

DALLAS REVIEW

Beau Comeaux

Marty Walker Gallery

Charissa N. Terranova

Photography historian Gregory Batchen astutely said, "The history of all photography is a history of image manipulation." The camera's is a warranted exploitation that, in the new millennium, is par for the course—even anticipated. We are willing victims of the distortion of reality, of its perversion of our existence. Whether pumping up or smothering us with luridness, the camera and reality dance a *pas de deux* now standard in visual literacy.

As bearers of this history, the photographs of Beau Comeaux purvey old tricks through new technology and contemporary subject matter. The banal half of a house in *Untitled (Dining Table)* and battered picket fence and blasted tree in *Untitled (Sidewalk)* shrink and retrench the visual field. The haziness of portions of these photographs makes it seem as if house, fence and tree are being sucked into a vortex at the rear of the picture plane.

Blurriness is a normative trope in art photography, as if being out-of-focus establishes an immediate patina that signifies "art." We know from the earliest images of William Henry Fox Talbot that this property is specific to the photographic image, taking advantage of the camera as a technological apparatus. In a similar vein, the Photo-Secessionists, led by Alfred Stieglitz, demanded that the camera and its images be understood according to medium specificity, thereby riffing before the fact on Clement Greenberg's Kantian take on "modernist painting," its autonomy and self-referential qualities. The idea here is that the artful cloudiness of a photographic image erases utilitarian value. It can no longer tell us the "truth" but one truth among many realities; it may no longer be used for anything practical (i.e., documentation) but in making disinterested art.

What distinguishes Comeaux's photographs from those of someone like the Photo-Secessionist Edward Steichen is subject matter. If for Steichen, the iconic, steely line of the Flatiron Building gave inspiration, it is the humdrum foursquare of the suburban tract home that is Comeaux's muse. There is nothing spectacularly interesting or new about wandering the snowy sidewalks of Manhattan as Steichen did a century ago. Yes, it



may offer a beautiful experience with many opportunities for sublime photographs, but in the 21st century, it is something of a cliché. To wander the streets of Plano, Texas, at night, on the other hand, might get you arrested. If armed with a camera, it also might transform you into something of a surrealist of the new millennium.

Comeaux hones in on the essentials of the camera—the medium specificity of the analogue era—and distorts it by way of the computer. This fusion of old and new, analogue and digital, makes for an odd combination that verges on the nostalgic. The saving grace here is the dumb architecture of suburbia and its perpetual newness—its built-in obsolescence as readymade, which obstructs true nostalgia. It is also the artist's combination of old tricks and new *topoi*—the eeriness of the blur and the facileness of suburbia—that is empowering. In distorting photographs of small, 1920s neo-Tudor and mid-century Cape Cod-style homes, an old trick suddenly seems relevant.

Comeaux shoots with a digital camera, downloads to his desktop, subtly abstracts and distorts his images and bumps up the color. The sky in *Untitled (Moonlit Fence)* is an electric yet powdery purple-blue, while the fence reflects a spectrum of grays and mauves. The source of bright

Beau Comeaux, *Untitled (Moonlit Fence)*, 2006
Archival pigmented print
17 x 25 inches

light at the center behind the fence is indiscernible, suggestive of illicit activities. The thunderbolt in this photograph and *Untitled (Dining Table)* brings to mind the conceptualism of contemporary giants Jeff Wall and Gregory Crewdson. As with Wall's Vancouver hinterlands and Crewdson's Massachusetts environs, Comeaux chooses to shoot the spartan, middle-class, post-urban Texan outback. Also different from Wall and Crewdson, his photos are not peopled. Without human presence, Comeaux's photographs lack theatricality; he hires no actors, stages no interaction. At such an early point in an artist's career, Comeaux deploys simple techniques of digital technology and reaps much from them. This work tells of great potential.

When we think of Baudelaire's wandering *flâneur*, the purposeless *rentier*, we envision a well-dressed drifter wafting along Parisian sidewalks amid an urban crowd. Take this drifter, give him a camera and send him strolling at night on the edge of a sprawling city and you get something completely different—something new. You get Beau Comeaux.