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# The Road to Nowhere?

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Photography has a long history of reflecting in a documentary way, or questioning in an artistic way, the zeitgeist. Among the most remarkable examples in twentieth-century U.S. photography are the 180,000 photographs produced between 1936 and 1943 for the history section of the U.S. Farm Security Administration under Roy Stryker. With visual integrity and some notable artistic strategies, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Gordon Parks, and forty-one other now highly regarded photographers set out to make the economic crisis public. Subsequent decades were no different. In the mid-fifties Swiss photographer Robert Frank famously exposed a racially divided America in his 1958 book *The Americans*. In the 1960s such photographers as Garry Winogrand, Diane Arbus, and Lee Friedlander emerged. Winogrand's chance observations of daily life delved far beneath their whimsical appearance, Arbus analyzed a populace hidden beneath the idealized surface of the era, and Friedlander sought to understand the decade by looking straight at it without theoretical or academic filters. This period also brought innovators in color photography like William Eggleston and Stephen Shore, who challenged the tradition that saw black and white work as the only serious photography for social observation. The 1970s brought photographers like Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, and Frank Gohlke, who, like Friedlander, produced unromantic descriptions of the American landscape, both social and physical, but with a more a direct concern for environmentalism, a questioning of capitalism, and an interest in national identity. The Reagan era, characterized by low taxes and corporate raiders, was illustrated strikingly by Tina Barney's portraits of the American wealthy. And the 1990s explosion of unbridled American consumerism was quintessentially documented by German artist Andreas Gursky in his large, complex images of endless rows of Nike shoes and garishly illuminated tiers of candy.

The geopolitical and economic tumult in the first decade of the new millennium, regarded by some as the close of the American Century, has similarly left its signature on contemporary U.S. photography. Each of the eighteen photographers in the exhibition *THE ROAD TO NOWHERE?* makes work that, while revisiting enduring American themes, calls into question the actual trajectory of our long-term national projects.

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In the short span of fewer than ten years, the profound self-confidence of the late 1990s, characterized by the United States' apparent geopolitical hegemony after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and a robust New Economy erected upon Silicon Valley technological innovation and Wall Street financial power, has been displaced by extreme anxiety about the fundamental economic instabilities and environmental degradations wrought by unfettered capitalism. America's celebrated "unipolar moment" increasingly appears to have been just that, a moment, whose tranquil triumphalism was soon pierced by the September 11 attacks, the ensuing complicated military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the spectacular implosion of the country's financial system. A belief in the seeming unassailability of the U.S. model among even the mainstream population has now given way to a sense of vulnerability as unemployment rises and as broad-based participation in the country's rising prosperity increasingly appears to have been illusory, resting on a credit-induced property bubble.

Like the photographers working in earlier decades discussed above, the majority of the artists in *THE ROAD TO NOWHERE?* might usefully be thought of as "cultural documentarians," defined here as those taking an artistic approach—whether objective or subjective—to understanding a particular society and culture, in this case the United States of America. Some manage this emphasis on U.S. life with directness and others with irony or humor. Through photography and video, they address a diversity of related themes including economic insecurity, race, war, and the contemporary American landscape. While the work is oftentimes critical, a quintessentially American optimism is evident throughout.

#### THE ECONOMY

In the early 2000s, the United States was marked by extreme rates of consumption and the "War on Terror." Wartime political leaders generally seek to strike a balance between the needs of civilians at home and the soldiers in the field. The Bush Administration, however, chose to fund an expensive war while urging American consumers to spend, a phenomenon facilitated by cheap credit and record low mortgage rates. In 2005 personal savings in the United States fell into negative territory for the first time since the Great Depression.<sup>1</sup> But consumers didn't feel the pressure to stop spending until the credit market imploded in 2008. Mortgage delinquencies, foreclosures, and unemployment soared, and the retail market plummeted. The photographs of Brian Ulrich, Tim Davis, Greta Pratt, and Eirik Johnson offer singular observations of U.S. consumer culture and the new economic insecurity.

