

EXAMINING IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY ART AND PHOTOGRAPHY

A Resource For Educators



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Altria



Cover: Nikki S. Lee

The Wedding (3) from the *Parts* series, 2005

C-print mounted on aluminum

30 x 22 1/2 in. (76.2 x 57.2 cm)

Courtesy of Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects

Design: Barbara Leff, The Monk Design Group

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ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

The **Jewish** community in the United States is a diverse and complex one. Today, Jews in the United States come from many backgrounds. They are people of color, immigrants, Jews by choice, and adoptees. They also observe a wide variety of customs and traditions. Studying this multidimensional group of individuals raises many interesting and provocative questions about Jews and about our **multicultural** society in general. Who is a Jew? What does it mean to be Jewish? Who determines these definitions? How do Jews perceive themselves? How do others perceive them? How do the concepts of **exile**, immigration, home, and community help us understand what it means to be a Jew in the United States today? How does the experience of the **Holocaust** affect what it means to be Jewish? How do we address the richness and multifaceted nature of this vibrant and diverse community without falling back on clichés and generalizations? And, more broadly, how does examining this particular community help us consider these issues as they apply to society as a whole?

The exhibition *The Jewish Identity Project: New American Photography*, held at The Jewish Museum in New York between September 2005 and January 2006, explores these questions through the mediums of **photography** and video. Commissioned by The Jewish Museum for the purpose of this exhibition, thirteen artists created works of art which challenge the viewer to explore a myriad of issues dealing with identity, **tolerance**, and **stereotypes**. The exhibition addresses issues relevant to both Jewish and non-Jewish audiences, examining the actual and constructed boundaries between individuals in many different communities.

The artists in *The Jewish Identity Project* were charged with the task of creating photographs or video projects that examine the multiculturalism of the Jewish community in the United States today. Each artist has framed these issues differently, through a variety of subjects, media, and artistic approaches. This resource takes a close look at photographs by four of the artists in this exhibition, along with works of art by two artists from The Jewish Museum's permanent collection, and provides suggestions for introducing these works and the themes they explore to students. The information and discussions in this resource will also assist teachers in preparing classes for a visit to The Jewish Museum, where many of the issues raised by these works of art are addressed on our school tours.

As this resource deals with contemporary art that focuses to a great extent on sophisticated ideas and complex visual imagery, we have geared the discussion questions and activities toward middle and high school students. However, these may be adapted for elementary-age students. Curricular and thematic connections provide educators with a context for introducing the works of art to students; the bibliography offers teachers and students further opportunities for research; and a CD-ROM features the images reproduced in the resource.

While the works of art presented here deal specifically with Jewish subject matter and identity, the topics they address raise broader questions. For example, how do people in the United States—as members of a multicultural society—perceive and identify themselves? How do others perceive them? How do stereotypes inform or shape this discussion? How do we recognize and address these stereotypes and assumptions? The main objective of this resource is to pose these questions, provide a framework for discussion, and encourage the articulation of various points of view.

By participating in discussions and engaging in the suggested activities students will:

- Consider issues of diversity, multiculturalism, and tolerance with regard to one's own community and others.
- Identify the ways in which certain groups of people are stereotyped and explore ways of appreciating differences.
- Understand the power of text and image to affect perception and express ideas.
- Engage in personal expression through photography, drawing, and collage.
- Develop skills in visual literacy by responding to works of art verbally and in writing.

ART, PROCESS, AND COLLABORATION

Many of the artists presented in this resource have collaborated with their subjects to some degree. Exploring this aspect of the creative process reveals more intimately how the artist produces his or her work, and sparks discussion about how this process affects the final product. To some of the artists, for example, Chris Verene and Andrea Robbins and Max Becher, spending time with and getting to know their subjects before photographing them is important. To other artists, like Dawoud Bey, learning about the subject beforehand is not necessary, and sometimes is even detrimental to making the art. The personal identity of the artist can also play a role in the ease or extent to which he or she can get to know the subject. For example, in Jaime Permuth's case, he feels his identity as a Latin Jew has allowed him easier access to the Torat Emet community—a congregation of primarily **Latino** Jews who are the subjects of his work. Have your students consider these approaches to collaboration when engaging in some of the activities suggested in this resource.

Also encourage your students to examine the photographs in this resource as works of art, specifically focusing on photography as an art form. When looking at individual photographs, ask them to consider how each artist has manipulated the medium to achieve his or her objectives. Have students think about scale, distortion, attention to detail, **composition**, cropping, use of color photography versus black-and-white film, and the type of camera used by a particular artist.

Jaime Permuth
Selection from
La bat mitzvah de Gila Viñas (Gila Viñas's Bat Mitzvah)
23 black-and-white digital prints
8 x 10 in. (20.3 x 25.4 cm) each





EXAMINING IDENTITY THROUGH TEXT AND IMAGE

DAWOUD BEY

Born in Jamaica, New York, 1953

With audio interviews by Dan Collison and Elizabeth Meister

The adolescent Jews of color depicted by Dawoud Bey for The Jewish Museum's exhibition *The Jewish Identity Project: New American Photography* are not shown as ethnographic subjects but rather as a diverse group of Chicago teenagers. In the early 1990s Dawoud Bey turned to portraying issues of identity and representation among adolescents from minority communities through large-scale **Polaroid** photographs. Eventually, Bey moved away from the Polaroids to crisp, monumental **chromogenic color prints** and, more recently, **pigment prints**. In 2002, he worked with Chicago high school students to create a collaborative photographic, audio, and text project addressing the questions: "Is it possible for a photographic **portrait** to reveal anything 'real' about you to someone else? What aspects of yourself are you willing to share with the world, and how do others respond to those self-representations?"

Bey's images in his project for The Jewish Museum continue this process of inquiry. His photographs of Jewish teens from Chicago mark the tensions of adolescence and project a sense of vulnerability; in their directness they also straddle the boundaries between public and private personas—what we keep to ourselves and what we show others. Bey has photographed his subjects in their homes and posed some of them with arms or elbows propped on a table. These gestures are at once defiant and protective. Much of the impact of these photographs is achieved through the image's large scale and through the close proximity of the subject to the foreground.

