasselblads. The format of these finally seemed constricting, though. I needed a wider scope – and I needed a defined territory. It seemed to me that the southwest had been photographed ad infinitum by a great many able photographers – and for that reason and because I had little true connection to it, the region didn't sustain my interest. Instead, I found myself moving northward, with the idea of a series of photographs that combined both open space and those little towns.



Dimmitt Meat Company, Dimmitt, Texas, 1992

In 1985, I made the leap to 4x 5 and began to explore the High Plains of Texas. I became fascinated with that part of the world. The interest had to do with the space and light, as well as the land. It was space unlike anything I'd experienced and color shifts that ranged from subtle and clear to bleached out and glaring. Combining these with elemental forces – all the storms and Biblical plagues of one sort or another that are visited on the land, and the mix – even apart from the architecture of the towns and ranches – was powerful and moving to me.

Back in the mid-80s when I began to work on this part of the country, I got paired up at Rice

University with a living legend named John Brinckerhoff Jackson. He was a cultural geographer and the first academic to look carefully and write about the vernacular landscape – the commonplace landscape of America. He published a number of important books – *The Necessity for Ruins*, and *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* are a couple. He was a great, crusty and brilliant man who taught me an enormous amount. He had a home south of Santa Fe and I drove out there a number of times. We'd take off to eastern New Mexico and then out through North Texas, traveling through those towns. Jackson had thought about and studied this country for decades. We'd roll into a town, and he'd just start talking off the top of his head about why the railroad station was over there, why the lots on that side of the street had never sold, why churches were clustered in a certain part of the town and the like. It was more than fascinating. I'd been looking at and photographing this country for quite some time, and here was a framework to put it all in.

DCE: So when you went out to photograph the Plains, the culture and the history of the area had an impact on you, and on what you wanted to take pictures of...

PB: Sure. What I wanted in the book was a description of the Plains as they are. Because its history is so slight and so much of its building was done with wood or sod and has just fallen away over the years – the visual record of a lot of it simply isn't that evident. So I've photographed more what's there in a contemporary way. But I've done quite a bit of reading on the subject and am fairly well versed in Plains history and literature. What's happened in the past, what remains from that, and what's being done right now – that mix continues to be fascinating to me.

DCE: When did you know that you were really on to something?

PB: I had the idea for the structure of the book back when I first moved to Texas; I just wasn't sure where it was going to take place. It became clearer to me after I hit the road with Jackson. It's basically very simple: On The Plains begins in open country, moves on to a town that's barely hanging on, back to the road, then on to a larger town and out into open space at the end. A full circle in a way. And with photographs dropped in from all over, a shot from Nebraska might follow one from Kansas and might lead to something from South Dakota, which says something about the homogeneity of the landscape. The road is the access to all this – and historically it's been true as well – from the gridding of the land into section lines by Jefferson in the 18th century, to the roads that followed the grid, to the railroads that produced so many of the town. . . . It was a natural idea that was easily approachable in book form and took in everything that I felt to be of consequence. That was back in 1985 and at the time I suddenly realized that this was a huge and somewhat overwhelming idea - how was I going to reduce the Plains to 90 – or so photographs? That was when it really started.

DCE: When I look at your photographs I get the feeling of the sun, and I think that stems from two things: one, you didn't limit yourself to shooting 30 minutes after sunrise and 30 minutes before sunset. You captured the fact that when you walk outdoors you have to squint a little bit – the colors for a great part of the day are somewhat pale, and you only get that when you're shooting in the middle of the day.

PB: I avoided that romantic, nostalgic quality that you get in the early morning and late afternoon light. There's some of that in the book, but not a lot. There's enough nostalgia it seems to me in ruined buildings and lives that are memorialized just by the scant evidence of their having been lived. I wanted the look and the feel of being there – that aspect that you spoke of – kind of squinting into the light – and the feel of the heat, the dryness, not necessarily a pretty picture – though there are a number of those as well, because much of the Plains is simply beautiful.

DCE: I think your film choice helped in that.

PB: I wish that film were still around – Vericolor III. It doesn't limit the palette and it shows pretty much what there is. I thought it approached real color better than any other film.

DCE: What film are you using now?

PB: I use Portra 160 NC, which is pretty close. It's a little more saturated. It's a nice film, but I haven't had reports back on its longevity. That was one of the great things about VPS III. Of all the color negative films, it was the one you could rely on for more than a couple of decades before it would begin to shift.



Plowed field, west of Levelland, Texas, 1992

DCE: In your later trips when you were by yourself, did you map out where you wanted to go beforehand, or did you just point the car and go wherever it went?

PB: Both. There were certain things that I needed to photograph – like a map of a town, say. Buffalo Gap, South Dakota starts the book and shows the names of the people in the area, and the grid. And I needed various other things – churches, movie theaters, particular kinds of roads – particular forms of weather, different times of year. . . . Generally, I would head out for a certain region, try to put on blinders and just drive, but it was always difficult. I'd keep getting confronted by interesting photographs.