Brian Ulrich has vividly illustrated the rise and fall of consumer culture in the United States since President George W. Bush encouraged citizens to boost the economy through shopping after the attacks on September 11, 2001—thereby equating consumerism with patriotism. Ulrich initially captured excessive consumption in the

bustling big-box retail stores. With the recent financial decline, the consumption-based model of the late twentieth century has suffered, transforming communities, the environment, and the American urban landscape. The title of series *Dark Stores, Ghost Boxes and Dead Malls* (2008–2009) are taken from retail industry terms for emptied, vacant, and dying retail stores. Ulrich's recent work seeks these out and records the remnants of a consumer world now abandoned and stripped of their brand and identity. Ulrich's pictures serve as reminders of the futility of consumption without foresight.<sup>2</sup>

Looking at retail from a different but related perspective, Tim Davis examines the increasingly vivid presence of commercial interests in small-town America. Photographing at night using only the available light from nearby street lamps and parking lots, Davis explores how illuminated retail signs leak into consumer consciousness and literally reflect upon the American landscape. Illuminated Dunkin' Donuts, McDonalds, KFC, and Jiffy Lube signs are found reflecting off of houses in small towns or suburbia. Davis states, "In all my work, light is cultural and political. It is put there by someone for a purpose—to invite citizens to share their money with corporations, to keep workers working, and to, in a sense, visually describe democracy."<sup>3</sup>

In the 1770s, on the eve of the American Revolution, Patrick Henry uttered the words, "Give me liberty or give me death," enshrining the word "liberty" as a descriptor of the American experience. Over a hundred years later, to celebrate the centennial of the United States, the Statue of Liberty was given to the American people by the French. This monumental statue, portraying a woman escaping the chains of tyranny, has become a universal and ubiquitous symbol of the United States. In 2008 the Liberty Tax Service embarked on a nationwide advertising campaign by dressing workers in Statue of Liberty costumes and having them wave banners on street corners to attract clients. Fascinated by the interpretations of U.S. history embedded in American society, Greta Pratt decided to speak with the wavers—in fact, day laborers—she encountered. Some were disabled and homeless, and almost all were seeking full-time work and struggling to make ends meet in the current economic crisis. Similar to some of Arbus's portraits in the 1960s, Pratt has used the often desolate urban environment as her backdrop to highlight the individual rather than the employer or employee.<sup>4</sup>

While Ulrich, Davis, and Pratt are focusing on the recent repercussions of the current economic crisis, Eirik Johnson observes communities in the U.S. Pacific Northwest that have been suffering for decades. Since 2005 Johnson has photographed throughout Oregon, Washington, and Northern California, capturing the tenuous relationship between industries dependent on natural resources and the communities they support. For nearly 150 years, timber had been the leading industry in the region, but the adverse environmental impact of these declining industries has been increasingly at odds with the contemporary ideal of sustainability. In Johnson's words, "Homes lie vacant and storefronts are closed indefinitely. Town streets are empty other than the

occasional teenagers who wander with no particular destination. They recall a young Kurt Cobain who spent his high school years drifting and struggling for purpose in the mill town of Aberdeen, Washington. An eerie, unhurried mood pervades these communities as they search for their own refashioned sense of purpose.”<sup>5</sup> Through landscapes, portraiture, and still-lives, Johnson has revealed a place imbued with an uncertain future and communities no longer built upon the riches of massive old-growth forests.

## RACE AND CLASS

As photography has evolved, its ability to offer neutral depictions has been much debated, from whether there is such a thing as the objective camera, to questions of the very desirability of neutrality, especially when it comes to conveying the controversial. During the 1970s and 1980s, this issue of oversimplified neutrality versus the racism found in clearly subjective depictions of race and class in America became an important area of study for art historians attempting to understand how photography actually works.

