

## Exhibit Review:

**"Faces From An American Dream": Pattee Library,  
The Pennsylvania State University, January 7-February 28, 1996.  
Photographs by Martin J. Desht. Captions by Richard E. Sharpless.**

William Pencak  
*The Pennsylvania State University*

Visitors to the main library at Penn State during much of winter, 1996, could not help but notice Martin Desht's deeply moving and disturbing images displayed along the building's three most-traveled corridors. Taken between 1989 and 1996, these black-and-white, all 11x14 inch photographs document the physical and human tragedy of deindustrialization. The victims depicted are representative citizens who trusted their leaders to ensure that hard work and law-abiding behavior would fulfill the American Dream of prosperity and security enjoyed by their parents and grandparents. Ironically, the urban ruin and human pain so visible in Desht's images has been inflicted by the pseudo-conservative politicians of the past several decades. These people have praised communal, Christian, and family values with their lips while destroying them with their laws, which have permitted corporations to wipe out economic opportunity and its requisite infrastructure for much of the nation.

Richard Sharpless, a Professor of History at Lafayette College, has written brief, compelling captions to place the photographs in context. He retells the depressingly familiar story of job loss, depopulation, impoverishment, and blight. But even those who are tired of hearing about it all will have to stop and think when confronted with statistics, bald facts, or stunning quotations from workers presented beneath shots of the debris of one of the world's greatest industrial regions.

Desht's photographs have been exhibited under different headings at venues throughout the state, including the Russell Rotunda of the United States Senate, at Lafayette College, and at libraries, museums, universities, and union headquarters. The exhibit travels and arrangements for viewing may be made by writing to Desht at 1855A South Delaware Drive, Easton, PA, 18042.

At Penn State, the primary audience for Desht's photos were students. They had no choice, in using the library, to walk between walls lined with the faces of people and the vistas of towns near many of their homes. They were compelled either to confront or to ignore deliberately the human and environmental costs of the economic policies which frame their career choices and chances as they begin their own odysseys in the corridors of the academy. This was a disquieting experience, as I could tell from the expressions of those

— a fair number — who stopped to read the captions and look carefully at the photographs. For they were looking into one possible future which may, or may not, be theirs, based on how their generation responds as voters and leaders to a decline too many now accept as an inevitable feature of the American scene.

Desht's most effective technique is the ironical juxtaposition of two elements, usually the beautiful and the ugly, either within one photo or in the placement of two or more. An elderly former railroad worker sits on an old rusted train car, discarded, like himself, when it no longer profited the stockholders. The train and the worker are bathed in light and surrounded by what are flowers or weeds. In either case, nature seems beautiful. It triumphs over yet renders man-made tragedy more poignant (#298-19; numbers in parentheses refer to photographs in the catalogue "Factory Work" by Desht which includes many of the photographs without the captions).

Buildings dealing with the welfare of the indigent are Desht's primary signifiers of recent construction in the post-industrial rust belt. An impressive, modern Salvation Army structure with a long line of people waiting for help (#283-3), or a newly-refurbished Rescue Mission with the slogan "Christ Died for Our Sins" (#275-5) with people hanging around in front contrast sharply with numerous dilapidated factories (for instance, #202-11, #177-15, #184-14). The scarcity of cars and people in the streets of towns where many houses are boarded up or falling apart explains the crowds around the welfare agencies (#s234-7, 234-11, 230-15).

Desht also effectively demonstrates the verbal promises of the good life, which before they turned sour sustained people's long hours of work in the factories and their dedication to improving their families' chances. The sign "Safety First" is prominently displayed in an abandoned factory courtyard where a conveyor belt is about to collapse (#186-4). A cigarette ad, "Newport: Alive with pleasure!" remains on the side of an abandoned building overlooking a defunct mill in Duquesne (#236-6). A former wire mill, whose sign is blocked in front by a "Railroad Crossing" placard that seems to be crossing it out with an "X", is now a junkyard for cars (#195-5).

