

## One Photographer's American Journey

By Susan Lago

The Cupsaw General Store in Ringwood, New Jersey, is empty of other customers this time of day. Greta Pratt looks out the window at the view of Cupsaw Lake and sips her coffee. "Photography," she says, "is your unique perspective, your particular life experience, your way of looking at the world, and how you can use that to communicate how you think about the world to others." That desire to share her own worldview is evident in her latest book, *Using History*, published in 2005 by Steidl, which lies open on the oilcloth-covered table. Her blue eyes light up as she describes her ten-year journey of creativity and self-discovery. As she slowly turns the pages, the photographs call out to the viewer, electric with saturated color, rich textures, and humor. "I just kind of let things happen in front of me," Pratt explains. "I stand around and observe, waiting for something to happen and then when it does I try to be really ready."

Pratt was fourteen when she got her first camera, an old Japanese Neica, given to her by her father. It was love at first click and she spent her teenage years photographing family and friends. Although she went to a high school that specialized in film, she didn't consider making photography a career. "I never thought of it as a way to make money," she says, "although I just always loved it and did it." Then at the University of Minnesota, Pratt discovered photojournalism. She was working as a photo lab technician at the student newspaper to put herself through art school. One day the paper was short of photographers, so although Pratt was a "wacky art student" they sent her out anyway. Over the next few years, she continued her art works while working as a photojournalist for Reuters News Service, as well as an adjunct professor of photography. Along the way she garnered several photography awards and was a Pulitzer Prize Nominee for her work for United Press International. Then in 1994, her first book, *In Search of the Corn Queen*, a compilation of black-and-white photographs that pay homage to her midwestern roots, was published by the National Museum of American Art.

Her next book project took Pratt ten years to complete. "A lot was the learning about what I was trying to say," Pratt explains as customers start to drift in and out of The Cupsaw General Store and frying bacon mingles with the smell of coffee. "I also tried to work intuitively and feel my way through things, let them open up and present themselves to me. It took a long time to understand what it was I was thinking and what I felt." What she discovered was the ways in which American history is mythologized through our historical iconography. She started to wonder: "Who writes our history? How does it become history? And what does it mean that we choose these particular events to celebrate? Who has the power to write it down, get it recorded, get it into text books to teach to people and pass it down?" *Using History* is her attempt to answer these questions.

Pratt turns to a picture of a Civil War Reenactment taken in Fort Stevens, Oregon. In the photograph children stand in line bearing toy rifles, the leader holding a Confederate flag. In another photograph, a woman in complete Statue of Liberty regalia eats popcorn at a sporting event and in another, a car flying an American flag displays an Osama bin Laden "Wanted" poster in one rear window. These are the images that Pratt has chosen to illustrate her vision of America. "History is used in so many ways to create identity," Pratt says, pulling up the neck of her green turtleneck against the cold that seeps in through the window. The photograph adjacent to Osama bin Laden shows a reenactment of a shoot-out at the OK Corral in Tucson, Arizona. The viewer peers over the shoulders of a gray-haired couple who are gazing at a cowboy lying face-up on the ground. "So much of our national identity is based on this lone gunman riding in and making right, getting rid of the bad guys." Pratt turns the page to a photograph of a building in Natchez, Mississippi that is – improbably enough – a red-skirted mammy holding a serving tray. Laughing, she says, "Photography is a gift. Because you never know what you're going to see when you open your eyes and start looking. It's miraculous."