

Zoe Strauss
Works for Columbus, OH
May 8–August 15, 2010



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Late in the afternoon of December 7 of last year, Zoe Strauss looked, and aimed her camera, down and across, out the window of the plane jetting her home to Philadelphia from Columbus, where she'd spent that day with us. Reviewed months later, those images of roiled cloud cover, whitish blue and grayish white, precluded any verifiable sense of its scale, amplitude, or depth; when taking the view from above, a steady ground to stand on is one option not offered.

For *Works for Columbus, OH*, Strauss has covered thirty-two feet of an irregularly rectangular white wall with a panorama of the winter sky above and then clustered images of her people and her places, beneath those unkind clouds, where year-round they live and breathe.

interacting with people she meets and the landscapes for which they provide scale and perspective. For *Works for Columbus, OH*, Strauss has covered thirty-two feet of an irregularly rectangular white wall with a panorama of the winter sky above and then clustered images of her people and her places, beneath those unkind clouds, where year-round they live and breathe.

Strauss took a few photography classes in high school and in community college in her native Philadelphia,

but she has remained essentially divested from any art-world scene and is extravagantly uninterested in its available aspirations. She approaches picture taking as a social activity, aiming to record no less than to honor what and whom she sees. Soon after being given a camera on her thirtieth birthday in 2000, she began to attract public attention for both her images and her ideas about presenting them. When still a relative novice at photography, she decided, entirely on her own and entirely unsanctioned, to produce a photo exhibition on the concrete pillars beneath an enormous stretch of the I-95 interstate cutting through her South Philadelphia neighborhood. In May 2001, Strauss, aided by her wife and family, pasted 231 separate photo prints onto every accessible surface of the columns, where they remained on view for three hours. At day's end, visitors (some of whom appeared in the pictures, which largely documented her and their home turf) were free to peel off the prints and take them home, delivering the fine art photo prints to their destined living-room display. Gradually, as the *Under I-95* project gained publicity and traction, Strauss and her family manned tables near the columns where visitors could purchase laser prints of their favorite images, give-away priced at five bucks. From the start, Strauss imagined this as an annual event that would take place the first weekend in May for ten years in succession; its final iteration occurred on May 2, 2010, one week before her Wexner Center installation debuted. The individual photos included in *Works for Columbus, OH*, originally were included in various versions of the event.



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For its decade-long course, *Under I-95* gave physical form and scale to the aesthetic and ethical values informing Strauss's artistic practice. As a gesture, it was profoundly magnanimous and utterly fearless, insisting not only that beauty is found within the everyday—literally, underneath the above-ground world we prefer, from our fears and hesitations, to inhabit, or to speed past in the hurried panic to revert to our lairs—but also that beauty, in the form of her lyrically forthright images, demands, deserves, to be dispersed, shared in abundance, proffered to all who need a form of it in their lives.

Posting images almost daily on her blog, Strauss is profligate in speaking via her pictures, which fall generally into three categories. That is to say they reflect three of the gravitational pulls to which she instinctively responds: domestic and commercial storefronts and interiors, typically in working- or lower-class neighborhoods; commercial or hand-made signage, frequently quizzical or eccentric in the messages being conveyed; and portraits of people, full-length or in medium close-up, choosing on their own how they'd like to pose for Strauss's camera within their own environments. Scrupulously attentive to the ethics of photo (or film) portraiture, Strauss always engages the "subject" in advance of the picture taking, securing their permission. It's open source photography, so to speak, with the only mediation between Strauss and what she beholds taking the form of her digital camera. Although Philadelphia remains the originating site for most of her imagery, she photographs as she travels, and among the locations represented in *Works for Columbus, OH*, are

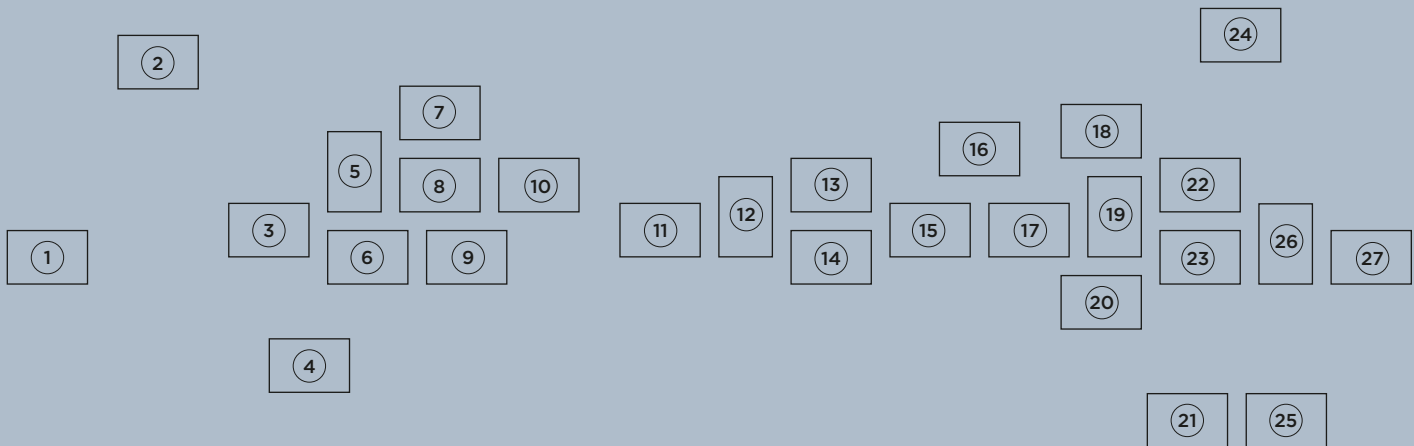
Biloxi, Chicago, Las Vegas, Atlanta, and the Muckleshoot Reservation in Washington state.

