
PROSTERMAN, LESLIE. *Ordinary Life, Festival Days: Aesthetics in the Midwestern County Fair*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institutional Press, 1995. Pp. xi, 220. Photographs, notes, index. \$24.95 pb.

Leslie Prosterman's study attempts to redress an imbalance in the scholarship that surveys Latin American and European festivals, but overlooks indigenous festivals, like the county fair, as sources of information about folk art and folk culture. She theorizes that because the fair displays folk art, one can see the fair as an art gallery. Indeed, Prosterman argues that "the fair is art; it showcases art, embodies aesthetic principles, and acts as a forum for the development of aesthetics" (p. 6). By conducting an aesthetic analysis of the exhibits at a county fair she hoped to gain access to the values, beliefs, and ideals of a people.

She chose to focus on the Midwestern county fair as an American festival because of its long tradition and because county fairs share similar characteristics. Prosterman brought to her study the tools of an anthropologist, and did sometimes exhausting ethnographic fieldwork at the county fairs. After an initial four-year survey period, she selected six Illinois county fairs to analyze over a two-year period. Prosterman decided the heart of the fair was not the colorful midway or tractor-pull, but the judging and exhibitions. There the fruits of country people's labors were displayed, judged, and rewarded, and there the local people gathered to socialize. She observed the exhibition and the judging process, and carried out extensive interviews with fair patrons, exhibitors, judges, officials, and workers. Their voices are liberally interspersed in the text, and charming photographs of the contestants and their entries illustrate the fair for the reader.

She approaches the fair as a cultural icon by first explaining the characteristics of a typical county fair, when it is held, and the layout of the fair grounds. She finds cultural meanings in the way the fair separates the farm exhibits from the midway, and sees it as embodying tensions between order and disorder, permanence and transiency, everyday safety and the thrill of the unknown. The

second chapter briefly sketches out an overview of the history of the fair in Europe and the United States, and explains the organization and the funding of the contemporary county fair.

The middle three chapters of the book contain the heart of her argument that the construction of exhibition categories, the ritual of the judging, and the judge's aesthetic criteria express what the community values. Prosterman privileges the local influences in constructing categories and criteria, giving less weight to mass market sources such as trade publications, craft magazines, breeder's association, and the state extension, which also shape the establishment of judging standards. She sees the judging process as a ritual performance in which standards are set for future work. Because judges use a set of mental criteria drawn from everyday life, she concludes from a study of the exhibits that the community prizes consensus: "middles rather than edges, consonance rather than dissonance, and symmetry rather than caprice" (p. 165). The book closes with a consideration of the meaning of the fair in everyday life by arguing that the winners represent reliable breeds of livestock and varieties of plants, and that prize-winning bakers find success marketing their goods in the community.

One of the most problematic aspects of the book is the question of where an analysis of aesthetics can take us. When she states that the fair highlights what the community values, instead of human ideals she means what will sell. The exhibits certainly articulate a set of community standards as to how a cow should look or how brownies should taste. However, if we want to know the values of a rural people, we might more profitably visit a church or school, or attend a town meeting, rather than wander through displays of canned produce or macramé wall-hangings. Had she consulted the growing literature on rural history, she might have been able to deepen her analysis of rural culture beyond a preference for consensus.

At times the discussion takes the festivity out of the fair. For example, Prosterman writes so straightforwardly about odd categories—the deformed vegetable, the pumpkin show, the Box-Cake-Mix-Up—that we wonder if she is writing partly tongue-in-cheek. Not so, we discover, when she tells us that these categories "comment on and release the participants from the distilled concentration and the simulation of the business of everyday life" (p. 99). This is just one example of how the use of anthropological theory and jargon can obscure the main line of the argument about the fair as a folk festival.

The reader interested in the county fair as recreation or sport will have to look elsewhere. Nevertheless, this book is an admirable effort to demystify the county fair as a folk festival. Based on inventive research and grounded in anthropological theory, it broadens our understanding of folk art and contributes to our understanding of the meaning of the county fair in ordinary life.

—SUSAN S. RUGH
Brigham Young University