

The photographs of Dorothea Lange

“To make the world a place for creation”

Richard Phillips
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*Exhibited at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, January 29-March 29;
the Art Gallery of Western Australia, April 16-June 7;
and the Queensland Art Gallery, June 20-August 16*

Dorothea Lange was undeniably one of the most significant American photographers. This 85-print exhibition, although small in comparison to Lange's vast body of work, gives an overview of her social outlook, the depth of her creative vision and her place in the development of documentary photography.

Dorothea Lange (1895-1965) began her career in New York before moving, in 1918, to San Francisco, where she opened a studio and built up a reputation as a skilled portraitist.

The major turning point in Lange's life came with the onset of the Great Depression and the overnight social devastation of millions of ordinary people.

One day in 1933, whilst standing at her studio window, she witnessed scores of poverty-stricken men lining up for food handouts. Frustrated with the limited and static nature of studio portraiture, Lange decided to take her camera out and photograph the scene. These photographs, later known as the *White Angel Breadline* series, opened up a new phase in her career.

Lange's decision to photograph the human consequences of the Depression did not come from any preconceived ideas about documentary photography. She was unaware of the work of two earlier American pioneers of photo-documentary and social reform—the Danish-born Jacob Riis, who exposed the slums and squalid poverty in New York's Lower East Side in the 1880s, and Lewis Hine, who used his camera to expose child labour in the early 1900s. Her motivation came from a burning desire to change the horrendous social conditions the Depression had produced.

After a year photographing unemployment and poverty in San Francisco, Lange began working for the Farm Security Administration (FSA)—one of a number of federal programs funded under Roosevelt's New Deal. The FSA and its remarkable team of photographers, which also included Walker Evans, Ben Shahn, Russell Lee and Arthur Rothstein, amassed more than 250,000 negatives in its seven-year existence—a vast visual record of Depression-era America.

Lange's shots, published widely in newspapers and magazines throughout the US, were used to demand and secure, in many cases, immediate government assistance and other social programs. Director John Ford was so impressed with Lange's work that he used her photographs to assist in the making of his film version of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*.

It is almost impossible to exaggerate Lange's impact on 20th century documentary photography. Her subjects were homeless itinerants, agricultural labourers and their families, single mothers, bankrupted sharecroppers and the thousands of unemployed trapped in overcrowded and disease-ridden roadside camps and makeshift dwellings. So evocative were her photographs that they constitute the principal component of our contemporary visual memory of the Depression.

Lange's most famous photograph, *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California, 1936*, is shown in the current exhibition, as are other extraordinary prints from this period: *Refugee from Drought, Dust, Depression, near Sacramento, California, 1936*; *Texas Tenant Farmers displaced from the land by tractor farming, 1937*; *Death in the Doorway, California, 1938*; and *End of an Era in a Small Valley Town, California, 1938*.

Also represented is her work for the Office of War

Information and the so-called War Relocation Authority during World War II. Three months after the outbreak of war with Japan, Lange and Ansel Adams were hired to photograph the internment of 110,000 Japanese-Americans in concentration camps.

Nothing she had witnessed during the Depression prepared her for this monstrous attack on democratic rights. “What was horrifying was to do this thing completely on the basis of what blood may be coursing through a person’s veins, nothing else. Nothing to do with your affiliations or friendships or associations. Just blood,” Lange later said.

Lange’s attempts to use her camera to expose the social impact of the mass incarcerations came into conflict with the authorities. She was regarded with suspicion by the military, and even called before the War Relocation Authority on two occasions for alleged misuse of her photographs. The Wartime Civil Control Agency impounded most of her internment photographs, refusing to release them until after the war.

By contrast, Adams endorsed the government action, justified the internment as an unfortunate but necessary evil, and scorned Lange’s concerns as “advanced political liberalism.”

For most of her life, Lange defined herself as simply a chronicler and social reformer. But more than any other photographer of this period, Lange’s creative vision and deep-felt concern and sensitivity towards her subjects imbued her work with an artistic quality that elevated it beyond a simple documentary record of the Depression and the social dislocations of the war.

Sixty years on, Lange’s images remain among the most complex and deeply emotional photographs of working people ever produced. They say much about the human condition. Her subjects are not passive victims, but proud, dignified, and, above all, tenacious people, determined to overcome all difficulties, and confident that they can.

In opposition to the ambivalent and detached tone that characterises much of today’s documentary photography, Lange conceived of her work as a way of advancing the social position of the oppressed, and humanity as a whole. “The question is,” she later wrote, “whether we, as photographers, can make of our machine an instrument of human creation, whether we, as artists, can make of our world a place for creation.”



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