

# EVOLUTION

## A new generation of photographers are literally taking their artworks into another dimension

words TYLER COBURN

**LEST THE APPROPRIATION FAD RESIGN PHOTOGRAPHY** to compulsive return, let us remind ourselves of American Colby Bird, Swiss duo Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs, and other artists moving the medium into a new type of dialogue with sculpture. Bird, Onorato and Krebs bring a sculptor's material ingenuity and consumer-capitalist's commodity savvy to image-making. Their efforts prove especially pertinent when they hone in on their own relationships with an American cultural mythology often produced and sustained solely by mass-media and popular iconography.

Bird, a Texan-bred, self-described exponent of "middle-class/bro' culture," builds a strangely sturdy bridge from gangsta rap, a music form whose predominant consumer base is white America, to analogously testosterone-fuelled minimalist art. Consumer readymades become the constituent parts of his sparse, frequently evocative sculptures, like *Untitled, 2006*, a group of malt liquor 40s stacked four-by-four in a ratty refrigerator and sporadically doused by fog. The artist here deftly plays into the capitalistic networks underlying his fandom, from the transformation of black, urban hip-hop into the materialistic gangsta rap that has dominated American airwaves since the late-1980s, to the translation of that genre, through consumption of its satellite commodities, to white, suburban America.

If the sculptures indicate Bird's awareness of his conceptual balancing-act, then his photographs enter more fraught terrain, largely because they proliferate the stock of a medium that was instrumental in Bird's absorption of this subculture. So it is that *Hennessy* (2008), a slick, in-studio photograph of a partially opened case of a rapper's choice beverage, appears indiscernible from an actual advertisement. Bird's sculptural practice takes the form of actions and object arrangements in other photographs, which are admirable for their resilience to being mere documentation and indicative of the artist's discomfort with his dual position as cultural consumer and commentator. A scruffy white dude dons a grille of gold champagne-wrapping and attempts his best thug mug, in *Ring Flash Self-Portrait with \$6 Champagne-Wrapping Gold Teeth* (2006). In the more transparently critical *Bacchanal* (2006), Bird's pairing of a berry-laden shrub with a snapshot of naughty female collegiates, pasted to a dormitory wall, suggests frustration – even dismay – with the way Arcadian pleasures have descended into contemporary revelry. A shot of one building from Queensbridge Houses (*View From the Window at Queensbridge (after Niepce)*, 2007), the largest public housing development in Northern America and childhood home

to scores of rappers, including Nas and Mobb Deep, interpolates a cautionary tale of modernist design with two origin stories (of the MCs and the medium's invention), demarcated along the denotative and connotative bounds of the photograph, and between the fantasies and realities of urban culture.

In Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs's case, mythology was all the Swiss artists had to build upon when they first set foot in the United States to produce their road trip series, *Twilight Switch/Factoiden* (2005–6). Theirs was a journey characterised by double vision, of seeing a country already seen, through the eyes of countless other creators – with the consequent challenge of making an original mark on so heavily trafficked a landscape. Yet the strength of Onorato and Krebs's project lies precisely in their never broaching these received myths. Rather, the artists have embedded them in their photographic practice, taking to heart Norman Mailer's term for superfluous, mass-media-generated information, from which the series takes its title. Fittingly, Onorato and Krebs's resulting contribution to the canon – at once comedic and insightful – only underscores a prevailing belief that the American West is not so much a place as a locus of collective imaginings.

This insightfulness is particularly impressive given Onorato and Krebs's exclusion of much of the roadside ephemera typical of the American landscape (the broken record loop of strip-mall franchises coming first to mind). Among the few signs of life: a lone billboard, obscured to the point of illegibility by a haze of red (*Red Glow*, 2006), and a rotting carcass of a car, burned by desert heat and overexposure. There are no people to be found – anywhere. The artists have stripped the canvases of the American West to their barest, most timeless of foundations – all the better to anticipate the coming array of their idiosyncratic objects and icons.

Perhaps it's a Swiss thing. Perhaps Fischli and Weiss simply deserve more credit for the tinkery, do-it-yourself ethos they've ignited in younger countrymen. In any case, Onorato and Krebs's sensibility and intervention-heavy relationship to the American landscape inclines back towards a previous generation of playfulness without getting burdened by it. But while these interventions, comprising sculptural assemblages, provisionally built of cardboard, tape, telephone cords – and, really, whatever seems like it was just sitting about – are patently funny, they also remind us of the continuing colonisation of the American West. In the excellent *Map* (2006), a two-lane, cardboard road, rendered in extreme, one-point perspective, sits atop two tripods, the boldness of its aim (at a distant mountain) counterpoised by its pathetically diminutive scale. Other flat, one-point perspective props snake and twist their ways to snow-capped peaks (*Street*, 2006) and through thick brush (*Bad Street*, 2005). The open road sustains its allure, but also illustrates its penchant to reduce full swathes of landscape to automotive scenery. The threat of encroachment reaches its absurdist limit, in *Pommes Frites* (2006), when a coterie of McDonald's French fries mount a Caspar David Friedrich-worthy peak and absorb the full expanse of the Grand Canyon, like tourists (or aspirant developers).