Throughout her life, Myra Greene has been questioned about her accumulation of white friends, as if her African-American heritage should dictate a particular social circle. Conversations about race in the United States tend to focus on the position of the “other,” often against ideas of whiteness, a concept that is rarely openly discussed. Greene’s project *My White Friends* (2008) explores the challenges of describing race in any guise. Greene’s subjects are confidants, mentors, and peers who have helped shape her understanding of her identity, even though their racial profiles are radically different. Greene’s photographs ask the viewer to consider where whiteness resides. Is it in gesture or material environment? In some images the environments suggest traditional arenas of whiteness, dictated by a sense of wealth and power, while others are more ambiguous. The subjects’ gestures vary from showing ease to betraying vulnerability, and their gazes shift from evasive to confrontational. Greene’s photographs force the black photographer, her white friends, and the general viewer to examine friendship as well as stereotype.<sup>6</sup>

Sheila Pree Bright explores suburban life within the African-American culture. Although suburbia was at one time synonymous with white flight, photographed humorously by Bill Owens in the 1970s and surrealistically by Gregory Crewdson in the 1990s, Bright’s subtle *Suburbia* project (2005–2007) contrasts the U.S. media’s projection of stereotypical African-American attempts to become “suburban” with a more realistic picture of middle-class African-American life. Bright seeks to explore the variations in an existence that subverts the stereotype rather than accepting the television-based fiction. Her images are as much about the assumptions of perception as the construction of identity.<sup>7</sup>

In documenting graffiti in the northeastern United States, Jeff Brouws has discovered that urban environments are one of the few places in the United States where political viewpoints are expressed directly—unlike in Europe, where one encounters sociopolitical commentary almost everywhere. Quoting Martin Luther King Jr.’s “violence is the language of people that haven’t been heard,” Brouws’s text-based project *Language of the Unheard* (2006–2008) explores the political and vernacular expression of the language-filled cityscape. Chronic poverty and racial segregation don’t register in the consciousness of most Americans, and poor urban inhabitants often feel invisible and forgotten. The graffiti in Brouws’s photographs pithily expresses the social realities of the inner city and directly confronts societal issues such as race and poverty.<sup>8</sup>

## WEAPONS AND WAR

Critics such as Susan Sontag have questioned the effectiveness of photography as a recorder of war—be it to promote or prevent armed conflict. Many iconic images celebrated as having great social power have been questioned or exposed as not what they seem. And yet a very real picture of a helicopter gunner responding to the death of a comrade in Vietnam clearly had a huge effect when published in *Life* magazine. Many photographers, including those whose work is in this exhibition, have sought to reveal indirectly their feelings about war.

Triggered by the attacks on September 11, 2001 and the claim that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and posed a threat to world security, the United States launched wars in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, and in Iraq on March 20, 2003. The United States has embedded photojournalists with military forces in both Afghanistan and Iraq, but much of the imagery that is released by the media is censored and sanitized by a government hoping to control the story and by editors with political concerns. Although An-My Lê’s petition to be an embedded photographer in Iraq was denied, in 2003 she was granted permission to photograph U.S. troops performing training exercises in preparation for deployment to Afghanistan and Iraq. The series *29 Palms* (2003–2004) takes its name from the Marine base in Southern California’s Mojave Desert where Lê photographed American soldiers both rehearsing their own roles and playing the parts of their adversaries. They were occasionally asked to dress up and act as Iraqi police and civilians, and sometimes linguists wearing traditional Iraqi clothing were brought in to create verbal confusion in Arabic. The military housing was tagged with mock anti-American graffiti, and fake villages had been built of particleboard. Lê’s pictures from *29 Palms* in many ways subversively mirror the media’s sanitized view of the two wars. They present no blood, no gore, no cruelty, no shock. They simply show the preparations for battle. Mountains and desert dominate the series, their vastness making the elements of war appear small and toylike. Soldiers almost disappear into the landscape, and Lê’s work rarely shows us their faces or provides hints of their emotional states or dispositions.<sup>9</sup>

