

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

‘This Land’ Review: Picturing America

An exhibition with over 400 photographs tries to take stock of the mood in the U.S. over the past decade.

By Richard B. Woodward
Sept. 4, 2018 4:55 p.m. ET
San Francisco

Since opening in 2010 on the San Francisco waterfront, Pier 24 Photography has provided what may be the most agreeable conditions in the world for looking at photographs.

The cavernous former warehouse is divided into both soaring and intimate spaces. Admission is free but by appointment only (via phone or email) so overcrowding is never a problem. Exhibitions are installed for six months or longer, usually without wall labels: An illustrated catalog serves as a portable guide for names, dates, titles, and as a paper record.

“This Land” is its latest thematic show, a valiant attempt to gauge the mood of the U.S. over the past decade. Within the 18 galleries are two sculptures, a video, a small installation, and more than 400 photographs by 18 artists, both well-established (Alec Soth, Alessandra Sanguinetti, An-My Lê, Katy Grannan) and lesser-known (Bryan Schutmaat, Corine Vermeulen, Donovan Wylie, Daniel Postaer).

National art surveys are risky, and maybe foolhardy. If curators try to represent every constituency, the exhibition may lack a strong point of view. Conversely, favoring one style or group can unfairly exclude nonconformists from the historical picture.

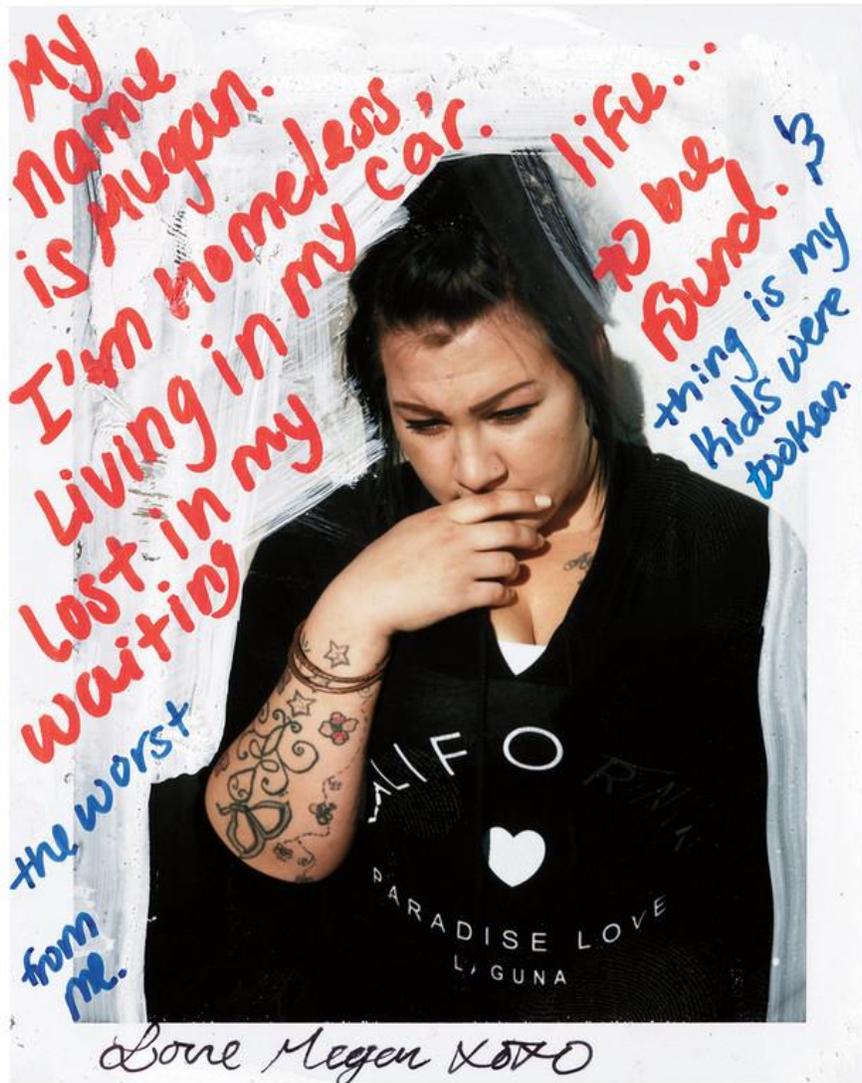


Alec Soth's 'The Key Hotel. Kissimmee, Florida' (2012) PHOTO: © ALEC SOTH

“This Land” only partially succeeds at resolving this dilemma, especially in a place as big and diverse—ethnically, romantically, economically, regionally—as contemporary America. (For those who measure art shows by numbers: Fewer than one-third of the artists are women; only one is African-American; another is Hispanic.)

