

V1 Gallery presents

Pray for America

A solo exhibition by Jacob Holdt



OPENING RECEPTION: FRIDAY, OCTOBER 25, 2019. TIME: 17.00 - 21.00

EXHIBITION PERIOD: OCTOBER 26 – NOVEMBER 30, 2019

The word is about, there's something evolving
Whatever may come, the world keeps revolving
They say the next big thing is here
That the revolution's near
But to me it seems quite clear
That's it's all just a little bit of history repeating¹

Jacob Holdt's first solo exhibition with V1 Gallery, *Pray for America*, presents 45 selected photographs from Holdt's archive of more than 15.000 photographs, shot during his vagabonding years in America between 1970-1978. Key examples are flanked by photographs never previously shown.

Refusing to pick up the mantle of pastor from his father, Holdt crossed the Atlantic in 1970 and gradually discovered his own way of preaching universal love, not within the confines of his Father's church in the village of Faaborg, but on the road in America: "I doubt that there is any other country in the world where I could arrive with only \$40 and travel for five years entirely as a result of people's hospitality and generosity. I have stayed in 434 homes in 48 states... My parents sent a camera for my birthday so that I could "prove" the many shocking things I wrote about. It was a cheap half-frame camera that didn't demand much skill from one who had never photographed before."

Pray for America is a photo-survey in the social sphere. A whirlwind tour through America's wild landscape of the 1970s. An inquisitive, beautiful, occasionally disturbing yet always compassionate journey into the back alleys and slums of America.

The photographic subjects are always depicted as people first and class representatives second: "They were lonesome and forsaken, forgotten by society in a world of emptiness only interrupted by the cheerless dripping of rain through the ceiling," Holdt recalls. Maintaining his credo "to say yes" (also the title of his newly published memoirs), Holdt expands the genre of social documentary photography into a social philosophy. It is an expression of intimacy which is always genuine, always insistently idealistic, but never naïve enough to make fetishes of its subjects. A tacit narrative seems poised to unfold within each frame. Tense with expectation, like a modern *tableaux vivant*, the people are frozen in an act or affect, yet always in a precise composition. Performing for the camera, the little girl Linda kneels in the sunset with her hands firmly folded in prayer and her eyes closed, in front of her family's shack, in the arid fields of the rural town (La Crosse, Florida, 1974).

This reddish glow recurs through Holdt's pictures from the South: the glow of petroleum lamps in decrepit wooden shacks and early interstate sunrises. In the absence of electricity and high-speed films for his camera, Holdt recreated the glow by wrapping his flash in pink toilet paper. In the picture of a couple in their bedroom, the glow from the oil lamp renders the bedlinen and peeling wallpaper in soft, painterly baroque folds, which frames the two bodies. Absorbed in each other, the only witness from an outside world is the "royal crown" sign (Tarboro, North Carolina, 1975).

Looking both backwards, into the history of oppression, racism and sexism, and simultaneously gazing into the future, the pictures seem, at times, prophetic. They are not just about America, but the Western world's dreams and nightmares in a late capitalist age of upheaval. To aim at the perpetuation of memories means, inevitably, that Holdt has undertaken the task of continually renewing, of creating, cultural memoirs. It sometimes takes an outsider to show what is amiss. The visual testimonies are above all an invitation for us to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to pray for America.

Each photograph is accompanied by a caption in the exhibition catalogue published by Trojan Horse Press / V1 Gallery. The illustrated odyssey *American Pictures* was first published in Danish in 1977 (in English in 1985). Holdt has travelled worldwide with his dias lecture ever since. Holdt's first edition of his memoirs 1947-1977 *Om at sige ja* was published by Politiken on October 10, 2019. As the first Dane to collaborate with Supreme, a new t-shirt features Holdt's iconic photograph of the sex worker Cynthia posing in front of a billboard (Las Vegas, Nevada, 1975). In 2009, Holdt was awarded the life grant from the Danish Arts Foundation. V1 Gallery represented Holdt at Paris Photo in 2017. Holdt has mounted solo exhibitions at Kunsthall Charlottenborg in Copenhagen, Denmark (2016) and Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk, Denmark (2010).

¹Except from "History Repeating", a jazz song written by Alex Gifford and originally performed by the Propellerheads featuring Shirley Bassey in 1997.