Most moving of all are the people, however. An industrial welder and his daughter are overshadowed by the fins of a large automobile, for many people their most valuable possession (#272-14). A painter in Blair County and his two daughters stand in front of his wooden frame house, which has one window sealed up. Their washing hangs on the front porch, its roof on the verge of collapse. A wrecked car and its parts sit in a dirt yard (#231-10). A former industrial crane operator sitting in the doorway of a building, junk visible behind him, wears a hat that proclaims "USA TODAY" followed in small letters by THE TELEVISION SHOW (#265-9). An elderly former garment worker looks back with bittersweet memories on the famous sign "Buy

American & Look for the Union Label" (#313-8).

When I wanted to select a photograph to accompany this review, however, I chose the one which appears on the front cover of this issue: "Two Youths Working Salvage, Northampton County, Pennsylvania, 1990" (#280-17). The expressions on their faces, the junk surrounding them, and the ruined building symbolize what the American Dream is turning into for so many young people today. When I requested the caption for this photo, Martin Desht told me he had written an essay relating these boys' experiences to his own. He grew up in an orphanage, the son and grandson of coal miners, the first member of his family to go to college. He only became a photographer at age twenty-nine, in 1978, when he was laid off from his job as an electrician at Bethlehem Steel. I am printing this essay as a tribute to his self-education, and to the way he has used his artistic talents to further the education of others. Perhaps the students who read this essay and view this exhibition can devise a future America that will not consist of successive waves of industrial jetsam left to rot as a handful of people who own the right pieces of paper redirect investment and destroy communities and lives as best their short-term profit margins dictate.

## Two Youths Working Salvage, Northampton County, Pennsylvania

Martin J. Desht  
*Easton, Pennsylvania*

One day Big Roy the antiques dealer asked me to take pictures of his place so he could appeal his tax assessment. "Make 'em good," he said. "I'm on fixed income and I'm serious."

When I arrived he was wire brushing an old rusted wheel from an old, ornamental coffee grinder. "Even rust fetches a dollar or two," he said, "pending who's lookin' at it."

I found he had hired two young men to help him load stuff out of the sheds and onto the truck bound for the flea market. They looked to be in their early twenties, didn't speak much, looked at me kind of warily, and when I approached them they froze like a pair of rabbits trapped in a wired cage.

"You two have a regular job somewhere?" I asked upon meeting them.

"You see it, man," replied one. "For now, anyway."

"Now?" I asked.

"We were getting \$6.15 an hour 'til yesterday down at the plastic factory. Then they came around and said all you guys pick up your pay tomorrow, Friday, at one o'clock. Like they didn't want us hanging around during their lunch hour."

"Did they say they would call you back?" I asked.

“Don’t they always? You know what they said? They said: ‘Hey Man, take a deep breath.’”

I got out of their way, sort of, and let the talk go for a minute. Laid off the day before, they weren’t in a friendly mood. I had just one more question:

“Think you’ll go back to school?”

“Takes time,” replied one.

“Takes money, too,”<sup>1</sup> said the other. And it takes, I thought, all that other stuff you don’t have: a car, insurance, purpose, a promise, a hope, a choice, and a real, real deep breath. Here were two skinny kids like me and my brother twenty, twenty-five years ago, back in the sixties, and despite the differences in our ages and the fact we had never met before, I had a feeling I knew these two kids.

Choice:

When I was fourteen my father refused to let me work in the local lumberyard, even during summers, except on weekends. He had said go read *The Dare Boys in Trenton* again, or read *Huckleberry Finn* again. But you will work the rest of your life whether you like it or not, so you’re not starting now at age fourteen. By which he meant: you’ve still got choice between *want* and *need*, and you’ve got it because you’re still a kid and I’m giving it to you. You don’t need money and be glad, very glad you don’t, yet.

In 1915 he was a “breaker boy” in the anthracite fields when he was nine. He was a nine-year-old slate-picker because of need. Ever see those pictures by Lewis Hine?, the ones with those grubby little coal mine kids gathered in front of a mine shaft like for a school football picture? There’s a face like my father’s in one of those somewhere.

