
John Raeburn’s new book, Ben Shahn’s American Scene: Photographs, 1938, is unique among the handful of publications in the past decade on Shahn’s photographic oeuvre in that it covers exclusively the artist’s Farm Security Administration project during the summer of 1938, documenting the American “small town” in various locations across central Ohio. Ben Shahn’s unique approach to this particular FSA assignment is exquisitely documented by Raeburn, whose well researched writing offers important insights into the motivations of Shahn as well as those of the FSA’s Roy Stryker in the planning and undertaking of the project.

The book is arranged thematically as opposed to chronologically or geographically, which affords the reader an opportunity to observe the ubiquity of “small town” life across many of the communities photographed, though there are a few photographs documenting the region’s larger towns and small cities as well. This unique arrangement is most powerful when reading the chapters devoted to documenting poverty and racism. The author’s writing enhances the readers experience throughout with his clear analysis of the imagery.

Raeburn has included all of the necessary documentation to support the book including index, notes, and a list of illustrations – though he oddly chose to not include the unique Library of Congress identifier for each of the images. However a researcher can easily navigate to the Library of Congress’ digital collections via loc.gov and find all of the pertinent identifier data if necessary.

Unfortunately the reproduction of the photographs is quite poor throughout and if a reader had no other knowledge of Ben Shahn’s photography they may be left wondering why he is considered to be one of the great photo-documentarians of the time. In far too many instances the photographs appear over-exposed and washed-out; the whites are very white but the mid-tones are lacking, giving the photographs a cold, lifeless, feel. This is very disappointing especially when comparing some of the same images to those reproduced in another, smaller book published by the Library of Congress on Shahn’s FSA photography, The Photographs of Ben Shahn, as a part of their Fields of Vision series.

The book itself is bound quite well and appears to be durable and able to withstand years of use in a circulating collection. This book is recommended for an arts library supporting study in art history because the research is so well done. However, careful consideration is suggested for collections where the primary users are photography students because the reproductions are so disappointing and uninspiring.

Sylvia Welsh, College Librarian, Montserrat College of Art, swelsh@montserrat.edu