

As a teenager, Jacob's imagination had long since romanticised stories about counterculture and the Civil Rights movement in the US. So, in 1967, when he was expelled from the Royal Guard for refusing to shoot a gun, a door actually opened for him to make of political activism a full-time lifestyle. Three years later, he left his native country of Denmark for North America. And that's when his backpack adventure began: "While in Canada, I wanted to go to Guatemala to join the freedom fighters because [President] Eisenhower and [Vice President] Nixon had overthrown the only democratically elected government Guatemala had ever had and started a bloody repression. However, on September 4, 1970, Salvador Allende was the first leftist to win a free election in Chile. Therefore, I was also thinking of going down there to support his revolution and income redistribution in favour of the poor," says Holdt. "I had no clear idea about my goal but in 1971, I got sidetracked while going through the USA."

That was nearly 50 years ago. What began as a rebellious departure from his father's pastoral legacy inevitably evolved into an advocacy for humanitarianism all over the world. Jacob Holdt never found the guerillas in the mountains of Guatemala. And if he did, he says that he likely would have been killed. Instead, Jacob found another way to fight. Upon Jacob's arrival to the US, his preconceived notion of the Free Speech Movement was shattered by the harsh reality of the oppressed. He quickly learned that the social infrastructure in the US was deeply rooted in the blurry lines of hatred and misunderstanding.

So, what did he do? Naturally, he threw conventional wisdom to the wind, hitchhiked through a whole bunch of crime-ridden neighbourhoods and snapped countless photos of his interactions with political activists, criminals, murderers, Ku Klux Klan members, Black Panther Party members, and all of the beautiful everyday people in between. The images that he captured would go on to impact the world in a way that very few have since. But the stories that accompanied them were so captivating to the strangers he would often share them with, which eventually led to the making of his first slideshow and book, *American Pictures*. The publication made him a breakout star in the world of photography and the college lecture circuit in the US. The book became so influential that it landed him a place on the KGB's radar before Jacob tried to use the content to counter the actions of his political nemesis, Ronald Regan, in 1984.

*American Pictures* provided Jacob's students, critics and supporters with a colourful illustration of his philosophy on how to break prejudicial barriers with love, empathy and an open dialogue. According to Jacob himself, the best way to overcome racism is to "simply move in with those you fear." Over the course of the last half century, the world has been able to live vividly through the legendary activist with long hair and his trademark, a braided beard. Since Holdt has dared to

venture into places that most people could only dream or have nightmares of. In fact, he would often seek out cities with the highest murder rate in order to find people to befriend and learn from. Instead of looking for people to fight, he brought them together. His stories are almost too extravagant to be true. And his photographic evidence is almost too true to process.

Jacob Holdt isn't done leaving his mark on the world just yet. His upcoming book, *Roots of Oppression*, is another compelling piece of work that documents his experience with some of the most polarizing figures in America's ongoing culture war. For this issue, we caught up with the photographer and discussed a wide variety of topics – from his hopes for the Biden Administration to the story behind the making of his very own KBG museum in Denmark. Holdt also opens up about his strong support for the LGBTQ+ community and the connection between #BlackLivesMatter and #StopAsianHate.

Miguel Costa: What events in your early life set you on the path towards being an advocate for anti-hate?

Jacob Holdt: For me, it was the Vietnam War that woke me up and made me critical of society. I came to the United States because I was an activist in Denmark. But suddenly I had to flee. I wanted to go to Latin America to become a guerilla fighter – I was so radical at the time. First I moved to Canada to work on a farm for a year. I had no interest in the United States at the time.

First, I tried to hitchhike from Canada through the South, but I got so scared. I met the wonderful American youth at the time and they said: "You can't hitchhike through Mississippi, they kill long-haired people like you." So, therefore, I went back to Canada, hitched across North America and took the safe route through California. I ended up in San Francisco and on my first day I was raped by a Black man; three days later, I was assaulted by three Black gunmen who robbed me at gun point. They all had so much anger. This is something I had never experienced before. That got me interested in Black America, and I never ended up in Latin America (laughs).

MC: Being attacked and raped by people from any ethnic group is something that would provoke anger, fear and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in most people. So why did those attacks increase your interest in the African American community?