Nine-year-old kids, in mines, or in cotton mills. For a parent then, choice wasn’t even a dream.

One day about a month before JFK was assassinated my father came home from work unusually tired, just sat flat-out on the day bed staring up at the ceiling. Two days later he began a thirty-day stay in the hospital. Heart attack. I was fourteen, climbing trees and rowing a boat five miles upstream just for fun, and he was beat and worn out by fifty-seven. He knew it, my sister and my brother knew it, and because some faces read like a book, I knew it too.

Three more heart attacks later, he finished a lifelong mission of self-education when he died at sixty-one. The ‘mission,’ his word, came out of desire, a want of more from life, already having the education needed for his livelihood which was factory work at forty hours a week, at forty years, with a comfortable pension at the end.

I’m glad I never worked the twenty to thirty hours in the lumberyard. It would have been a waste of youth, a waste of teenage freedom, a waste of money for junk food or junk cars I didn’t need. And besides, he was right, the books were more fun.<sup>2</sup>

But don't get me wrong. In 1967 I was one of the worst students in the Allentown School District and was proud of it; proud for six months anyway

During my last year in high school I attended classes in the morning, then thumbed or rode the bus downtown in the afternoon. By then I had a buck thirty-five an hour pot washing job at Woolworth's. But I really didn't attend the morning classes either, and that's simply because nobody cared and we were allowed to get away with it. If I did go to school, my first and usually only class was with the men down in the boiler room. It's where I learned to smoke properly, discovered a certain kind of feminine calendar art, learned how to swing a shovel full of coal, got an early though basic understanding of the thermodynamic properties of steam, and where I started dreaming about going to sea in a live steamship instead of just in books.

If the calendar girls were mere paper, "garage" art, then the boilermen were absolutely real and the most vivid, concrete human specimens I had ever met at the time.

Shoes: They wore thick-soled, black, boondocker steel tips, greasy dungarees, blue chambray shirts with greasy collars, and proudly rolled up their sleeves to flex their blue-skinned tattoos: coiled chains in Prussian-blue, 'Sweet Mother' couched in pink valentines, names of women, lovers, scratched on and scratched out. No bleeding hearts here, just biceps, bloody knuckles, blunt stumps from a cut off finger or two.

A&P coffee and cigars were the order of the day, every day: cigars were short, fat, cheap factory seconds on Mondays, White Owl New Yorkers on paydays. Chewing tobacco and snuff, besides being a filthy street habit, was flavored hay for farmers. The place smelled of burning fumes, of heat, steam, old motor oil, apple cores rotting in the pit-bottom of a steel green waste can, and if you wanted extra flavoring, you could chew on soot.

The rest was fake. Sports, pep rallies, proms. Fake. Wasn't real enough, and I wasn't going to have any part of it.

It was where the men and people were kind and good, where the men were dirty with sweat, where the talk was shared and pure and the work was hard; the boiler room was a place where, to a sixteen-year-old kid like me, the world was undeniably true and good. Excepting the art of creative profanity, this was a place free from euphemism, free of language that only masqueraded as truth.

No, it wasn't a hotbed of intellectual revolutionaries. No, it wasn't a place where all Modern Social Problems were solved. Instead it was where general knowledge got boiled down to particular wisdom. For example: the meaning of honorable work, the meaning of meaningful work, what it means to have pride in your work, and what it means to be out of work.

With an entire life of work ahead of me, I thought, well, here it is. What more do I need to know?

At school you could smell the boiler room two blocks down the hall. It was the wafting heat, the wafting power, and though I had many years training for a devout Catholic future, I thought thermodynamics was the only real power in the world. Next thing my nose was seeing things around corners and I became a classic daydreamer.

Around the corner came graduation, June, 1967, and in a hundred ways the whole world proved that I didn't know a single thing about anything.

