

ARTS

Pier 24 Offers a Dark Look at America's Past Decade in 'This Land'

By [Sarah Hotchkiss](#)  Jul 5, 2018



Bryan Schutmaat, detail of 'Wes,' 2011. (© Bryan Schutmaat, courtesy the artist)

“This is not,” Alec Soth says, “a happy-go-lucky portrait of society.”

While Soth's exhibition-guide description refers to only his own series *Songbook* (black-and-white depictions of small-town life, community gatherings and solitary moments caught in a stark flash), he may as well be talking about the entirety of Pier 24's latest yearlong exhibition, *This Land*.

Named after Woody Guthrie's alternative national anthem, the 18-person show takes stock of the United States over the past 10 years, offering up images of lives and landscapes during and after the 2008 financial crisis. Taken as a whole, the exhibition is, in one word, bleak.



Paolo Pellegrin, 'A police officer. Northeast Rochester, NY,' 2013. (© Paolo Pellegrin/Magnum Photos, courtesy the artist)

But bleak settings and situations make for some truly compelling images. Bruce Gilden documents foreclosed properties across the country, some halted partway through construction. Bryan Schutmaat captures the dramatic effects of strip-mining on the American West. Police detain black men, women and children in Paolo Pellegrin's photographs of Rochester, New York. Richard Misrach surveys the U.S.-Mexico border, zeroing in on the artifacts left behind by those moving across it. And closer to home, Daniel Postær's *Boomtown* series frames the jarring juxtapositions of extreme wealth and dispossession in San Francisco.



Katy Grannan, 'Anonymous, Bakersfield, CA,' 2011. (© Katy Grannan, courtesy the artist; Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; and Salon 94, New York)

Balanced against these reminders of economic collapse, environmental degradation, police brutality, border politics and homelessness are small moments of unexpected pleasure.

But these moments are few and far between. More than a comprehensive picture of “America,” *This Land* offers up pictures of multiple Americas, all very separate from each other, in places where the opportunities for happiness, prosperity and success are far from equal.

Despite their subjects' reduced circumstances—or perhaps because of them—some of the photographers in *This Land* turn to formal, stately portraiture. Katy Grannan's *The Ninety Nine and The Nine* captures, in both vivid color and black-and-white photographs, people living in the dusty, sun-bleached landscape of the Central Valley. In *Anonymous, Bakersfield, CA*, a boy stands against a concrete-block wall, chin up and eyes squinting against harsh sunlight, long brown hair clasped in his right hand. It's a modern take on the “hand-in-waistcoat” pose of 18th and 19th-century military portraiture, and it fits.

An-My Lê picks up this thread with *The Silent General*, tracking the legacy of military posturing, the Civil War and racial inequalities in modern-day Louisiana. The gallery of her work moves in beautiful succession from an image of a New Orleans monument to General P.G.T. Beauregard (first prominent general of the Confederate army) to a Fourth of July party in the same city's Bayou St. John. Between them, images of a Civil War movie set, graffiti protesting “this racist asshole president” and both black and white teenagers sitting companionably on a picnic blanket complicate ideas of history and fiction, what is real and what is not.



An-My Lê, 'The Silent General: Monument, General P.G.T. Beauregard, New Orleans, Louisiana,' 2016. (© An-My Lê, courtesy the artist)

Set against underpopulated towns, enormous infrastructure and places of surprising natural beauty, the people photographed in *This Land* exist mostly within and as a result of their surroundings. They make sense together. (Bruce Gilden's series of extreme facial close-ups in *Citizen* is a major, fascinatingly grotesque exception.) But the lone video work in the show, despite its very recognizable setting of New York City, is a study in human movement, the location merely window dressing.

James Nares' 61-minute *Street*, soundtracked by Thurston Moore, is a smooth, slow-motion ride through the streets of New York. People chat on corners, look at their phones, duck under rain, hold their children's hands and, sometimes, make gleeful eye contact with the camera. The slow speed of the video amplifies every tiny gesture, making each raised hand, head tilt and sideways glance instantly relatable—examples of shared humanity.



James Nares, film still from 'Street,' 2011. (© James Nares, Courtesy the artist and Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York)

Of all the works in *This Land*, *Street* sparks the most intense feelings of joy. Maybe this is because video, as a medium, depicts a world of motion and perpetual change. Unlike their compatriots in the still images around them, the people within Nares' video aren't static. *Street* is pure quotidian magic, a reminder that Guthrie's "land" (and yours, and mine) is best experienced by walking, roaming, rambling and strolling through it.