

HYPERALLERGIC

Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Interviews: Weekend

By John Yau

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John Yau and Justine Kurland Discuss the Relationship of Photography, Poetry, and Narrative



Justine Kurland, "Family Portrait at Family Campground" (2009) (all images courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash)

The following email exchange with the photographer Justine Kurland focuses on her exhibition, *Sincere Auto Care*, at Mitchell-Innes & Nash (September 4 – October 11, 2014), which is accompanied by a self-published book with the same title. While Justine was putting together the book, I sent her a poem that I thought had something to do with the images she had sent me to look at. Before I sent her the poem I mentioned the possibility of doing an interview. She agreed to this format as long as she also could ask me questions. This is the result.

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John Yau: When we first talked, you alluded to a new body of work that you were still making, which seemed very different from the work I had seen: the gatherings of young women in the monograph, *Spirit West* (Coromandel, 2000); the views of hobos and panoramas of trains in *This Train is Bound for Glory* (Ecstatic Peace Library, 2009). One thing you said was that you were about to embark on “an end of the road trip.”

I remember thinking that it sounded as if you were moving away from the alternative worlds you evoked in your photographs of young women, as well as from the nomadic life and fantasies of freedom associated with train

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hoppers. While your interest in the landscape was evident, it occurred to me – and I am being literal to make a point – that you were moving from fantasy to documentary.

Justine Kurland: If I were to place a picture I made in 1998 next to a picture I made this year it would feel like two different and opposing artists. The younger me seems impossibly ideological. I used the camera then to fix a utopian fantasy onto the world, I forced the world to look the way I wanted to see it, and through photography proved that it existed. But even then, unlike most practitioners of staged narrative photographs, my production values were low so my constructions inevitably unraveled as I photographed them, allowing for a slip between being allegorical and the actual event before the camera (i.e., bringing schoolgirls into the woods to be photographed).

The thing that changed in the work was this slow letting go. It seems cliché to say I became more interested in the world than my projections onto the world, the truth is something more crushing and brutal maybe about losing illusions.



Justine Kurland, "76 Station" (2012)

I think there's this spectrum between the perfect and the real and it became increasingly evident that my life was not perfect. A lot also had to do with following the photographs to their next logical conclusion, and then there were the circumstances of my life. The birth of a boy child was significant, the break up with his father, my own father's illness and subsequent death.

Teaching also changed how I worked, it made me become more traditional as I tried to reinforce fundamental qualities I believed to be photographic to students engaged in expanding the medium. Slowly I found my way backward through the history of photography toward the ultimate goal of the photograph as a document.

JY: And yet, as you found your way backward, you also went forward in time.

JK: The photographs of the cars came out of *This Train Is Bound for Glory* where I had looked at trains as both a symbol and a fact in the landscape.

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In some sense the car pictures are no different from the first photographs I showed. They are about certain supposed American virtues such as Freedom and Self-Determination. But now instead of having some girl enact Freedom I am looking at the literal stuff that has made my escape possible, at the greasy underbelly of automobiles and the cracked surface of the open road.

I don't remember in which context I had meant "the end of the road trip." I could have been referring to how my responsibilities these days make my road trips increasingly difficult, I have gone from spending eight months of the year on the road to spending only four, and I have begun to want to shed everything about the process with which I make work. Or probably I was talking about how these last pictures, looking directly at the oil-stained support of my road trips after a decade and a half of driving is an endgame move – where can I go from there? Or maybe I meant it as a kind of peak oil, end of an optimistic identification with cars, American-made muscle, the burnt-out remains of car culture and our dominance over that industry.

But I think it's important to mention that while these pictures maybe appear to be cold facts, it's a highly subjective project. Maybe I could even say the document is subjugated to my emotional attachment to it. I wonder if it's similar for you in your poem "Robert Herrick," that revolves around the owner of a gas station: "In the afternoon the lake is as smooth / as the polished black hood / of Mr. Meriwether's vintage '38 Cadillac. / It has that bottomless dark feeling about it / that only cars and lakes and you can have."

JY: I wrote "Robert Herrick" because I wondered if it were possible to imagine what the 17th-century English poet, Herrick would write if he were living in the present. In that sense, it was a projection. In the end, I liked that the pairing of "cars and lakes" mirror each other through sound. While there is, as you say, an "emotional attachment" to your subject, and you consider your project to be "highly subjective," it also strikes me that it is not anecdotal, not a story with a character or alter ego in it. I would also suggest that both your work from 1998 and your recent photographs have "a bottomless dark feeling about it." The photographs are, to use a word that Svetlana Alpers has used, vexing.

JK: But more than the sound is the almost uncontrollable urge to drive your car straight into the depth of a lake. Lake and car, so innocuous apart, become suicidal when put together.

JY: The poem probably was a way for me to return to a car accident I had when I was twenty, during the height of the Vietnam War. I had just received my draft notice after my college decided not to give me a student deferment. As you know, I spent eight months in double traction and needed to get a metal plate in my left leg. But, at least with this poem, written around ten years later, I didn't want to write about it autobiographically.



Justine Kurland, "Windshield" (2012)

JK: Do you know the story by Baudelaire of "The Bad Glazier?" The narrator calls out from his window to a

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glazier on the street to come up and show his wares. The narrator becomes enraged because the glazier has no colored glass. He shoves him down the stairs and throws a flowerpot at him when he reappears on the street causing the glazier to fall and shatter all his glass. The narrator screams down from his window to the ruined man, “Let life look beautiful! Let life look beautiful!” (I would like to footnote here that I was made aware of this story by the artist William Wendt, who has for years been working on a glass bead project).

