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Chris Verene Welcomes You to Another America

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By **Christian Viveros-Fauné** Tuesday, May 11 2010

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Cultural theory, [Terry Eagleton](#) wrote in his revisionist scorcher *After Theory*, once promised to grapple with folks' most important problems, but failed miserably. "It has been shamefaced about morality and metaphysics," he fulminated, "embarrassed about love, biology, religion and revolution; largely silent about evil; reticent about death and suffering; dogmatic about essences, universals and foundations; and superficial about truth, objectivity and disinterestedness."

Substitute the word "art" for "cultural theory," and you've just described a parallel universe for much of the stuff that regularly fills contemporary galleries and museums. While rafts of visual artists today flock to subject matter like [Michael Jackson's praxis](#) and the emancipatory possibilities of "hamster nests," very few sign up to tackle what were once tagged "grand narratives"—stories about how regular people deal with poverty, injustice, and suffering, among other conditions not fully captured by the drolleries of air quotes.

One artist who's prepared to venture into familiar if unpopular terrain instead of following art's hipster conformism is photographer [Chris Verene](#). The town shutterbug for Galesburg, Illinois—33,000 mostly white, culturally homogenous, and economically rudderless souls—Verene has been chronicling the inexorable downs and rare ups of a community whose march toward capitalist obsolescence is as steady as [Thomas Friedman's](#) appetite for shitty euphemisms for globalization (*The Lexus and the Olive Tree; Hot, Flat, and Crowded*, etc.).

A Johnny-on-the-spot since before the local



Twin Palms Publishers

"My Cousin Candi's Wedding With Her Two Favorite Customers From Her Job at the Sirloin Stockade," 1993

Details

Family
By Chris Verene
Twin Palms, 120 pp., \$65

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Maytag plant decamped for Reynosa, Mexico, the 40-year-old Verene has been photographing family, friends, and assorted acquaintances since he was 10 ("Prior to my knowing," he says, "that what I was doing was art"). Pictures of an America culturally undergirded by 4-H Clubs, Ag Festivals, and Carl Sandburg paeans, Verene's portraits of Galesburg locals resemble, synesthetically speaking, Bruce Springsteen's *Badlands* turned out in loud Target stretch- and sleepwear. The photographic results—for a town often merely glimpsed from the Interstate's passing lane—overwhelmingly prove, in a word, moving.

"This is my life's work," Verene told a crowd gathered at Chelsea's Postmasters Gallery two weeks ago. They were there to celebrate the publication of *Family*, a new book of his photographs that will also become a traveling museum exhibition. "I make pictures that show stories anyone can understand." A Whitney Biennial artist (2000) and veteran of countless gallery shows, Verene's work resonates far beyond wine-sipping country. Reflections of life that ignore multimillion-dollar museum expansions and gavel-ready Picassos, the images Verene collects in *Family* lay bare America's dirt-poor, cracker, punch-drunk face. That's *Deliverance* minus the banjo and anal menace. Fair warning: It is still not a pretty picture.

Not for nothing has Barack Obama mentioned Galesburg twice in his speeches—at the Democratic National Convention and in his State of the Union Address. In the logic of his speechwriters, the town is a symbol of "rural communities that have been hit especially hard" by the recession. In Verene's photographs, on the other hand, Obama's soaring attentions take on the awkwardness of a reunion with long-lost relatives. For the parochial, Purell-doused, New York reptilian brain, it's time to prepare for halitosis recoil.

Verene's book includes an uncomfortable number of such encounters: There's a visit to Travis's vinyl-sided trailer, a picture of cousin Destiny's shag-carpeted bedroom, a snapshot of baby Lexus squalling on a bare mattress (that's right, Tom Friedman, I said *Lexus*), as well as acres of cluttered porches and front yards occupied by fair-haired, overweight, bored-looking folks the artist records with the throttling fatalism of his heroine Diane Arbus. (At Postmasters, Verene told a childhood story about breaking into a locked cabinet at school to peruse Arbus's books; he also wrote his college thesis on her work.) Just as Arbus preferred subjects who couldn't fake their expressions before the camera—freaks, the blind, and the mentally deficient—Verene's Galesburg victims face his lens with the 1,000-yard stare of accumulated misfortune. If they're smiling (New Yorkers, take note), it's because they metabolize insults by remaining unflinchingly polite.

Injuries and insults are the gristly meat of what Verene charts across the 120-page expanse of *Family*. One group of photographs of a homely couple is walloped by an image of their house impaled by a tree. In keeping with his scheme of titling photos by writing on them, Verene scrawled the following on that shot: "The same day they signed the divorce papers, a tornado hit the house." It's enough to make Job cry. Instead, Verene's shit-out-of-luck realism—in imitation of his subjects and in contrast to the hair-splitters of contemporary art—just shrugs, takes aim, and gets on with it.

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