

By Mike Rogers  
February 2004

## ***Cross Country***

I moved from Los Angeles to New York in August 2001, accompanying my wife who was doing a fellowship at Columbia University. Four weeks after we arrived, the attacks of 9/11 occurred. Like many people, I visited “ Ground Zero,” viewed the subway and street shrines honoring the dead, and talked to survivors and friends of victims. There was an eruption of emotions that continues to boil over every time another “ code orange” is declared.

One response that interested me was the intense patriotism that surged in the country following the attacks. It reminded me of the period in U.S. history followed the Iran hostage crisis of 1979-80. That display of U.S. vulnerability led to the Reagan era, which was also characterized by zealous American pride. Patriotism then seemed more about aggression than introspection; more about securing international dominance than about recognizing economic and social privileges. It's the same today as much as 9/11 created a swell to defend America, the people themselves seem distant from the country. As life gets more fast paced and as we rely more on machines and technology to get us through the day, we seem more out of touch with each other and the land.

When it was time to move back to Los Angeles in July 2002, I bought a super-8 movie camera, attached it to the dashboard of my car, and filmed the journey. The resulting film, *Cross Country*, stays focused on the highway beginning at the Atlantic Ocean in Coney Island, New York, and ending at the Pacific Ocean in Santa Monica, California. A frame was shot every six seconds so it appears as if the traveler were speeding at 6,000 mph. Paradoxically, it's hardly a thrill ride. Despite the high rate of speed on the road, the landscape

only gradually changes. Cities appear as blips, passing cars and trucks come and go in a flash, but the otherwise unremarkable flat landscapes dominate the picture.

Road movies have had a long history in American films. The vast landscapes seen from the roads shown in these films have kept alive a mythology of promise about the country first propagated by landscape painters in the 19th century and then by landscape photographers. What's seen from the interstate, however, is far less grand. I made *Cross Country*, in part, to give Americans a chance to see the entire country close-up in one sitting. For others, it offers a view of a land that, as the world's last remaining superpower, has never been both more regarded and loathed.

*Cross Country* is the first in a planned trilogy of films about the iconography of the American landscape and its relationship to Americans. I completed the second film, *Faithful*, last year. Filmed at the Old Faithful geyser in Wyoming, the film documents the crush of summertime visitors to the natural attraction over a 13-hour period. For this 25-minute film, the camera was placed at the beginning of a path framed by pine trees leading from a parking lot to the geyser. A frame was shot every two seconds. While visitors move quickly to the geyser so they don't miss an eruption, and then back to their cars so they can beat the rush out of the parking lot, the action of the geyser seems to progress at a more leisurely pace.

As a former newspaper and magazine reporter, I often use art as a way to examine a social situation. When I first moved to Los Angeles in the late 1980s, I was surprised by the high

rate of speed of cars on the freeway. Drivers of Chevrolet El Caminos, an affordable and powerful hybrid car/truck, went particularly fast. So I started to investigate the cars and their owners, resulting in a show of more than 1,200 photographs of El Caminos, video interviews with drivers, and sculptures and drawings about the car. Another project concerned my boyhood home outside New York. The suburban neighborhood was once farmland belonging to the 18th century political philosopher Thomas Paine. Through sculpture—including a floating teepee—photography, and an underwater video taken in a polluted pond called Paine Lake, accompanied by a soundtrack of actual and fictional Paine writings, I tried to address the ideals and failings of Paine's life and of contemporary America.

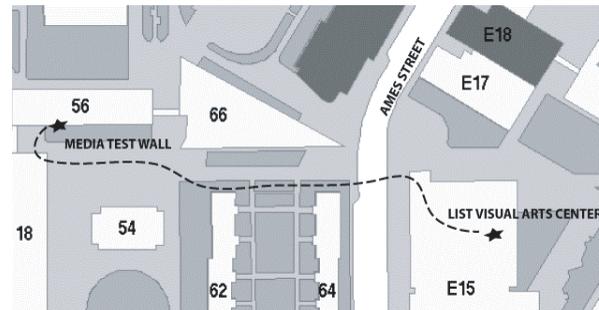
Now back in Southern California, I'm living in a treeless, middle-class neighborhood sandwiched between two military bases, where homes are surrounded by high walls. People enter and leave their homes by car, through their automatic garage doors, so they never have to see or talk to their neighbors. I recently began to photograph the neighborhood's backyards with a panorama camera held above my head and above the walls, not knowing what I have photographed until I develop the film. The photographs reveal that what's being hidden—barbecues, playsets, plastic garden furniture—is fairly mundane stuff and hardly needs protection. One question, however, is whether the photographs violate the privacy and security of the property owners, even when the photographs are empty of people and uncover nothing of value.

## About the Artist

Mike Rogers was born in 1957 during the Columbus Day parade in New York City and now lives and works in Los Angeles, Calif. He has an MFA from Otis College of Art and Design, Los Angeles, Calif., and an MSJ from Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill. His work has been included in Brrrr!, Off Loop Festival, Barcelona Culture Studio, Barcelona, Spain (2003), Sharjah Biennial 6, United Arab Emirates (2003), Cross-Country and Other Works, Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica, Calif. (2003), Drawing Quirks II, Parker's Box, Brooklyn, N.Y. (2002), I Wanna Be Joey Ramone, Mark Moore Gallery, Santa Monica, Calif. (2001), and Gymnasion, Palais Thurn & Taxis, Bregenz, Austria (2001). He is a co-founder of Caltech Outdoor Art Space, California Institute of Technology, Pasadena, Calif.

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## Media Test Wall

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