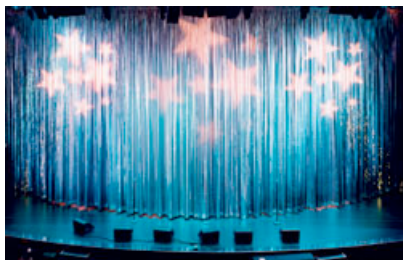


exhibition review



Caroline Hake, *Miss World*, C-print (28 x 41 in.), 2002. Courtesy Galerie b2, Leipzig

THIS LAND IS YOUR LAND AT THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY, CHICAGO

by James Yood

It's been recognized for a while that Woody Guthrie's 1940 "This Land is Your Land" is not the blissful paean to America it's often thought to be. It was written in response to the cloying boosterism of Irving Berlin's 1939 "God Bless America," and in several of the verses rarely performed today Guthrie spoke with empathy of the unemployed and the dispossessed. It's this darker, more brooding, and decidedly less empathic America that curator Karen Irvine seems to see, and this exhibition of the photographs and videos by Roberto Bellini, Peter Granser, Caroline Hake, Christian Jankowski, Simon Roberts, Greg Stimac, and Bryan Zanisnik chronicled a nation many Americans might find strange and foreign. The artists—only two were born in America—collectively reinforce the recent cliché of shallow and retrograde red-state America, a largely rural place of televangelists, xenophobic conservative politics, post-9/11 paranoia, and a kind of rampant redneck machismo.

British photographer Simon Roberts' photos of mostly middle-aged white guys watching things blow up in the stark beauty of the Nevada desert reveals a kind of pathetic and impotent updating of the energies of the frontier. Taken during two visits—in 1999 and in 2002—that were separated by the events of 9/11, his photos of the latter gathering are sheathed in patriotism, as if their activities constituted exercises in self-protection and guerrilla training rather than a juvenile destruction fetish. American artist Greg Stimac's video *Peeling Out* (2007), showing car after car screeching and burning rubber in usually peaceful and rustic sites, hits a similar note of brash machismo—America as adolescent male rampage. Though these events are staged and the gender of the drivers can only be surmised, Stimac's recognition of the impulsive predilection of America for the fastest, loudest, and most aggressive and destructive tendencies—driving as tantrum and psychobiography—is well realized here. German photographer Caroline Hake's images of Los Angeles chronicle empty stage sets for pageants and game shows and interior views of museums, seeing them as shallow and artificial contexts for America's obsession with fame and glamour, both gussied up and empty at their core. These artists and their curator see America as a troubled giant, lumbering inexorably toward a glum and dysfunctional future.

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