

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL • REVIEW

NOVEMBER '10

CHRIS VERENE POSTMASTERS

Since he was 10, Chris Verene, now 40, has taken pictures of his relatives. "Family," his first show at Postmasters, included over 40 photographs spanning 1987 to 2010. They evoke the works of Nan Goldin and Richard Billingham in

their close study of the photographer's intimates, as well as those of Verene's heroine, Diane Arbus, in their square format and unblinking stare at unpretty subjects. All are candid shots made on film with available light and printed for this show. Understated but poetic handwritten descriptive captions, inscribed at the time of printing, serve as titles. The pictures were taken in Galesburg, the small Illinois city where Verene's family hails from (and which President Obama has cited as an example of "communities that have been hit especially hard" by the recession). Verene's frank and touching images portray lives of misfortune, but his colors, described by critic Max Kozloff in his 1997 book *The Theatre of the Face: Portrait Photography Since 1900* as "tender, warm and sensual," betoken a kindred emotional palette.

The show followed friends and relatives over the decades. On the first wall, we met Verene's cousin Steve, with his frightened-looking young daughter at McDonald's in 1993, when "his wife had just left them," according to the caption; the title of the next image—a photo of Steve in his yard—inform us that "Steve never saw his girls again." Hubcaps dangle from the frame of a swing set, a quirky symbol of the ways he might fill his time in their absence.

Nine photographs represent Verene's friend Amber and her children. The stout, dark-haired girl first appears at age 19, in 1998, in the trailer where she lives; later, in *Amber and her girls are living in the car* (2006), she's pictured

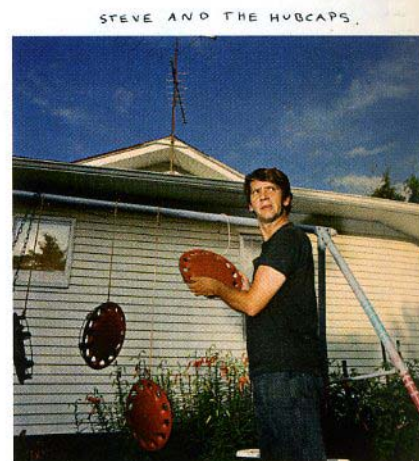
through an open back door, headphones on, tending to her two daughters from the driver's seat. In this group was the show's most unsettling image, of Amber's daughter *Lexus* (2005). On a bare mattress on the floor, the squalling infant lies between a stuffed animal, a TV remote control and an iron skillet, heartbreakingly lost in the expanse of the mattress, which dominates the frame, and the room's blank white walls.

We met Verene's cousins Candi and Heidi in a double portrait from 1987. They sport poufy hair; their teenage faces convey bravado. In an image from 2005, we learn that "Candi and [husband] Craig lost their jobs when the factories moved to Mexico." Candi smiles stiffly on the lawn with her children Cody and Caity, both astride a single bicycle. An image from 2007 shows their modest home under cloudy skies, a massive tree limb atop the roof. After the jobs had gone (as it were) south, marriage and the elements also soured: "the same day they signed the divorce papers a tornado hit the house."

The show was not without joy, including several images of children at play, Verene's son Nico among them. For example, *Destiny on Labor Day* (2002) celebrates simple pleasures: under a "God bless our mobile home" plaque, amid a homey mess, a young girl smiles at the camera, holding a carton of ice cream.

[*Chris Verene—Family* is at the Figge Art Museum, Davenport, Iowa, Nov. 13, 2010-Feb. 27, 2011.]

—Brian Boucher



Chris Verene: *Steve and the hubcaps on the girls old swing set after the divorce Steve never saw his girls again*, 1993, chromogenic print with handwritten caption in oil, 24 by 20 inches; at Postmasters.