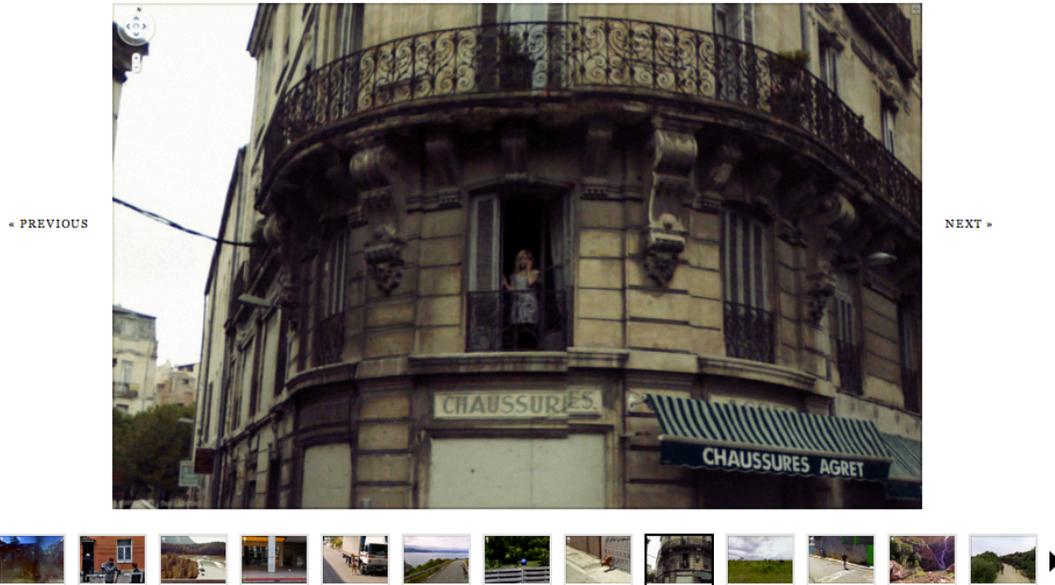


Jon Rafman's Google Street Views

MAR. 7, 2011 By JIMMY CHEN 



Jon Rafman is a lucky man for at least two reasons: (1) his priceless sensibility is a veil through which he sees a more beautiful world, a precious one that reaches such a state through the very aesthetic of non-preciousness; (2) he, through scouring the near infinite territory of Google street views, is statistically even able to consistently find universal moments of “condensed being” which would make the greatest haiku poet weep.

Under the auspices of conventional photography, these images — a dog struggling to transgress a gate whose holes are barely larger than its own skeleton; an infant crawling alone in front of a seemingly “fake” Gucci store; a derelict horse gnawing away at urban detritus for food — point to a kind of surreal alienation incurred, unconsciously, by a negligent modern world. These Lynchian moments are informed by their very verity, beyond cinematic or narrative agenda generally imposed by the invoked director, or those like him. The idea of art somewhat cheapens this enterprise.

The lazy and easy answer is that God, his canvas our flesh and the space between us, is a great artist, perhaps a stunning genius so misunderstood that half the world despises him. This is a lesson in entropy, the soft arbitrariness of life, that when finally punctured by a sudden moment, oozes meaning. And yes, our friends at Google may have something to do with this, but their voice is muted, neutral, and merely incidental. Their camera is blind, even glib, in their profit-fueled survey of the known world. And God has yet to sign the gallery consignment, so this leaves us with you, me, and dear Jon, polishing these turds of absurdities into shiny diamonds.

One motif we see over and over again is the prostitute between solicitations, just standing half-naked by a truck, her face blurred out. Such illicitness lends itself to the power of Jon's either somber or enthralled voyeurism. It is difficult to read Jon, his sense of humor, sadness, cynicism, or irony; perhaps he is merely presenting us a version of a world as a journalist might. The unmarked story, if we are to engage ourselves with these prostitutes, is the explicit trade of sex. The invisible money shot only visible between the two participants. Our role, here, is to not see. But it is not just these whores whose faces are obscured, but everybody's, as if simply being human is a derogatory act. These photographs, or I should say curation, are less about seeing than imagination, fueled, ironically, by the boring empiricism of life. We understand perfectly the preceding and subsequent moments of each image. A man crashes his car and lol calls his cell phone. A dog pisses legs raised on a wall, cognizant of and shamed by its non-humanness. A man vomits next to a pay phone, barely missing his shoes. The formal compositions of the photographs barely matter, and after a while, the subjects — the unwitting representatives of our race — seem to blur into one. All the drama — the car crashes, the indignant moonings and middle fingers, the near or imminent deaths, the police arrests, the mysterious fires — are slowly taken for granted, soon to reside in a shallow past, a pool in which we put our own shady memories.

But I never want to forget that butterfly, the orange winged floating period that could end this sentence, if only this sentence marked my end. But I'm still looking, grateful for everything and everyone who might be responsible for this: Jon, God, Google, the butterfly, and maybe even me. People are ugly to one another, yet life, in its ultimate punkdom, is quietly beautiful. It's

ridiculous if you think about it. An OJ-esque white unmarked van with a 360° aggregated view drives around the world to visually dictate the flayed mark of road, passing whores, car crashes, kids on bikes, misguided animals, punks with guns, dying great wide landscapes — passing it all with a billion dollar budget right under our noses, in order to make a timeless appointment with a butterfly, who as a pair of floating lips, was able to muster a silent smile for me. T