David Oresick offers a raw, transparent, and seemingly authentic view of war from the perspective of those closest to it. *Soldiers in Their Youth* (2009) is a series of montages assembled from videos found on the Internet that were created by American soldiers and civilians reacting to the war in Iraq. The project is divided into two sections: part one, *Soldiers in Their Youth*, is made from footage of soldiers on the ground, and the second part, *After the War*, examines the lives of veterans and their families after combat experience. By making editorial selections from hundreds of clips, then cutting, juxtaposing, and, perhaps most significantly, changing the context in which the images are viewed, Oresick has created works where new meanings are made. Blank white spaces interrupt the video to give the viewer time to reflect or to anticipate what will be seen next, and to illuminate the space within, making the viewer aware of his or her own presence even though the official position is to keep war remote.<sup>10</sup>

During the Cold War, the ordinary citizen had very little contact with long-range nuclear bomber aircraft or intercontinental ballistic missiles, and nobody attempted to enter this secretive world. Influenced by Wim Wenders's 1997 film *The End of Violence* in which crime is stopped by surveillance cameras installed on every street corner in Los Angeles, Jeff Brouws, with his photographic typology of surveillance cameras throughout the United States, has revealed a ubiquitous presence of monitoring in public spaces and questioned how that has affected our privacy. With its Orwellian tone, heightened by homeland security rhetoric, the surveillance camera emerges as a symbol of the government's monitoring of its citizens.<sup>11</sup>

Inspired by the methods of early astronomers Kepler and Galileo, who documented the previously unseen moons of Jupiter in the early seventeenth century, geographer Trevor Paglen began a project of photographing classified American satellites in the night sky. Paglen has extended and developed this body of work by translating observational data into a software model that describes the orbital motion of classified spacecrafts. With these tools, he can calculate the position and timing of overhead reconnaissance satellite transits and photograph them with telescopes and large-format cameras using a computer-guided mechanical mount. The resulting photographs record trails of sunlight reflected from the hulls of obscure spacecraft hurtling through the night sky.<sup>12</sup>

As with all wars, technology often shifts, yet certain weapons that become obsolete may retain their symbolic meaning. Paul Shambroom is fascinated by the obsolete weapons on view in communities across the United States. Town squares, city parks, armories, and VFW and American Legion posts all display retired weapons from past wars involving the United States. Initially built for combat, these objects play entirely different roles in their new settings: as memorial, tourist attraction, retail signage,

playground equipment, historical artifact. Shambroom hopes that pictures of these weapons will lead us to consider the complexities of a community's response to war and remembrance of war in America. His fascination and curiosity is driven by several questions. Why is a machine that was made for killing used as a memorial to the dead? Does a tank or artillery weapon help a community mourn and heal from its losses, or is it intended to inspire new generations of warriors? Can it do both? As these weapons age, as their surfaces weather, and as technologies turn obsolete, do the weapons lose their association with violence and death? With our nation once again at war, what can these relics of previous wars teach us about the United States and other societies' proclivity for armed conflict, and humanity's implicit, ongoing endorsement of war?<sup>13</sup>

Another obvious context for predator and prey, one often seen as nostalgic, recreational, and related to the American sensibility of self-reliance, is hunting. A tradition passed down through families for centuries, hunting has been a means of survival and, by extension, a sacred sport. For some, learning to hunt is a rite of passage. Erika Larsen has spent numerous years photographing hunting in the U.S. Her thoughtful portraits and landscapes occupy an unusual place in the world of photography: she has been a contributing photographer to the sportsman's mainstay, *Field and Stream* magazine, and as such, her work celebrates and is celebrated by hunters. In her series *Young Blood* (2006-2007), Larsen has focused on children as they learn to hunt. Her subjects seem somber, mature, and comfortable within their environment. For them, the thrill is in learning to follow their instincts and being immersed in nature. They not only carry on a sacred tradition, but also learn to embrace the environment. They have direct contact with life and death and become part of that cycle. No longer just observers, these children are working parts of nature.<sup>14</sup>

