

EXHIBITION REVIEWS

Ken Heyman at Sundaram Tagore Gallery

Ken Heyman's work is both marvelously poetic and a spontaneous celebration of tribalism; tribalism as a unifier not a divider. He achieves this through the simple humanity of his work, as revealed in his recent show.

Though this work's gritty, unpolished surfaces, black-and-white expression, and lack of glamour stand at odds with the glitzy, flashy, shiny, celebrity-obsessed qualities of the present, especially in faster-developing parts of Asia, its truthfulness establishes an important counterpoint to the brasher values regularly imprinted in our minds through everyday press and television images. Heyman's honest simplicity reflects the post-War, pre-affluence memories of the Western world and its artists. These memories are present reality for much of Asia, despite the progress genuinely made in terms of health, education, economics, and politics in the past 30 years, and the prosperity that has accompanied it.

Heyman's work speaks to us because poetry and tribalism are deeper and more enduring than the effects of prosperity. It is poetic because it condenses, in language often calling for thought, analysis, and contemplation, the experience of man across a wide range of social and cultural contexts.

It is tribal because he catches his subjects in the surroundings that have nurtured them, and allows us to observe their responses—which are as varied as the psychology of man. A tribe contains and excludes; it supports and it constrains, it defines and it provokes rebellion. And Ken Heyman's tribes range from the narrowest, clannish or family frameworks to the most universal aspects of birth and death; from the highly specified tribes of upper-crust Western society to the universal tribes of motherhood or of crowds; from relationships driven by economic common experience to the aloneness that comes of exile, difference, and otherhood.

Though his work can be gritty and sad, it is in general affirmative and realistic. He does not gild the lily, nor doubt its roots in the mud, but nor does he let the mud detract from the beauty or allow cynicism to intrude upon his contemplation of our essential humanity in the old sense: man not as an animal with 'animal' instincts, but man as an animal with human instincts.

Doubtless, as pointed out by Sundaram Tagore in a catalogue essay, and averred by Heyman himself, this is because of his early relationship with Margaret Mead, the renowned American anthropologist, whose wisdom he learnt young, not least the value of travel and experience. His works could have been produced to illuminate her observation, in her book *Com-*



Ken Heyman, Bali, Seeing Photographs of their Parents for the First Time, silver-gelatin print. Image: Courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery.

ing of Age in Samoa (1928): "As the traveler who has once been from home is wiser than he who has never left his own doorstep, so a knowledge of one other culture should sharpen our ability to scrutinize more steadily, to appreciate more lovingly, our own."

To observe the tightly framed faces and gleaming eyes of young Balinese caught in the photo-frame as they themselves are caught looking at their first photos, made years earlier of their families and friends, is to be made aware of tribe and poetry, of common humanity and the beach, seen from behind, literally confronted by a huge crowd of whites, it appears Italian-



Ken Heyman, Nigeria, The Railsplitter, 1959, silver-gelatin print. Image: Courtesy of Sundaram Tagore Gallery.

Americans. We do not have to know the precise cause of the anger on the face of the middle-

manufacture in Germany. The respect given to work, and the physical effort it demands; the reality of economic dependency, and its inevitable acceptance; the language of international trade and transactions between man and master in all parts of the globe—also a universal. All this is evoked, and given respect rather than anger, but without closing out the potential for judgment by the viewer. The work is not didactic, it is fact. As factual as the images of children: being born, growing up on the streets, playing, working, sometimes adult before their time. The Kennedy family and their children, seeing their father laid to rest, privilege stripped down to simple loss.

Whomever Heyman photographs—South American Indians, rich, poor, a breast-feeding woman on the beach, a family bathing; the young at Woodstock—he does so with respect for their dignity and their individual contribution to humanity.

In this his work is especially rewarding and a balm to nerves, perhaps our own, shaken by a constant stream of news images that in their truthfulness and intensity affirm our worst fears, while his, with their lack of ostentation and refusal to dramatize, reaffirm our fondest hopes for humanity.

Alternatively, consider the image of a Nigerian in Lagos cutting the bark from a tree destined for export to furniture

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