When Strauss began to draw fashionable notice within art and photo circles (she was included, for example, in the 2006 Whitney Biennial), critics were quick to characterize her work, by default, in such self-diminishing terms as "aggressive" and "unsparing." Those judgmental emphases suggest a hard-core shock aesthetic that couldn't be more repugnantly alien from Strauss's vocation as an artist. It's a scare tactic masquerading as commentary: a photo image becomes "aggressive" only at the moment the viewer decides the world it represents falls beneath the threshold of legitimate visibility, offends the politesse of what we've conceded, at our loss, not to acknowledge. Strauss's photography demandingly adheres to an insistence on attention being paid, and because of and from that, it offers nothing less exact nor precise nor nonnegotiable than an abiding consolation: balm in South Philly, and now Columbus, and hence outward, down and across.

Bill Horrigan, the Wexner Center's director of media arts, is the curator of this exhibition.

Zoe Strauss's Blog
zoetrauss.blogspot.com

Checklist for the Exhibition



About the Artist

Zoe Strauss was born in Philadelphia in 1970 and has lived there for most of her life. In 1995 she established the Philadelphia Public Art Project, a one-woman organization producing staged tableaux and temporary murals in economically challenged neighborhoods. In 2005, four years after the first version of *Under I-95*, Strauss was awarded a Pew Fellowship in the Arts, and in 2007 she received the United States Artists' Gund Fellowship. Her first book, *America*, was published in 2008, and among her recent projects was *Week of the Perfect Game* (2009), commissioned by and shown at the Art Institute of Chicago. She presently is planning a major retrospective exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Strauss is represented by Bruce Silverstein Gallery in New York.

Zoe Strauss

Works for Columbus, OH, 2010
Archival inkjet prints and vinyl
Courtesy of the artist.

The prints included in this installation were originally created as part of the *Under I-95* series between 2000 and 2010.

1. *Equitable, Atlanta, GA*
2. *Vanessa, Philadelphia, PA*
3. *Sage Jumping, Muckleshoot Reservation*
4. *Art Showing Revolver, Crystal, NV*
5. *Yes We Did, Chicago, IL*
6. *Blue and Red Motel, Atlantic City, NJ*
7. *Nick's Pizza, Philadelphia, PA*
8. *Ken and Don, Las Vegas, NV*
9. *Prison Letter, Philadelphia, PA*
10. *How Universal Can It Be?, Anchorage, AK*
11. *Salt Pile Covered, Chicago, IL*
12. *Mummer with Flag Outside of Dolphin, Philadelphia, PA*
13. *AI, Philadelphia, PA*
14. *Everything, Philadelphia, PA*

Horizontal prints measure 11 ³/₄ by 16 ¹/₂ inches each. Vertical prints measure 16 ¹/₂ x 11 ³/₄ inches each.

The artist took the background image, *Between Columbus and Philadelphia*, from an airplane window en route between those two cities on December 7, 2009.

15. *Two Women, Camden, NJ*
16. *Frank and Beverly's Bed, Gary, IN*
17. *Billy I Love You, Philadelphia, PA*
18. *Vikki, Honey He Really..., Crystal, NV*
19. *Half House Boulevard, Philadelphia, PA*
20. *Sticker Removed, Camden, NJ*
21. *Redemption, Wildwood, NJ*
22. *MLK Parade, Biloxi, MS*
23. *Econolodge, Central Pennsylvania*
24. *Woman Showing Dead Bird, Madrid, Spain*
25. *I-95, Philadelphia, PA*
26. *How Do I Look?, Philadelphia, PA*
27. *Kaia, Muckleshoot Reservation*

Artist's Talk: Zoe Strauss

Thu, May 20 | 4:30 PM

Film/Video Theater

Free

Hear Strauss discuss her philosophy and practice, from the *Under I-95* project to her upcoming Philadelphia Museum of Art exhibition, in this afternoon talk.

Walk-in Tours

Thursdays at 5 PM

(May 13–August 12)

Saturdays at 1 PM

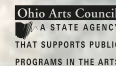
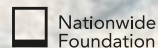
(May 15–August 14)

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Support

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Accommodations

Acknowledgements

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