But there was some method to all of this – an attempt to deal with diverse geography and subject matter. But for me the greater pleasure has always been a sense of discovery – that adventure. You never know exactly what you're going to find, and finding something worth photographing is one of the things I like to do best.

A view camera, particularly an old wooden Deardorff, is a draw in any little town. People want to know what you're doing, but usually not in the suspicious way they might if they caught you working with a smaller camera. The view camera is so big and bulky that it somehow proclaims its own innocence – and many conversations get started simply through the strangeness of the camera. Someone from

the historical society might wander up and talk about an octagonal barn or where Charlie Goodnight was buried, and I'll try and find what they're talking about. And if I do, fine, and if not, there usually is something else.

DCE: When you started out, you were photographing the landscape and then people, kids particularly, began to make their way into your pictures. You have a lot of children in your photographs – the boy with the dog or the kid carrying a gun at the grain elevator. Did a method evolve in which you started to use just a few people, which is really kind of the way it is out there, you don't see many people.

PB: I know. I did quite a few environmental portraits of people near their homes, and shop owners and ranchers in pickups – that kind of thing, and the editors and I finally decided not to put many of them in for two reasons: first, because, as you say, there are not a lot of people out there, and I wanted the book to mirror what was real. But second, I think having a close-up of a human face, a portrait that relates a strong

human presence, changes the perceptions of a person looking at a photographic sequence. Another set of issues begins to come up that may be interesting in their own right, but are not necessarily the issues that I wanted to address in the book. The book has primarily to do with landscape and a sense of place on the Plains. I'm more interested here in what people have done in general ways. General things can be made specific in a photograph: what people have built, what they've left behind, what they've done to the land – more than the way that specific individuals look. And I didn't want "generic" people. When it comes to human beings, I'm particularly interested in details – a face, an expression, an old coat and a beat-up old dog starts my mind spinning in novelistic ways – and I'm off on a tangent. I think others may do the same thing.

DCE: Tell me a little about the individual photographs.

PB: The plowed cotton field in Levelland. That's the way it is. I'm sure you've been out there. Just an absolutely surreal landscape: cotton monocultural, not great for the land, but beautiful in the oddest way. This is taken looking south, but look north and you see the same thing. There was great color and light – and it's the strangest feeling being there. The road, just a line with a string of telephone poles marching into the distance is the only thing that grounds you. The furrows reminded me of baling hay in Wyoming – round and round and

round – never ending work. There's an Atget that I discovered after I took the photograph that could be its French turn-of-the-century twin.

DCE: Brownfield - The Rialto Theater, the little boy and his dog.

PB: A couple of things on that - I love that painted facade. So many of these little towns have them. The movie house is a mess inside, no more films in the Rialto, but some of the bigger towns are refurbishing their theaters, bringing them back in symbolic ways that kind of parallel the impulses that create the town murals. And murals that show what once was, are a constant. In Shamrock, the entire center square is painted to look the way it did back in the 20s. But back to the photograph – my nephew had just gotten a new dog for his birthday and I was thinking about him that morning. This kid came walking down the street with a big chow dog on a rope, and I asked him if he'd like to be in the photograph and he said sure.

DCE: I like the grain elevators and the boy with the rifle. The scale of that is the way they build those things.

PB: I was struck by the color and the graphic arrangement. It looked like something out of Sheeler or early Weston but it was filled with washed out American color. I was using a 4x5, and had pulled the dark slide back – and sometimes something will happen when you least expect it. That kid just wandered out of the grain elevator with his gun, and he just happened to be wearing a red cap and a blue shirt. So I was lucky.

DCE: That seems symbolic of the Plains, because you really have to look to see the kid. You have to look to appreciate things – especially when you're going by on an Interstate, like we usually do. It's just from Point A to Point B. What you seem to be talking about is slowing down and taking off down the back roads – where you can see some great stuff.

PB: That was one of my reasons for doing this book. The Plains are so overlooked and under appreciated. The general feeling is that there is nothing out there; that it's a part of the country to be traveled through as quickly as possible. So either you see it from the Interstate going ninety, or from the air, where it looks like a nice Amish quilt.

But if you take the time to get off on some of the smaller roads and poke around, you'll see a fascinating part of the world. And if you get out of your car and do some walking – and feel the air, hear the birds

and get a sense of the slower time involved in such a vast space – you can actually be changed. The skies are incredible and the sweep of the land is like nowhere else. And as you say, it's the little things – wildflowers, grasses, the discovery of an old dugout, animal tracks, rabbit, deer – or just some wheat field smack dab in the middle of Marsland, Nebraska with the sun hitting the grain just right and a thunderstorm brewing in the background. There is exceptional beauty. Sometimes it knocks you out, but more often it's subtle and elusive.

DCE: Remember the Cake Palace in Tahoka?

