



Sean O'Hagan's best photography books of 2017

Studies of social tensions in the UK and US, rural Sweden by night and mafia countryside in Sicily were among the most striking collections of the year

Sean O'Hagan

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If America increasingly seems like a nation riven beyond repair politically, Peter van Agtmael's **Buzzing at the Sill** (Kehrer Verlag £32) evokes that ominous sense of disunity in darkly poetic images and impressionistic prose. Over the past few years he travelled extensively across the country, spending time in a rehabilitation centre for traumatised soldiers, on a Native American reservation, with Ku Klux Klan members at a flag burning and in a black-owned Louisiana bar, where an all-white audience were attending a themed "white night". An unsettling book for these uneasy times.

Likewise, in an altogether different way, Mathieu Asselin's **Monsanto: A Photographic Investigation** (Verlag Kettler \$55), an exhaustive look at the ways in which a multinational agrochemical and agricultural biotechnology corporation impacts on the lives and environments of hundreds of communities across America. Asselin spent five years delving deep into the company's history, from the use of Agent Orange during the Vietnam war to the introduction of genetically modified seeds in the late 1990s. A book about corporate impunity that unfolds through the deft interweaving of Asselin's own images and a wealth of found material, from personal testimonies to courtroom files.

American mores come under scrutiny, too, in **Deep Springs** (Mack £35) by Sam Contis, which is set in a remote desert community close to Sierra Nevada, where a small, all-male liberal arts

college has existed since 1917. Merging old photographs of its earliest students with her own, often intimate studies of their contemporaries, as well as the elemental landscape, Contis explores the traditional idea of masculinity in the American west in a subtle, thought-provoking way.



A third generation victim of the chemical Agent Orange, from Mathieu Asselin's 'exhaustive' Monsanto: A Photographic Investigation. Photograph: Mathieu Asselin

For the past two decades, the Japanese photographer Rinko Kawauchi has created luminous images of the world around her with an unerring eye for the everyday sublime. In **Halo** (Thames & Hudson £55), she broadens her gaze, portraying the Shinto rituals that occur annually at ancient Japanese holy sites and contrasting them with the natural wonder that is the winter murmuration of migratory birds along the south-east coast of England. Here, the elemental and the tranquil are portrayed in moments of otherworldly beauty.

The British photographer Stephen Gill has also shifted his gaze to evoke the magic of the natural world with **Night Procession** (Nobody Books £48). Gill placed cameras equipped with motion sensors and an infrared flash on trees in the woodland of rural Sweden, where he now lives. The resulting images of nocturnal animals in a spectral landscape have the aura of 19th-century photography. Gill writes about how he wanted to step back from the position of active observer “so that the subjects would orchestrate and perform and take on the role of author while I was likely to be sleeping. This was nature’s time to speak and let itself be felt and known.”



'A sustained atmosphere of unease': a man waiting for the bus in Palermo, from Mimi Mollica's *Terra Nostra*. Photograph: Mimi Mollica

For **Terra Nostra** (Dewi Lewis £35), London-based Sicilian photographer Mimi Mollica cast his eye over his native island, a place of deep shadows and harsh sunlight. The stark black-and-white portraits and landscapes suggest the lingering, insidious nature of mafia crime and corruption on the land and people. There is nothing bloody or violent here, just a sustained atmosphere of unease made all the more palpable by the play of darkness and light. In stark contrast, another London-based Italian photographer, Lorenzo Vitturi, follows up his acclaimed debut, *Dalston Anatomy*, with **Money Must Be Made** (Self Publish, Be Happy £45), which evokes the sensory overload of Balogun market in Lagos, an overwhelming maze of streets selling cheap plastic products, fabrics and household goods. Vitturi's mix of studio portraits, sculptural still lifes and collage is an imaginative response to an overwhelming environment where everything is used, reused, recycled and resold.

Anyone looking for a Christmas present for their Brexiter dad or Remainer mum should seek out Simon Roberts's big and beautifully designed **Merrie Albion: Landscape Studies of a Small Island** (Dewi Lewis £45). A portrait of contemporary Britain, it presents the nation in all its complexity, from city traders to Muslim worshippers, while somehow evincing a sense of place that is palpable and oddly reassuring. Shot on a medium format camera, often from an elevated point of view, Roberts sometimes makes composites of the same scene, creating images that have the theatricality of one of his inspirations, William Powell Frith, the 19th-century painter of everyday English tableaux. A book that speaks quietly and powerfully about this increasingly disunited kingdom at a pivotal moment.

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