

“Keepin’ It Random”

-Fred Camper, Chicago Reader, April 14, 2006

In 2004, after moving across the street from the Funky Buddha Lounge, Jonathan Gitelson found that his car was being festooned daily with nightclub flyers. He collected more than 1,000 of them, spent three months sewing them into a car cover, and took pictures of his covered car in front of the nightspots advertised. Eight of these large photos are now on view at Peter Miller, along with the car cover, in a show that not only has a unique history but that "talks back" to our culture. Though urban clutter can encourage passivity, Gitelson takes an active approach. "Cover my car with flyers?" he seems to say. "I'll show you how to really cover a car." His goal is to reveal that "there are interesting things everywhere," he says. "Perhaps the next time a viewer sees a club flyer, they'll actually notice it."

Gitelson's previous projects, documented in artist's books, combine active engagement with humor. For *I Wave in Front of Every Apartment That I've Ever Lived in Except for One*, he photographed himself in seven different locations from Vermont to Chicago. He didn't so much want to reference himself, he says, as provide material others might identify with--and his folksy, unassuming approach does invite thinking about the places you've lived. After this project Gitelson was wondering what to do next--so he started going up to strangers with a camera and tape recorder, saying "I'm trying to figure out what I'm doing. What are you doing?" One guy who sat down next to him while he was resting told him the story of an evening so interesting that Gitelson made him the subject of his next book, *The Ballad of Carl Wilson*. Each page includes a different photo of Wilson, a quote from him describing something he'd experienced (seeing a couple "doing it" in a park, he told himself, "Shit, I'll catch a seat"), and a map showing where the incident occurred. (These projects are anthologized in a book in the gallery.)

Gitelson thinks that his readiness to engage with strangers comes partly from his parents, social workers in a New York City suburb. "I come from a long line of social interactors," he says. "One of the things I've learned from my father is that when someone asks you for change, even if you're not going to give it to them, you show the respect of stopping and looking in their eyes and saying, 'Sorry, I can't.'" In middle school he and two friends began hanging out in diners, where they would drink coffee and smoke. "There was this whole group of regulars who were really strange. Two construction workers in their 60s were identical twins who would dress the same and order the same." At Marlboro College in Vermont, reading Camus inspired him to take art classes. He became a street photographer, observing what he calls "the way we're all connected in our lostness." After graduating in 1997 he lived in Guatemala for a year, where

he taught photography to kids living in garbage dumps, but by 2000 he no longer understood why he was taking street photos. "When in crisis," he says, "go to graduate school." He moved to Chicago to enroll at Columbia College and found the city amazing: "It felt like the Wild West, no hills, railroad tracks stretching out forever."

Since he wasn't sure what he was trying to get at in his photos, Gitelson decided he was going to make pictures "that didn't mean anything" and began shooting at randomly selected street corners. Shortly afterward he came across a copy of the zine *Found*, which collects found notes and photos. "I was looking for that same sense of randomness, that chance encounter," he says; it's a quest he believes connects people. Lately Gitelson has observed that garbage cans keep getting stolen from his building. For his next project, he's coming up with conspiracy theories to explain why, such as the possibility that the cans are being held in one place and rearranged in patterns that send signals when seen from the air. For research, he says, "I'm thinking about surveillance videos from our window, embedded transmitters, and taking notes on each person who opens the cans."