

GETAWAY

**JEAN-CHRISTOPHE COUET
DAVID ROTHENBERG
CHLOÉ SALEMBIER**

January 15 – February 14, 2010



David Rothenberg, still of *Covered Tracks (Candles)* from the project *Watercorpse*, 2006, DVD loop, sound

Parker's Box is delighted to present *GETAWAY*, an exhibition of works by three young filmmakers all dealing with European subject matter. While the exhibition title might suggest otherwise, the films do not deal with short vacations in the comfortable luxury of Paris, the Riviera or Tuscany, for example, but rather with a darker interpretation of "getting away" or the desire to escape from some of the more miserable or oppressive contexts that Europe has generated.

The young Belgian filmmaker/anthropologist, **Chloé Salembier** presents a film about hitchhiking in Romania where this mode of transport is both part of a parallel economy and an arena for exchange of opinions about the bleak state of the post-communist country. The French-American artist, **Jean-Christophe Couet** shows a work using images and voices from Slovenia, where the suicide rate is one of the highest in the world, and Queens-based artist, **David Rothenberg** presents two short video loops developed from carefully selected fragments of films by Veit Harlan, one of the foremost film directors of the Third Reich. Salembier's film is the most documentary-style work of the three, but its spontaneous narrative flow gives it a freedom that allows the strikingly mundane (though beautiful) imagery of deepest Europe to resonate. The same is true of Jean-Christophe Couet's piece, though he orchestrates a more technically structured installation with this work. This consists of what is essentially a black and white slideshow, accompanied by a non-synchronized soundtrack (looped separately with a different running time). This formal device also serves to heighten impressions of the fragmented lives of his subjects. David Rothenberg's work offers the most pared down use of imagery here, as he fixates on a single (moving) image in each work. Thus, like the work of three contrasting painters of social realism, *GETAWAY* offers a panoramic landscape of Romania, multiple portraits of Slovenia and obsessive compositions extracted from "officially sponsored films from war era Germany.

In *Undeva la Mijloc (Somewhere in Between)*, Belgian anthropologist, Chloé Salembier accompanies a young Romanian driving back home for the first time after achieving what most of his generation hopes for: the chance of escaping to the "West". The road-trip unfolds with a flow of hitchhikers providing willing subjects for Salembier's questions about life in Romania, which finds itself stuck in an awkward "in between" state: *"the filmmaker takes us on a journey between modernity and tradition...somewhere between the fast and modern West, and these villages torn between traditional work and the desertion of their sons and daughters, drawn elsewhere by desperation"*, (Virginie Breuls). The word for hitchhiking in Romanian is "ocazia" which literally means "opportunity", and this takes on ironic meaning as there is clearly little opportunity here for the younger generation who rarely think of building their lives in this place, rather than dreaming of Western Europe or America. Two songs recur through the film providing a telling subtext, as one speaks of bribing a policeman, and the other of leaving for America: *Mother, I'm off to America. Pray that I get my visa...I'm going to miss you, Mother, I'm off to America, this mess is not for me...*



Left: Chloé Salembier, still of *Undeva la Mijloc* (*Somewhere in Between*), 2009, DVD, 40 min
 Right: Chloé Salembier, still of *Undeva la Mijloc* (*Somewhere in Between*), 2009, DVD, 40 min

As countries like Romania and Slovenia reach their goal of joining the European Union, they invariably enter an indefinite no man's land of a time-warp, struggling to shake off the traditions of primitive practices and rural economy, as they desperately try to get in step with globalization.

