



Gregory Halpern
Untitled, 2010, c-print, 45 x 36 cm,
 edition of 5, © the artist,
 Courtesy ClampArt, New York

Exhibition Reviews

Art Review:

GREGORY HALPERN

Gregory Halpern: *A*
 ClampArt, New York
 5 January – 11 February

The letter 'A', used as the abbreviated, codelike title of Gregory Halpern's exhibition of photographs (an abridged version of his 2011 book of the same title), began to haunt me when I was three-quarters of the way in. After noticing the capital 'A' tattooed on the chest of a shirtless young man, I started to see the letter everywhere. A makeshift scaffold supporting the porch of a once grand colonial-style house forms the very same capital letter, as does an eerie wigwam-type structure of spindly logs, charred and threatening to collapse. Most striking of all is a shard of A-shaped broken mirror glinting in the dirt that gives a portent of violence, or a suggestion of violence just occurred. This proliferation of 'A's turns Halpern's series into a dispersed and incomplete poetic form.

'A is for America' is the banal, childish ditty that came to mind when I first entered the gallery. But banal these images are not. Halpern avoids the cliché of nostalgic Americana. Instead, with all photos *Untitled* and no recognisable landmarks, *A* gives us traces of a blankly generic America. In true American documentary tradition, this series is formed by a journey, but not the wide-ranging ramble of, for example, Robert Frank's *The Americans* (Halpern dances deftly around the ghost of this seminal 1958 work). Instead the artist travelled to what politicians insincerely refer to as 'the real America'. As the press release indicates, the impoverished rustbelt cities of Baltimore, Cincinnati, Detroit – and probably Buffalo, too, where Halpern lives and works – appear in anonymous fragments.

A includes scattered tokens of the economic crisis and sly hints of these recessionary times. A flattened-out office block looms like a glowing cardboard cutout against the night sky, an emblem of corporate America. A burning house in an overgrown lot is enough to suggest the subprime crisis that started the recession stateside. A black-clad cyclist proffers a pearl bracelet as if it were stolen goods for sale. The print is overexposed, so that the narrative suggested is barely drawn. We slide along, like the rider, to the next incomplete trace.

A kitten, tail puffed in aggression and fear, confronts us with a warning as we enter the gallery. Like nearly all the animal subjects, this diminutive feline functions anthropomorphically. It prepares us for the hostile stare of a middle-aged shirtless man who looks directly into the camera. His aggression is softened as our eyes shift to the beads of sweat mingled with blood on his brow, the only zone of focus in a very shallow depth of field. Everything else, including his piercing gaze, slides into degrees of blur. This glide within the print prepares us for the next in the series, making the overall structure of the exhibition one defined by metonymy.

Violence and menace are all here in flashes, but the dominant note is pathos. Halpern, as Jack Kerouac wrote of Frank, 'has sucked a sad poem right out of America onto film'. *A* is a terse elegy to these dark times.

SIONA WILSON