Dawoud Bey's collaborative photographic and audio project, created with Dan Collison and Elizabeth Meister, allows these adolescents from Jewish backgrounds to speak for themselves about issues of race, religion, and ethnicity. Jacob, for example, is the only child of a single Jewish mother; his father was from Belize. Zenebesh was adopted from Ethiopia and converted to Judaism by her parents. Bey's subjects undermine easy assumptions about Jewishness and affirm his belief that young people "are arbiters of style in the community; their appearance speaks most strongly of how a community of people defines themselves at a particular historical moment."

Dawoud Bey

Zenebesh, 2005

Pigment print

50 x 40 in. (127 x 101.6 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Look at the two portraits by Dawoud Bey. Describe the subjects' facial expressions, poses, and attire. What do they communicate to the viewer? What is your impression of these individuals as evidenced by these portraits?
- Dawoud Bey posed his subjects for these portraits. How would you describe the poses? How do you think they affect the way we view the individuals portrayed in the photographs? For example, do these figures seem approachable? Reserved?
- Describe the composition in each photograph. How does the subject's proximity to the viewer's space affect the way we view the image?
- Describe the setting in each image. What is the relationship between the setting and the subject both visually and in terms of the photograph's content? Does the knowledge that Bey photographed his subjects at home affect your perception of the work?
- Bey has stated in an interview that young people "are arbiters of styles in the community; their appearance speaks most strongly of how a community of people defines themselves at a particular historical moment." What do you think this means? Do you agree with Bey's assessment?
- Bey included interviews with his subjects to complement the photographs. The following is an excerpt from the interview with Jacob:

My name is Jacob Goldstein and I'm 15.

My father was Belizean, my mom is American, and I'm Jewish. So I'm one of a kind, you could say. I didn't know my dad because he died when I was little. But I grew up with my mom, and she's raised me all by herself, and she's done a great job.

A lot of people thought I was adopted. But, when people think I'm adopted, I really don't think anything of it, I just have to tell them that, no she's my mom and my dad was black.

I identify myself as being black, but I also identify myself as being Jewish, too. I think of myself more as an individual than like any other person, because I'm both, like I'm Jewish and I'm black, so I'm different than most other people. I like being different than other people, I like being a leader, I don't like to follow other people and what they do.

People base too much on the way people look, like the way people dress, like they look at me, and might think, like, I'm in a gang or something. That's just because of the way I dress. You can't really put an identity on someone that you don't really know. When people don't know that much about you and you're just like, oh, I forgot to tell you, I'm Jewish, they're like, what? That's something they'd never expect.

Read this quote with your class. How does reading the excerpt above affect your perception of this person?

- Think about the subject's gaze. To whom is it directed? How do the gazes of these figures compare with those in some of the other photographs included in this resource? Compare these photographs to those by Chris Verene. How are they different from one another? How do they communicate information about their respective subjects?

Dawoud Bey
Jacob, 2005
Pigment print

50 x 40 in. (127 x 101.6 cm)

Courtesy of the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago



- Discuss this quote by Dawoud Bey with your class:

Because the introduction of the camera disrupts the normal social situation, what happens at that point takes on an aspect of personal theater and performance. I, as the photographer, become a kind of director, attempting to provoke a credible performance on the part of the subject, a performance which nominally reads in the photograph as a kind of nonperformance actually, since the role, as such, that the person is “performing” is his or her self.

ACTIVITY: WRITING ABOUT PORTRAITS

Curriculum Connection: Language Arts

- Aim: To articulate ideas and impressions of a photographic portrait through a first-person narrative.

- Materials: Paper and pencils

- Procedure:

1. Ask your students to look carefully at one of Bey’s photographs and speculate about the subject’s interests, emotions, and personality.
2. Then have them write a paragraph from the point of view of the sitter.
3. Have your students read what they have written to the class.
4. Discuss the various interpretations that emerge from these texts.

ACTIVITY: EXPLORING IDENTITY THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY

Curriculum Connections: Creative Arts, Language Arts

■ Aims: To create a photographic portrait; to describe the elements of a portrait verbally and in writing.

■ Materials: Cameras, paper, and pencils

■ Procedure:

1. If possible, pair your students up with a student in another class, preferably someone they do not know very well.

2. Read the following statement made by Bey during an interview:

If the person doesn't like the picture that results, I try to make them realize that this is a picture, not reality, and it is my own subjective take on them at the moment we made the photograph. While I don't consider myself beholden to the subject's response, it is never my intention to demean them. . . . What I try to do is to make all of the artificiality of the situation—the lights, the camera, and other activity outside the frame of the picture—disappear, so that what we are left with is a photograph that contains a certain level of emotional, psychological, or material information and credibility.

3. Discuss Bey's remarks with your students.

4. Once students have chosen their subjects ask them to pose the person; both photographer and subject must be comfortable with the pose.

5. Ask your students to consider how much of the setting they will incorporate into the photograph.

6. Have them take a photo of this person.

7. After taking the photograph, have students interview their subject and take notes about the person's background and interests. Also have them ask their subjects about the experience of being the subject of a portrait. How did their subjects feel? Did they feel comfortable or uncomfortable when they were being photographed?

8. Gather the photographs and ask students to randomly choose one to study. They should not choose their own photograph.

9. Ask students to describe the photograph in writing, considering the subject's pose and facial expression, the setting, and the compositional elements of the photograph.



NIKKI S. LEE

Born in South Korea, 1970

Nikki S. Lee immigrated to the United States from South Korea. She is the subject of her own work—enlarged snapshot-like photographs staged to explore specific issues regarding the construction of female and ethnic identities. In a recent series, *Parts*, begun in 2002, Lee uses male friends or hired actors in carefully staged narratives, which are then photographed. In the enlarged final prints, Lee slices out most of the male figure. The viewer receives only hints of a story and must confront what is missing. By cropping out the man and including only part of his body, Lee also draws attention to his absence. Although barely visible in the photograph, he is clearly present in the scene and becomes an integral part of the narrative.

