

Suburban Windows
An Interview With Bill Owens
By Tim Hildebrand

[from Darkroom Magazine]

Ten years ago, Bill Owens's book *Suburbia* was released to rave reviews across America. Rather than being a cynical outsider's view of the suburbs, it was a warm and honest look into the lives and homes of America's middle class. Since then, he has produced five more books and received a Guggenheim fellowship and four grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. But now, with a decade's worth of critical acclaim under his belt, but little money in his pocket, he's tired of being a "starving artist."

TH: Why did you pick suburban life as a subject to photograph?

BO: I'm not interested per se in the poor or the rich or the minorities. I don't want to go photograph the American Indians. I don't want to exploit them any more than they've been exploited. Turn me loose on the middle class. I understand the culture. I speak the language. Let me exploit them!

TH: Many of the images in your book "Suburbia" are accompanied by a caption. How did these come about?

BO: I would sit down with the people and show them their photograph; just like an anthropologist showing a photograph to the natives. I would show it to my subjects and say, "What do you want to say?" Sometimes I'd write it down verbatim and it would be perfect. Other times we'd have to juggle the sentences and change a word or two so it would make sense. Then I'd call them back and say, "Is this what you really meant?" I made sure they saw the photographs and that they knew what the captions were. The wonderful thing about the captions is that sometimes they add information to the photographs, but other times the captions contradict the photographs. Sometimes they say "Hey, this isn't really me," or "What I really want is a little house with a white picket fence," but there they are with a supercar and a suburban house. That's the reality of the American Dream. We get caught up in it.

TH: Let's talk about *your* dream, which was to become a successful photographer.

BO: I wanted to be a photographer, for sure. I had a good newspaper job and I think I was successful, but there was really no place for me to go after that. I was not going to move to New York City. I'm a Californian. I own a house in Livermore and I have children. I've been in this town for fifteen years and I'm not going anywhere; I like it here. This has caused me, to a certain degree, to be locked into where I am and what I'm doing. I've published six books, I've had a Guggenheim, I've had four NEA grants. But when you spread that over a fifteen-year period, it's poverty level! I'm 44 years old now and I'm tired of being a starving artist. I've had some critical success, but not financial. Ultimately, I think most photographers want to be a critical success more than a financial

one. You want people to recognize you and your work, and I've been able to accomplish that.

TH: Let's go back to your college years and talk about when you first got interested in photography.

BO: I graduated from Chico State College in 1963 with a degree in auto mechanics. I wasn't interested in anything visual. I did take a photography class when I was there but I got a C, and that's the best I could do. When I graduated from college I was just in a different time warp. I came out, started teaching high school auto mechanics, and then went into the Peace Corps for a couple of years. So I was not at all interested in photography. But while in the Peace Corps, a photographer came to photograph my wife and me in this little village where we lived and worked, and I said, "*That's* what I want to do!" So I bought a Leica and started taking pictures. When we got out of the Peace Corps I bought a Nikon and went to Europe and took thousands of slides. I came back and decided to study photography. I looked at various schools and decided San Francisco State was as good as any.

TH: What types of classes did you take?

BO: Well, when I enrolled I made a mistake: I took courses in the art department. And here I was with a degree in auto mechanics! I ended up with C's in the art classes but then I took courses in photojournalism and visual anthropology and loved it.

TH: You felt more at home in these classes?

BO: Definitely. I was a photographer on the college newspaper and I started covering the student anti-war riots on campus, and one of these pictures was published in *Life* magazine. And a photograph I took of a Hell's Angel beating someone with a pool cue at a Rolling Stones concert was picked up by newspapers and magazines across the country. All of a sudden I was a superstar. So I got away from college as soon as I could and went on my way.

TH: You didn't get your degree?

BO: I went just long enough to learn technique. It's a craft and I wanted to be proficient at it. I think a lot of people fail to realize that it's a craft. You've got to learn how to develop film and you've got to learn how to print.

TH: So, from the beginning you were interested in documentary photography?

BO: I've always loved the documentary thing. When I used to go to the library to kill time, the books I checked out were the ones from the Farm Security Administration; I have all of those images memorized. Show me a Walker Evans and I can practically tell you when and where it was taken. I like Dorothea Lange even better; I think she was more of a humanist. And of course, I know all of Lewis Hine's images. You know, I think

it's very interesting that many photographers interested in the documentary go out and do Louis Hine photographs. They go out and look for old barns, they go out and photograph the old section of town. And I say to them, "Hey, go do Kmart. Kmart's what's happening, man, the flashing blue light special!"

TH: Did you attempt to work in the tradition of the FSA photographers?

BO: When I got my job at the *Livermore Independent* newspaper I attempted to make those kinds of images but I got cut off at the pass very quickly, because a newspaper requires that you make certain images. They must be straight and they must communicate—which is an excellent discipline for you as a photographer, because a lot of photographers allow things to be implied rather than having the image say it directly. I think the hardest thing in the world is to say something directly. I want to make images that communicate mood, that communicate lifestyle, that say something about culture, about society. I think that the purpose of photography is to make sharp, clear images. I dislike soft focus and gimmicks like painting on photographs and solarizing them.

TH: Has anyone had an influence on your work?

