

North Carolina: THIS IS NOT THORNTON WILDER, by John A. Bennette

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Sometimes photographs can be viewed as a component of language, each image contributing to a larger idea. Some would call this documentary but, as usual, there is a fluid quality that defies definition. With photographs, we can reach across cultural gaps and speak a direct shorthand; the difficult part is not to be too simplistic or to produce clichés.

This year as I was preparing to do a second exhibition about my memories of the South for Slow Exposures I looked back at last year's *Southern Memories*. I wanted it to be in the middle, showing a world that was neither rich nor poor. One of the artists that was a part of the exhibition was David Simonton, with his stark images taken in North Carolina.

The idea of small town America as the place to be is still a ghost memory of our past. This is where good things happen; you know your family, your home, your neighbors. The cycles of life will run their course. Connecting stories will be told from one generation to the next. The people are bound by knowing, and few feel the need to leave.

In David Simonton's photographs of shrinking small towns I found a disconnect from that idea. Daylight is harsh, the streets at night are overwhelmed by shadows and hopelessness in seeing another soul; light makes one feel vulnerable, not safe, and shadows add fear.

Walking around a small town after 10 pm seems strange; good people are at home, the shops are closed, doors are locked. Dogs bark at footfalls. The body tends to lean into shadows at approaching cars. Nothing is familiar in the dark. This is not Thornton Wilder.

This is an Edward Hopper town when the last of the brave or unaware have made their way home to lock doors and hide. This is the town you want to drive through quickly. With contrast and neo-expressionist lighting, David Simonton has created images that reminded one of "The Night of the Hunter" and the stories my parents told. These are the small towns we hear about and dread as we drive quickly toward the city.

In the past I used the terms "lonely" and "anxious" when describing these photographs. What makes them modern for me is not the depiction of a single standalone person or decaying building in picturesque perfection. These images are frozen between better times and a dark future. That modern quality comes from an essay on small towns inside and out; the abandonment as people leave for the city and jobs. Is it not saying something about America now? An evocation; a translation of the South (and other small towns across the land) over the past half-century.

To quote David, "Manuel Alvarez Bravo said in a late interview, 'When one takes a photograph, one doesn't think about making a statement, but rather about creating something visual which can later bear a meaning. The meaning of the photograph depends upon the viewer's interpretation, but not necessarily the photographer's.' I couldn't put it better myself—that's exactly how I feel about my work: what I respond to is visual (and, okay, a little bit emotional). What the viewer responds to is the visual, of course, and also (if the picture's any good) something more, perhaps something that's inside of them."

I think good pictures stay with you, and over time there become many ways of seeing them; that is what keeps photographs alive. I first saw these about three years ago, and they are still a part of my discussion about life in a small town.