

Exhibit by James Southard: Why Buy the Cow

By Kathy Black

I am still surprised by the clarity of seeing something new through an artist just arriving in Johnson, even after my 28 years here. James Southard came to the Vermont Studio Center for an artist's residency in 2015 to take photographs and he returned 2 more times. Southard's photographs of a Johnson, Vermont dairy farm and family, Warren and Tara, with their cows, capture the texture and the challenge of the moment. This work is on exhibit at Institute 193 in Lexington, KY, titled "Why Buy the Cow".

Clear greens shine through the overcast day that is quintessential northern Vermont- green, green and not too much sunshine. The warm reddish brown and white of the cows is a striking contrast.

The setting, whether captured or posed (Southard does both), holds the feel of the work of a farm, the ground, the temperature, the day, the cow's hide on Ila's arms and neck. Southard presents the family's directness, too, everyone is looking at us, except Ila who lays her cheek dreamily on the calf's back.

Clothes tell the story. Ila in her sweat shirt as she hugs the calf, Tara and Warren Jr. in their down jackets with bare feet. You can feel the cold mornings even with a warm day. Shirts, too, the three photos of Warren's shirts, short-sleeve, cotton, button down shirts feel like they are comfortable when you get hot from work or as the day warms up.

It is an interesting moment to witness these photographs, with so many things paused, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Livelihoods are on hold or, in some cases, forever changed. Thomas Dairy, nearly a century old, fifth generation dairy processing plant in Rutland, Vermont, closed in September due to the pandemic. Elizabeth Glass notes in



James R. Southard, *Ila with Calf*, 2018, digital photograph. 15.75 x 22.5 inches



James R. Southard, *Tara and Warren Jr. (mother and son)*, 2018, digital photograph, 34.5 x 34.5 inches

the introduction to the exhibit that the challenges to family farms and the dairy industry are not new and they continue to slowly weed out the small farmers. This tension makes the visceral quality of the photographs all the more striking. It is a tricky thing, commenting on another's situation with your outside eyes. Sometimes, the photographer or commentator misses the thread, telling mostly their own story. Southard made room for the family's story in his work. He captured the texture, temperature and sweat of the work even at this remove. The portrait of Warren is compelling, we can feel that he has questions, that he knows how to work hard, and that he will make his choices. The exhibit speaks directly to this moment because Southard captures the

changes and challenges facing the small dairy farmer that we all are now confronting as our world shifts unsteadily to face the pandemic and the ensuing economic fall out. Focusing on this family and this farm, Southard captures the essence of our plight.



James R. Southard, *Warren (farmer)*, 2018, digital photograph, 27 x 18 inches



Clockwise from top left: James R. Southard, *Shirts 1 - 4*, 2018, digital photographs, 13.5 x 9 inches