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Art in Review

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Chris Verene

'Family'

Postmasters
459 West 19th Street
Chelsea
Through Oct. 16

The artist Chris Verene often combines photography and performance. In the mid-1990s he shot an exposé-style series of pictures on amateur cheesecake photographers by posing as one himself. In the person of his female alter-ego, Cheri Nevers, he periodically presents his "Self-Esteem Salon," a therapeutic environment in which he guides willing viewers in acting out healing fantasies for the camera.

But in a remarkable series of photographs that he has been taking over the past 26 years, other people do the performing and he does the looking. The setting is the economically battered town of Galesburg, Ill., where Mr. Verene was born in 1969. The people who appear are members of his family. In the 46 pictures at Postmasters, dating from 1987 to the present, we meet his parents, his grandmother, his great aunt Doris, some of his many cousins — Candi, Heidi, Steve — as well as step-cousins and "a cousin's husband's brother's cousin's cousins," to quote a caption handwritten directly on a print.

In addition, along with a hard-to-keep-track-of assortment of kids and pets, there's an extended family of friends: Dorothy and Rozie, who live, or lived, in a residential hospital where Mr. Verene's parents once worked; and Amber, a young woman who has had two or three children, each by a different man, but whose primary partner is a woman.

We follow the lives of these people over several years. In a well-known picture not included in the show we are at Candi's wedding. Then we see her having children, being laid off from her job at the local Maytag factory, getting divorced and almost losing her house to a tornado.

Luck's not on her side, we think, but she smiles good-naturedly for Mr. Verene's camera through it.

Amber's life seems even rougher. In 2006 we find her, apparently homeless, living with her children in the back of a car, then a year later in a breathtakingly dumpy abandoned restaurant. The circumstances suggest lives in a state of turmoil, but the images don't bear this out. In every shot, Amber looks rock-solid, impassively attuned to her children, soldiering on.

Encountered individually, many of these pictures, in which bodies are far from slender and lives are far from neat, might be taken for send-ups of Midwest working-class life. But that impression evaporates in the context of the larger series, with its wealth of wry details — a disembodied infant arm reaching over a shoulder, a Renaissance Fair get-up, a pigs-in-blankets still life — and its tone of ungainly tenderness.

Many of the Postmasters pictures, along with others, are included in Mr. Verene's book titled "Family," which was produced, handsomely, by Twin Palms Publishers in Santa Fe, N.M., earlier this year.

In a brief essay in the back of the book he brings us up to speed on changes in Galesburg lives. (His grandmother and great-aunt Doris, for example, have died.) After spending rapt time with his photographs, I'm glad for any news. **HOLLAND COTTER**



Chris Verene's "Amber at Twenty Six." In his show at Postmasters, we meet his parents, numerous relatives and others.

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