Greg Stimac began his exploration of recreational gun use during the summer of 2004 when he made repeated trips to unregulated rifle ranges in Missouri and California. Armed with a medium-format camera and a (thankfully) long cable release, Stimac would take a picture as his subjects opened fire. Sometimes catching the blur of bullets leaving the barrel or a momentary burst of light and smoke, Stimac's *Recoil* (2006) pictures are remarkable for the relationships implied or suggested among the people in the frame. The shooters' responses range from intense to casual, while their companions demonstrate anything from total absorption through mild curiosity to completely indifferent boredom.<sup>15</sup>

## SOCIAL LANDSCAPE

The phrase "social landscape" was first used in the title of an exhibition at the George Eastman House in Rochester, New York, curated by Nathan Lyons in 1966—*Toward a Social Landscape*. Part of Lyons's endeavor was to distinguish between the kind of picture produced by Lee Friedlander and that of Ansel Adams—perhaps more pre-

cisely, between the world we live in on a daily basis and the abstract beauty of a very small national park. Most of the work in this exhibition could be considered social landscapes.

Influenced by such work as Hilla and Bernd Becher's serial typography of disappearing industrial sites, Conceptual artist Greg Stimac set out to create a photographic series showing people throughout the United States mowing their lawns. From Midwestern suburbs to towns in Florida and Texas, Stimac traveled with his camera listening for the sound of mowers. The people in his photographs are a true cross section of U.S. culture, and the lawns themselves vary dramatically, from weed-ridden plots and brown patches of dry grass to verdant lawns surrounding pristine homes. Through its deliberate formal repetition, the series draws attention to the mundane labor required to maintain a lawn while at the same time addressing the ritualistic aspects of the effort. In the end, the scope and variety of Stimac's survey underscore the predominance of the lawn as a social landscape.<sup>16</sup>

Nic Nicosia has traveled by car between Dallas and Santa Fe many times over the years, never becoming disenchanted or bored with the beauty of the mutable scenery he passes. Nicosia's habitual trek takes him from the manicured lawns of the Dallas suburbs to the stark, jagged edges of the desert. He also moves from the soft rolling hills of north Texas to the vast minimal landscapes of New Mexico. More than half of the drive follows Interstate 40, which parallels historic Route 66, considered one of the great American driving experiences, a symbol of America's vibrant nomadic spirit as recorded by Robert Frank and Jack Kerouac, and the road taken to California by many families during the 1930s. *9½ hours to SaFe* (2003–2004) documents one of Nicosia's solitary automobile trips. The entire drive was filmed in real time with three video cameras inside the car. One was mounted facing the front, with one to the rear, and an additional handheld camera was manipulated by the artist. At least one camera was running at all times, whether Nicosia was driving, filling the car up with gas, or taking a break to stretch or change the video tapes. The result is an unnervingly monotonous yet ultimately intriguing and personal document.<sup>17</sup>

Through straight-on focus, detail, and uniform lighting, Victoria Sambunaris reduces her subject matter of everyday landscapes and common industrial parks to crisp clear images of forms in neutral space. Shot during two road trips through Texas, Wyoming, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Iowa, on five by seven-inch negatives, Sambunaris's images capture at once the vastness of the American landscape and the subtle, sometimes overwhelming, cues to its underlying capitalist mentality. As she explains, "It is the anomalies of an ordinary landscape that have become the focus of my work: massive warehousing, infinite distribution facilities, and systematized shipping terminals. These numerous paradigmatic structures, I sense, portend the future of landscape and our relationship to it."<sup>18</sup>

