

Peripheral Views: States of America

July 13 - September 30, 2012

Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin / Veronica Corzo-Duchardt
Martin Hyers & William Mebane / Liz Magic Laser
Michael Mergen / Taiyo Onorato & Nico Krebs / Object Orange
Doug Rickard / Harry Shearer

Taiyo Onorato & Nico Krebs, *Hill Street*, 2006

As we debate our country's economic and political course in this election year, *Peripheral Views: States of America* brings together artists grappling with the difficulty of picturing the United States in our time. Authoritative images and grand narratives give way to malleable viewpoints in this exhibition, with each artist using photography as a means to take measure of our bearings and locate certain markers—past, present, and

future—within the American Dream. By using diverse and fragmented images of America as barometers of the social climate, might we create a larger view of the state of this nation? Through closely focusing on the everyday objects, places, and images of the present and immediate past, can latent hopes and desires for an America full of opportunity be revealed?

Some of the artists in *Peripheral Views* approach issues of class, race, and power indirectly by using information from influential institutions like Google, television, advertising, and government. Other artists evoke nostalgia, as our current anxieties coexist with a longing for a past ideal. As the artists try to bring forward a clearer understanding of the United States today, their photographs operate as synecdoche, or parts attempting to represent the whole. Ultimately their works underscore the impossibility of creating an encompassing picture of contemporary America. A team of seven people organized this exhibition, and likewise many of the artworks were created collaboratively. The multiplicity of creators and imagery reflect a contemporary American experience that is larger than any single person or community, and complex beyond concise explanation.

As attitudes in the United States have splintered, one founding principle of American democracy, the fair distribution of government power among all citizens, has remained vital to reaching national consensus. **Michael Mergen** (American, b. 1978) reflects on the capacity for individuals to actively influence politics as he travels the United States photographing buildings and homes that share the White House's iconic street address—1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. His typological study intentionally excludes the White House, however, in effect isolating the president from the general populace and questioning the extent to which lines of communication can be drawn between leader and citizenry. **Object Orange** (Anonymous, American) also interrogates the degree of influence available to citizens, in this case through unconventional political

action. Working together as an anonymous group, the artists paint the facades of abandoned houses in their home city of Detroit, Michigan, bright orange. Neighbors and community members had previously petitioned the city to demolish the buildings, to no avail, but after the intervention of the bright orange paint, the local government began to raze them. Thus Object Orange's response to widespread blight ultimately resulted in material changes to the city's landscape. As one of many enduring remnants of the project, the photographic document on view in this exhibition evidences a complex negotiation of resources and power often experienced by communities in economic decline.



Object Orange, *Auburndale Site #4*, from the "Detroit. Demolition. Disneyland" series, 2006, printed 2012



Doug Rickard, #83.016417, Detroit, MI, from the "A New American Picture" series, 2009

Doug Rickard (American, b. 1968) investigates divisions of class and race in the United States in his series *A New American Picture* (2008–09). He captures street scenes from some of the country's most impoverished neighborhoods in striking images that are appropriated from Google Street View. The series raises questions about photography's ability to provide viewers with impartial access to communities outside of their direct experience, while revealing ways surveillance is ever more integrated into our lives. **Harry Shearer** (American, b. 1943) also uses appropriated imagery to expose others, in this case well-known political figures and commentators. His multichannel video installation *The Silent Echo Chamber* (2008) presents footage of political pundits, newscasters, and other on-air

personalities who are silently waiting in broadcast studios to appear as guests on live television. Shearer extracted the footage from satellite feeds that travel the airwaves but never appear on our screens, allowing us to watch professionals negotiate their postures and facial expressions as they prepare to perform live, as themselves, for a viewing audience. Their fidgeting reminds us that their personas are, in many ways, manufactured. The performance of authenticity in televised politics is comparably scrutinized in **Liz Magic Laser's** (American, b. 1981) video *I Feel Your Pain* (2011). As actors restage political interviews and press conferences from broadcast media—such as a recent conversation between Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin—they use body language and cadence to insinuate the progression of a

romantic relationship. By transforming rhetorical language, they throw into question the significance of honesty and originality in politics and love, two subjects that elicit genuine emotion, but are also deeply influenced by mediation.

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Veronica Corzo-Duchardt (Cuban-American, b. 1978) considers the increasing saturation of technological communication in American life with a newsprint takeaway that depicts obsolete technological devices that she personally owns. Images that juxtapose the old and new, the antiquated and the slightly outdated, investigate the impulse to collect and archive the past as a means of mitigating accelerated technological change and the changing ways we consume information. Nostalgia appears again in **Martin Hyers and William Mebane's** (American, b. 1964 and 1972) collaborative project *Empire* (2006). Their photographs of the American South and West catalogue the interiors of hundreds of homes and workplaces, noting objects as poetic indicators of not only individual dreams and circumstances that have resided there, but also of the United States as a whole.

In contrast to the specificity of the personal belongings in Hyers and Mebane's work, **Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin's** (South African, b. 1970 and British, b. 1971) series *American Landscapes* (2009) reveals widespread fantasies perpetuated by America's advertising industry. Their pictures show the emptied interiors of commercial photography studios where prominent celebrities and brands have shot promotional ad campaigns and editorial portraits. In nearly abstract images of undulating white walls and photographic sweeps, the artists consider the dominance of artifice and mythology in the construction of American identity. Likewise, Swiss artists **Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs** (Swiss, both b. 1979) probe our shared identity using a cultural narrative that this country is perhaps best known for—the American West as wild frontier. The collaborators record their own journey across the United States, creating pictures of unpeopled landscapes, which they actively shape through their use of staging and manipulation. Throughout the project, these foreigners merge past and present, using the interplay of distant impression and direct experience to reinterpret well-known cultural clichés.