If Salembier's film reveals some of the hidden truths of this seemingly endless transition in post Ceausescu Romania, Jean-Christophe Couet deals with what individuals might hide from themselves as he explores the subject of suicide in Slovenia. Drawing on his experience as a photographer (working for example for UNICEF in Kosovo, or the volatile Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia) his work entitled *Camouflage* is comprised of a series of black and white photographs accompanied by a soundtrack of conversation and ambient sounds. In setting out to realize this project, Couet embarked on some serious research on the subject, discussing the reasons for the frighteningly high rate of suicide in Slovenia with psychologists and psychiatrists, as well as suicide candidates and those left behind. In reference to these encounters, Couet explains that "*all of them have a different approach to this abstract subject and that is what I've discovered most of all. It is abstract.*" This fact permeates both the photographs and the soundtrack of *Camouflage*. From crazy-eyed portraits to nervous laughter, the work exudes inexplicable melancholy and isolation, but in the most realist, matter of fact manner with little room for romanticizing the desperation of lost souls. The black and white medium endows the work with a timeless quality that seems particularly appropriate to the problem in parts of former communist Eastern Europe, where time seems to stand still, neither moving forward nor being able to revert to the former values and "stability" that many individuals still hanker for. Waiting for the promise of the overturning of communism to be fulfilled feels like it might take a lifetime at least, and this burden and the isolation and loneliness that often accompanies it in Slovenia, is too much for many to bear.



Left: Jean-Christophe Couet, still from *Camouflage*, 2009, DVD, slideshow with sound
 Right: Jean-Christophe Couet, still from *Camouflage*, 2009, DVD, slideshow with sound

David Rothenberg presents two works, *Covered Tracks* (*Candles*), a video loop with sound and *Revival*. The first piece uses a short excerpt from *Verwehte Spuren*, a 1938 film by German filmmaker, Veit Harlan. The sequence shows Harlan's preferred actress (and wife), Kristina Soderbaum blowing out candles. Here, Rothenberg intervenes, reversing the sequence so that the actress bizarrely reignites the candles. The forward and reverse sections of the piece are seamlessly looped using the moment when Soderbaum looks out of the frame with an

exaggeratedly coy and self-satisfied expression. The whole piece is imbued with an atmosphere of voluptuousness, perhaps even indulgent decadence that both belies and highlights the subtext of Rothenberg's work. While *Verwehte Spuren* itself was not overtly nationalistic in nature, Soderbaum and Harlan's collaboration is best known for providing some of the most virulent propaganda films for the Third Reich, through which Swedish-born Soderbaum became one of the strongest wartime symbols of the female Aryan ideal. Rothenberg's treatment of this carefully selected fragment of an (apparently) innocuous Harlan-Soderbaum collaboration offers no clearly defined message. However, by constructing his own version of those trick candles that refuse to be blown out and putting them under the languorous, controlling gaze of Soderbaum, it's easy for these perpetual fires to take on different more sinister symbolism. The year before making *Verwehte Spuren*, German propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels made Veit Harlan one of his principal propaganda film directors. In 1940 he produced *Jud Suß*, which became his most notorious anti-semitic propaganda film, starring Kristina Soderbaum as its tragic Aryan heroine, pursued and persecuted by the film's Jewish villain. In *Revival*, Rothenberg uses another eerie image, that of Veit Harlan's idea of the gates of Heaven, from the 1943 film *Opfergang* (*Sacrifice*). The gates move in and out of focus, supposedly as seen through the eyes of the dying heroine, Aels, once again played by Kristina Soderbaum. Rothenberg's homing in on this particular vision of death is striking in the light of the holocaust that was occurring concurrently with the film's production.

Jean-Christophe Couet is currently studying at Le Fresnoy, the French National Studio for Contemporary Art, an innovatory institution for advanced artistic research. He previously gained a Masters at the Academy of Performing Arts, Film and Television, in Prague and has won numerous prizes and awards including the Nikon Documentary Prize; the Tribeca Film Festival Special Jury Prize; and Best Short Film prizes at the international film festivals of both New Orleans and Palm Springs.

David Rothenberg is a graduate of the Bard College MFA program, and has shown his work among other venues at Socrates Sculpture Park, Queens; Capricious Space, Brooklyn; Rowland Contemporary, Chicago; and Galerie Nikolaus Bischoff, Lahr, Germany.

Chloé Salembier is an anthropologist and filmmaker who currently teaches at the Institut Supérieur d'Architecture de St. Luc, in Tournai, Belgium