The settings for Lee's works have been wide-ranging: the back seat of a London taxi, a Home Depot store in Queens, the delivery room of a Memphis hospital. Who is Lee playing in each of these scenarios? Is this the real Nikki S. Lee? Is this a masquerade? The answer is intentionally ambiguous, to be determined by the viewer. Such questions are central to the work Lee has created for The Jewish Museum. Employing the strategies from the *Parts* series, Lee has had herself photographed as the bride in a Jewish wedding ceremony, literally cutting the bridegroom out of the picture. (Note that Lee has deliberately framed three sides of the photograph with a white border and cropped the fourth.) The final work addresses the typical assumption that Asian American women sometimes encounter in the Jewish community—that they are there because of a man. Lee's work asks: Has the missing man provided her character's access into Judaism?

For Lee, the work also questions how far she can successfully integrate herself into a group that is intrinsically different from her own—is there a common ground between her and her partner? Can she be Jewish? And can viewers of her work see her as such?

Nikki S. Lee

The Wedding (8), from the *Parts* series, 2005

C-print mounted on aluminum

30 x 22 1/2 in. (76.2 x 57.2 cm)

Courtesy of Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What do you think is happening in these two photographs by Nikki S. Lee?
- What is the context? Which portions of the event has she decided to depict?
- How would you describe the characters in her photographs and their status as participants in the scenes? What are their roles?
- Who is the central figure in these photographs? How has Lee made this evident in terms of each photograph's composition and focus? (Example: she is at the center; other figures are cropped or blurred)
- Is there anything unusual about Lee's photographs?
- Discuss the composition of her works and her characteristic cropping of the central male figure's form. How does cropping the male figure affect our perception of the scene?
- Read the following excerpt from an interview with Lee about her project for The Jewish Museum's exhibition *The Jewish Identity Project: New American Photography* to your students:

And then for The Jewish Museum project: I used to have a Jewish boyfriend, so I know that this is possible. It's a little bit of *Projects* [an earlier series] and *Parts* in one. It's a Jewish wedding, so it's more about social identity issues. And I'm not trying to become a Jewish woman, but an Asian woman who marries a Jewish man. When you marry someone, you enter his or her culture, and he's going to enter my culture, too, probably. So, it's more of a mix of cultures, and the cultural issue is more from the *Projects* series. But the context is more like the *Parts* series—how I met this Jewish guy, dating him, how I ended up with him, and now I'm having a wedding—will we be comfortable in the future? I can see similarities between Jewish and Korean cultures as well because my dealer and my ex-boyfriend are Jewish, I'm familiar with Jewish culture: Jews have suffered from oppression, and in Korean culture there is oppression from the Japanese; Jews eat pickles and we eat pickles, too! So perhaps the couple in the image can manage both cultures well if they get married. How does the Jewish man affect the Korean woman's identity and vice versa? Similarly, I live here as a Korean, but I have an identity as a New Yorker as well. When I'm here, my New York identity comes out more, and in Korea my Korean identity comes out more—I hold both inside of me.

- How does Lee's work reinforce or challenge stereotypes of Jews and non-Jews? Of Asians or Asian Americans?
- Ask students to imagine the scenarios that precede and follow those depicted in the two photographs reproduced in this resource. Discuss Nikki S. Lee's focus on herself as the central figure of the narrative and how this affects the way we view the celebration.



Nikki S. Lee
The Wedding (3), from the *Parts*
series, 2005
C-print mounted on
aluminum
30 x 22 1/2 in. (76.2 x 57.2 cm)
Courtesy of Leslie Tonkonow
Artworks + Projects

ACTIVITY: DESCRIBING AND UNDERSTANDING RITUAL CELEBRATIONS

Curriculum Connections: Language Arts, Social Studies/History

■ **Aims:** To research and describe the context of Nikki S. Lee's photographs—a Jewish wedding—verbally and in writing; to research the wedding rituals of other cultures/religions and provide a written description of one of these celebrations; to write a description of a celebration in which the student has participated.

■ **Materials:** Paper and pencils

■ **Procedure:**

1. Have your students conduct research about Jewish weddings and the rituals associated with them.
2. Discuss how these rituals are either familiar or foreign to the students in your class.
3. Have students research the marriage rituals of other cultures and write a description of them.
4. Ask your students to think of a celebration in which they have participated. Have them write a description of this event. Have them consider their involvement in the celebration and how they felt as participants.



Ken Apteckar

I Hate the Name Kenneth, 1996

Oil on wood, sandblasted glass, and bolts

Overall: 69 x 120 7/8 x 3 in. (175.3 x 307.1 x 7.6 cm) Each: 30 x 30 x 3 in. (76.2 x 76.2 x 7.6 cm)

The Jewish Museum, New York

Purchased with funds given by Barbara S. Horowitz, Howard E. Rachofsky, Ruth M. and Stephen Durschlag, Marcia May, J.W. Heller Foundation, Michael L. Rosenberg, the Fine Arts Acquisition Committee, Helga and Samuel Feldman, Caroline B. Michahelles and Robert G. Pollack, 1997-26 a-h

Isidor Kaufmann (Austrian 1853–1921)

Head of a Rabbi, n.d.

Oil on panel

15 3/8 x 12 3/8 in. (39.1 x 31.5 cm.)

The Jewish Museum, New York

Bequest of Edith B. Weisz, 2004-11



KEN APTEKAR

Born in Detroit, Michigan, 1950

Ken Aptekar's works of art juxtapose text and images that simultaneously pay homage to and critique historical paintings. His constructions of appropriated images coupled with narrative fragments offer the viewer open-ended stories with information about the artist's family, identity, and personal beliefs. Aptekar's works are provocative, reframing old masterpieces and representing them as a backdrop for a deeply personal autobiographical account.

In *I Hate the Name Kenneth*, Aptekar paints reproductions of portraits by the Jewish Austro-Hungarian artist Isidor Kaufmann (1853–1921) and overlays them with sheets of etched glass. The narrative superimposed on images of Jews in traditional garb tells the story of the artist's grandfathers, both named Abraham and both of whom immigrated to the United States. The brief account describes how one assimilated and the other maintained his European Jewish identity by preserving his customs. Through his blunt yet poignant narrative, Aptekar reveals why he dislikes his name, using the story of his two very different grandfathers as a means of examining his own identity.

Aptekar has stated that he is conflicted about his Jewish heritage: "Jewish names . . . interest me. Perhaps because of pangs of guilt at my own willingness to pass as Not Jewish, I have little tolerance for Jews who change their names to sound less Jewish." On one hand, he understands the impulse of his grandfather Abraham to assimilate, changing his name to Albert. On the other, he resents his own and others' desires to pursue this route, admiring the other grandfather Abraham who did not.

