

PORTRAITURE: IN THE AMERICAN WEST

If I hope for anything for these portraits, I hope that years from now people will be able to look at them and see something serious that happened to the quality of life, in our country and in my time.

Richard Avedon, 1985

Avedon's In the American West portrait series was commissioned by the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, Texas. Avedon spent six summers (1979-1984) scouring the western states for 752 anonymous participants. Ultimately, he selected 123 photographs for the landmark 1985 exhibition at the Amon Carter Museum.

When the show opened it was to both great acclaim and stinging criticism. Avedon's larger-than-life sized prints of mostly poor and working class people startled viewers unaccustomed to confronting our country's "hidden injuries of class." This was not the cowboy west of America's collective mythology, but the west that supplied the raw goods – and the taut emotions – for America's material excess during the Reagan years.

In a testament to the enduring power of In the American West, the show toured the country in 2005 on its 20th anniversary.



Debbie McClendon, carney,
Wyoming, 1981



Ronald Fischer, beekeeper,
California, 1981

POINTS OF DEPARTURE:

1. While photographing the people In the American West, Avedon, after focusing, stood next to the camera, and faced his subjects directly and at close range. How do you think that affected the outcome of the portraits?

2. Ronald Fischer answered an ad that Avedon placed for a beekeeper as a photography subject. Avedon sketched out the portrait in advance from a snapshot that Fischer sent in. The shoot required two days and 121 sheets of film. Do these facts support or refute the criticism that the individuals were “manipulated” by Avedon into participating in a project they did not understand?
3. In the western portraits, Avedon photographed unknown people against the same white background that he almost always used in his portraits of the wealthy and powerful. How does the technique emerge as social commentary of American society? What impact does the technique have on stereotypical ideas about the American west?
4. Debbie McClendon was just 16 years old when this portrait was taken at a Wyoming carnival where she was working. What do you think attracted Avedon to her? Why do you think that Debbie, and all of the others, wanted to pose?
5. While these pictures unsettled many of the viewers, most of the individuals who were photographed liked their final portraits. Why do you think these two responses were so different?