# I do not see poverty in my pictures

Are Shelby Lee Adams's documentary stills of rural Kentucky insightful or exploitative? SARAH MILROY talks to the photographer, who is himself tormented by contradiction.

By SARAH MILROY, *The Globe and Mail*

September 12, 2002

When it comes to ethics, documentary photography may be the most vexed of artistic media. By definition, it involves a relationship between the vulnerable participant in history -- the starvation-wracked sharecropper's wife with her wind-worn face; the Spanish revolutionary, reeling from the bullet wound on his lonely hilltop; the seated, self-immolating monk, engulfed in flames -- and the photographer, whose fortune is distinct from that of his subject.

As the acclaimed American documentary photographer Mary Ellen Mark puts it: "It's a form of voyeurism. . . . I really feel that the act of taking someone's picture is in a sense exploitative. No matter what."

For documentary photographers, then, self-scrutiny comes with the territory, and the better you are, the more lacerating that self-scrutiny becomes. Take the case of American photographer Shelby Lee Adams, whose most recent pictures documenting the remote rural communities of Appalachia are showing this month at Toronto's Stephen Bulger Gallery. He is also the subject of a sensitive and probing film by Canadian filmmaker Jennifer Baichwal -- *The True Meaning of Pictures: Shelby Lee Adams' Appalachia*, which premiered on Saturday as part of the Toronto International Film Festival. "What is it that fascinates us about watching someone else's misfortune?" Baichwal asks. It is now 2 years since she began the project and she is still puzzling over this fundamental aspect of human nature.

Over beer and popcorn in a downtown bar in Toronto, Adams permitted himself a short laugh. "You have to admit, it's pretty remarkable," he says in his Southern drawl. "I have had people come up to me and hug me after seeing my work. And I have had people spit at me. If a photograph can achieve that range of response -- well, I think that's really something."

But the laughter is short-lived. Adams comes across as a man hounded by his own demons and bedevilled by the criticism of exploitation that is often levelled at his now 30-year-long photographic project in the mountains of eastern Kentucky. The sting of these criticisms is sharper because Adams -- who has nine years of university education under his belt and an exhibition résumé as long as your arm -- is photographing his own roots, a community he has been accused of betraying.

Typically, his harshest criticism comes from the South. Julie Ardery, for example, writing in the Lexington Herald Leader in 1998, quipped that his second book of photographs, *Appalachian Legacy*, might better have been called, "Let Us Now Praise Heinous Men," and slammed it for pushing "regional stereotypes over the brink of grotesqueness; greasy guys showing off their snake-handling scars, girls with vacant stares and a retarded fellow standing at the kitchen table in a diaper. . . . With their spooky lighting, their fake flowers, heaps of dolls and open caskets, Adams's photographs come close to representing Appalachia as one big horror show."

Sorting through his statements about his work, one finds evidence of a conscience tormented by contradiction, and gripped by compulsion. "I do not see poverty in my pictures. I don't see poverty, and neither do they." These are not people to be pitied, he argues. They have a sense of community and authenticity to their life that we should envy. But elsewhere -- in Baichwal's film, for example -- he allows: "My psyche is attracted to people who are suffering and in pain. I identify with that part of the human condition."

The contradiction in Adams's position springs from the complex relationship to his subjects. While he often describes the mountain dwellers living at the heads of the "hollers" as "his people," it is only partly true. Yes, Adams, an only child, spent much of his childhood on his grandparents' farm near Whitesburg, Ky. But his parents supported his diligence at school and he had many glimpses, while he was growing up, of the wider world beyond.

Adams's only constants were the summers on the farm, where he kept owls and crows as pets, spent hours running wild in the woods and helped his grandfather with the hog killing, once he was old enough to hold a gun. While his mother condoned his friendships with the poorer kids from up the valley, his father disapproved. Mother and son would drive up into the hollers, delivering Shelby's outgrown clothes to his needier acquaintances, but they did so behind his father's back.

His mother's side of the family, including his uncle, encouraged his interest in art, and by his mid-teens, he was goofing around with the camera, mostly taking pictures of his family. But, with Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty in the 1960s, the region saw an influx of photojournalists and reporters from the big cities, swarming to document a poverty and way of life they saw as heartbreaking. The young Shelby Lee became the go-between, delivering the city folk into the harder-to-reach places.

He enjoyed it, he remembers today, but soon a backlash set in. The mountain dwellers resented the characterization of themselves in the media as ignorant, God-forsaken hopeless cases, their commmunity wracked with poverty, genetic abnormality and violent crime. "These people that I knew, they started saying, 'They really hurt us, Shelby. Don't you ever bring those people around here again. We don't like what they say about us,' " he recalls. "I had contributed to that."

