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Review

Time Out Chicago / Issue 180 : Aug 7-13, 2008

"Are We There Yet?"

★★★★★ Critic's Rating

As the average price of gasoline in Chicago hovers well above \$4 per gallon, Dawoud Bey—who curated "Are We There Yet?"—suggests travel frustrations in the U.S. are giving Americans a taste of the restrictions on movement experienced by most of the world.

Such limitations are one of the themes tackled by this assemblage of photographs and video from the last decade. But the nine artists selected by Bey, a Columbia College professor and an internationally recognized photographer, are interested not only in how people respond to places in real life but also in how they construct them in their minds.

Since the artists range from newly minted Columbia graduates to established practitioners, it's not surprising that the quality of their work varies—but almost everyone has at least one exceptional piece. Some of the six photographs from Rula Halawani's series, "Intimacy," for example, at first seem dull. They reveal only people's torsos and their hands holding up identity cards and other items for inspection by soldiers; the absence of faces, the unattractive setting and the overwhelming grayness of these black-and-white images make it difficult to engage with them. But the exhibition brochure's revelation that "Intimacy" documents Palestinians' interactions with the Israeli army at a West Bank military checkpoint forces viewers to see the photographs differently. A picture of a Palestinian man pulling up his sweater becomes riveting: Halawani captures the humiliation of this man, who must expose his paunch to strangers, and the fears of his interlocutors, who presumably have asked him to prove he isn't carrying explosives. The image neatly conflates incompatible Israeli and Palestinian beliefs about who has the right to own and travel through the Holy Land, with the violence, invasions of privacy and crippling disruptions to everyday life resulting from their conflict.

The checkpoint isn't the only transitional space in "Are We There Yet?" Christine DiThomas created the small, blurry color photographs in her "American Gothic" series while riding trains across the U.S. In the exhibition brochure, Bey explains that DiThomas intends to make viewers remember their own travels, as prompted by the indistinct buildings and bodies of water in "American Gothic." (They may instead make viewers remember to call the eye doctor.) Surendra Lawoti's crisp portraits address the unstable status of Nepali immigrant communities in the U.S. His photographs of objects such as a portable closet and an empty fish tank—and *Rolled Bed*, which depicts a mattress pad squeezed into the corner of a shabby room—speak eloquently about their owners' makeshift living arrangements and uncertainty about the future.

Howard Henry Chen's large-scale images of Vietnam capture even more effectively the fluid identities of both a nation and the immigrant who leaves his homeland behind. Chen's diptych of young tourists engrossed in their *Lonely Planet* guide at Ho Chi Minh City's War Remnants Museum portrays Vietnam cheerfully adopting American-style capitalism—the museum has a gift shop, and Pepsi-branded umbrellas shade nearby cafe tables—even as it clings to reminders of the war, which forced Chen's family to move to the U.S. The photograph's caption states that the museum was called the Museum of American War Crimes "until Hanoi and Washington normalized relations"; the tourist couple is surrounded by various munitions and a U.S. Air Force plane.

Oscar Palacio's photographs of American landmarks warn that tourists' strong preconceptions of certain sites may lead to major disappointments. His deliberately underwhelming pictures of the Hoover Dam, the Hoover Dam parking lot and Plymouth Rock—which is just a rock—remind viewers that, aesthetically, famous destinations rarely live up to their hype. Alan Cohen's black-and-white series "Lines of Authority [Panama Canal Zone]" serves a similar purpose, revealing the site of a fatal 1964 riot to be a boring landscape of rocks, concrete and dirt, which offers no hint of its historical significance. Curtis Mann takes an opposite approach in his series, "Modifications," in which he compiles photographs of war-torn areas, removes recognizable details with bleach and draws in new ones.

Mann's project is most notable for its reliance on Flickr for images from around the world. Bey writes that the camera "[makes] accessible the inaccessible." It may be more difficult to get "there," but it is easier and easier to experience it through photographs.

—Lauren Weinberg

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LAKE EFFECT Aron Gent's *Sun Sets Over Lost Lake (2006)* and other photos reveal how his family interacts with his Aunt Suzie (who has Down syndrome) at their summer home.

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