



THE QUIET AMERICAN

An exhibition at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford showcases the Central Asian work of American documentary photographer Carolyn Drake. Curator Philip Grover ARPS reflects on her recent projects

A finalist in this year's Santa Fe Prize for Photography, Carolyn Drake has quietly been building an impressive body of work on the five neighbouring countries of post-Soviet Central Asia: Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. She has travelled regularly to the region for several years, finding as her theme the importance of shared water and energy resources among the countries, in the process highlighting a fast growing environmental crisis.

Despite political and economic divisions which have emerged since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the large Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers flowing through these different countries continue to link



their futures inextricably. But where once the two rivers sustained life for millions, the earlier regime's imposition of a widespread and water-intensive cotton monoculture now threatens the sustainability of the region.

Drake follows the rivers, from their rising high in the Pamir and Tien Shen Mountains, to their dwindling ends downstream at the shrinking Aral Sea, intersecting people's lives and layers of history along the way.

"This project has become a way for me to experience the role that water plays in sustaining life, development, and empire", writes Drake, "as well as a starting point for understanding the particularities of a culture that the

western eye beholds with a degree of exoticism."

Having previously worked as a producer on multimedia projects, Drake is acutely aware of the media landscape. Frustrated by the conservatism of the American news agenda, and acknowledging the restricted view of the world offered by the Western press, she has set out to learn about different cultures through direct personal experience.

"Something happens when an American puts herself in other peoples' shoes", she says, "and takes a good look at who she is from another perspective. My pictures aren't directly about this, but a huge part of what I get from my work is a chance to come face to face with what 'American' means to the rest of the world."

Top: Buildings in Khujand seen through a cracked and dirty window of the Leninabad Hotel. The Syr Darya river is visible in the upper left corner. Khujand, Tajikistan. March 2009.

Main picture, far left: Gifts of money at a Pamiri wedding. The Pamiri people are part of the Ismaili sect of Shia Islam. Roshorv, Tajikistan. July 2008. Above: A healer works to cure tiredness due to a recent bereavement. Dushanbe, Tajikistan. July 2008.

Left: Children cool off in an irrigation canal that flows intermittently through their village. Akjar, Tajikistan. July 2008.



Above: Guests enter a village home during the annual Navrus festival. Marking the coming of spring and rebirth, Navrus has become a major public holiday since Uzbekistan's independence in 1991. Shege, Uzbekistan. March 2008.

Now based in Istanbul, Drake studied photography at the International Center of Photography in New York, and subsequently completed a masters in visual communication at Ohio University. After an internship at *National Geographic*, which culminated in a portfolio on the Lubavitch Jews of Brooklyn Heights, a Fulbright Fellowship in 2006 enabled her to photograph in the Ukraine, compiling a body of work which last year won a World Press Photo award. Drake told me when I met her recently that her current work in Central Asia grew directly out of this earlier project.

"After living for a year in the Ukraine", she says, "I was curious to explore the opposite end of the former Soviet empire, a place that I knew would be vastly different culturally and geographically – harsher climate, mostly Muslim, less industrialised, linguistically unique – to understand better the scope of the Soviet Union, and to look at what kind of lasting impact its ideology has in this very different environment.

"Most of my visits were prompted by myself. I've been to Tajikistan and Turkmenistan three times now, and to Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan twice. As my body of work from the region has developed, photo editors have become more interested in it, so some of the recent trips were partly funded by magazine or newspaper assignments. But generally, assignments have to be connected to news that is considered relevant in Europe or America, and that is rare.

"Before each trip, I usually spend some time reading the latest articles on the region, but I am increasingly interested in literature, film, and poetry as well. I want to tap into something more esoteric, spiritual, and intangible about the place. The central

themes come from a combination of sources: books, articles, observations and experiences with local people, and discussions with other foreigners.

"The thought of following the rivers came while I was reading a traveller's guidebook during my first trip through Uzbekistan, but I didn't start pursuing the project seriously until a year later. As I've become more familiar with the area, the idea of water as a connecting point between all the countries, both in the present and historically, has become more and more interesting."

Shooting with a Canon EOS 5D, and wherever possible travelling with a local translator, Drake gives considerable thought to finding the best ways of engaging with the countries' peoples. Writer Ilan Greenberg, with whom she works, praises her for the time she invests when approaching a community.

"Carolyn's patience with villagers in Central Asia is endless", he says. "She's the opposite of the photographer who parachutes in. She invests an enormous amount of time getting to understand what she's trying to capture."

It is this commitment to her subject, as well as openness to experience, which lends a consistency of style across her work.

"For some reason, I'm not naturally inclined to step back," says Drake. "It's something I have to keep reminding myself to do, something I should do more often." Embracing aberrations of the medium such as lens flare, and with figures filling the frame, her pictures speak tellingly of her acceptance by those she is photographing, and the resulting images welcome us, albeit briefly, into their lives, the hospitality shared.

As Drake brings her Central Asian rivers project to a conclusion, she continues to work in the region, across



Above: A baby in a crib on the floor of a house in the Ferghana Valley. Yaipan, Uzbekistan. March 2007.



Left: A boy climbing onto a platform in his home. Piles of locally grown cotton in the adjacent room will be used to make mattresses for a newly-wed couple. Karimov, Uzbekistan. March 2008.

the border in north west China's Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. For this ongoing work, she and Greenberg were awarded last year's Lange-Taylor Prize.

Their collaborative project, *Becoming Chinese: Uighurs in Cultural Transition*, will investigate how Uighur people negotiate being under the Chinese government's repressive anti-Uighur policies. They propose, 'To document the nodes of the Uighur network: the truck stops, livestock markets,

secondary schools, and county offices where Uighurs connect with each other, sometimes furtively'.

Through their characters, they will, 'Tell a story of Uighurs negotiating a path forward, those who obstruct, circumgyrate, or submit to the state's programme of Uighur cultural disappearance'. As recent events in Xinjiang have demonstrated, Drake's extraordinary photographic vision is more relevant and timely than ever.

Philip N Grover ARPS

Until 15 Nov Carolyn Drake: Photographs of Central Asia, Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford.

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