PB: I considered naming the book, "The Cake Palace" because that phrase sums up so much of what the settling of the Plains seems to be about. So many have come from the outside with dreams, and have quickly been set back a step or two. But those who stay pop back up with a tenacity that I admire. I felt the same way actually in this work. I had no idea what I was getting into when I took on this project – the enormity of it. You wander into the Plains, and end up being swallowed whole, but as you find yourself going down, a kind of jocular peace, an understanding of the odds begins to emerge. You know that you don't have a chance really, but you'll hang in for as long as you can, which is what the Cake Palace represents for me. Right there in the middle of Tahoka, not remotely a palace, and the owners are obviously aware of this, but it's a beautiful building, painted and tended with care. I like the geranium barrel out in front and the design of the sign and the largeness of the vision and that vision's relationship to reality – I love that one.

DCE: I do too – and of course the half barrel of flowers that can be seen again at the Dimmitt Meat Company.

PB: At that point you know some salesman came through that part of west Texas selling whiskey barrels. But these things change. I revisited the Dimmitt Meat Company in the late nineties, and the barrels were beginning to fall apart, and the sign had begun to fade. The cloud makes

that photograph for me. I saw it before I found the Meat Company. I careened around Dimmitt, looking for a place to put it – and it came to rest above that little building.

DCE: Downtown Marfa – from the top of courthouse. Looking south...

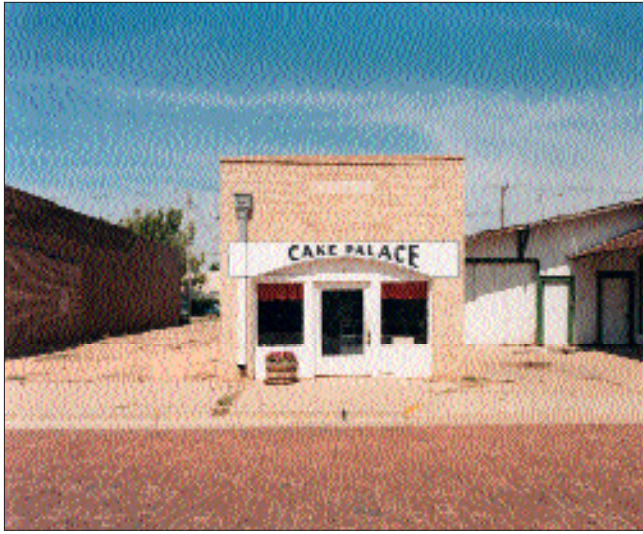
PB: That's taken from one of the most beautiful rooms I've ever been in. It's the cupola of the courthouse, and it looks north to the Davis Mountains and south to Big Bend, and is just filled with light – tall windows on all sides. I like the photograph because it shows the oddness of the placement of the town, dropped down by the railroad, with the street ending in scrub prairie, as it so often does in these small towns.



Rialto Theatre, Brownfield, Texas, 1994



Grain Elevators, Hartley, Texas, 1985



Cake Palace, Tahoka, Texas, 1994



Main street from Courthouse, Marfa, Texas, 1991

DCE: Are you through with the project?

PB: It continues. And I know I'll never be done with it. There's far too much to photograph, and the Plains continue to change. Since the time I began the project, the population has fallen even further. I don't know if you've heard of the Buffalo Commons – it's an idea proposed by an academic couple from

Rutgers in which the entire region, it is imagined, will be bought up by the Federal Government and conservation groups over time. The ranches and farms will sell out, and a sort of patchwork national park will be formed. I don't think this will happen any time soon, but the future is certainly tending this way. More and more people leave and more and more land reverts to prairie.

There really never was enough water to successfully settle the western Plains and because of this people have wandered across them for centuries, trying to put down roots and having a very hard time. I have great respect for what people have done, and the lives that have been lived on that land. And I have enormous affection for the land itself. And I want to continue to photograph it for a long time.

About the Author: Peter Brown

Peter Brown lives in Houston with his wife Jill Fryar and their daughter Caitlin. He received a BA in English and an MFA in Photography from Stanford University, and has taught in the art departments at Rice University and Stanford.

Brown received individual artist's fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Cultural Arts Council of Houston and Harris County and the Carnegie Foundation. He also received an Alfred Eisenstaedt Award from Columbia University and an Imogen Cunningham Award. Brown received a publication grant from the Graham Foundation (Chicago) for *On the Plains*, which won the Fred Whitehouse Award for Design from the Texas Institute of Letters.

His photographs are in the collections of Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and The Menil Collection, Museum of Modern Art in New York, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Amon Carter Museum, Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Stanford University Museum of Art, Rice University Collection, and Humanities Research Center Collection at the University of Texas at Austin, among many others.

His first book, *Seasons of Light*, was published by Rice University Press with an afterword by Denise Levertov. His second book, *On the Plains*, is a DoubleTake Book published by W. W. Norton with an

introduction by Kathleen Norris. It was excerpted in *DoubleTake*, *LIFE*, *The New Yorker*, and *Texas Monthly*.

Peter Brown serves on the ex-officio council of Houston Center for Photography and on the art board of FotoFest International. His writing appears regularly in *DoubleTake* and *SPOT*. Brown's work is represented by Harris Gallery in Houston, Stephen Cohen Gallery in Los Angeles, Stephen Clark Gallery in Austin, Barbara Able Gallery in Santa Fe and Stephen Bulger Gallery in Toronto.



Peter Brown

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