

The Roma Journeys
by Ken Grant
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Charlotta's sleeping infant is held in a patterned knotted hammock. Next to a railside escarpment, between trees that root themselves deeply in the earth of an adopted country, this young unblemished life will grow. Close to a mother who will shield her from the extremes of a St Petersburg winter, and a father who will exchange scrap from the land for nourishment, the family will mature among a people that, in a watchful and nervous age, remain at the edge of a more cared-for world.

Joakim Eskildsen's substantial new book opens with this tender and poignant observation. Perhaps signalling an ambition to work with a greater warmth and intimacy among a stigmatised, widely spread community, Eskildsen's collaboration with his partner, the writer and poet Cia Rinne, is a move beyond the cursory, opportunist representations that photographers, for whom the Roma people have long held a fascination, have so often settled for.

The book, at over 400 pages, is indeed a committed and ambitious statement by both publisher and contributors. Its distinctive shape and carefully chosen materials successfully negotiate the extravagant freedoms that have been deployed in Finnish photo-book design over the past 25 years and, as such, it is a deep, sprawling and engaging work. In considering the Roma, the book touches upon approaches that Eskildsen has previously used in an earlier work, *iChickenMoon*. Again, it is a collaborative work, layering the photographs with essays and field recordings of music and the incidental activities of Roma life. Eskildsen and Rinne initially undertook the project in 2000, and until 2006 they moved through Roma communities in seven countries – working over extended periods to articulate a response to a people who, to use a phrase from Günter Grass' eloquent and emotive introduction, live “somewhere beyond all provident care”.

Each chapter shares a structure that moves from panoramic monochrome to the earthen and saturated colour of medium format. While the wide scenes evoke a sense of interaction and activity, it's the application of colour itself that distinguishes Eskildsen's work. Rich, ink-laden and dark – the photographs are often made at dusk or in shallow light, allowing a vivid sense of territory and the adornment of body and interior to dominate. The colour seems to shift as the photographer travels. It becomes particular to each region, emphasising characteristics, like the blue-greys of Finland, or the ochre sands and pink twilight of Rajasthan, to significant effect. The photographs extend into large, generously edited series, often with the sense of family dynamics and architecture foregrounded through repetition – rather than perhaps the iconic stoicism we have enjoyed in Koudelka's early work.

Eskildsen has found a voice that manages to merge the formal portrayal of washing scenes in Rajasthan – as still and laden in purpose as a 19th century Felice Beato plate – with the most contemporary sense of a frayed, unsettled landscape. Furthermore, the portrayal of order, warmth and progress within the family successfully extends the thoughtful journalism of Isabel Fonseca, whose earlier essays (previously published as *Bury Me Standing*), seemed preoccupied with the anxiety, social mistreatment and inequality of Roma communities in a manner that Eskildsen, though conscious of, is purposefully free from any obligation to labour.

Beyond the copious portraiture that dominates this work, it's perhaps the photographs of the land that add so much. Eskildsen's colour photographs of the villages and wider landscapes are exquisite and singular, taking him – and us – somewhere fresh and significant in photography. They show how a community functions, how it manages itself, how its people work, survive and even how night falls upon it... It's here, with attempts to suggest something of the structure and roots of the Roma communities, that the work becomes such strong, evocative and exciting territory in itself, and a book of no small achievement.