Aptekar's constructions are visually and intellectually compelling. The paintings are black, white, and gray whereas the originals that inspired them are vibrant and colorful. Although the figures portrayed in Aptekar's works are versions of Kaufmann's meticulously detailed portraits, the contemporary artist has made them his own. A near monochromatic palette and his inclusion of the painted frames—rendered as well in the same gray and black tones—clearly indicate that the works are not mere reproductions. By incorporating paintings of the frames, cropping the images in a seemingly arbitrary way, and interrupting his imagery with areas of white space, Aptekar reminds the viewer that he is presenting him or her with a reinterpretation of an artistic and historical document. One's eye is drawn to the empty areas and the moldings of the frames.

In terms of content, Aptekar combines the masterful Kaufmann portraits—which at the time of their creation hung in well-appointed parlors, enhancing the social status of the collectors who could afford to purchase them—with his own family history. Kaufmann's portraits of religiously devout Jews linked the world of cosmopolitan fin de siècle (turn of the century) Vienna to a traditional lifestyle that endured outside the capital. Aptekar uses these images to draw attention to the dichotomy between these two worlds in his own life. Throughout the eight panels, Aptekar weaves together a blend of powerful words and evocative imagery that hark back to the past, but are firmly located in the present.

Portions of this text are drawn from The Jewish Museum's website, www.thejewishmuseum.org.

Abraham from Odessa
changed his name.
He had to if he wanted
to get ahead at Ford
where he got a job
painting stripes on
Model Ts. Fifty years
later Albert retired, a
vice-president in the
tractor division.

Abraham from a
shtetl near Minsk
never changed his name.
He lived in an
apartment near the
oldest synagogue
in Detroit, ran a
bicycle shop with
my grandmother
his whole life.

Kenneth was what my
parents named me.
They said it was the
closest they could
come to my Jewish
name, "Chaim,"
Hebrew for "life."
Abraham from the
shtetl called me
"mein Kenny."

I was seven when I
lost Grandpa Abe.
When he had to face
a small claims judge,
he collapsed from a heart
attack on the floor of
the courthouse.
Grandpa Al died much
later. I hate the name
Kenneth.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In *I Hate the Name Kenneth*, Aptekar addresses the relationship of naming to identity. In his text, he refers to the identifiably Jewish names of his grandfathers and to their transformation into ethnically neutral English versions—a common practice in the United States when immigrants arrived here. Discuss Aptekar’s text and its implications. Ask students to consider its tone and content. What is the significance of the title of his work of art?
- Why do you think the artist says that he hates his name? Why do you think he uses such a strong word to describe his feelings?
- Discuss the relationship of the Kaufmann paintings reproduced by Aptekar to the text on the etched glass. How does this combination of text and image affect the way one views the work of art? How does the content of the text relate to the content of the images of devout Jews in traditional garb? What does this combination explore about the act of looking versus the act of reading?
- Discuss the way in which Aptekar has painted the portraits. What is the effect of including painted images of the frames and their shadows? How is this different than painting the figures without the frames? Discuss the artist’s use of cropping and his inclusion of white areas.

ACTIVITY: USING TEXT AS IMAGE

Curriculum Connection: Creative Arts

- Aim: To create a work of art using the student’s name as a component of the piece.
- Materials: Paper, collage elements, paint, brushes, pencils, scissors, etc.
- Procedure:
 1. Ask students to create a work of art inspired by their own first or last name.
 2. Have them brainstorm about the type of media they will employ. They may choose to execute a drawing or create a work that combines painting and collage.
 3. The only requirement of the piece is that students incorporate their names in some way.
 4. Discuss the finished works of art with the class.

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITIES: ILLINOIS, IOWA, AND NEW YORK

BARRY AND DONNY AND HARRY HAVE BEEN
BEST FRIENDS SINCE CUBSCOUTS.



MY FATHER, DONNY, SAYS THEY ALMOST
MADE EAGLESCOUT TOGETHER.

Chris Verene

Donny and Barry on the Porch, 2001

From *Prairie Jews*, 1997–2005

from the series *Galesburg*

Type C Archival print, with artist's handwritten text in oil

30 x 36 in. (76.2 x 91.4 cm)

Courtesy Chris Verene Studio—ChrisVerene.com

CHRIS VERENE

Born in Galesburg, Illinois, 1969

Chris Verene took these photographs in Galesburg, Illinois, the small town where he was born and where most of his photographic work has been based. Part of a series titled *Prairie Jews*, these works portray Jews in the Galesburg community either alone or with their non-Jewish neighbors. Galesburg is an overwhelmingly Protestant manufacturing town with a population of just under 34,000 people. The first Jewish settlers came to Galesburg in 1855, less than twenty years after the city's founding in 1837. Though few in number, they are not only immigrants to this Midwest town but were settlers as well.

As Verene himself has observed, the Jews in this community do not have a strong visual presence. He notes: "There is a small synagogue and an old Jewish cemetery there and yet one would not know who is Jewish in the community without asking." The local Temple Sholom's Reform congregation is comprised of thirty-five families. Too small to afford a permanent **rabbi**, it is served by a student rabbi from Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati.

Verene currently lives in Brooklyn but continues to travel frequently to Galesburg to visit and photograph its inhabitants. Simultaneously insider and outsider to this community, Verene—through his photographs—raises questions about the identity of Galesburg's residents. In *Donny and Barry on the Porch* (2001) Verene depicts his father Donny and one of his father's two best friends from childhood. Both of Donny's best friends happen to be Jewish. Verene's composition in *Donny and Barry on the Porch* echoes Grant Wood's famous painting *American Gothic* in the collection of The Art Institute of Chicago, which depicts a farmer and his daughter in front of their house. Wood—who was from Iowa—was accused of creating a satire on the intolerance and rigidity that the insular nature of rural life can produce. He denied the accusation; in his view, *American Gothic* epitomized the Puritan ethic and upheld the virtues of Midwestern character. With a nod to Wood, Verene seems to offer us these Jewish and gentile Midwesterners as embodiments of similar virtues. He also explores how Jews and non-Jews interact and live together in the town.

