

# ARTnews

## Chris Verene

VAKNIN SCHWARTZ

Atlanta

These superb color prints (40 out of a projected series of 65) represent an interim report of Atlanta photographer Chris Verene's decade-long documentation of his family's hometown. Each one is annotated with blocky text handwritten in the print's wide margins. For example, a photo soberly reads: "This is my family portrait in Galesburg, Illinois. We are sitting for Christmas breakfast." Although his early photos are bland, Verene's later subject matter captures a more remarkable range of characters and social details from this economically distressed locale.

The pseudo-naïveté of his approach allows Verene to present a great deal of carefully sifted information about the mostly downscale characters he lovingly



Chris Verene,  
*Travis' Grandma*,  
chromogenic print,  
20" x 24".  
Vaknin Schwartz.

chronicles. He follows the teenagers of Galesburg into cluttered and crumbling homes (his homage to mentor Larry Clark, an influence he quickly outgrew), and focuses on such anomalies as rows of prize-winning flowers well past their prime at the Galesburg Knox County Fair.

His own family members not entirely excluded, many of Verene's subjects would seem at home in John Prine songs or David Lynch movies. *But* though his photographs include peculiar details—ranging from kitsch angel figures and ceramic unicorns to an Illinois Department of Public Aid envelope—his purpose is not to gawk at Midwestern absurdity, but to record a dignity that survives beneath the bizarre surfaces. It would, for example, be all too easy to poke fun at Rozie, who in one photo appears as an aging, haggard-looking woman on a bicycle; instead, Verene's other shot of Rozie delivering food to sick people is a study in pathos.

*Jerry Cullum*