

**This Land is Your Land**

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There is nothing like the long, slow, burn of presidential campaigns for revealing the complexity and volatility of American culture. They provide unique opportunities to scrutinize the seams of our country's fabric, under a magnifying glass that is at once stultifying and magnanimous. So the exhibition *This Land is Your Land* at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, curated by the ever-innovative Karen Irvine, seems particularly timely.

Irvine establishes a time line of patriotic fervor that ebbs and flows between September 11, 2001; the downward spiral of the Iraq war; and the continuing fragmentation of national identity, utilizing the famous folk song refrain "This Land is Your Land," as title and philosophical framework for the exhibition. Woody Guthrie wrote those lyrics to a Baptist hymn in 1940, as a critical response to Irving Berlin's overly patriotic anthem "God Bless America." Since only two of the exhibit's seven international artists (Roberto Bellini, Peter

Grasner, Caroline Hake, Christian Jankowski, Simon Roberts, Greg Stimac and Bryan Zanisnik) are Americans, and all are younger than Guthrie's generation, perhaps a better reference would be the brilliant 1975 essay "Travels through Hyper-Reality", written by the Italian writer and literary critic Umberto Eco, upon completion of his tour of the United States. Eco wrote that "technology and consumerism will Americanize us all". Like Eco, these artists move beyond their roles as mere tour guides, to be social critics and semiotic interpreters of the cultural landscapes of America, as Americanization goes global.

The German artist Caroline Hake sought out locations in Los Angeles, long considered the epicenter of artificiality, to create her series *Unigloria* (2002). She dissolves distinctions between reality and fabrication, making photographs of Star Trek's transport beaming station and the Miss World set, among other television stage sets and locations. The photographs no longer seem like exaggerations, just total fakes, convincing and consumable as total reality.

Peter Granser, a self-taught German photographer and founding member of the

artist collective POC (Piece of Cake: European Network for Contemporary Images), clearly has an ongoing fascination with America. His published works include *Coney Island* (2006), and *Sun City*, (2003), about the largest retirement community in America. In this recent body of large-scale color works, called *Signs* (2006-2007), Granser goes to Texas, the heart of the evil empire itself, to explore unflattering stereo-types of American identity. With perfect irony and just the right touch of the absurd, he constructs comic riffs on American culture, conservative politics, the Iraq war, oil, and the current presidential elections.

Arguably the most intriguing piece in the exhibition is Christian Jankowski's 15:52-minute video, *The Holy Artwork* (2001). Utilizing strategies that blur the lines between music videos, reality TV, and infomercials, Jankowski films John Cannon, pastor of Harvest Fellowship Community Church, preaching about the art created by man, Jankowski specifically, and art in the form of man created by God.

Most disturbing is the role Jankowski plays: a believer, laying prostrate at the feet of the preacher, video camera in hand and empty

monitor revealed to the audience (who is both the viewer and Cannon's congregation). The artist becomes the empty vessel that God can "fill up" with his glorious spiritual creations. For the length of the video, Pastor Cannon twists the arcane language of art, taking every metaphor traditionally used to talk about art to proselytize about the Creator vs. the creative. Resembling a fast talking, mumbo jumbo, snake oil salesman, Cannon, a master at mixing metaphors, tries to convince us that God is the ultimate artist with no need of money or glory, just audience. Does the artist use the preacher or visa versa? Whichever it is, it is clear the artist dies for our sins.

Simultaneously referencing America's love affair with the automobile and photography's love of road trips, American-born Greg Stimac's 6-minute video *Peeling Out* (2006), of cars and trucks burning rubber at various nondescript intersections across the country, sums up the exhibition best. With voraciously spinning wheels, the cars peel out, becoming very public displays of tremendous impotence, awash in massive consumption disguised as good old-fashioned cowboy bravado. As the billowing smoke lingers then dissipates, so do the anger and pleasure of the moment. We are

left with the telltale singe marks of where the rubber met the road, going nowhere fast. This exhibition ultimately begs a question, not just of Americans, but of world citizenship: "Where are we going, and how are we getting there?" The presidential election might help determine the answer.