Looking back today, the addictive hook in the boiler room was the shared control of power. The boilermen let me pretend I was one of them. They'd let me reach up, grip that black steel Chapman, that eighteen inch, hot, steel valve wheel with my puny hand and share the command of cracking steam; share the feeling of control in a world of imminent chaos. The boiler room was an extremely compressed little world that would, without slightest mercy, explode and suddenly eject five tons of school bricks into the Lehigh River, and a skilled boilerman could make that cat whine and meow like a kitten in two seconds.

At five feet, seven inches, weighing a full one-hundred and four pounds, was I reaching beyond my grasp? You bet. It was exhilarating, and the men smelled like my father coming home from Mack Trucks, and it was a kind of home away from home, and I felt I belonged, and I liked the smell of heat and live saturated steam. And one more thing: here one reached for the heat of live steam, not for mops, buckets, brooms. You didn't even think the word *janitor*. Here stood honorable members of the Royal Order of Black Seals and you didn't forget it.

For an aimless, drifty kid like me school was not only fake, it was a scam. From boiler room to wash room we had a form of legalized truancy blessed by none other than the school board. They called it the Distributive Education Program;<sup>3</sup> and it was run by a part-time teacher who doubled as a full-time local operator of a juice cannery out of an eastside basement. The scam was that he distributed cheap, high school labor and banana juice out the back of a rented garage. He save all the local retailers lots of money. He made "convenient" deals with all the local restaurants. He ran the school candy store and complained a lot about pilfering. He complained when none of us volunteered to rake his lawn, and he sent his girlfriends rolled condoms by mail. You could feel them through the envelope. But that's another story.

I kept on reading though, just for fun mind you. But nobody cared about my education. Not even me, and what stupidity that was.

Yeah, I know these two kids. I used to be just like them. No job. No money. No education. No nothing, just drifting around looking for a ship. But I was lucky, I had made friends in the 'steam' works and happened to be born in '49, not '69, and came of age in the 1970s and not, thank God, in the 1980s when

a high school education wasn't the ticket to the American Dream it used to be.

Back in '68-'70 there was a low-tech war going on. It wasn't that I was wild about going off to war, but you could sign up at the local p.o., then be all you could in the army; or suck in your gut, join the marines and enjoy being one of the few. In April of '68 I shipped aboard a destroyer for four years, met a lot of different guys from around the states—rich, poor, middle-class, smart, educated, unfortunately ignorant, plain stupid, white, black, Filipino, Hispanic. Life aboard ship taught a bit about tolerance and community, that people weren't entitled to sleazy shipboard jobs because their folks had money, that men *and* officers stink alike when there's no showers for three weeks, and in certain, narrow ways life aboard ship is a living democracy in action.

Did I like military life? After two years I hated it, like a lot of guys, but stuck to it for two more years and learned a decent salable trade, then took the job of choice when I got out.

And what choice:

In 1973 I worked in a steel mill alongside thirteen thousand others. Mack Trucks had five thousand jobs, across the river Ingersoll-Rand Pump & Compressors had three thousand jobs, and there were the small foundries, the gas cylinder factory where my uncle worked, garment mills, textile mills, AT&T, ITT, PP&L, Bell Telephone, right here in the Lehigh Valley, in Pennsylvania, in America.

Through the forties, fifties, sixties, and after the coal mines closed, my father worked the line in a truck factory with five thousand others. Like my grandfather's booking from Eastern Europe to Ellis Island, an adequate education was your ticket to the American Dream, even if the seventh grade was as 'adequate' as you got. Pennsylvania was to the American Dream what Lady Liberty was to all those folks who had arrived tired and hungry and poor with a suitcase full of dreams.

And they still come. From where? . . . Well, name your own flag.

Then again, there are people born right here who are like aliens, immigrants, in their own country. Like those black American street kids I met in a small steel town in southwestern Pennsylvania, and like these two street kids junkin' in a scrap heap in southeastern Pennsylvania.