Onorato and Krebs also make sculptures – most recently for their Summer 2008 show at Swiss Institute, New York, where they exhibited the products of an upstate sojourn. Yet even when displayed in a gallery context, their objects' provisional, prop-like qualities allude to the photographic half of their practice. Like Bird, the artists have built a highly specific, interdisciplinary language to address some of the dominant narratives of our time, and through photography have appended them with small, personal and often irreverent accounts.



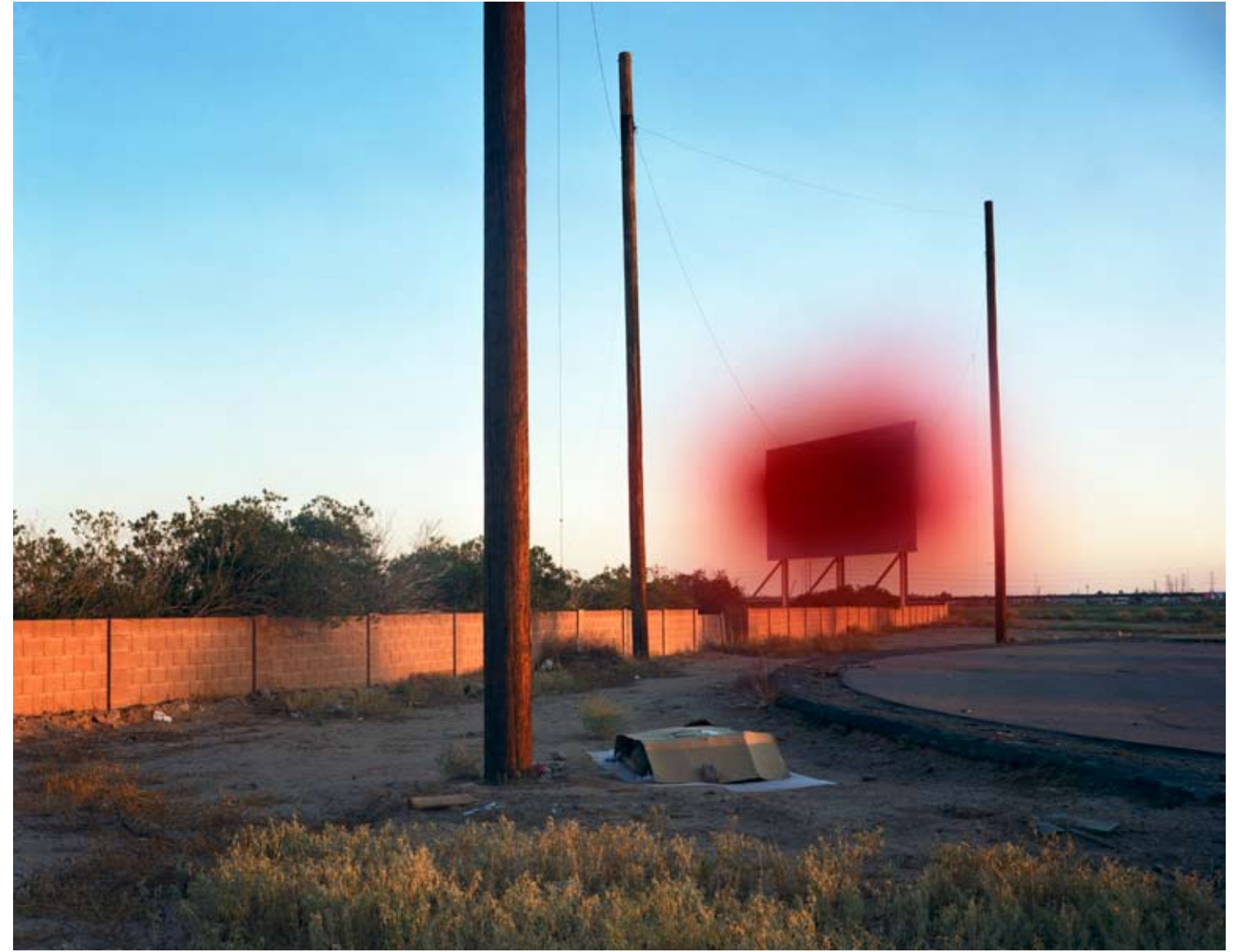
Colby Bird, *Theatre*, 2008, c-print, 104 x 127 cm

TAIYO  
ONORATO  
NICO KREBS

Born in Switzerland in 1979, Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs first began collaborating in 2003 during their time in the Photography Department of the University of Art and Design, Zurich. A stream of photographic and sculptural projects ensued, including the 2004–2007 lookbooks for German fashion maven Bernhard Wilhelm, all foregrounding the artists' inexhaustible creative whimsy. A 2006 solo show of their *Twilight Switch* series at P.S.1, in New York, officially put them on the international map, and with momentum from their 2008 Swiss Institute exhibition, one can expect bigger and grander things from the boys in the near-future.







WORKS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

*Map*, 2006

*Half a house*, 2008

*Building reno I-V*, 2008

*Street 2*, 2006

*Untitled (car)*, 2008

*Red glow*, 2006

All works courtesy the artists, from the series *Factoiden*, 2005–8, which will be published by Patrick Frey Editions in spring 2009