The captions accompanying Verene's photographs do not try to provide the complete story of their subjects or to seamlessly narrate a complex life as a journalist might. We glean from the artist's texts that "barry and donny and harry [the other best friend] have been best friends since cub scouts" and that "my father, donny, says they almost made eagle scout together" and that "harry founded the galesburg model train show." Verene's work in Galesburg has the effect of creating an extended family album, a chronicle of the town. In getting to know the town's Jews and adding their representations to his ongoing narrative of small town life, a reshaped history emerges.

In Max Wineman ("our friend max is 93 he was close to my father's father" and "max escaped from the camps and came alone to galesburg. his wife passed away in 1972"), the photographer sees "a fascinating hybrid identity" where the "work in the end seeks to complicate any stereotype of Jewishness—yet relies on it as well." Max's life and Verene's visualization of it may make us think about how Jewishness is constituted not only through the communal institutions or familial rituals but also individually and alone.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Look at Verene's photograph titled *Donny and Barry on the Porch*. Discuss the photograph's composition. What is included in the foreground, middle ground, and background? Do you see lines and/or shapes repeated throughout the composition? (Note the vertical lines in the fence, the figure's suspenders, and the weather vane in the background.)
- How do colors animate the photograph? Where are they repeated in the composition?
- Both Verene's and Dawoud Bey's photographs are posed. Can you tell? Why or why not? How does this affect the way you think about the images?
- Read the artist's captions, mentioned on the previous page, that accompany the photographs by Verene included in this resource. How does reading the quotes affect your perception of the photograph and the people portrayed in them?
- Describe Verene's *Max and Marlene*. Discuss the placement of the figures in the composition, the setting, and the relationship of the figures based on what you see.
- What do we know about Max based on Verene's photograph and comments? What would you like to know?

MARLENE TAKES CARE OF MAX AND HIS HOUSE.



ACTIVITY: EXAMINING FAMILIAR COMMUNITIES

Curriculum Connections: Social Studies/History, Language Arts

■ Aims: To define the concept of “community” and to examine and describe communities that are familiar to students; to consider people both as individuals and as members of a community.

■ Materials: Photographs, paper, and pencils

■ Procedure:

1. Chris Verene photographs his family and their neighbors—members of a community that is familiar to him. He has stated the following:

My work is about documenting the real story and real lives of my family and friends and their town of Galesburg, Illinois. My role in this is to sincerely describe the life and circumstances of the people and to show reality while preserving the people’s honor and dignity. My role is also as interpreter—I explain the story in short form using my handwriting and picture editing. My role or job as artist is understood through the fact that I only make work about people I have known for years or am related to and with whom we have found mutual trust.

Read the quote to your students. Discuss it with them.

2. Ask students to choose one of the photographs by Verene included in this resource and write a description of the scene depicted. Have them focus on the individuals portrayed and the information they learn about them through the photograph and Verene’s commentary.
3. Then ask your students if they have any photographs of people from their own neighborhood—family, friends, or acquaintances. If they do, ask them to bring them to class.
4. Have them write a short narrative about the person/people in the photograph.
5. Discuss the narratives and what they present about the students’ communities.

Chris Verene

Max and Marlene, 2004

From *Prairie Jews*, 1997–2005

from the series *Galesburg*

Type C Archival print, with artist’s handwritten text in oil

30 x 36 in. (76.2 x 91.4 cm)

Courtesy Chris Verene Studio—ChrisVerene.com

ACTIVITY: DEPICTING COMMUNITIES

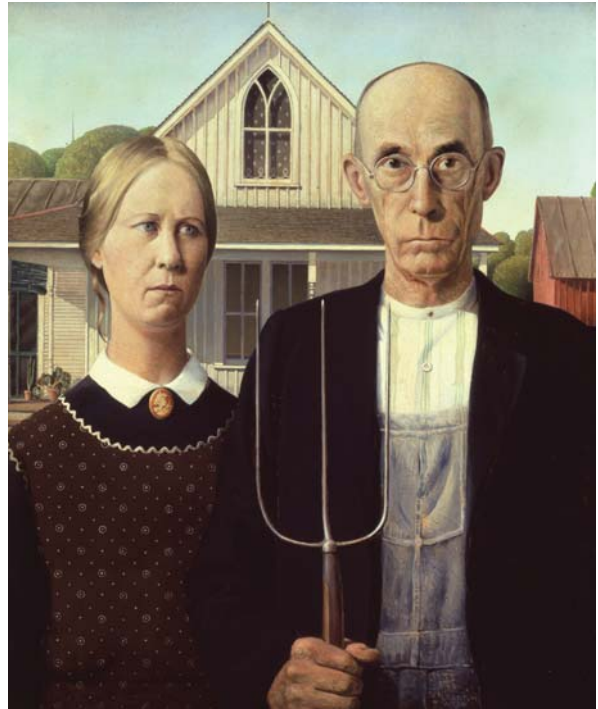
Curriculum Connections: Social Studies/History, Creative Arts, Language Arts

■ **Aim:** To depict one's own community through photographs and/or drawings.

■ **Materials:** Cameras, paper, and pencils

■ **Procedure:**

1. Ask your students to either photograph or sketch a scene depicting their neighborhood. Have them focus on the environments they observe and on the people who inhabit them.
2. Discuss what they decided to include.
3. Have students write a description of their neighborhood.
4. Have students read the narratives and try to find the corresponding drawing or photograph.
5. Another option is to have your students study your school's community. They may photograph, sketch, and/or write about the people who work and/or study in the school environment.



Grant Wood
(American, 1891–1942)
American Gothic, 1930
Oil on beaver board
30 11/16 x 25 11/16 in. (78 x 65.3 cm)
The Art Institute of Chicago
Friends of American Art Collection, 1930.934

ACTIVITY: CREATING A WORK OF ART INSPIRED BY A WORK OF ART

Curriculum Connection: Creative Arts

- Aim: To create a work of art inspired by a work of art in another medium.
- Materials: Camera or paper, pencils, paint, paint brushes, glue, and collage elements
- Procedure:
 1. Have your students look closely at Chris Verene's photograph titled *Donny and Barry on the Porch*. Sometimes works of art are inspired by other works of art. In this case, Verene may have been inspired by Grant Wood's well-known painting titled *American Gothic*. The poses of the two figures, along with the inclusion of the white fence, for example, bring to mind elements in the Wood painting. Discuss how Verene has transformed this image to make it his own.
 2. If your students plan to take photographs, have them look at reproductions of paintings and sculpture for inspiration. If possible, you may want to take them to a local museum to view original works of art. If your students will be drawing, painting, or using collage, have them look at works of art in other mediums for inspiration.
 3. Ask your students to find an element of the work of art they are using for inspiration to appropriate for their own work. This may be a pose, gesture, compositional element, color combination, or narrative component.
 4. When they have completed their works of art, have students discuss how they were inspired by the image they selected.

