

Jane Hilton Dead Eagle Trail



Above Cotton Logan, Cowpuncher, Peoples Valley, Arizona, 2008
Opposite Johnny Green, Livestock Trader, Cortez, Colorado, 2006
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“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