BO: I did have a mentor and his name is Paul Glines, who's a photographer at the *San Francisco Examiner*. When I started working on *Suburbia*, I would complain about the quality of my stuff and Paul would say, "Buy a bigger camera if you want sharper photographs." I couldn't afford a Hasselblad. I hated the twin-lens reflexes—I can't use those cameras candidly. With a 35mm, it's click, click, click and you're done and you move on. So, I bought a Pentax 6x7 which allowed me to have, essentially, a giant 35mm. I could hold it up to my eye. I could advance the film, focus, and bracket quickly. Paul then introduced me to the bare tube flash, which gives you a very natural light, and showed me how to use quartz lights to bounce off ceilings.

TH: You've had shows and some of your work is in museums, but in the art marketplace, you've never been accepted as a "collectible" photographer. Why is that?

BO: The documentary image is not important to gallery people because there's no commercial value. For example, you can't hype my photo of a Tupperware party as art. They don't think my kind of stuff sells because it smacks of journalism and the snapshot ... they can't deal with that snapshot look. The galleries exhibit the work of "fine-art" photographers and proclaim them as the artists of the decade. But the people at *National Geographic* say to me, "Hey, we throw away those kinds of shots. We drop those on the ground and don't pick them up." So it depends on your point of view. However, Southland Corporation, which owns the 7-Eleven food store chain, has some of my photographs now. Bought from a gallery. Can you believe it?

TH: So that hasn't happened often?

BO: Most dealers aren't going to deal with me. They'll deal with a Richard Avedon or an Irving Penn. Personally, I'm appalled that Penn can pick up cigarette butts, rearrange

them, photograph them; then Marlborough Gallery gives him a show and the *New York Times* writes about it in glowing terms. I say, my god, what's happening? You know, one of my proudest moments was to have Richard Avedon throw me out of the G. Ray Hawkins Gallery because I was talking too loud. They were setting up his show when I got there. I was talking to one of the guys there and Avedon was sitting on the floor a few feet away. I was telling this wonderful Robert Frank story and he came over and asked me to leave. He has no idea of who I am or what my books are about because Avedon lives in a jet-set world. He doesn't have to apply for an NEA grant and pray that he gets \$5,000. So the rest of us out here trying to communicate have tremendous obstacles to overcome. We don't live in New York and we're not connected to any magazines. How do we get the break to make any kind of personal images, and to get them out to the public?

TH: Have you ever considered doing commercial photography?

BO: I find it demeaning to go to an advertising agency and hustle my work. I can't do it. There's just something in me that won't allow me to take my craft and sell those skills. I can't cross over into the commercial world.

TH: Tell me about your working habits. Do you usually know what you want to photograph before you begin?

BO: Originally I started walking the streets. Just looking; photographing the fronts of houses. But with all my books I had a shooting script. I knew certain types of images I wanted to make. I think you have to photograph with love and energy; to find the right spot and wait for the right people to come along. And then be able to go back and shoot it two or three times until finally you have the image. I'm not afraid of blowing it. I'm not afraid of wasting film. I make time work for me, rather than against me. I can't be beating my head against the clock to make the image. I've got to have the ability to go out to say, the Elks' Club, and be there for three hours and shoot maybe ten rolls of film and come back with one image that I really like. As far as I'm concerned I've only produced maybe nine great images in my lifetime. Out of all these books and hundreds of images and thousands of rolls of film, there's only a few that I think *really* communicate.

TH: When working on a book, is the shooting and printing and editing going on simultaneously?

BO: I work generally in blocks of time. I'll shoot for five months and then I'll put the camera down and I'll edit and print for five months. Then for the next year, I'll put the book together. I don't drive around making candid images of this or that.

TH: Have you ever worked in color?

BO: Oh, definitely. Two of my NEA grants were used to do 8x10 Polaroid color work with a view camera. The prints were exhibited in several places around the country. I was

documenting the Los Angeles Bicentennial—the city was 200 years old. I did everything from disco roller skaters to a sushi bar. Contemporary L.A. lifestyles, basically.

TH: Do you ever use the zone system when working with a view camera?

BO: I hate the zone system. I'm not interested in that vocabulary. I'm not interested in all the technique. I think half of the photographers out there who have studied it are buried in that garbage and don't understand what photographic images are all about. I think they're caught up in the technique and fail to see the forest for the trees. They're caught with their heads underneath the cloth and the whole world's happening around them.

TH: In 1979 you produced a book called *Publish Your Photo Book: A Guide to Self-Publishing*. I understand it's still in print. Could you tell me more about it?

BO: I covered everything from working with designers to finding a printer to dealing with distribution. What does a book contract really look like? Most people have never seen one. What happens when you get in legal trouble? Other books on self-publishing are basically for novels or "word" books. None of them tell you the problems of printing photographs, of dealing with half-tones. Printing books with images is much more difficult than printing a straight typeset book. People don't realize that kind of information is really hard to find. I take them through it step-by-step.

TH: Are you doing any teaching these days?

BO: I'm going to be at the New School for Social Research in New York soon. Usually once a year I'll teach a course somewhere back east. And I still do my lecture on suburbia from time to time. I do six to ten of those a year. And I'm also teaching a course on brewing—my latest passion. Actually, much of my time and energy recently has gone into my new business in Hayward. It's a combination brewery and restaurant called Buffalo Bill's Brewery. I've got my own beer on tap.