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PHOTO-OP An Ocean Apart, a World of Difference

By AMANDA FOREMAN Photographs by TINA BARNEY Published: August 21, 2004

In a relationship as complicated as America's with Europe, where politics, history and culture collide, politicians and analysts have but a limited role in defining its meaning. Exposure of its more subtle aspects requires the skill of an artist, who can explore the realms of the half-conscious, where the indefinable and the inexpressible reside.

Tina Barney, a photographer known for chronicling the lives of the American upper class, has spent the past several years photographing European aristocrats. Although visual feasts in themselves, the photographs are also cultural artifacts, containing vital clues to understanding the American discourse.

After all, the tensions that exist now between the United States and Europe are not simply a matter of political differences, whether over Iraq, Israel or the Kyoto agreement. The psychological chasm between the New World and the Old has always defied easy crossing. Alexis de Tocqueville - who formulated the idea of "American exceptionalism" - saw much in 1830's America to praise. But he despised the way its politicians took it upon themselves to lecture Europeans on liberty and freedom. He suspected that it was a gnawing insecurity that made them posture so. "Do not lead an American to speak of Europe," he wrote. "He will ordinarily show great presumption and a rather silly pride."

It may be a truism to say that Americans and Europeans regard each other with deep ambivalence. But it is unavoidable. Their respective attitudes spring from a volatile combination of jealousy and admiration, mistrust and understanding, ignorance and familiarity. However, America carries the extra burden that its founders specifically rejected the aristocratic system that underpinned European society. Castles, titles and hereditary privileges, therefore, provoke a unique American reaction, one that combines guilty fascination and pious revulsion. Until the 1860's, American ambassadors in London had to appear at court in plain, black coats - a stark and intentional contrast to the court dress worn by every other member of the diplomatic corps.

The dilemma continues. It does not matter whether a European would recognize "Europe" in these photographs of aristocrats at play. (All her subjects posed on the condition that they not be named.) Her pictures do not speak European truths, but American ones. Of the six photographs shown here, the most alien is that of the eight English schoolboys in their Eton College uniform. It neatly encapsulates the ambiguous nature of America's feelings toward Britain, its staunchest ally. "I HATE England," wrote Nathaniel Hawthorne during one of the petty quarrels that marred Anglo-American relations in the 1850's. "Though I love some Englishmen, and like them generally, in fact."

The unblinking gaze of the Etonians embodies the fear that despite everything, the British still consider themselves superior to the Americans. After all, the English have harbored equally ambivalent feelings ever since the 13 colonies became a nation. In a notorious essay that soured relations for at least a generation, Sydney Smith, the renowned wit, gave the fear its voice when he condemned American culture as worthless and its democracy a sham. "Who reads an American book," he wrote in 1820. "Or goes to an American play? Or

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looks at an American picture or statue. Under which of the old tyrannical governments of Europe is every sixth man a slave?"

Conversely, the actions in the other five images, whether it is the Austrian girl arranging flowers or the Frenchman attending a country show with his dog, all have an American equivalent. The subjects therefore possess a superficial familiarity. But in every photograph the high arts are mingled with the ordinariness of everyday life in a manner that is intrinsically European. The Italian women eat cake in front of a classical statue. The German granddaughter leans her arm against a display case of 18th century figurines. The Spaniard sits in a centuries-old room while a sculptor puts the finishing touches on his bust. This is a world of ancient refinement, of the ties born through heritage and lineage. In this world, America is simply irrelevant. It is by chance, not design, if their interests meet.

The photographs can be interpreted as suggesting that the American heart will never touch the European soul. The former, Europeans say, is driven by money, the latter is shaped by tradition.

It should be no surprise, therefore, that the French assign equal blame to Britain for propagating the Anglo-Saxon values of self-advancement and competition. The British have always been less squeamish about American consumerism and more envious of its large refrigerators and modern plumbing. When Anthony Trollope visited the United States during the Civil War, he was fascinated by its unapologetic celebration of wealth. "I have never walked down Fifth Avenue alone without thinking of money," he wrote. "I have never walked there with a companion without talking of it."

Tina Barney's photographs cannot solve the conundrum that is America's transatlantic relationship. But they are a valuable reminder to look beyond the obvious. The British are easier to criticize precisely because their culture is more readily accessible. In contrast to their European counterparts, those Etonians are far more likely to get jobs with American banks, fight alongside American troops and marry American women - another time-honored British tradition. We cannot choose our relations. Nor, it seems, can we choose our allies.

Amanda Foreman is the author of "Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire" and a forthcoming book about Britain's involvement in the American Civil War. Tina Barney, a photographer, will be the subject of a one-person show at the Barbican Art Galleries in London in 2005.

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