Andrea Robbins and Max Becher

Fishing Scene, 2004

From *Postville*, from the series

Brooklyn Abroad, 2004–2005

Archival ink jet print

20 x 24 in. (50.8 x 61 cm)

Courtesy of the artists and Sonnabend Gallery, New York



ANDREA ROBBINS AND MAX BECHER

Born in Boston, Massachusetts, 1963, and Düsseldorf, Germany, 1964

During the last twenty years Andrea Robbins and Max Becher have created photographic projects encompassing portraits, landscapes, and architectural motifs. Their photographs center on dislocated cultures and on their formation in new contexts. Each series of their photographs is accompanied by a text that they have written to address the ironies in their pictures. In their project for The Jewish Museum, entitled *Brooklyn Abroad*, they have photographed members of the **Lubavitch** community in Postville, Iowa, a group of **Hasidic Jews** who moved there from Crown Heights, Brooklyn, in the mid-1980s, attracted by the opening of a **glatt kosher** slaughterhouse and processing facility. Hasidic Jews pride themselves on maintaining their heritage through a strict adherence to Jewish customs and practices, including dietary laws that require specific methods of food preparation. The kosher slaughterhouse provided jobs for them, as the operation of such a facility requires a specific kind of expertise.

In Robbins and Becher's view, and as shown in their project, Hasidism is now "one facet of the family of American Jewry." Hasidim can no longer legitimately be represented as the remnants of a dying culture, as ethnographic photographers have before. Nor are Hasidim representations of the essential Jewish self. The picture *Fishing Scene* is not tied to a specific religious practice but rather depicts a father and son enjoying nature. Although these Hasidim have been criticized for their failure to attempt to blend into public life in northeastern Iowa, Robbins and Becher's photographs show that they are not so different from their neighbors in their everyday relationship to a place where lawns must be mowed, houses painted, and nature and family can be enjoyed.

While some viewers may associate the Hasidim with urban spaces, they rarely have been depicted outdoors or in color photographs the way they are in Robbins and Becher's intensely hued examples. The Hasidic Jews in these two photographs may seem somewhat out of place in this natural environment but, to them, this is their home. This scene may not be what most consider a typical Iowa scene—or, for that matter, a typical view of Hasidic Jews—but it is part of the state's actual societal fabric.

Robbins and Becher's representation of the Postville Hasidim incorporate the familiarity of the snapshot aesthetic; their subjects appear to be caught unawares engaging in everyday chores and pastimes. The photographs seem to capture a transitory moment in their lives. They also undermine stereotypical perceptions of tight-knit regional groups. Sometimes, unfamiliar communities or ethnic groups are perceived as being exotic, spiritual, and mysterious. They are mythologized through the creation and perpetuation of stereotypes and generalizations. Do we see these people as ordinary folks or as members of some sort of exotic community? The reality is that they are Americans and that Iowa is not as homogeneous as one might imagine. Robbins and Becher encourage the viewer to challenge his or her own expectations about Hasidic Jews, Iowa, and regional photography.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is your reaction to these two photographs? What are the figures doing? Do their actions seem unusual to you in any way or perfectly natural?
- How do you think your answers are similar or different than those of someone else viewing this work? Do you think a Jewish person would have the same reaction to these photographs as someone who is not Jewish? Do you think a Hasidic Jew would have the same response to the photographs as would a Reform Jew? (If your students are not familiar with the different denominations of Judaism, you may want to ask them to research these terms.) Do you think the viewer's religion, race, or cultural background would influence his or her reaction?
- Discuss the artists' use of color in these two photographs. Describe how color is used to unify the composition. Discuss the placement of the figure(s) in the composition.
- Describe the settings in Robbins and Becher's photographs. How does each setting affect the way the viewer perceives the figures? How does this challenge our assumptions about the figures?
- What do you think it means to mystify or exoticize a group of people? Can you think of any group of people in our history that has been mystified or stereotyped either positively or negatively? (Example: Native Americans, African Americans, Jews)
- Compare and contrast these photographs with those by Chris Verene. Both depict Jewish people, but show very different communities in the Midwest. Can you discern differences simply by looking at the photographs or do you feel that you need more information?



Andrea Robbins and Max Becher
Lawn Mowing, 2004
From *Postville*, from the
series *Brooklyn Abroad*, 2004–2005
Archival ink jet print, 20 x 24 in. (50.8 x 61 cm)
Courtesy of the artists and Sonnabend Gallery, New York

ACTIVITY: BREAKING DOWN STEREOTYPES

Curriculum Connections: Social Studies/History, Language Arts

- Aim: To examine the formation and use of stereotypes.
- Materials: Paper and pencils
- Procedure:
 1. Have your students research a group of people living in the United States who have been the victim of stereotyping. Ask them to consider how this group of people has been portrayed either positively or negatively in the media or in works of art and literature.
 2. After they have conducted their research, ask them to write an essay describing how these stereotypes have affected particular individuals or groups.



JAIME PERMUTH

Born in Guatemala City, Guatemala, 1968

Jaime Permuth uses a traditional **documentary** approach in his artwork. He develops ideas through an investigative process, spending lengthy periods with his subjects. In his project for The Jewish Museum, he maps the intersections of ethnic, national, linguistic, religious, and gender identities as he follows three narratives of the Spanish-speaking **nondenominational** congregation El Centro de Estudios Judíos Torat Emet (Torat Emet Center for Jewish Studies). Torat Emet was founded in Riverdale, in the Bronx, New York, by Rigoberto Emmanuel Viñas, a young **Sephardi** rabbi born in Miami of Cuban descent, who, like many in his congregation, traces his roots to the Spanish **Anusim** (*conversos*). Through his activities both as a **scribe** and rabbi, Rabbi Manny, as he is affectionately known, has gained a reputation beyond the borders of the United States and has become a spiritual guide to individuals seeking to convert or return to Judaism.

