

# Jane Hilton Dead Eagle Trail



Above Cotton Logan, Cowpuncher, Peoples Valley, Arizona, 2008  
Opposite Johnny Green, Livestock Trader, Cortez, Colorado, 2006  
All Images © Jane Hilton



“They’ve all got a John Wayne story,” photographer and film maker Jane Hilton reveals of the cowboys featured in her debut book *Dead Eagle Trail: America’s Twenty-First Century Cowboys*. For the last four years Hilton has zigzagged across the Cowboy States of America in a ‘66 Mustang, following a trail from one cowboy to another across states and frontiers. Johnny Green, a livestock trader, who features in the book and is now retired, sold John Wayne his horses. All the subjects are “authentic cowboys” and, though some are now retired, it’s a case of “once a cowboy, always a cowboy,” according to Hilton. “I don’t think I met one cowboy, who said, ‘I used to be a cowboy’.”

However, in Hilton’s hands, the American cowboy stereotype is tamed, somewhat, and a reversal takes place. Hilton likens this to “flipping it on its head”, a term she uses more than once to explain her photographic strategy. The book contains over 60 colour photographs, all shot using a 5x4 inch camera, including portraits, only a few of which feature women, landscapes, and details. This makes the project as much about how personal identity is tied

to the representation of the cowboy, both as a stereotype and as a more complex construct, as it is a document of a changing way of life. “My work is about the extraordinary realities of ordinary people’s everyday lives, revealing their individual characteristics and ways of being that one so often overlooks,” she writes.

*Dead Eagle Trail* is, therefore, “not just about cowboys, it’s their interiors and their homes”, she says. “I also took pictures of road kill, landscapes, and western objects and artefacts – things that are connected to the Wild West and the American Dream,” she says. “All my work in America has had an underlying theme about the American Dream and the different aspects of American culture geared towards it. Whether documenting deer hunters, people getting married in Las Vegas and the wedding culture (which became a personal project), or legalized brothels. It’s all about what these people aspire to and the fact that they promote the idea that, ‘you can do anything in life’.”

Thus Hilton probes the promotion of this national ethos and surveys its effects but more as a “celebration



of the West from the buckaroos of Nevada to the cowpunchers of Arizona”, rather than as a critique of its inner machinations. Hilton searches for the contradictions in the propagation of the ideals of the American Dream and the reality of American society, “signs that things are not so buoyant”, as well as visual references, such as the kitsch and the unexpected, which often stem from popular culture. “Nevada is my favourite American state because it’s a dumping ground for everything people don’t want to have to face, whether it’s religion, legalized prostitution, nuclear testing, or gambling. It’s extraordinary,” she says.

Her work is regularly published in *The Sunday Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* magazines and she made a series of ten documentaries on legalized prostitution for the BBC, *The Brothel/Love For Sale*, based on two legal brothels in Nevada, the *Moonlight Bunny Ranch* and *Madame Kitty’s Cathouse*. In fact, her first trip to America was in 1988, when she assisted a commercial photographer on a three-week shoot in Arizona. It was an experience that

cemented her affection for the Wild West. “I was blown away,” she recalls. “It was the most exciting thing I’d seen in a very long time. It was the wide open spaces; it was reminiscent of films I’d seen. I grew up watching Westerns on Saturday and Sunday with my dad and siblings cuddled up on the sofa.”

The title of the book, *Dead Eagle Trail*, is inspired by “a very symbolic moment” when she found a dead Golden Eagle on the side of the road at the beginning of last year. The bird’s association with North American history, as well as its Native American symbolism, struck a chord and she tried to take a photo. Yet, the resulting image “doesn’t match up to the experience,” she offers. “There are certain things you just don’t photograph, it’s an emotional experience.” Initially, Hilton’s *Dead Eagle Trail* took her to Colorado, where she photographed the first cowboy in the series, a young man called Jeremiah Karsten, who travelled 4,000 miles alone on horseback across the States from Alaska to Mexico in pursuit of his own American dream. “It took him two and a half years. He was 17 when he started and



19 and a half when he crossed the border,” she says. Hilton photographed him in Cortez for the *Times* magazine and discovered that his achievement had won the admiration of some of the older cowboys. “He epitomized the American Dream and the older cowboys loved him for that”, and they “saw him keeping the cowboy tradition and dream alive”. He also led her on her way to the next cowboy and on to Nevada, Arizona, Utah, New Mexico, Texas and Wyoming. Hilton’s latter road trips, the last in November 2009, also gave her the chance to document a new generation of younger cowboys. These young men also stand as symbols of hope against a backdrop of decline. Ranches have been bought by big businesses with owners selling off land to survive, while livestock shows face dropping attendance as cowboys are forced to cut back and grapple with increases in the price of feed and gas, as well as the changes wrought by the impact of new technologies.

Immersed within this changing infrastructure, Hilton gently prods the cultural edges of the cowboy

myth to reveal a soft underbelly. “I never photographed cowboys outside where you always see them and never on a horse,” she says. “As you can imagine, they thought that it was very odd when I asked them if I could photograph them at home. Quite often, I’d turn up and they’d have the horses ready and I’d say, ‘No, we’re not going out on the horse, we’re going inside’. It made them uncomfortable. They’re much more comfortable on a horse.” Crossing a threshold into the cowboys’ homes, as a way of breaking down the macho stereotype, Hilton then suggested photographing some of the men in their bedrooms, a situation in which her gender paid off. “It’s contrary to everything we associate with a cowboy, so in quite a lot of the images, I put them in their bedroom. I’ve tried to capture their softer, or even, their more feminine side,” she says. One of these portraits, *Cotton Logan, Cow Puncher*, includes his pet cat and was a runner up in the 2009 Taylor Wessing Photographic Portrait Prize and is on show at the National Portrait Gallery until the middle of February.





years go on, the collection seems to get bigger.”

Thus *Dead Eagle Trail* also serves as a social and anthropological document of a world in transition. A place where the desire to collect could be linked to a need, especially as one gets older, to preserve, in the face of threat, the Cowboy way of life – its heritage, traditions and culture – through the acquisition of material objects. Later, Hilton goes full circle when she describes herself in the same way, remarking, “I’ve collected this series of cowboys. I’m a collector as much as they are.” MIRANDA GAVIN

Dead Eagle Trail will be launched at HOST Gallery, London where work will be on show from April 21st – May 21st.

Justin Anz, Olney, Texas, 2009



Ron Redford, Picketts Ranch, Benjamin, Texas, 2009  
Following Spread Laramie, Wyoming, 2006

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