Nonetheless, if you can accept its stylistic prejudice for the sharp-focused, documentary-style still image, “This Land” offers notable rewards. These are highly personal reports from around the country by photographers you won’t see together elsewhere.

Jim Goldberg often encourages his subjects to write on his portraits of them, a technique that introduces unpredictable feedback into what is typically a rigid one-way process. The words on “Fifty-Six Polaroids” (2011-16), hanging near the entrance, range from the prosaic (“My dream is to retire”) to the confessional (“I like to wear women’s underwear”) to the guilelessly boastful (“I am Jack and I can spell the word ninja”)—hand-drawn messages as distinctive as voices on a video.



Jim Goldberg's 'Meghan' (2015) PHOTO: © JIM GOLDBERG/PACE/MACGILL GALLERY, NY/CASEMORE KIRKEY, SAN FRANCISCO

Mr. Schutmaat's series (2010-12) on mountain mining communities in the West is another of the show's highlights. He wants it known that the business of ripping metals out of the ground leaves harrowing scars on people and the land. At the same time, as he writes in the catalog, "every structure built and later abandoned is a relic of hope," even a makeshift cemetery.

Work about the U.S.-Mexico border by Guillermo Galindo and Richard Misrach fills one of the largest rooms. Standing in the middle of the floor are two of Mr. Galindo's improvised sculptures/musical instruments. Fashioned in 2014-15 from artifacts picked up in the desert (a shoe, chair seat, bicycle wheel, juice can), they're tributes to those who have passed briefly across these desolate lands.

Mr. Misrach has photographed in the deserts of the American West since the 1970s. The examples here are from visits (2013-15) to Southern California, Arizona and Texas, where the border fence has taken various forms: towering steel pilings driven into the sand on a beach in San Diego; a vehicle barrier of x-shaped bars in Ocotillo, Calif.

One wall of prints shows discarded bottles and pieces of clothing on the barren ground. Like Mr. Galindo's objects, they're a memorial to the area's transients. But in what may be the most militarized landscape in the country, Mr. Misrach views the continuing contest between immigrants and law enforcement as a draw. Both are minuscule in his photographs compared with the forlornness of the sun-blasted terrain.



An installation view of works by Guillermo Galindo and Richard Misrach PHOTO: PIER 24 PHOTOGRAPHY, SAN FRANCISCO

On the opposite extreme are the action-packed scenes of police raids in high-crime districts around Rochester and East Rochester, N.Y., and Miami by the Italian photojournalist Paolo Pellegrin. Taken during 2012-14, mainly at night, the images are suffused with the dreamlike violence of film noir, mitigated by Mr. Pellegrin's obvious sympathies for the bystanders, who watch as friends and family members are handcuffed and pinned to the ground.

Less lurid, and perhaps more representative of daily life in many cities, are Dawoud Bey's affectionate studies of streets and people in Harlem (2015-16), and Ms. Vermeulen's in Detroit (2007-17), where she lives. Both places suffered steep economic declines over many decades and are now on an upswing, realities that each photographer has documented with neighborly care.

"This Land" allows artists to present unique aspects of America. Ms. Sanguinetti set herself up as the town photographer in Black River Falls, Wis., center of the Native American Ho-Chunk Nation; Ms. Lê takes us to parishes in New Orleans that tourists don't frequent; Mr. Wylie explores the architecture of the interstate highway system in New Haven, Conn., and how lives are shaped by it.

While the social tensions in the country can't be ignored in these rooms, the photographers aren't illustrating headlines. Independent of the news cycle, the show reassures us that certain landscapes and rituals will endure, no matter who's in office.

—*Mr. Woodward is an arts critic in New York.*