I’m reminded of that story by your poems in *Radiant Silhouette*, which seems to be littered with shards of jewels and glass and mirrors, the most profound of course being your own broken bones. I guess that’s how I feel about these car parts, broken pieces of a dream, maybe the dream was just to get to work on time, or maybe it was to cruise through the neighborhood pulling down tail. In my case it was to get far away, seduced by all those little dots in my Rand McNally Road Atlas with exotic sounding names: Helper, Utah; Whiskey Town, California; Truth or Consequence, New Mexico.

It seems obvious now, but in my previous body of work, the train photographs, the space between photographs, was a huge discovery for me. I had three discreet genres of photographs — trains in the landscape, modern-day hobos, and my life on the road as evidenced through portraits of [my son] Casper at our campsites. The meaning never rested on the nominal subject of any single picture, but was about a confluence of the three, between something historical, something imagined and something about being on the road with a kid.

The car pictures take more liberties. Here the juxtaposition is between what I found serendipitously along the road and everything swirling around in my head, so while these are straight documents, their logic is dependent on an omniscient narrator. For instance, I think of one wall in the installation of *Sincere Auto Care* as the Casper broken wall (its the only part of the show where he turns up). There is a picture of him in his car seat, which because of the set-up of the van is the front passenger seat. The next picture is a mother’s nightmare. It shows a windshield shattered exactly as it would if I had an accident and he was launched through. The next picture shows Casper’s hand holding a tooth that had fallen out the day after he fell while playing on the roof of my van. The last picture looks like an insurance agency photograph of a very bad car accident. This is the most explicit example of my fear of not being able to keep my son safe.

JY: You seem to be speaking about autobiography that is neither about the I, as in “I did this,” nor about me, as in “this happened to me.” There is a photograph in *This Train is Bound for Glory* that shows you and Casper in the middle ground. There is a table with toys on it, and the van is behind you. Further back, there is a telephone pole to the right and a trailer in the distance. A cliff face is visible there as well.

You and your child are in an enclosed world, which opens to the viewer. But the distance between you and the camera makes the viewer into a voyeur, a stranger possibly approaching you. The photograph is idyllic, sweet and yet also fraught with vulnerability and perhaps even anxiety. This reading arises out of the placement of the figures in the landscape. In this group of photographs, and in the ones of girls and women in the landscape, it is apparent how much you have absorbed of Romantic landscape painting, from the English and German traditions, as well as the photographs of Timothy O’Sullivan, Carleton Watkins and the great illustrator, Arthur Rackham. It seems to me that in the recent work you have moved into a different landscape, less Romantic.



Justine Kurland, “Baby Tooth” (2011)

JK: The photograph you’re describing is titled “Family Portrait at Family Campground” because the sign at the entrance had advertised that. It was a pretty desolate place. When I made the picture I had been living out of my van eight months of the year and we were often mistaken as homeless and discriminated against to the point where other mothers would pull their kids away from mine in playgrounds. So for that and other reasons I began to think ambivalently about the word family. I began to think ironically about the Romantic conventions of landscape I had been referencing — so here an RV instead of a Grecian ruin, a telephone pole instead of a doddered tree. Compared to all the landscape photography that has come after the New Topographics, it is still relatively tame. But I was trying to figure out how to position the reality of my life with Casper on the road inside a tradition of landscape that I had been working with.

By 2011, I was teaching a lot. I was giving slide lectures on Eugene Atget, Walker Evans, Robert Adams, William Eggleston and Stephen Shore and falling in love with Photography all over again, with the way a lens organizes space and its descriptive powers. So I became invested in a new frame of reference. But also I began to move into towns, to manmade landscapes that don’t lend themselves as easily to allegory.

And then there’s the part of it that I was talking about before. Maybe I should call it a kind of resignation on the one hand and a faith in the medium on the other, which made me more interested in what was actually in front of the camera.

I have two of your books of poetry. In *Radiant Silhouette* your poems are much more narrative than in *Further Adventures in Monochrome*, which seems to look at the words and the sounds in a much more pared-down way. Do you think it was a kind of narrative shedding? And do you think artists shed so they can grow more fur?

I’m not done with narrative. I love stories.

JY: In “Maximus, to Gloucester: Letter 2,” Charles Olson wrote:

people/don’t change. They only stand more/revealed.

There is the early poem, “Ten Songs,” included in *Radiant Silhouette*, in which sound plays a key role.

I think of stories as complete sequences; they contain the beginning, middle and end. In your photographs, no matter when they were made, there is the middle. The viewer completes the narrative – the beginning and end. There are narrative drifts in your work, but they don’t necessarily fit smoothly together nor do they add up. The

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openness invites speculation: Who are these women and why have they gathered together? Where is the young man with the bouquet of flowers going?

JK: That's a perfect way to describe a photograph — perpetually caught in the middle, unwittingly arrested, innocently incarcerated. I remember Lynne Tillman saying at a lecture once that she thought people don't talk enough about how absolutely silent photography is. Any narrative photograph is by definition a failure.



Justine Kurland, "Crash" (2013)

Which was why I was so happy to print your poem, "Reader's Comments," in the self-published book I made for my exhibition:

Your
Poetry
has
neither
headlines
nor headlights

Besides the allusion that a poem might be driven, I like that your poem conveys the boundaries of silence in my photographs.

Sincere Auto Care continues at *Mitchell-Innes & Nash (534 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through October 11.*