The service economy was there back in the sixties but, chasing stock in a Sears department store?, pumping gas?, flipping burgers at some joint downtown? Were you kidding? Jobs like that were for people who didn't or couldn't know better: kids, high school dropouts, or retirees, bored pensioners, ex-steelworkers chased out of the house by their wives; Mack truckers who, after forty years of wrenching nuts and bolts, needed to keep their hands busy.

Choice? You bet life was choice, and you could get a real job, then shack up, get married if you wanted, have a kid, buy a house, a Chevy, a Ford, and your wife didn't have to work if she didn't want to.

Yeah, that was factory work.

So who got rich? No one I ever knew. Who became famous? No one I ever knew. Who paid off their house, sent their kids to college, saved a few bucks for a rainy day? Practically anybody. My uncle stepped up to a used Buick when he retired, a big white thing plugged with four bullet holes in the front fenders.

Yeah, all the neighbors laughed but, after he hit sixty-five and got his pension, he had all he needed. All he wanted. The Buick was just a big white birthday cake.

Choice? For these two kids?, and all those others who are running around the mountains calling themselves the sons of Neo-nazi pride?<sup>4</sup>

Like they said, "It's too late, man."

And they know it. And they've taken their deep breaths and they feel it gut deep inside.

After the welfare runs out, if they're *not* lucky, if they don't find some honorable means to an honorable life, in a year or two their minds will be like a pair of hard sponges left to dry out and curl up in some alley behind a Burger King, then they'll be so confused that they'll soak up anything that sounds good or perhaps quenches, just a little bit, a thirst for revenge.

They won't call it revenge, they'll just know that the bombast and hate and rhetoric tastes so good, like cool, cool water on a hot, hot day, that it satisfies well enough for now.

Who knows what they'll hear? Who knows what they'll think after a couple of years on the streets in a town like Shamokin, or North Philadelphia, Camden, Newark, South Central Los Angeles, West Side Chicago, Oklahoma City?

Bet on it: they'll find their brand of truth. They'll find their reason to believe, a reason to belong. They may even find a big lie to believe in and swear to as the only world that's real and good and kind.

Some of America's sons and daughters will tell you now: Your truth of the sixties was a lie, that to struggle for a good or even a great society was foolishness. It is *our* truth, *our* neo-individualism, *our* neo-pride of the nineties that is good, and that if it's good enough for us, it's good enough for America. For them this is their piece of shared power, their piece of shared warmth, family, and community; their thin slice of the American Dream. They will smile at your embarrassment for them, for their tattoos expressing hate. It will satisfy them to see you shudder with disgust. They have power. And they will tell you that any piece of shared power is good enough when you haven't got anything else.<sup>5</sup>

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## Notes

1. Street interview. In possession of the author.
2. See "Negative Impact of Part-Time Work on Adolescent Adjustment....," Laurence Steinberg, et al. *Development Psychology*: 1993, Vol. 29, No. 2. Many studies of part-time work during adolescence have shown that many problems arise with students engaged in such enterprise. For an abstract of the above see "Consuming Passions," *Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine*, 17 Jan. 1993.
3. Still exists in Pennsylvania. See "Student Interns Help Local Retailers." WFMZ-TV, Channel 69, Allentown, Pa., 5 p.m. News, 18 May 1993.
4. "Skinheads arrested in Shamokin (Pa.) probe." *Express-Times Newspapers*, Easton, Pa., 7 May 1993, p. B3. Pennsylvania reportedly

has more white-supremacist groups than any other state in the nation. (Over 60.) National Public Radio, 'All Things Considered,' 11 April 1995. Pennsylvania also boasts a new "growth industry": the building of new prisons continued: of new prisons—10,000 cells—to alleviate overcrowded conditions. See also "Whispers from the Walls." William Ecenbarger, *Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine*, 9 May 1993, p. 16. "America invented the penitentiary, and we still use it more than any other people in the world . . . Since 1980, the nation's prison population has increased by 150 percent. Prison is the ultimate welfare state."

5. Raphael S. Ezekiel, *The Racist Mind*. Viking: New York, 1995.