

Afterward to Trip

The commonplace is sometimes the most out of place. This is the paradox at the heart of this book.

Trip is a joyride through a landscape of imagery at once real and surreal. It takes us on a journey that begins and ends somewhere in the United States. Exactly where, or even when, is left for us to figure out, though the pictures bear the unmistakable imprint of the American South. Where else would one find a wall of photographs memorializing forty years of home-grown beauty queens with "girl-next-door" looks and names like Loretta, Corinne, Desiree, and Lonnie; a bathroom stall sporting a still from the Southern epic *Gone with the Wind*; or, perhaps most telling, a wall of devotional votive prayers inscribed on Post-it notes and stuck on a fake wood panel wall beneath dime-store images depicting the life of Jesus?

The America Lipper shows us is light-years away from the fashionable icons celebrated in Hollywood cinema or in the music industry. Instead, she places us into a cultural milieu that seems to rarely open itself up to outsiders, preferring to remain complacent in, if not wholly indifferent to, its anachronistic simplicity. This, at least, is the impression conveyed to readers who do not belong to this world.

As a visual essay documenting life on the road and conveyed to us "as is," *Trip* belongs to a rich literary and photographic tradition. Yet its spirit of discovery is not in the tradition of Jack Kerouac or Walker Evans. *Trip* presents a challenge to how we read images and create our own narratives in response. While it is inscribed with the aura of nostalgia and objectivity inherent in traditional documentary work such as the Farm Security Administration photographs of the 1930s, Lipper's pictures countermand the authoritative clarity conveyed by those and other socially concerned images whose content is so direct that the possibility of multiple readings is closed off.

Though neither travelogue nor visual diary, this series of photographs has a journal-like structure — a beginning and an end, with various moments sandwiched in-between — but just as it seems to reveal certain facts about itself or the world it portrays, it deftly switches stream. Even its opening is a provocation: on a highway devoid of traffic signs and landmarks, vehicles run in opposing directions while the car closest to us has pulled over onto the shoulder of the road. We are left undecided whether we are coming or going, and what follows is no better at making any of this easy for us to discern. It also offers lighter moments — moments which are both insightful and funny — demonstrating how absurd reality can be. Just as the circumstances of many of the images are ambiguous, so too is the title. No longer understood as merely

getting from point A to point B, "trip" can stand for everything from a psychedelic experience to someone or something that is beyond belief.

This ambiguity and uncertainty are lasting impressions, not as a sense of doubt about the meaning behind the work but more as the vagary that stems from trying to describe people, places, or events after the fact. So many of Lipper's pictures begin and end with this premise, forcing the viewer to create his or her own frame of reference to structure a meaning around the work, a meaning that can shift with each individual reading. Time and again, it is unclear if her work is staged or spontaneously captured. Some of the images convey the Imprint of intervention: the word "motel" -scrawled in soap on a bathroom—mirror, a scrambled-egg breakfast that looks like its picture in the menu, or a restaurant sign that charges us 93 cents for a small "slushpupp" while a large costs only 79 cents. Other works are more obviously the result of a random encounter: a white picket fence that keeps nothing in and no one out, a fresh-fruit stand that looks as decayed as a dump site, or an election poster, nailed to a tree in the middle of a rough bramble, for an African-American candidate for police juror with the nickname "Blood."

A key element binding us to these photographs is our familiarity with the heightened sense of awareness that we have when we travel. Uprooted from everyday surroundings, the traveler renders everything as new and unfamiliar so that even the most commonplace object or event seems somehow strange and exotic. It is Lipper's sensitivity to this "Twilight Zone" between familiarity and peculiarity that informs some of the most enduring and arresting images in this book: a television on a picnic table, a mannequin in the woods, or a death announcement written in elegant script on a paper plate tacked to a bulletin board. These are not isolated gestures. They are moments which occur again and again, interrupted here and there by periods of absurd normalcy. And while these images seem somehow personal and idiosyncratic, they also carry that faint air of something seen before, conveying an experience that all of us can identify with in one way or another.

This familiarity is offset by an odd silence that permeates this series. There is certainly nothing tame about its subjects; nor is its recontextualization of places and things passive. Yet despite the movement—the twists and the turns—the persistent absence of people in Lipper's images creates an ominous stillness. Composed of the traces and remnants of events past, Lipper's work leaves unanswered the mystery of who or what we are looking at. This in turn becomes a kind of reflection upon our own search for identity. It is a subtle yet poignant revelation, formed in the moments we reflect on the alternating peculiarity and familiarity of these images.

This identity crisis is exemplified by one of the series' darkly humorous moments— an image appropriated and then reappropriated. It's an old joke, appearing here as a hand- scrawled poster tacked to the side of a shed, about a lost dog

who is castrated, blind, and missing a few other vital parts of his anatomy. He answers to the name "Lucky."

I'm still looking for him.

MATTHEW DRUTT

Matthew Drutt is Associate Curator for Research at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, and serves as the lead curatorial advisor on photography, new media initiatives, design, and education.