Rites of passage bring newcomers into the community, but they also allow for individual new beginnings. Permuth's series of photographs titled *La bat mitzvah de Gila Viñas (Gila Viñas's Bat Mitzvah)*, 2003, takes place during the **bat mitzvah** of Rabbi Manny's daughter at his new synagogue, Lincoln Park Jewish Center in Yonkers. The photographs capture the cautious encounters between the two populations brought together for the celebration: the Torat Emet group, mostly young and Spanish speaking, and the Lincoln Park congregation, mostly elderly survivors of the Holocaust.

Rituals, holidays, and life-cycle events have been used to establish a common ground among Jews in the Diaspora for centuries. By focusing on these rituals and their role in defining Jews and Judaism, Permuth raises questions about the role of these ceremonial customs in framing Jewish identity. In other words, are you Jewish if you have not had a **brit milah** (or **bris**), or have not been **bar mitzvahed**? For Permuth to depict these particular events, which are as firmly prescribed by Jewish law as any others, is to unveil the borders and boundaries of a supposedly homogeneous community, allowing other stories to be added to the collective history.

Jaime Permuth

Selections from

La bat mitzvah de Gila Viñas (Gila Viñas's Bat Mitzvah), 2003

23 black-and-white digital prints

8 x 10 in. (20.3 x 25.4 cm) each

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Jaime Permut's photographs document a series of events, in this case, the ritual of a bat mitzvah. He tells this particular story visually through a series of twenty-three 8 x 10-inch black-and-white photographs. Considered as a group, the photographs chronicle a celebration. What kind of effect do you think is created by Permut's narrative grouping? How does this affect the way we consider the images?
- Examine the series of photographs by Permut titled *La bat mitzvah de Gila Viñas*. First, consider the content of the photographs. Then think about Permut's choices in terms of color, composition, scale, and technique.
- Describe the way Permut has captured his subjects, e.g., informally, at transitory moments.
- After examining each of Permut's photographs individually, consider them in the context of the narrative chronicled by the twenty-three photographs in the piece. Does your perception of the photographs change in any way once you learn about the context in which they were taken?
- Compare the snapshot-like quality of Permut's photographs to the posed portraits by Dawoud Bey and Chris Verene. Discuss differences in composition, setting, facial expressions, and overall impact.
- Compare Permut's depiction of a Jewish ritual with Nikki S. Lee's photographs of a different Jewish ritual.
- How are the photographs similar? How are they different?

Jaime Permut
Selections from
La bat mitzvah de Gila Viñas (Gila Viñas's Bat Mitzvah), 2003
23 black-and-white digital prints
8 x 10 in. (20.3 x 25.4 cm) each





ACTIVITY: CHRONICLING A RITUAL THROUGH IMAGES

Curriculum Connections: Language Arts, Social Studies/History

■ **Aim:** To compose a narrative about a community in writing and through images.

■ **Materials:** Paper, pencils, camera and/or colored pencils or paint and brushes

■ **Procedure:**

1. After discussing the ritual portrayed in Permut's photographs, ask your students to think of a community ritual that they would like to either photograph or depict in drawings/paintings. They may choose a ritual that is familiar to them or one that is not. Be sure to discuss the importance of collaboration and of being sensitive to their subject's privacy.
2. If students are unable to photograph a series of events, they may want to bring in family photographs of a ritual celebration or religious service such as a bar or bat mitzvah, communion, wedding, or birthday.
3. They may also choose to document the ritual through drawings or paintings.
4. Ask students to organize their photographs or drawings into a series of events that they may present either in an album or propped up against the wall.
5. Then, ask students to write about the event. They may use words in any way they like and compose a written account that is either in paragraph form or in a series of sentences that accompany each image.
6. Display these in class and discuss your students' responses to the images and texts.



ART AND MEMORY

CHRISTIAN BOLTANSKI

Born in Paris, France, 1944

Christian Boltanski's *Monuments* series explores the themes of loss, death, and memory. Combining appropriated images and mundane objects in a powerful and evocative way, these installations memorialize unknown persons at the same time that they raise questions about the veracity of the photographic medium.

In 1985, Boltanski began his *Monuments* installations, focusing on photographs of children as the means to convey the transience of life and awaken a collective consciousness of the dead. Here, childhood represents temporality and an irrevocable loss reclaimed only by memory. Characteristically shown in semidarkness in museums and churches, these poignant works effect a haunting atmosphere and quasi-religious tone with their altar-like design and incandescent light bulbs substituting for votive candles. Although the subjects are anonymous, the children in *Monument (Odessa)* have all been identified from a group snapshot as Jewish students celebrating **Purim** in France in 1939. Boltanski enlarged individual faces in the photograph, blurring particular features and creating a less personal image. Knowing the religion of these children and the year in which they were photographed inevitably links them to the Holocaust and evokes thoughts about their unknown fate. Lights illuminating their images also beg another interpretation, namely, *Yahrzeit* candles, to honor and remember the dead. The empty, rusted tin biscuit boxes, a fixture in Boltanski's works, hold more than childhood treasures and memories—they hold unwritten histories of unrealized lives.

“Odessa” refers to the birthplace of the artist's paternal grandfather. Boltanski was born in Paris and has a Catholic and Jewish background. The artist has said, “My work is about the fact of dying, but it's not about the Holocaust itself.” However, for Boltanski, having grown up in postwar France with the knowledge of his father hiding in fear during the occupation, the reality of **genocide** was never far nor forgotten. Certainly, the six children in Boltanski's altar offer a silent elegy for the six million Jews who perished during the Holocaust.

This text is adapted from Irene Z. Schenck's entry in Maurice Berger et al., *Masterworks of The Jewish Museum* (New York: The Jewish Museum; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 82.

