

Unsettling portraits only go skin deep

Viewers must question the motives behind Bruce Gilden's photos on display at Pier 24

By Charles Desmarais

At the far end of the vast Pier 24 Photography exhibition space, halfway through the current show, a series of faces looms like severed heads mounted on pikes, hung there like the admonishments of a current-day Reign of Terror.

Bruce Gilden, the artist whose head-turning portraits of everyday Americans are on view as part of a larger exhibition at the nonprofit Pier 24 Photography through March, has been called "relentlessly cruel" and an adherent of "modern-day film noir." He calls himself "blunt." One picture is of a young boy, gamely trying to smile through tears that run down his cheeks at a camera shoved

This Land: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday by appointment. Through March 31. Free. Pier 24 Photography, Pier 24 and the Embarcadero. 415-512-7424. www.pier24.org

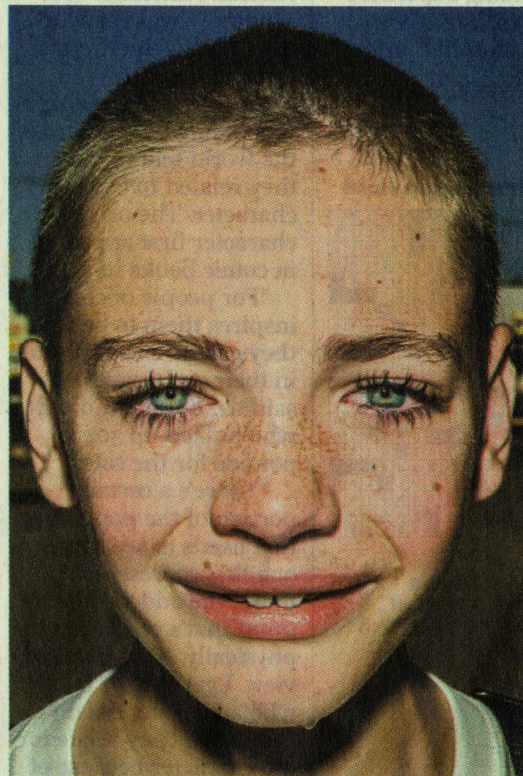
"Nathen, Iowa State Fair, Des Moines, Iowa, USA" is among the Bruce Gilden photos in the exhibition.

in his face. "I empathize with the kid, but at the end of the day, I'm a photographer," Gilden told Time magazine.

The exhibition is "This Land," a better-than-average survey of recent photography projects offering "diverse vignettes of life in the United States." The show's strengths derive from Pier 24's broad familiarity with current threads in the timeworn fabric of straight photography. Its weakness is in its overweening trust of the photograph as a faithful reporter.

Not all the photographs in "This Land" are portraits, but there are many. They include those that come across as ennobling images of people in constrained circumstances by

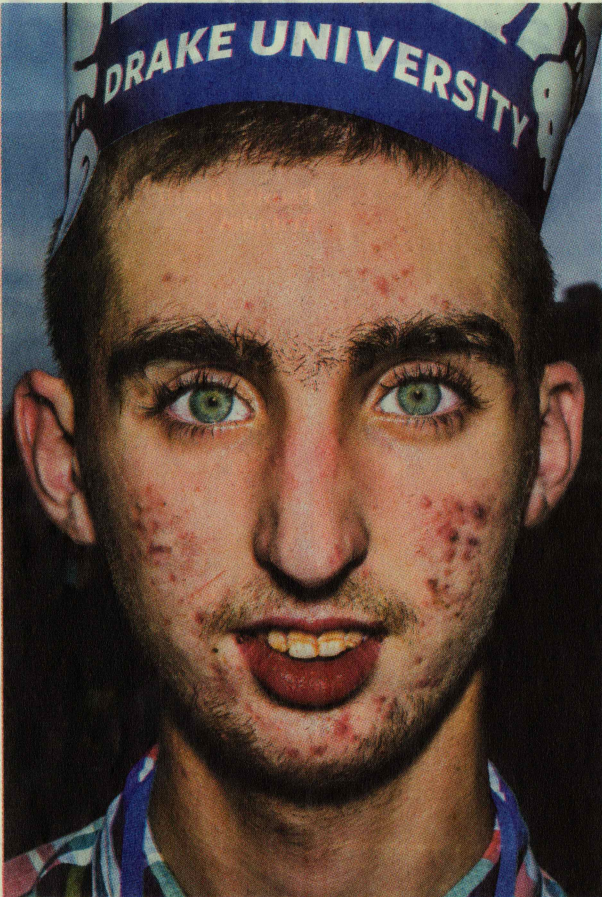
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Bruce Gilden / Magnum Photos