Christina Seely's series *Lux* (2005–2010), titled after the system for measuring illumination, examines the disconnect between the immense beauty created by human-made light emanating from the earth's surface and the environmental impact of the carbon dioxide produced by the world's wealthiest countries, evident in the brightest areas detected on a satellite map. The three regions most visible in NASA images are the United States, Western Europe, and Japan, which together emit approximately forty-five percent of the world's CO<sub>2</sub> and, along with China, are the top consumers of electricity. This body of work focuses on Seely's imagery of the cities in the United States: Boston, Chicago, Houston, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, and New York. Eventually, *Lux* will comprise photographs of the forty-three brightest cities in the world, but the project is less about the individual locations than their effective interchangeability and the global ramifications of consumption. Reflecting this, each photograph is titled simply *Metropolis*, accompanied by a notation of the city's latitude and longitude. Seely's photographs explore the realities of dealing with the infrastructure of these urban environments and their excessive energy consumption, but she consciously takes an indirect approach to the subject. "I am interested in the dialectic between the surface documentation of the photograph and the complex reality that lies beneath the surface," she explains, "how beauty can suggest the simple and ideal while both subtly reflecting and obscuring a darker more complicated truth."<sup>19</sup>

For the last six years, Jason Lazarus has investigated individual and cultural obsessions by weaving together personal and public moments of significance; his work humanizes public moments while making the universal personal. These moments range from the splat of bright red blood from a dead bug on his windshield, to a picture of Spencer Elden as a high school senior (Elden was the naked baby floating on the cover of Nirvana's *Nevermind* 1991 album), to the aura of light in the night sky above Barack Obama's election night rally in Chicago's Grant Park. In lieu of using the camera to address a traditional single topic, Lazarus makes photographs that embrace his long-term commitment to documenting moments of shared public relevance, whether overt or covert, moments that speak to the tensions, conflicts, and ideologies that reveal our personal experience.<sup>20</sup>

## THE END OF THE AMERICAN CENTURY

Michael Robinson's 2007 film *Victory Over the Sun* takes its title from the 1913 Russian Futurist opera written by Kruchonykh and Khlebnikov in which the plot revolves around an angry group trying to capture and extinguish the sun. Robinson's film surveys the abandoned grounds of three World's Fairs—those in Seattle ('62), New York ('64), and Montreal ('67). Robinson's father beautifully filmed the actual fairs back when they portrayed a hopeful and celebratory future. However, visiting the sites four decades later, Robinson learned how corporate and competitive the fairs actually were, and their "striving for the future" took on a darker meaning. To enhance the sinister undertones, Robinson has mixed science-fiction atmospherics with orchestral splendor and

chanting drones that fall somewhere between the operatic and the ludicrous. The text being chanted is a mixture of excerpts from Ayn Rand's 1938 novella *Anthem* and Oscar Wilde's 1894 play *Salome*, and the singular voice in the second section is from a scene in the 1987 film *Masters of the Universe*, where the villain Skeletor gains control of the universe and declares himself God. All three sources are about power and the connections between the reckless ego and the subconscious drive to end all things. The music is a string quartet version of the Guns N' Roses 1992 ballad "November Rain." And the chorus, "Nothing lasts forever, even cold November rain," is in line with both the failed projections of the future asserted by the three world fairs and the apocalyptic quality of the now-abandoned spaces.<sup>21</sup>

Greg Stimac individually filmed three white Mustangs for both their iconic muscle car status and the idea (suggested by their name) of three white heroic horses. In each of the three-channel synchronized video projections, the car horn was held down and recorded until each burned out and died. The three horns start out sounding the same, then slowly each becomes individual and distinct, fading and dying at different rates. As aggressive and annoying as car horns can be, in this triptych the noise is quickly transformed and reduced to a meditative and lamenting chorus until the last garbled mutter.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps the horns are the last gasps of the American Century or merely a comment on an exhausted metaphor in twentieth-century photography. The artists in *THE ROAD TO NOWHERE?* welcome our enjoyment of their deliberate confusion of photography with reality and their own reflections on meaning in U.S. culture. Hyper-aware of the cultural motifs identified and popularized by their counterparts in the previous century, these artists are not cooperating with current theory or criticism and deliberately leave it unclear whether they are looking in the rearview mirror or keeping their eyes firmly on the road ahead.

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