One of the most notorious conflicts between the media and the locals touched the Adams family personally. In 1967, a Canadian filmmaker, Hugh O'Connor, was shot by a cousin of Adams, Hobart Ison. O'Connor had been taking footage of one of Ison's run-down rental properties when Ison arrived on the scene, packing a loaded rifle for emphasis. Adams says: "He gave the warning shot. When someone does that, you listen. That's the culture." It was a vivid object lesson in the politics of representation.

Adams went off to art school, but he returned each year with the previous year's crop of pictures, painstaking in his efforts to involve his subjects in his project, and to insure the authenticity of their consent. "I was trying to make right what the media has done wrong", says Adams, who now lives most of the year in Pittsfield, Mass. It's a process that continues to this day.

One of the most interesting questions surrounding Adams's work is its status as documentary. While his subjects are as he finds them -- he doesn't direct wardrobe or grooming -- he is quick to point out the ways in which his subjectivity imposes itself. As we see in Baichwal's film, his famous hog-killing photograph, taken of the Napier family in 1990, was entirely staged, following the slaughtering practices he remembered from his boyhood. Adams bought the hog, positioned the players, fiddled with the light and the composition until he was satisfied with the results. But you wouldn't necessarily know it to look at it.

Likewise his representation of a home funeral, taken in Leatherwood, Ky., in 1990, in which the composition is split in half by a dividing wall, segregating the space of mourning from the ongoing business of life in the room next door. It is a highly directed picture that captures both what he saw that day and his memories of visiting the grieving with his grandparents.

In an image of the Childers family, taken in 1986, Adams re-imagines one dwarfed and misshapen boy as a Christ figure in his loincloth, eyes turned heavenward beneath a shaft of light. (The series documenting this family contains some of the toughest pictures Adams has made.) As photography critic A. D. Coleman, a commentator in the film, says: "If this is Shelby Lee Adams's Southern Gothic poetry of Appalachia, that's one thing. If this is really documentation of Appalachia, then that's something else altogether."

It seems clear that it is the former. Adams allows that his earliest art interests -- in addition to the work of such photographers as August Sander, Diane Arbus and Walker Evans -- inclined toward "the darker side." Francisco Goya, Hieronymous Bosch and William Blake were particular favourites. While Adams insists that he doesn't try to enhance the macabre, the eerie, or the grotesque in his subjects, the pictures don't bear him out. But what is it that Adams is probing here? The ensnaring stereotypes through which the Southern poor are entrapped in the American imagination? His own fear and fascination with the by turns brutal and transcendent culture he has been privileged to penetrate? The dark alleyways of his own psyche?

The answer, of course, is all of the above. Even when he employs mountain dwellers in a commissioned fashion shoot, as he did in one notorious and much reviled instance in 1999 for *The New York Times Magazine*, one gets the sense of an artist salting his own emotional wounds. "One of the things that I do believe happens when he takes a picture," remarks Baichwal, "is there is an exchange of vulnerability. It's not just him as an omniscient person. He is, in some way, just as vulnerable. That's what makes me have faith in him."

These images make us squirm, in part, because they refuse to advocate. Asked if it is a bad thing that practitioners of the Holiness Pentecostal Church may drape their children in poisonous snakes in their mystical serpent-handling rituals, he says, simply: "I don't know."

Pushed to evaluate whether life in Appalachia is better or worse than it use to be, Adams again refuses judgment, asserting simply that there is more education and medical care, better highways, more computers -- but less of the traditional culture and values now. "Those traditional Appalachian families, working 12 hours a day, growing their own food, making their own furniture, singing their songs in church -- very self-sufficient -- that is gone. Now, very few of the mountain people have that look; earthy, honest, open. They would grip your hand with a firmness. They were solid. Foundation stones. That was my grandparents."

In his most recent pictures, the children have their hair combed. Their clothes are cleaner. The satellite dish looms. Has Adams backed off his initial hard-core subjects for lighter fare? No, he insists. These kids are from the same demographic group as his earlier subjects. They just don't look it. The families may have no food to put on the table, he says, but they will have their TV set and they will devote every last resource to dressing those kids in the logo shoes and T-shirts that function as magic talismans for assimilation.

Adams's position -- the suspension of judgment in the act of looking -- is strangely contagious, and repeated viewing of his work leaves you more and more unsure of your footing. Baichwal makes brilliant use of this phenomenon in the film. The first time we see the pictures, we can hardly bear to watch. By the time the end of the film rolls around, 72 minutes later, we are smiling back at them with affection.

Which is the better stance to take toward your fellow man? As Adams says: "By pushing photography, by pushing all the limits, by getting in there with the camera, creating some distortions, I'm hoping to make everyone think -- 'What is our job here as a human being?' Stop making judgments and experience life. I'm experiencing this environment. I'm trying to share with you, in an intimate way, the experience."