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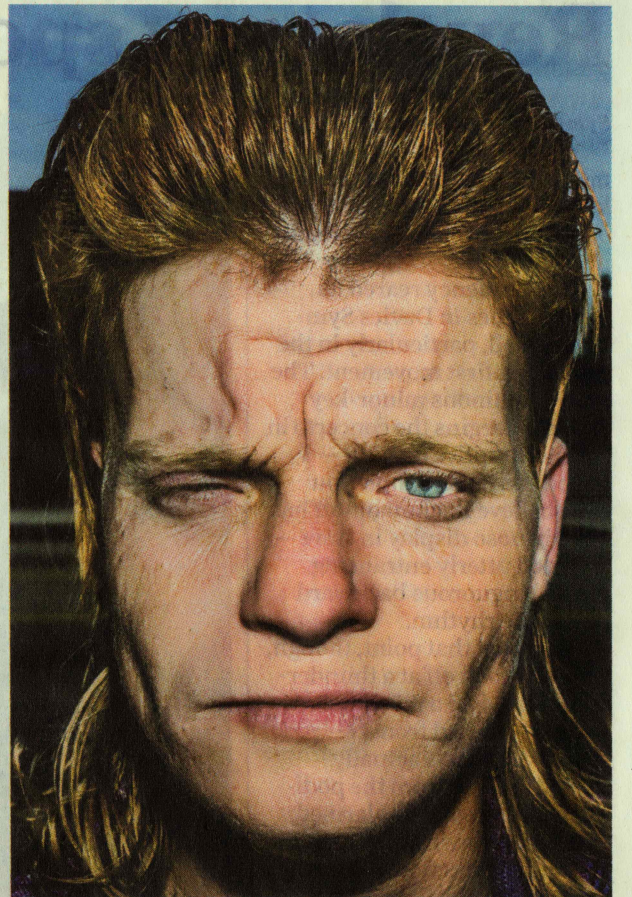
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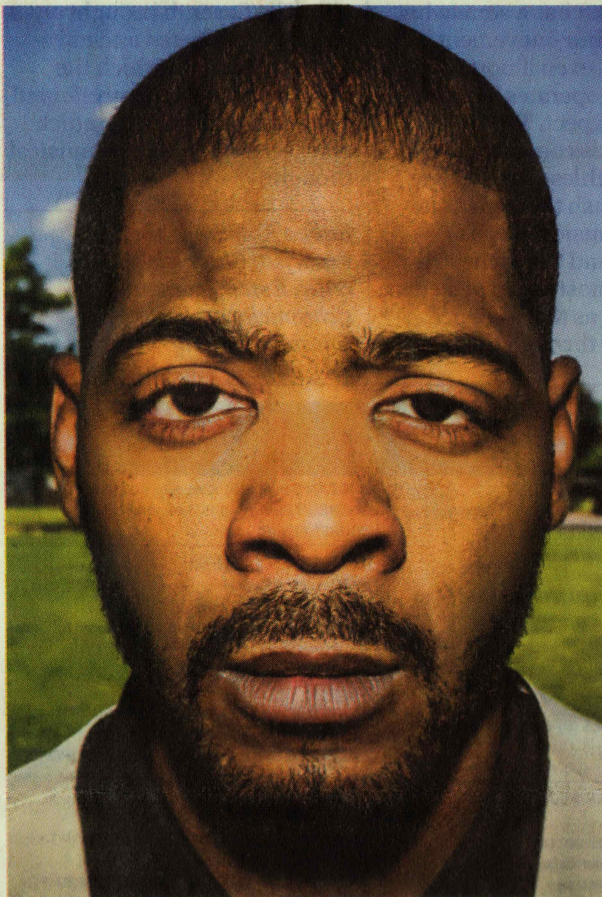
Bruce Gilden / Magnum Photos 2014
"Dewayn, Des Moines, Iowa, USA" (2014)



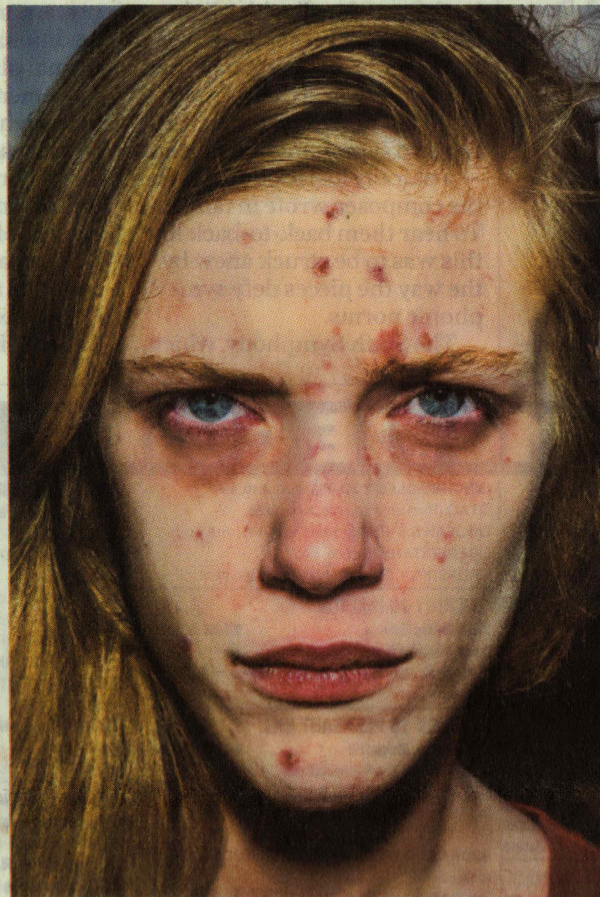
Bruce Gilden / Magnum Photos 2014
"Lima, Brighton Beach, New York, USA" (2014)



