

NY ARTS

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Are We There Yet by Courtney Mallen

In 2000's best-selling expose, *Fast Food Nation*, Eric Schlosser documented and analyzed the rise and cultural integration of the All-American fast food restaurant experience. At the same time that Americans were being sold on the cheap, easy way to take your family "out to dinner," they were also being sold on the idea of the "family vacation." In the same mode as Schlosser, who starts by telling American Dream-like stories of fast food giants and their suppliers and in the same tone describes the negative human costs, Mark Mann's large-scale digitally altered photographs expose a world of family travel that is attractive in concept but ultimately leaves the travelers unfulfilled and spiritually lost.



Are We There Yet?, the second exhibit of photographs of appropriated travel postcards from the 1960's and 1970's, expands the themes of Mann's exhibit a year ago. In an artist's statement on this earlier series, Mann writes: "It has been my three year pursuit to visually express the ironic, irrational and sometimes pathetic elements of the human condition...." One of the more irrational and pathetic American hopes has long been the weeklong "family vacation" as a panacea for the deeper spiritual failings of the family unit. The futility of these hopes is summed up in *Mecca* (2001), arguably the hardest-hitting image of the series. The image is sadly humorous, showing a husband and wife dwarfed by a giant two-story motel gazing up at the signs proclaiming it to be the Mecca Motel. The huge bags the travelers carry implies a long journey since the journey to the Islamic Mecca is supposed to take place only after an intense spiritual preparation, As in most of the work, the scale of the attraction in relation to the travelers is disproportional.

The dangerous nature of the quick-fix vacation is abstractly explored in such works as *Long Highway* (2002), in which sheep- like families take a tour on a two-lane highway through a foreboding forest. Dark, muddy-colored trees loom over the brightly colored families while the pixelation prevalent in all of the works lends a documentary feel to the piece. One can almost hear disdainful commentators explaining the follow-the-leader mentality of the group being led into a harsh Nature. *Log Jam* depicts a solitary family marooned in a sea of immense floating logs, at a pseudo-rustic tourist attraction. The family, a classic nuclear setup of Mom, Pop, Sis, and Junior, slumps haplessly on their own log. A silo and processing house loom in the background as the only other (unattractive) attractions. Mann chooses to show the isolation of individuals within the family unit quite literally such as in *Lifesaver* A young girl in bathing suit sits expectantly on one double bed in a sickeningly orange-hued room with no other family member in sight. The matching-toned carpet and bedspreads give the room a feel more of a hospital than a family bonding space. Similarly, alone boy stands on a stepstool in *Screen* (2001), dressed for swimming but mesmerized by a picture of the same beach outside his window on TV in a spacious, sparse hotel room. Perhaps the set has more reality to him than the impersonal room.

While the arrangement of the large photos on the walls was not true to a narrative thread one could glean from the selected pieces, Mann's dissection and analysis of the quick-fix American family vacation was thorough and thoughtful. The use of vintage imagery is a reminder of how little the prepackaged vacation as fix-it has come. The viewer recognizes these images as differing only in clothing style from similar brochures one can pick up at any rest stop on an interstate highway. In the same way that the *Fast Food Nation* continues to look for cheap physical nourishment at a high human cost, Mann's *Vacation Nation* ends up constantly searching for something other than the Mecca Hotel.