

SIMON ROBERTS

This Land is Your Land

by Karen Irvine, 2008

"This Land is Your Land, This Land is My Land," those words were written by Woody Guthrie in 1940 in response to what he felt was the overzealous glorification of the country in the lyrics of Irving Berlin's song "God Bless America," widely released in 1938. Guthrie, who had grown up in a farming family in Oklahoma, was reacting to what he believed was a disconnect between the exalted adoration of the country in Berlin's song and the reality of social problems such as the extremely unbalanced distribution of wealth that existed at the end of the Great Depression.

Sixty Seven years later, "This Land is Your Land" is has become one of the most popular patriotic songs of all time. As Irving Berlin once said, "a good song embodies the feelings of the mob;" in this case one could say the mob endowed the song with good feelings. Its call for egalitarianism along with its ambiguous lyrics that, like "God Bless America," speak about the grandeur of the American landscape, has allowed the left wing song to be fully co-opted by the American mainstream and turned into a well-loved patriotic anthem.

What seems to be patriotic, even positive, on the surface is not always what it seems. Throughout history, some of the world's most revered thinkers and philosophers have been suspect of patriotism. 17th and 18th century German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe once said that "Patriotism ruins history," and in the 18th century British write Samuel Johnson said "Patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel." In the 19th century, American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson exclaimed, "When a whole nation is roaring Patriotism at the top of its voice, I am fain to explore the cleanness of its hands and the purity of its heart."

Immediately following 9/11 the United States roared Patriotism in a common outcry against terrorism and inhumanity. Yet that common outrage led us, ultimately, into a complicated and messy war that has raised serious

questions about our own moral conduct as a nation. As the war efforts unravel, patriotism, as well as international support of the war, fades. In an election year, the war debacle and our nation's other problems are thrown into high relief, as politicians battle over immigration, security, abortion, and economics. These polarizing issues heighten our awareness of the impossibility of a fixed national identity, and reveal the fissures behind any common devotion to our country. But perhaps these fissures are indicators of patriotism in its higher form – the questioning of one's country in a desire to make it better. The seven artists in this exhibition--two are American, five are not--offer diverse perceptions of the United States. Their artwork touches upon some of the most current American concerns as well as some of its most enduring stereotypes. Often with humor, they use current events and personal observations to comment on the political, religious, and cultural climate of this country. In their work they demonstrate that our nation's character is not tribal, rather it is a constantly shifting confluence of traditions, stereotypes, and opinions, as understood from both within the country and from the outside.

This essay was from the exhibition catalog for This Land is Your Land Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, February 1 – March 22, 2008

Curated by Karen Irvine.

Featuring work by:
Roberto Bellini
Peter Granser
Caroline Hake
Christian Jankowski
Simon Roberts
Greg Stimac
Bryan Zanisnik