

Chris Verene: Contemporary Art Center.

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Raised and educated in Atlanta, Chris Verene found his voice in the late 1980s on the city's bohemian gender-bending scene. Verene exhibited photographs and appeared in other guises; as a drummer with the Rock*A*Teens and a drag performance artist. "From Galesburg to Atlanta, 1986-2004," organized by the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, showed that his sensibility as a photographer is rooted in performance.

Verene's photographs from the mid-'90s to the present in which he portrays Cheri Nevers, his female alter ego, and "The Baptism Scies," 2002 (produced in collaboration with Christian Holstad), which documents candy-colored, knowingly tacky ritual immersions (also the subject of a DVD. The Baptism Series, 2002-2004) transpose the camp, trashy aesthetic of Warhol's Superstars and especially Jack Smith from the '60s to the '90s without significant innovation.

In "Camera Club," a series from 1996-98, however, Verene more provocatively probes the ambiguities of the relationship between photographer and subject. The clubs in question provide a pretext for amateur male shutterbugs to hire women as nude models. Verene and a female confederate insinuated themselves into this milieu, and as the woman posed Verene photographed the photographers from behind without their knowledge. Because these subjects are in focus and the models they are photographing are most often not, we have an impression of what the men see but are prevented from sharing their voyeuristic pleasure. There is something unsettling about the way the amateur photographers are made to perform unawares for Verene's camera, particularly since he pretended to be one of them in order to gain access to their circle. The artist's trick of exploiting the exploiters is neatly turned and conceptually satisfying here, but his ongoing series of portraits of residents of Galesburg in central Illinois ("Galesburg," 1994-), raises the question of exploitation in a less comfortable context.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Galesburg, Verene's birthplace and his father's hometown, is a small railroad settlement that the artist has been photographing since he was a teenager. This exhibition included a substantial number of these works, most from the past two years. Depicting a semirural underclass that is seldom represented elsewhere, these images participate in the tradition of socially conscious documentary photography as well as the offbeat regionalism associated with William Eggleston. Compositionally sophisticated, rich in saturated color, and often moving, Verene's shots of Galesburg are his strongest to date. Nevertheless, they court controversy through the artist's ambiguous relationship to his subjects.

While the citizens of Galesburg pose willingly and often cheerfully, it is clear that Verene is drawn to the more gothic aspects of their world suggested by *Crystal and Amber Took Me to the Jewish Cemetery and Told Me That They Are Jewish Witches*, 1998. Verene does not allow the images to speak for themselves but annotates them with fragments of narrative. A lovely and haunting image of a trailer home at twilight festooned with Christmas lights is inscribed *Pam and Dan's Trailer, Pam and Dan Are Hoping To Get Custody of His Kids*, 2004. By itself the image is evocative, but the legend encourages a stereotypical reading.

Although Verene insists that he considers Galesburg to be home to his extended family and that his intention is celebratory, the suspicion that his representations of its residents are ultimately sensationalistic and condescending is hard to shake. This is Verene's best work, but it still teeters on the fine line between representation and exploitation, between allowing an audience to see his subjects as they are and forcing those subjects to perform a stigmatized identity.

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