

Review: American Dreaming by Jerry Spagnoli

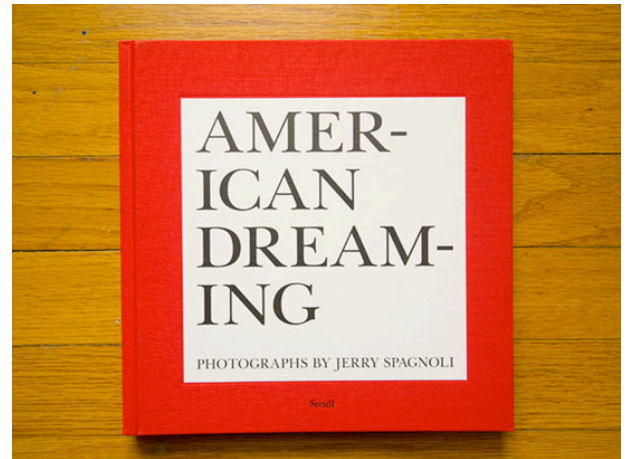
BOOK REVIEWS, PHOTOBOOKS

By Joerg Colberg
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There's something visceral about Jerry Spagnoli's American Dreaming that gets lost the moment the book gets translated into an electronic form. For the reviews on this site I photograph the photobooks so that readers get the chance to see selected spreads.

Working on the images for this review, I noticed that looking at the images on the screen of my camera was very different than looking at them in the book. Even seeing the images on the screen (as you can when you click on the icons on the side) does not quite reproduce the feeling you get when looking at the book.

There is more to this, though, than merely the difference between the object and the flat screen - it's the images themselves, which lose all their power.



If you know your history of photography, or the history of the photobook, you will be able to place American Dreaming. The references seem obvious, but at no stage does the viewer actually get the feeling that this is just some sort of re-hash. But the idea that it is a re-hash might be a sign of our times, both photographic times and cultural/political times. Much like photography itself our culture currently seems to be stuck, like a broken record, jumping back to a slightly earlier spot in time. You get to hear the same little snippet that you just thought you had behind you, the same little story, the same little promise, the same little empty phrase...

So an artist might as well work with this, and go back to work shot in the past, to extract a bigger picture. This is what Spagnoli has done here, using photographs taken in the early 1990s, focusing on little bits, little details, to put them center stage and to have them work against and with each other. Hands and gestures play a prominent role in this game. Hands, pointing or holding (back), plus there are birds, and people with power, far away. Photographic grain plays a prominent role as well, the noise underneath it all, the frontier at which photographs resolve into nothing more than an abstract pattern, the background noise that permeates everything - much like, if I may add that analogy, the microwave radiation in the cosmos, Big Bang's echo.

On the cover it says "I can dream," and then inside "The War Years (Ignition 1991-1995)." It's hard to keep track of all the wars, isn't it, and what happened to the American Dream anyway? Where is this all going, where has this all been going for such a long time now? These are the questions American Dreaming appears to be asking, waiting - just like us - for answers.

American Dreaming, photographs by Jerry Spagnoli, 96 pages, Steidl, 2012