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After a 12-Year-Long Road Trip, Justine Kurland Captures the American Dream and the Freedom of the Open Road

By Molly Gottschalk
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Justine Kurland
280 Coup, 2012

ARTSY EDITORIAL

After 12 years on the road, traversing the American landscape behind the wheel of a green Chevy Astro minivan, photographer [Justine Kurland](#) presents a body of work that looks to the automobile as a vehicle for the American Dream—and her insatiable wanderlust. A perpetual nomad (perhaps inspired by her artist-mother, who brought her children in tow to Renaissance fairs across the U.S.), Kurland has clocked over 150,000 miles on her odometer since 2001, capturing idyllic vistas of the American frontier—and its inhabitants—along the way. In her 2009 exhibition “The Train is Bound for Glory,” Kurland shared a romantic view of train-hoppers drifting through the U.S.; before that, “Of Woman Born” pictured mothers with their children, which the artist photographed while living out of a van with her one-year-old son—equipped with a bed, curtains, and a box of toys.

In her new series, “[Sincere Auto Care](#),” on view at [Mitchell-Innes & Nash](#), Kurland again offers observations from her travels; this time documenting—with a nod to [Walker Evans](#)—cars, mechanics, and the freedom of life on the open road. Photographed across the U.S. over the course of the last three years, some 35 photographs find beauty in the characteristically bleak: a gritty hand or dangling roadkill; a shaggy-haired “junkie” in Tacoma; a tattooed mechanic, tucked under the body of a Mercedes 280 Coup; a driver holding a gleaming Cadillac wheel with wire spokes. All that, as she [says](#), exist in a place “where beauty is found not because the world is beautiful but because it is beautifully described.”

In tandem with the exhibition, Kurland has curated a group show at the gallery’s uptown location, titled “[Days Inn](#)” for the iconic (if tired) roadside motel she’s come to know intimately. Featuring works by [Jay DeFeo](#), [Louise Bourgeois](#), [Samuel Fosso](#), and [Cindy Sherman](#), among others, the exhibition takes the motel as a lens through which to explore the contradictions of daily life. “My son learned to read from his car seat in a landscape full of signs. “Days Inn’ was a favorite,” Kurland says. “To me, the name seemed sinister—an impending ‘end of days,’ like a floral bedspread with faint bloodstains on the blended polyester sheets beneath.” Like “Sincere Auto Care,” the show presents a complicated yet romantic investigation of the American Dream, recalling the 19th-century postcards that once promised a better life for all those who ventured west.