

Reviews

Oregon

'true bearing' at PDX

Summertime and the livin' is easy. Estival group exhibitions often reflect the easygoing season in looseness and lightness. Galleries can try out new artists under the guise of very thin themes. But pleasure can be found within this light gazpacho of summer shows and this was certainly true of *true bearing* whose central visual premise was beauty. Not a dumb, pretty vacuousness, but a true radiant beauty. The other thread winding its way through the works was escape expressed here by way of alternate lifestyles and utopian visions. Given the pervading exasperation with current politics and that summer is the season for road trips, for ditching the everyday mainstream grind and finding verdant

possibilities, *true bearing* and its undercurrent of "tune in, drop out" was extremely well-timed.

Lucas Foglia's photograph, *Live Slow*, epitomized the show's spirit: A decrepit van sits in a wooded area, its back swung open. The contents reveal a nomad's trappings. In dun colored nets and bags hang the tools of living—lamps, cookstoves, clothes and general detritus. A burlap sac hangs on one door and on the floor of the van is a large bag of Natural Choice dog food. The words "Live Slow-Die Whenever" are written on the bumper. The photo is part of a series taken around an organic community garden. In other images, we see two Buddhist monks, a man named Phil proudly showing off his bunch of carrots and pair of young African-American boys eating fresh watermelon. In *Brittney Swimming* a

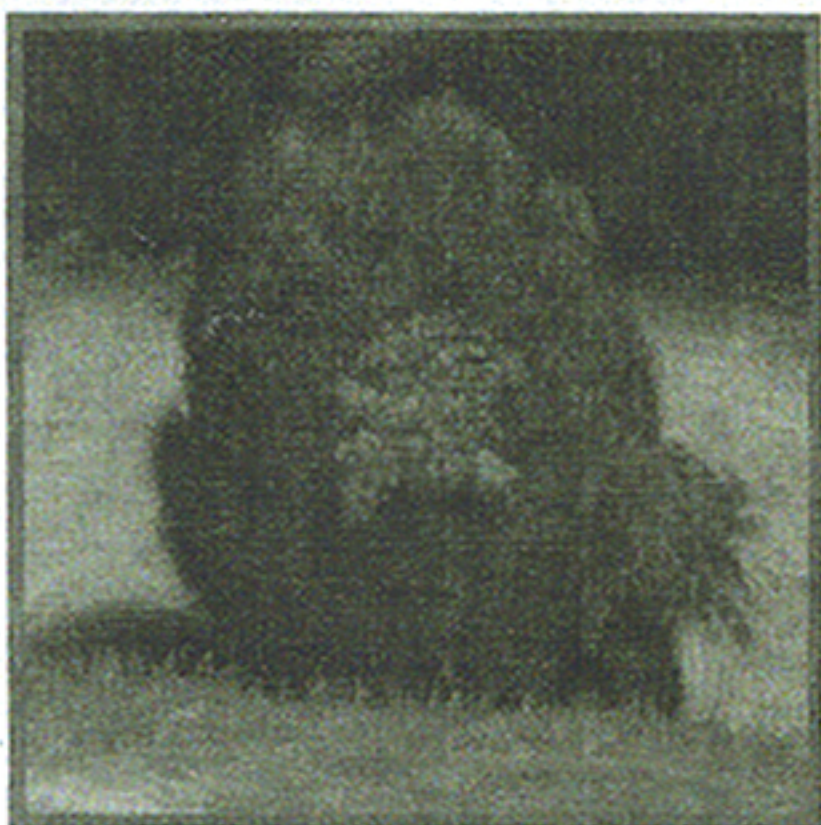


archetype for Edenic purity. The commune has always been a mechanism for starting over from scratch—a way of ditching the corrupt mainstream and creating a new model. Of course, the commune's history is often a predictable arc from idealism to dissolution because the commune cannot exist without the mainstream that surrounds it. The thing it breeds may not be practical application but time resistant ideas—hope springs eternal.

Perhaps the template for striking out to create home in the wilderness is Henry David Thoreau's *On Walden Pond*. Thoreau's experiment in living off the grid has inspired countless movements and imitators. In his quest for self-reliance, Thoreau only went a few miles out of town, but in doing so became the quintessential American. He could walk to his friend and fellow transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson's house in no time. Harrell Fletcher's video *Where I lived*,

What I lived For transposes Thoreau's words to France, asking French picnickers to read in their native language Thoreau's words; the ideas ricochet through time and nationality.

Eschewing fashion and hipness, Nick Blosser's practice is one of meditation and patience and his paintings radiate the cicada filled quiet of the summer field. *Farm Road in Burkes Garden* is a single-point-perspective road disappearing into a cluster of trees and a blue hill. Both title and image are redolent of the stillness of the rural landscape. Equally quiet, *Leafy Vines Attached to Scrub Tree* suggests a life in which observation of such small occurrences could yield pro-



From top: Justine Kurland, *Mama Baby, Procession*, 2006, C-print, 30" x 40"; Lucas Foglia, *Live Slow, Die Whenever*, 2006, C-print, 16" x 20"; Nick Blosser, *Leafy Vines Attached to Scrub Tree*, 2007, oil on canvas, 11-1/2" x 11", at PDX Contemporary Art, Portland.

young woman bathes nude—in the tradition of Eakins and Matisse—in a brown and green river near her commune in Southeastern U.S.

Group living figures even more largely in the work of Justine Kurland who, after 9/11, went traveling around America looking for people living in communes or otherwise alternate lifestyles. Her photos engage in a complex history of utopian impulses. In her photo *Mama Baby, Procession* a parade of nude mothers march down a fog-enshrouded beach. The photo has a painterly, Turner-esque quality to it. Like Foglia's *Brittney Swimming*, the nude woman in the landscape becomes an

found epiphanies. Barbara Stafford's *Falling Light* and *Evening* also slow down time to an eternal moment. And a similar sense of time meditated on, of transcendence through practice comes through Nell Warren's clunky but elegant monotypes. The images recall early surrealist images as well as the Northwestern transcendental abstractions of Mark Tobey and Carl Morris. With tertiary blues and pinks, biomorphic forms suggest landscapes, plants and cells simultaneously. In the same vein, Megan Murphy's drawings on vellum appear as koans of emptiness and space.

Two photographers reveal different aspects of landscape. Sam Beebe's detailed images of exploration and vacation sing with vernacular intimacy while Raymond Meeks's rich charcoal-toned images and artist books celebrate the western rural countryside.

This year is the fiftieth anniversary of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, which when originally published sent an army of thousands, dissatisfied with 1950s conservatism, across the highways of America to find life with a capital L. Every generation believes that somewhere "out there" is an alternative, a place of likeminded souls who will make a go at new kind of living. Beautiful and serious, the works in *true bearing* reflect some current options for respite from the compulsive novelty of our mass culture while offering refuge in this lazy somnolent season.

—Daniel Duford

true bearing closed in August at PDX Contemporary Art, Portland. Christophe Berhault was also included in the exhibition.

Daniel Duford is a freelance writer based in Portland.