JH: I was curious. I thought, where is all the hatred coming from? And little by little, that led me into the Black world. During that time, I also had the luck of being invited into Angela Davis' Che-Lumumba club, which was romanticised in Europe. So, in my experience, I was both met with anger and the constructive struggle against oppression. That was the salvation for me. In my first couple of years in the USA I was attacked constantly by criminals – robbed, beaten up, and so on. So it took me a

while to get over my fear. But when I learned to no longer fear people, I realised that this was the same as sending messages of love to people who had never met love before. From then on, Black people opened up to me. Even the worst criminals and murderers took me by the hand to show me around in their world of pain. When I learned positive thinking and non-violent communication skills instead of running away, they never attacked me again. Crime got ten times worse over the years, but I was never since physically attacked. You have to learn to listen to where the pain is coming from. If people can feel that you have compassion for them, they melt. That is the best way of taking the gun away from people. It's my own self-defence.

MC: Let's fast forward to about a decade and a half later. One of the first American lectures that you gave was in Jane Fonda's house in Santa Monica in 1978 for her invited Hollywood promoters. Can you tell us how you went from being expelled from high school in Denmark to filling out lecture halls at some of the most prestigious universities in the United States?

JH: Kicked out of school? Yeah. But there is very little connection... I realised years later that the reason I'd been kicked out was that I suffered from Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. My ex-girlfriend, Marly Sockol, diagnosed me in the 1990s. She also said an interesting thing: ADHD is characterised with excessive risk-taking. That's why so many people in prison are ADHD victims. She once said to me, "You've never had any fear of approaching all kinds of people." To which I replied, "Well, I always thought that having faith in people is what makes you that way. But now you're telling me that I made my book because I was sick in my head?" And she said yes! (Laughs). But there's some truth in that. I had romanticised the mantra "You must have faith in the best of people and distrust the worst, otherwise, the worst will prevail." But she saw it in a different way. I couldn't foresee the consequences of my actions. I didn't fear walking into different situations, but I learned that the less fear I had, the less negative thinking I would project to traumatized people. By seeing them as victims – as 'good' – instead of 'bad people', the more I would disarm them and win them over since all people have a need to feel loved rather than feared and despised. So, it all ties together. Without my ADHD, thanks to which I had the luck of being kicked out of high school, I would have never become a vagabond. I would have been studying theology to become a minister like five generations of my ancestors. So with my handicap I was lucky to end up on this road and learn anti-hate in the process.

MC: You've travelled the world in an endless quest to educate, combat racism, end war and provide resources to the less fortunate. How has working with CARE

(Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere) enhanced your ability to help people living in developing nations?

JH: That was another way of working against racism. It came very late, in 1991. By that time, *American Pictures* had become such a success that money from my books and slide shows was going to different countries in Africa – especially to support the struggle against Apartheid. When I tried to hitchhike around Africa trying to find different projects we could support, I realised by staying with several Danish aid workers that there was a lot of racism involved in aid work and development aid. In many instances, they were highly educated and fenced off from the general population in places like Tanzania, Zambia and Kenya. Some would even give the guards orders to shoot to kill in case somebody tried to break in. I saw a tremendous amount of racism down there, because the aid workers lived in luxury compared to the people they were down there to help. They developed racism by being separated from the people they were serving. So, I felt that if I continued to do that kind of aid work in Africa, I would develop the same racist mentality. I've always said that if you're prejudiced against anybody, you should just move in with them, and they did the exact opposite. So, I gave up development work for about ten years.

Then one day, I got an invitation from Dr. Charles Godfrey (from CARE Canada). He had a meeting in Copenhagen and invited me. In some way he started *American Pictures* by inviting me to work on his farm in Canada 20 years earlier. When I visited the CARE office, they asked me if I would like to do some information work for them. I said: "You can send me down there to look at your projects, but I felt there is so much racism in development aid that I will not promise to work for you." So they sent me to Bolivia, and it was there that I learned that CARE had a different approach. They don't send highly educated white people out among the natives. No. Usually, the director of the CARE programme comes from another developing nation. Their way of working involves listening to the villages' needs, and after endless discussions with their people, they develop the appropriate projects. But they have to do it themselves. The projects are not over their heads by international corporations, so to me, that took racism out of the equation. That is why I started working with CARE. Another reason was that, by that time, I had been standing onstage in front of thousands of people every day as a big hero at universities across the US. And it isn't safe for your own mind's sake to be cultivated into someone who feels that they can walk on water. I needed to just be anonymous, and I felt that way working for CARE. Among the poor peasants nobody knew me, and that is the best way to get your feet on the ground and get away from a kind of fame, which is not good for your own head. I needed that, mentally. I never got paid by CARE, and I'm still an ambassador 30 years later.