

**CHICAGO**

**Chris Verene**  
GESCHIEDLE

Chris Verene has been documenting family and friends in his hometown of Galesburg, Illinois, since 1984, when he was sixteen years old. A recent exhibition presented forty-four images shot between 1987 and 2006. The idea of an artist creating an extended photographic series about the people and places that surround him is nothing new. We've been looking at shots of Nan Goldin's adopted demimonde and Tina Barney's well-to-do family for years. But novelty is not what makes Verene's project worth viewing, nor should it be. On the contrary, his photographs hum with familiarity and constancy, as individual subjects reappear year after year, for better and for worse.

Galesburg is a small city of some thirty-three thousand people, a railroad boomtown that, like many such places, has known better days. The sad histories of its townspeople, as told through Verene's pictures, hardly surprise: Death, divorce, teen pregnancy, poverty, obesity, and loneliness are widespread. None of these need be named—they reveal themselves in the guise of dilapidated trailer homes and overweight kids, a pushcart lady and an old man at home alone. His pictures also show a grandmother and an aunt giggling in their gardens, children playing outside, a woman showing off a puffy gown, and plenty of folks just sitting around contentedly. That the good and the bad sometimes inhabit the same picture, sometimes not, gives pause. The facts, uplifting or depressing, are there, but rarely does Verene make the false promise of purporting to tell the entire story.

We don't get to know these people from Galesburg any more than we get to know anyone through visual representations alone. Pictures, even exemplary ones, have their limitations, and photographers very often acknowledge this by working in series or displaying captions prominently. Verene does both, and he offers a solution to the perpetual image-text problem by painting key phrases directly onto the white border of the photographic paper. The uncontrived result achieves the necessary balance between aesthetic effect and documentary information—which is to say, between the general and the particular. Without its subheading, Verene's 1995 close-up of a yellowed pillow against a tufted headboard would have a certain fashionably retro currency. But considered with its caption, which reads, *EVER SINCE GRAMMY JANE DIED, GRANDPA BILL HAS LIVED ALONE IN THAT LITTLE HOUSE*, the photograph speaks tenderly of old age, loss, and absence. Merely attractive pictures are easy to make and even easier to lift from their contingent sources, but doing so risks emptying them of meaning. The most effective alternative isn't to burden them with extended text but to root them, as Verene does, in the just-specific-enough.

These are real people with distinct lives, troubles, and joys. The viewer might attempt to sort out the sad story of cousin Steve, or how Amber ended up living in a car with her two baby daughters (bizarrely named Lexus and Mercedes). But as with all such voyeuristic musings, these eventually come to naught. The "Galesburg" series, finally, is not really about these individuals,

or the photographer's relationship to them, or their particular mid-western town. It pictures what American life might look like in such a place as Galesburg, but more than that it visualizes the possibilities for approaching, looking at, and depicting other people with a combination of respect and clarity, seeing them for who they are, and then some.

—Lori Waxman

**ARTFORUM**

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Chris Verene, *Dalton Wrestling Travis* (detail), 2006, color photograph and oil, 36 x 30". From the series "Galesburg," 1984–