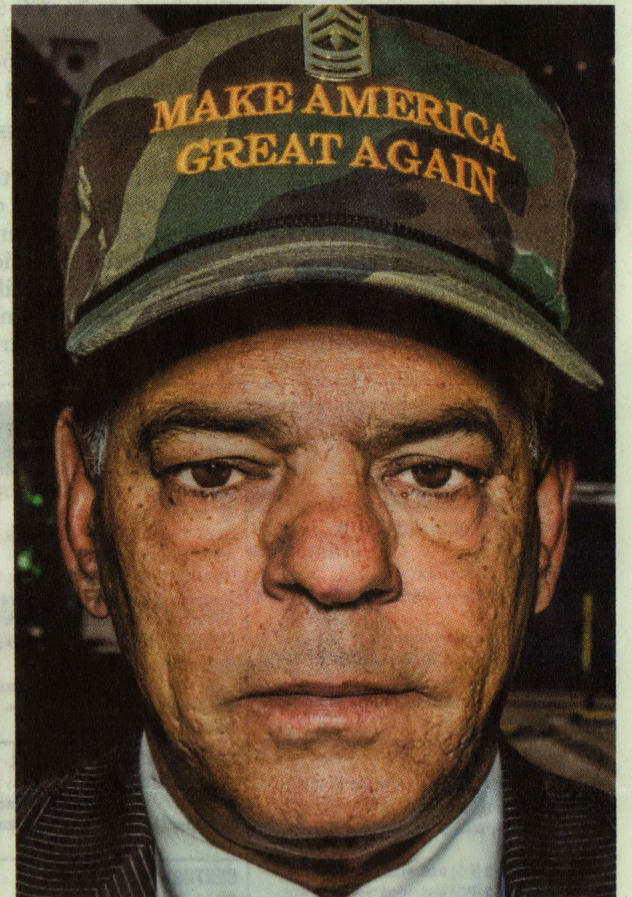
Bruce Gilden / Magnum Photos 2014
"Sherrie, Los Angeles, California, USA," (2014)



Bruce Gilden / Magnum Photos 2014
"Gary, Camden, New Jersey, USA" (2014)



Bruce Gilden / Magnum Photos 2017
"Amber, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA" (2017)



Bruce Gilden / Magnum Photos 2016
"Al, Republican National Convention, Cleveland, Ohio, USA" (2016)

Portraits veer toward the grotesque

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Katy Grannan, and works that seem the essence of empathy by Alessandra Sanguinetti. Jim Goldberg turns encounters with strangers into touching image-and-text biographical sketches, on which he collaborates with his subjects.

If the exhibition has anything to say about these pictures of people, it is that they all are stories, told about characters drawn from their makers' experience and imagination. A photograph by Gilden may be cruel in that it ignores the inner person — the one who is real, in any moral sense of that word. I don't know for sure if the same could not be said of the works here by Grannan, Sanguinetti and Goldberg, but they certainly make a more convincing case for their generosity.

Still, though a photographic portrait may flatter, can it ever be kind? "To photograph people is to violate them," Susan Sontag famously wrote. "It turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. Just as a camera is a sublimation of the gun, to photograph someone is a subliminal murder — a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time."

A portrait, of course, is not only a description but also a symbol, subject to manipulation through a vast array of micro-decisions. Even if the artist does not fawn, the subject might select that certain spot, some special garb or tilt of head, to convey an ideal that would never be reflected in the face.

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ting and the trappings of status hacked away. They are grotesques, in the medieval sense, fantastic morphed humans that both frighten and ridicule.

I don't like Gilden's portraits at all. Even if, in the end, they are no less true than more conventional portraits, the question comes down to motive, as it would in adjudicating any murder. I think of an unexpected

and deeply moving visual passage that takes place at one point in Francesca Zambello's production of Richard Wagner's "Ring" Cycle, currently at the San Francisco Opera. As the Valkyries sing of fallen heroes, they suddenly hold up to the audience tightly cropped photographs of faces. They are pictures of American soldiers killed in action during the Civil War, World Wars I and II and in

Afghanistan and Iraq. These photographs, to the eye, are unremarkable, yet their effect on the heart in this performance is crushing.

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Cory Weaver / San Francisco Opera

In this scene from "Die Walküre," part of Richard Wagner's "Ring" Cycle, performers hold photos of war casualties.