

“Breakout Artists”

-Michael Workman, New City, April 27, 2006

“Against the backdrop of a Warhol show breaking attendance records at the MCA, the desire to break down any remaining distinctions between culture and fine art, to demolish any remaining boundaries on the making of art, have never been stronger. The very idea of art as only a visual medium is no longer a given, a notion that simultaneously invigorates the practice while challenging its remaining conventions and support systems. In that light, or darkness, we offer a look at a handful of yet-unsung Chicago artists who are doing their part.”

Born in 1975 in Mount Kisco, New York to a family of social workers, Gitelson developed his interest in art his senior year at Marlboro College in Vermont. He was a lit major and "looking for something non-academic. I'd always taken art classes but never really took it seriously. It was just to take an elective--Photo I-- and it just clicked. I'd always taken painting, drawing--but I'm a terrible painter. Photography was the first time I felt confident. I liked that I could explore photography from this film-noirish perspective; it had a kind of eerie, mysterious quality because it was black and white." Gitelson fell in love with street photography, and with documentarians of everyday life such as Robert Frank, "people like that." When he graduated from Marlboro, Gitelson moved to Guatemala for eight months to work with an organization called "Out of the Dump," a group that teaches to kids living in city garbage dumps. He taught photography in Guatemala City and when eventually he moved back to the U.S., it was to Boston, where he worked a series of odd jobs: short-order cook, housepainter. He set up a darkroom in his apartment, and set to pursuing his passion. "I lived in Boston four years, and kept up with my photography while I was working forty hours a week at these other jobs to pay my bills." It was during his time in Boston that he took a month-long Greyhound bus trip to shoot the street life across America. "I was one of those photographers who try to shoot twenty rolls a week." He bounced back and forth awhile from Boston to Philadelphia, before coming to Chicago in 2001 to attend Columbia College. "I kept bumping into people who mentioned it, and at that time I was much more traditional, so was looking for schools with photo departments instead of five different unrelated departments. There weren't that many schools that have a straight photo department and I just loved Chicago. It seemed like a different urban space than I'd lived in before."

Columbia expanded Gitelson's view of photography as an art. "It's funny because I think it was the perfect school for me. I think if I'd gone to a more experimental school I'd make more traditional work. Columbia's more traditional; you look at UIC, for instance, which is much more doctrinaire, and I

think the stubborn side of me would have rebelled." Gitelson had never really worked on one project for a long period of time, but at Columbia he started making artist's books and "that was my way of not having to work on one thing for too long. It opened up for me how to get around it." But Columbia's biggest benefit to him was its community. "I met people like Jason Lazarus and Brian Ulrich there, and since graduation we've all been pushing ourselves as a unit as opposed to in any way cutthroat competitive."

When Gitelson graduated in 2004, "I was thinking about how to get work out and, as I was making books, they're tricky to circulate so I started thinking about different ways to approach narrative and storytelling." He experimented with making "these kind of storyboard poster projects, in response to seeing the Chris Ware show at the Cultural Center and also old movie posters." His goal was to begin thinking about how to get his work back to a finished product that could be wall-hung, something he viewed as "more accessible to more people at once and I went with that for a year or so and pushed it outside Chicago wherever I could." It was a little over a year ago that he started collecting flyers that were left on his car and stitching them together into a car cover that he eventually parked in front of the nightclubs that the flyers were advertising. Finished images of the car are viewable at his website, www.thegit.net. "'The Car Project' was a little more conservative for me, a single image where I had to care about print quality, decent scans and proper lighting--these more traditional concerns--and bring them to this more conceptual project. Also I started thinking about one coherent body or series of work. It's kind of a one-year project, taking this idea of a book or a finite project and doing it as a wall show."