Christian Boltanski

Monument (Odessa), 1989–2003

Six gelatin-silver prints, three tin biscuit boxes, lights, wire

Installation approximately 80 x 72 in. (203.2 x 182.9 cm)

The Jewish Museum, New York

Purchase: Melva Bucksbaum Contemporary Art Fund, 2003–11

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is the first word that comes to mind when you look at Boltanski's *Monument (Odessa)*?
- Describe the various components of the work and the combination of various media. What is the overall effect?
- Does this work of art evoke any specific sensation or emotion in you?
- Do you find it to be mysterious or elusive in any way? Why or why not?
- Is the work easy to look at and understand? Why or why not?
- Describe the work's compositional structure. How do the various elements work together to create a coherent whole?
- Discuss the concept of multi-media art or art that incorporates a range of different materials. In this case, Boltanski has incorporated photographs, lights, wire, and tin boxes. How does Boltanski's installation challenge your expectations of a traditional sculpture or work of art?

ACTIVITY: CONSTRUCTING A MONUMENT

Curriculum Connection: Creative Arts

- Aim: To design a work of art that memorializes an individual or an event in an original and thought-provoking way.
- Materials: Paper and pencils
- Procedure:
 1. Boltanski's work of art is rooted in memory. The black-and-white photographs in *Monument (Odessa)* evoke the past. Combined with the lights and tin boxes, they encourage the viewer to experience a work of art that is both visually and conceptually compelling. Discuss the evocative and spiritual nature of this piece with your students.
 2. Ask your students to think about an event or individual that they would like to memorialize. They may choose something very specific or something less explicit and more conceptual. Have them think about creating a piece that evokes emotion rather than provides a literal description of an event or person.
 3. Ask them to make choices about the materials and images they will incorporate into their work of art.
 4. Then have them design their monument through a drawing or series of drawings and paintings and discuss their piece with the class.

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

Use the following themes to compare and contrast selected works of art by the artists listed below:

Community	Bey, Lee, Permuth
Ritual	Lee, Permuth
Inclusion/exclusion	Aptekar, Bey, Permuth, Robbins and Becher, Verene
Diversity	Bey, Lee, Permuth
Stereotypes	Aptekar, Bey, Lee, Robbins and Becher
Memory	Aptekar, Boltanski, Verene
Photography	Boltanski, Bey, Lee, Permuth, Robbins and Becher
Narrative/Storytelling	Aptekar, Lee, Verene
Identity	Aptekar, Bey, Boltanski, Lee, Permuth, Robbins and Becher
Tradition	Aptekar, Boltanski, Lee, Permuth, Robbins and Becher



Dawoud Bey



Nikki S. Lee



Jaime Permuth



Ken Aptekar



Chris Verene



Christian Boltanski



Andrea Robbins and Max Becher

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Anusim (*conversos*) Jews who outwardly converted to Christianity in Spain and Portugal during the Middle Ages to avoid persecution, many of whom continued to practice Judaism in secret.

Bar mitzvah A ceremony marking a Jewish boy's transition to manhood at the age of thirteen.

Bat mitzvah A ceremony marking a Jewish girl's transition to womanhood at the age of twelve or thirteen.

Brit milah (or Bris) The ritual circumcision of a male Jewish child on the eighth day of his life or of a male convert to Judaism.

Chromogenic color prints Photographs in which the final image is made using colored dyes formed during processing. "Chromogenic" literally means "color forming." Also known as C-prints.

Composition In art, the structure or organization of a work of art, literature, or music; the act of assembling parts or elements to form a whole; the way in which such parts are combined or related.

Documentary A television, film, or other presentation of factual political, social, or historical events or circumstances.

Exile Enforced removal from one's native country; self-imposed absence from one's country.

Genocide The deliberate and systematic destruction of a racial, political, or cultural group.

Glatt kosher Refers to meat that is permitted to be eaten according to Jewish religious law. In order to qualify an animal must have completely smooth lungs.

Hasid or Hasidic Jew A member of a Jewish mystical sect founded in Poland in the mid-eighteenth century in opposition to rationalism and ritual laxity. Hasidic Jews maintain many characteristics of early modern Polish life, including its dress. There are diverse sects of Hasidim (plural for Hasid in Yiddish and Hebrew) active throughout the world today.

Holocaust The genocide of European Jews, Gypsies, and others by the Nazis during World War II.

Jewish Being of a monotheistic religion that descends from the ancient Hebrew people.

Latino A native or resident of Latin America; a person of Spanish-speaking heritage.

Lubavitch A sect of Hasidism (see definition of Hasid), founded in the late eighteenth century in what is now the Eastern European nation of Belarus.

Multicultural Of, pertaining to, or including different cultures.

Nondenominational Not associated with or restricted to a particular religious denomination or sect within a particular religion.

Photography The process or technique of rendering optical images on photosensitive surfaces; the art, practice, or occupation of taking and printing photographs.

Pigment prints General term for any kind of print which uses a pigment to produce the image, including gum, Fresson, carbon, and carbro.

Polaroid A trademark for a camera and film that produce instant photographs.

Portrait A likeness of a person, as a painting or photograph, especially one showing the face; a verbal picture or description, especially of a person.

Purim A joyous festival celebrated in late winter or early spring on the 14th day of the Hebrew month of Adar. The holiday commemorates the rescue of ancient Persian Jewry from an attempt to annihilate them by the king's minister, as told in the biblical book of Esther.

Rabbi An ordained spiritual leader of a Jewish congregation.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Reform Judaism A branch of Judaism dating from the nineteenth century that aims for reconciliation of historical Judaism with modern life and does not require strict adherence to traditional law.

Scribe A professional copyist of manuscripts and documents.

Sephardi A member of the branch of European Jews who settled mainly in Spain, Portugal, and northern Africa.

Stereotype The assigning of identical characteristics to all members of a group in disregard of their individuality.

Tolerance Recognition of and respect for the opinions, practices, or behavior of others.

World War II The war fought from 1939 to 1945, in which Great Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and the United States defeated Germany, Italy, and Japan.

Yahrzeit candles Candles lit by people of the Jewish faith on the anniversary of the death of a close relative. The literal meaning of “yahrzeit” in Yiddish is anniversary.

Note: Many of these definitions are drawn from the *Riverside Webster's II New College Dictionary* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995).

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ANDREA ROBBINS & MAX BECHER

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CHRIS VERENE

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Photographs from the artist's ongoing photo essay of Galesburg, Illinois.

<http://thecontemporary.org/pics/ChrisVerene/>
Images by the artist.



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