

An Oasis in a Cactus-strewn Desert

By Gordon Nelson

“We are a contemporary family...” from *Rich and Poor: Photographs by Jim Goldberg* (1985, in Miles Orvell, *American Photography*, 152) is initially striking because of its use of open space for a portrait.

The photo contains, in its center, a man and child and a woman posed on a king-sized bed in the back of an almost empty room. They are framed by potted cactus plants (two on each side of the bed) and reading lamps (one on each side of the bed). To their right are an open doorway and a light switch. To their left is a window, reaching almost to the floor, streaming bright sunlight through a gauze curtain. Underneath the photo is a signed handwritten statement by one of the subjects of the photo.

The king-sized bed suggests a dim white island on a sea of dark gray against a light gray sky or an oasis in a cactus-strewn desert. The camera has pulled far away from the man, child and woman, making them seem less significant than if the picture were in close-up. This public portrait is a demand image. The man and child are in the foreground and the woman is in the background. The man’s hand is on the child but the man and woman are not interacting. Their facial expressions are as if they are in three different worlds. The man’s face is more stoic almost confronting, challenging the photographer but the woman is smiling engagingly and the child’s face expresses confusion. The woman is lying comfortably, holding her head erect, but the man’s shoulders are stooped as if he feels defeated.

The way the photo is spatially organized, the people are dwarfed, swallowed up by the empty space surrounding them on all sides. Dividing the picture into nine equal squares,

eight of the nine squares are empty areas. The man and child are closer to the camera than the woman who is behind them. Though the child's face is closest to the center of the photo, the man's position near the center and in the foreground of the photo, closest to the camera draws the eye to his dark hair and light skin, his dark trousers against the light bed. The image can visually be split into three parts: the lighter wall making up the upper middle portion of the photo, the darker rug is the middle part and underneath the photo in the third lower section of the composition is a handwritten statement. The photographer appears to be standing above the subjects looking down on them because one can see the top of the bed. A photo taken from the subjects' level would only show the bed's front.

The only colors this artist utilizes are black and white and shades of grays; these, along with the empty expanse of the composition add to a sense of bleakness. The dark cactus plants contrast sharply with the light gray wall. The man, woman and child wear tops that, in black and white, blend into the background. Only their dark hair and trousers make them stand out from the grayness surrounding them. The handwriting on the bottom third of the image is dark ink standing out prominently against the white background. The bold black handwritten statement is striking, placed beneath so much grayness, giving voice to the subjects who visually are at the mercy of the artist.

The light on the subjects is very bright, primarily from their left. There is reflected light making the shadows are not as dark as they would be if there was only one light source. The cacti in far left corner and on the right side of the bed leave distinct shadows as opposed the other cacti whose shadows are more washed out. Though there are shadows under the people posed on the bed and on their left side, for the most part, the people blend into the spacious room with wall to wall carpet and exotic plants. A strong, bold, chiaroscuro contrast

of light and shadow would have heightened the drama of the photo and the importance of the subjects.