



Almost Home-Less at Fulton & 45th Avenue.

# Photo Synthesis

Richard Gilles brings together stunning images that are beautiful and thought-provoking

By Liv Moe

**S**ocial content is no substitute for technique in evaluating a work of art. Though an artist may have the desire to communicate conflict or hardship through their work, without the skill to express their subject matter effectively the work will almost always fall flat. Through his latest body of work entitled *Almost Home-Less*, Richard Gilles couples compelling social content with beautifully composed photographic images to create a show that is both visually stunning and thought provoking. Gilles' 2'x6' images have a vivid, crisp, Eggleston-like quality to them, transforming his seemingly mundane subjects into lush compositions that demand the viewer's attention. It is in this way that Gilles is able to communicate his social message. *Almost Home-Less* explores the existence of urban trailer dwellers, or individuals who live within a city or suburban area in a trailer-home parked just slightly off the beaten path. Often found under a freeway overpass, or down an alley, the occupants of Gilles subjects try to stay "off the radar" in order to maintain a sort of nebulous address. I spoke with Gilles recently about his involvement with the Axis Gallery and how this recent body of work came together.

## How does the Axis Gallery work?

The Axis Gallery is an artist co-op with 14 members. Every year and a half or so you get a show and then in between the member shows are guest shows. Last month we had a show with the winners of our juried exhibition. Scott Shields, curator of the Crocker Art Museum was the juror.

## Is this your first solo show with the Axis Gallery?

This is my first solo show since 1982. In between, I worked in the printing industry as a journeyman bookbinder. In March of 2005, I was in a very exciting show at the BJ Spoke Gallery in New York titled *Expo XXIV*. The show was juried by David Ebony from *Art in America*. Not long before being picked up for that show I had already made the decision to quit my job and pursue making work full time.

## The work at *Expo XXIV* was part of your *Power Plant* series. When did your focus in subject matter shift from the power plant to this new body of work?

It's something that's (long) been jelling in mind to work on. I've been working on this new series for about 10 months now—not even a year yet ... 10 months exactly. This is something I've been thinking that I wanted to do even prior to the *Power Plant* series. In my work prior to the *Power Plant* series I found that these homeless images kept cropping up, and I thought that I should pursue them. They basically just kept showing up in other things I was doing. Two of those images prior to the *Power Plant* series are at the Axis gallery right now.

## How did you go about collecting this work?

In the *Power Plant* series I made the shift away from SLR photography to digital images, and worked in color for the first time. I began by upgrading my equipment because I wanted to pursue these images (*Almost Home-Less*) and I wanted to be able to get the information that I needed. After making the shift in equipment I went to hunt them down, ending up in the Bay Area, Berkeley, Oakland. There are a few from Sacramento, mostly the Central Valley so far. I want to take it further



*Almost Home-Less at N. Thorton Road & Highway 12.*

this year. My subjects are virtually unnoticed by those that see them. They want to be unseen. They don't want to be harassed. I look in low-traffic areas. Once you find the places to look for them you realize that there are actually quite a few people who are living in their vehicles.

#### **Did you forge relationships with any of the residents?**

No. Like I say I have met two or three in the whole time I've been photographing. If they're home, they don't want to come out. They stay as much under the radar as they can. They don't want people to perceive that they are living there. It's not illegal to park but it is illegal to live there. Some cities react differently than others. Berkeley is really cool with it, but other places not as much. Different places view them differently. Some see them as riff raff while others see them as just down on their luck a little bit as long as they stay as unobtrusive as possible.

#### **Do you intentionally seek out social content for your work?**

The *Power Plant* series I just stumbled on. It was really fortunate. More of a visual feast than social commentary. *Almost Home-Less* is social commentary. These people are stuck between home and homeless. The power plant was a fairy land of rust and colorful paint. The *Power Plant* series will show at the Viewpoint Gallery in May.

#### **What is your intention/goal when composing subjects?**

That really delves into the process of making a photo. Juxtaposing the subject with its environment. Color against color. The vehicle alone isn't important, it's the vehicle and where it's at. Shape, and line, make it interesting beyond any social component. I want the imagery to be interesting, to draw the viewer in, and then make them think about what they're looking at. I take a series of digital photos and then compile them so that the detail and resolution is really fine. You can actually make out individual rivets in the trailer. My methodology is such so that the images can hold up to size that they are printed at. They have a real presence on the wall, 2ft x 6ft. The viewer can see the chain coming out of the side door and the dog dish, the bike under the vehicle, I want the viewer to investigate this with me. Why is there tape on the window or a power cord running under the hood? I want the viewer to really see the detail. That's what I'm after.

#### **How do you edit?**

There is a difference between what's shot and what's shown. Every time I approach these I shoot 5-7 sequences. I only use one if it turns out right. About one-third of the scenes make it into the larger body of work. Out of that, there about 40 images that I consider acceptable to keep. The show will have about 18 images all together. Six really big images and one wall with nine smaller images, to give people an idea of the breadth of the body of work, for context.

#### **Does the personal nature of the images make the editing process harder?**

You probably could say that. Any time you're dealing with a subject matter that is somebody's life there is more reverence to the image. You're putting someone's existence or the shadow of their existence on the wall. There are some photographs that I'm attached to but they just didn't make the cut, because they didn't compose correctly. There are some vehicles that are just outrageously cool but they just didn't make the cut. For whatever reason I couldn't compose them in such a way that I could draw people into them.

#### **Is there any manipulation involved?**

What I shoot is never what I show. I'm using a digital camera. I'm always making decisions like: What's the light like? Should there be more detail in this shadow? I'm not moving anything around but this is a piece of artwork. I want to put some effort into it. I want to make a photograph that isn't the way the camera saw it but the way I saw it. The camera is just a tool in that aspect.

#### **Why have you made a shift in scale?**

The *Almost Home-Less* series was a change in equipment. The *Power Plant* series was a lower resolution camera and that was the size at which the imagery would hold up. I wanted to bring this environment to the viewer and I felt like I could do it with this series.

#### **What is it that you hope for the viewer?**

I really would like the viewer to take away both things. First that this is an image I like looking at. Then the process of, now I got them! Now they really have to see what's in the image. Who are these people? Why are they here? Are they traveling, are they not? What brought them to this situation? And the simple awareness that these people exist to the viewer. But I have to make an image that the person wants to look at to draw them in, in that way.

#### **What do you suppose the residents of these dwellings might want the viewer to take away?**

My hope would be that people would be aware of them and that attitudes about minimum wage would change, and that conditions would improve for them, but at that same time I think that they would be afraid that people would be aware of them, because that is what they are constantly trying to avoid. The irony of these things is that I title them with the address of the location where they are shot in order to give them, at least temporally, an address.

*Almost Home-Less will be on display at The Axis Gallery, located at 1517 19th Street, February 3rd through the 25th. Call 916.443.9900 for more details or go to [www.axisgallery.org](http://www.axisgallery.org)*