

BLOUIN ARTINFO

20 Questions For Cross-Country Traveler Justine Kurland

By Ashton Cooper

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Justine Kurland, pictured on the right, photographing on set.
(Photo by: Tim Carpenter)

Name: [Justine Kurland](#)

Age: 44 **Occupation:** Artist

City/Neighborhood: Lower East Side, New York

You have two projects opening this September at [Mitchell-Innes & Nash](#). The first is a series of new photos titled “Sincere Auto Care.” What inspired you to focus on cars and the open road?

The cars came directly out of the train photographs — themes revolving around certain American values like freedom and self-determination. But specifically I remember driving along some highway talking to a friend who works as a landscaper on the phone. He told me he had been working so much he felt like he was a tree. And I realized I had been driving so much I was a car.

So much of the dialogue around contemporary photography lately has been about examining the material support of the medium; in a way looking at the road is my way of looking at my own support. Also my van has 250,000 miles on it and is 10 years old. I inevitably spend a lot of my time in garages.

And I was thinking about masculinity — about raising a son, the death of my father, and rough trade.

The press release describes the photos as being in the “purely documentary style in the tradition of Walker Evans.” Do you think photographs can really be pure document?

There is a difference between a purely documentary *style* and a pure document. Walker Evans described his work as co-opting the look of a document, in other words, the forensic quality of police report or court evidence that he subverted for his own intentions. Maybe I could say a document is always pure but the context is always biased.

The second is a show you’ve curated called “Days Inn,” which centers on works that depict everyday objects but convey great emotion. Did the idea for this project arise from the long road trips you often take when working on new photographic projects?

I curated “Days Inn” around the ideas I’ve been thinking about in my work recently, photography’s ability to authenticate the real while still serving as a vehicle for emotion. I’m interested in the traces or stains of lived experience. A photograph is indisputably anchored to what was there, and at the same time its meaning is unhinged, fugitive, subject to interpretation. The show uptown is not literally about road trips, but I used a highway motel as a metaphor to talk about the contradiction between something sterile but indelibly scarred, something generic but completely mysterious, as a respite from pain but the epitome of it.

What project are you working on now?

Right now I’m printing for my show, figuring out an installation, and making a self-published book. After that I’m going to help Diana Welsh publish some of the articles from her online magazine, Transgressor, for the PS1 Book Fair.

What’s the last show that you saw?

Christopher Williams at MoMA.

What’s the last show that surprised you?

Jay DeFeo at Mitchell Innes & Nash last spring. It was so economical and poetic, the slow mutation of objects, a Kleenex box that is Xeroxed, then collaged, then painted, and collaged again. I liked that her trajectory was cyclical rather than linear. I like that it invested everyday objects with value because of the intensity of DeFeo’s attention rather than pointing outside themselves towards value. I was surprised how much she made me care about these objects by teaching me how to pay attention to them.

Describe a typical day in your life as an artist.

I don’t have typical days, but the most significant part of my day is sitting by my son’s side as he wakes up and as he falls asleep, petting his soft hair and telling him the sweetest things I can think of. It is a

ritual that both atones for and marks the passing time. Except for the days he sleeps at his father's house.

What's the most indispensable item in your studio?

I don't have a studio, but my practice is dependent on camera gear, a working automobile, the cooperation of Casper and his father, and a certain amount of free time, money, and peace of mind.

Where are you finding ideas for your work these days?

I find my ideas by returning to my original ideas — by delving deeper or taking new turns. It's a process of expanding returns.

Do you collect anything?

Photography books.

What's the last artwork you purchased?

The last art book I bought that I was really excited about was Kwiekulik (Zofia Kulik and Przemyslaw Kwiek), a collaborative husband and wife team working out of the People's Republic of Poland in the '70s and '80s. The most interesting pieces are tableaus where their baby is decorated by utensils and linked sausages like an illuminated manuscript.

What's the first artwork you ever sold?

Claudia Gould, then the director of Artists Space, bought a piece when I showed there in 1998, which was also my first ever exhibition. I idolized her so it was terribly exciting that she thought my work was worth buying.

What's the weirdest thing you ever saw happen in a museum or gallery?

The steps of the Metropolitan Museum was a favorite nighttime destination as a teenager without a fake ID or money. There is a small painting by Hieronymus Bosch that I can never find until I'm lost. I fell in love with my son's father in front of the Japanese landscape scrolls and we named our child Casper after Caspar David Friedrich, whose painting "Moon Watchers" had been acquired by the Met three years previous. During the Courbet retrospective 4-year-old Casper said loudly in front of "L'Origine du Monde," "Look mama, its your vagina." Most recently I walked through the Garry Winogrand exhibition with a man I knew I never wanted to live without. A friend once told me he had seen a little old woman flicking the paintings — "thwump" — with her fingers. I didn't actually see it, but can only imagine she was kicking the tires because it's all too good to be true.

What's your art-world pet peeve?

Mostly I'm just grateful there is an art world. But I guess the disproportionate amount of successful white men.

What's the last great book you read?

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

Jane Bowles, “Two Serious Ladies.”

“You must give up the search for those symbols which only serve to hide its face from you. You will have the illusion that they are disparate and manifold but they are always the same. If you are only interested in a bearable life, perhaps this letter does not concern you. For God’s sake, a ship leaving port is still a wonderful thing to see.”

What work of art do you wish you owned?

A first edition Eakins Press “American Monument” by Lee Frielander.

What international art destination do you most want to visit?

Moscow or Mexico City or Seoul.

What under-appreciated artist, gallery, or work do you think people should know about?

Artists: Jean-Marie Casbarian, Rory Mulligan, Kate Levy, Paul Kennedy.

Spaces: Cleopatra’s Gallery, La MaMa Galleria, Ortega y Gasset Projects, Wow Café, Interference Archive.

Who’s your favorite living artist?

Joan Jonas, William Pope.L, Moyra Davey, Nayland Blake, A.K. Burns, Zoe Leonard, Patti Smith, Robert Adams, William Eggleston, Robert Frank, Lee Friedlander.

What are your hobbies?

Drinking, walking, and dreaming of alternative spaces.