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Justine Kurland's Vivid, Haunting Photographs of Men and Cars

By Rebecca Bengal

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Appearing in Justine Kurland's first New York solo show in five years — "Sincere Auto Care" at Mitchell-Innes & Nash — is "280 Coup," 2012.

For more than a decade, **Justine Kurland** has taken photographs during annual cross-country journeys from New York to the Pacific Northwest that reveal the double-edged nature of the American dream. A lifelong nomad (she grew up traveling to Renaissance festivals, where her mother sold hand-sewn clothes), her tools are her 4×5 camera and her van, which allow her to dwell, briefly, in the worlds of the marginal figures she photographs. First, there were the girls she cast as runaways, forging into forests and swimming holes. Later came images of commune members in wilderness idylls and panoramas of westbound freighters and the hobos who ride them.

Tomorrow, Kurland's first New York solo exhibition in five years, "**Sincere Auto Care**," opens at **Mitchell-Innes & Nash**. Named after a Nebraska garage, it explores the culture of cars and the men who drive and work on them. A disembodied wrist rests on a rusted hood, cradling a cigarette; a teenager loiters by a sign that reads "No Loitering"; tattooed mechanics bend over their work. And yet in the mix of paint, chrome and grime that coats these scenes, a beautiful order prevails, in the symmetry of used tires hung on hooks, the fantasy of a pair of ferocious tigers painted on a hood and the way one part of a motor fits into another.

When she began photographing these images four years ago, Kurland herself was at a crossroads having to do with boys and men. Her relationship with her son's father had ended; her own father, the painter Bruce Kurland, was dying. She'd also just turned 40 and was teaching full-time, which meant less time on the road shooting. "I started mining my own history and figuring out what it was about photography that I really loved," Kurland says.

The photographs of "Sincere Auto Care," she says, will be arranged on the gallery walls "like sentences." Some are formal, as in a paired set of images in which electric wires in one photo are continued by the line of a dog leash in the next. The dark side of masculine culture's fantasy fully emerges in the only series where her son, Casper, appears. There's an image of Casper in his child seat, a shot of a shattered windshield on another car and a final nightmare titled "What Casper Might Look Like If He Grew Up to Be a Junkie in Tacoma." "Beauty," Kurland says, "means there has to be something at stake. You can't show affection — or even disaffection — without showing there's something to be affected by."

"Sincere Auto Care" opens Thursday, Sept. 4, at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, 534 W. 26th St., and will be on view through Oct. 11; miandn.com. Follow [@miandn](https://www.instagram.com/miandn) on Instagram to see Kurland's Instagram takeover with outtakes from the exhibit.

*Kurland also curated the concurrent exhibition "**Days Inn**," which includes works by Ed Ruscha and Cindy Sherman, at Mitchell-Innes & Nash's 1018 Madison Ave. location, Sept. 4 – Oct. 11.*

Correction: September 3, 2014

An earlier version of this post misstated the title of an exhibit curated by Justine Kurland. It is *Days Inn*, not *Days End*.