



Chris Verene
My Cousin Candi's Wedding
2004



Chris Verene
Crystal at Eighteen
2003



Chris Verene
Lexus
2005

GALESBURG CHRONICLES

by Walter Robinson

Chris Verene, "Galesburg: The New Chapters," Sept. 16-Oct. 22, 2005, at Marcia Wood Gallery, 263 Walker Street, Atlanta, Ga. 30313

Chris Verene was born in Galesburg, Ill., in 1969, and began taking pictures of his friends and neighbors as a teenager, as soon as he learned how to use a camera. Galesburg is a small railroad town with 34,000 people that looks to nearby Peoria -- the politician's epitome of Podunk America -- as "the big city." The town is 84 percent white and economically depressed, with a median household income of about \$32,000 a year.

Verene's photographs are notable for finding sincerity and mutual respect -- the pure niceness -- that lies in the heart of our vast cultural wasteland. Cousin Candi poses at her wedding with her two favorite customers from the Sirloin Stockade. Cousin Steve, whose wife has just left him, sits dolefully in a booth at a fast-food restaurant. A cheerful Rozie rides her bike, dubbed Rosalina, to bring meals to elderly shut-ins.

Verene clearly loves them all. Who wouldn't? The people are sadly sweet, with expressions that have the pathos of a pet dog's smile. The hick-town fine-tuning even extends to Verene's color sense -- in one photo, as a critic has pointed out, the hue of a little girl's eyes perfectly matches the blue naugahyde of the restaurant upholstery.

In the 1990s, Verene showed his works at galleries in Atlanta and at Paul Morris and American Fine Arts in New York. In 2000, Twin Palms Publishers put out a book of his photographs, titled *Chris Verene*, that brought the residents of Galesburg to the attention of a wide audience. The book and the photographs proved very popular.

Now, Marcia Wood Gallery in Atlanta is premiering "Galesburg: The New Chapters," a show that brings Verene's fans up to date on the Galesburg goings-on.

There's *Crystal at Eighteen* (2003), showing a big girl in sandals, white socks and a patterned jumper, who slouches on a small couch in a magenta-carpeted rec-room, smoking a cigarette. In *The Pregnancy Test* (2003), a pair of Jerry Springer teens hold hands -- the boy wears a wife-beater and a black do-rag, and has a tattoo, while the girl is in a t-shirt that reads "horsemeat" -- presumably, the test referred to in the photo's title is positive.

One photo that says it all is *Lexus* (2005), a picture of a tiny, fussing baby who shares the stained expanse of an unmade mattress with a frying pan and a TV remote control. Not for nothing did *Arforum* critic Rachel Kushner note that Verene captures "moments that crystallize entire constellations of meaning and emotion."

You can feel the artist's deep and committed relationship to the people in the town, where he spends several months a year. In addition to chronicling Galesburg life -- "If I hear that something is going on, like a baby being born, I try to photograph it," he said in a recent interview -- he also organizes exhibitions at the Galesburg Civic Arts Center and with his friends puts on a photography show every summer during the town's "Railroad Days" celebration.

"One thing we try to do," he says of these programs, "is bridge the distance between the younger and older citizens of Galesburg, who can be alienated from each other." His pictures have a photojournalistic dimension, particularly the ones that focus on Galesburg's senior citizens.

"I'm into this to make things better," he said. "One goal is to bring attention to nursing homes, to take note of the circumstances of institutional living."



Chris Verene
Max and Marlene
2004

One subset of the Galesburg series is "Prairie Jews," a group of photos documenting the daily lives of the town's Jewish residents, who include Max, a nursing-home resident, and Crystal and Amber, who like to visit the Galesburg Jewish cemetery and say they are "Jewish witches." A selection of these works is included in "The Jewish Identity Project: New American Photography," the current exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York.

Though Verene was born in Galesburg, he went to high school and college in Atlanta, where his artistic activities extended far beyond his photography. He played drums in rock bands (he now tours with Cordero, a successful indie group fronted by his wife, Ani Cordero). He developed several performance personas, including the magician and escape artist Vereni the Great, and Cheri Nevers, an anagrammatically named "beauty and fashion photographer" who provides the kind of therapy unique to a personal style makeover.

Verene has also done a "Camera Club" series of photographs, in which he photographed the photo shoots he and a female accomplice set up for middle-aged amateur photographers, allowing them to play Hugh Hefner for an afternoon. These scenes of hothouse fantasy are both comic and sad.

These elements of Verene's practice give his down-home photographs a distinctly avant-garde dimension. His is an experimental sensibility that derives not from cosmopolitan Europe or New York, but rather takes its peculiarities from the native undercurrents of the U.S. heartland. The route from low to high, from small-town America to the big show in the 21st century, could hardly be a prettier picture.

Verene's photographs, which are printed in editions of six, range in price from \$2,500 to \$10,000.



Chris Verene
Vereni the Great
2001

WALTER ROBINSON is editor of *Artnet Magazine*.



Chris Verene
Camera Club
1995