

Gallery 5

July 2 –
September 10
2006

RESPOND!

In the RESPOND! Series, the Art Center asks visitors to tell us what they think about the work in the exhibition:

As an anthropologist, I cannot help but view Jennifer Greenburg's wonderful photographs, so full of detail, color, and life, as ethnographic documents—as a "thick description" (the phrase comes from Clifford Geertz) of a way of life among a delineated community or sub-culture. I found myself most drawn to the photographs of interior spaces, where we see into living rooms, bedrooms, and kitchens that, perhaps, "recall" for us images of post-war America, with all of its objects and artifacts, brands and styles, symbols and sentiments. But how should these photographs be seen? Are these "real" or "staged" (and if the later, are they staged any more than other images)? Are these not images of nostalgia, and of a nostalgia borne by people not even of the time recalled? While looking at the show, I overheard another couple whispering among themselves: "Look, there's a car that's obviously not from the 50s. And there's a...." And I was drawn to these elements too. As if seeking some sort of "proof" that would destabilize the composed reality of these images and cry out: "Look, it is not real." Yet, if it is not quite "truth" that we see in these photographs, it is certainly real, a reality like any other. And how we see that reality (and how the subjects of these photographs want us to see it) forces us to think about the relationship between subjects, objects, and "truth" -- or to pick both a more appropriate and more complex word, authenticity. For, whatever else we may say, these photographs carry an enormous weight of sincerity and authenticity. What seems to be (but only seems to be) a temporal confusion -- occasioned by the presence here or there of some object, like a Johnny Cash CD, a neighbor's car, or for that matter, the dates on the labels of the photographs! -- is a key part of their power. For me, at least, those little bits of "the real" of the 21st century (when the photographs were made) that penetrate into the frame, and into everyone's lives, only strengthens the relationship between image and reality, and reveals some of the complex ways in which we, all of us, live in multiple "times" and among an uncanny collection of objects. But then again, these photographs aren't about objects at all. They are about people. And they are beautiful.

Greg Beckett

Student in the "Photography: Alternative Processes" class at the Art Center and Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology, University of Chicago.

Recalling Americana Photography by Jennifer Greenburg



Jennifer Greenburg
Arty the Cowboy
2005
C-print
20 x 24 inches

Selecting, arranging and installing the portraits by **Jennifer Greenburg** is like assigning the placement cards at a table for a dinner party. Personalities revealed in the photograph are carefully matched. Images of cars, loving couples, family, hair dos, and vintage collectables among other things suggest a larger personal narrative and help sharply define the individual presented within the metal frame. The people in this series are not actors and the environment that surrounds them is not a stage set—it is all contemporary real life. These powerful photographs of men, women and children consciously posed in their post-war era modeled living rooms, bedrooms and other interior spaces, explore the beliefs and codes of conduct that define the Rockabilly community, a culture that adopts the looks and values of mid-twentieth century America.

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Rockabilly is a term first used to describe music blending the pure 1950's style Rock and Roll with country music. This harmony of revolutionary rhythm and folksy lyrics extends to a lifestyle for pockets of people throughout the world. All of the individuals photographed in this series exist as they are frozen in time, only instead of it being 1956, it is 2006. Although the 50s and 60s were by no means a favorable moment for civil rights, there is nostalgia here for a believed innocence of the era. The contradictions between actual and idealized is revealed by the artist in the deliberate composition of the portraits. Under close inspection, there are small blips in the photograph's content that hint at the contemporary world in which these people live. Among the porcelain figurines and tiki are VCRs, digital radios, and 2000 model cars in the distance that recall the juxtaposition of time while also underscoring this conflicted notion of a simpler time in the face of technological and social progression.

For nearly six years the Jennifer has been documenting the "Rockabilly" community from Costa Mesa, California to Berwyn, Illinois and many places in between. Jennifer is not a voyeur of the Rockabilly culture, but rather a passionate spectator and a modest participant who recognizes her position within the

Jennifer Greenburg
Ruby Van Go-Go and Stuart in Love
2004
C-print
20 x 24 inches



social network of the community. Within the history of female American photographers that have documented certain American subcultures and significant moments in time, such as Nan Goldin, Nikki Lee and Diane Arbus, Jennifer's crisp and color saturated aesthetic combined with the individual's choice to lean more towards the sentimental produces an almost Hollywood version of a group that exists on the fringe. Cultivating a relationship with her subjects by sharing the same interests in vintage clothing, music and design championed by the Rockabilly culture, Jennifer has had the access to authentically capture a unique wedge of contemporary society.

The Art Center is pleased to present the largest solo exhibition of Jennifer's work to date.

Allison Peters
Director of Exhibitions