



## FOTOFEST

By DOUGLAS BRITT Copyright 2010 Houston Chronicle  
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COURTESY OF PAUL SHAMBROOM

Paul Shambroom's work focuses on public spaces that use obsolete weapons as monuments. His photos are among the collections found in *The Road to Nowhere?*

I wish Natasha Egan, curator of *The Road to Nowhere?*, had chosen a different title for her group show of contemporary U.S. photographers.

It makes perusing the exhibit sound like a grim duty — seeing it because you should, not because you want to — when in fact it's a surprisingly pleasurable experience, as I discovered after putting off my own visit for too long.

On the other hand, the title is in sync with her stated interest in "work that, while revisiting enduring American themes, calls into question the actual trajectory of our long-term national projects."

Certainly, when you look at the photos of abandoned retail outlets in Brian Ulrich's *Dark Stores*, *Ghost Boxes and Dead Malls* series; Eirik Johnson's eerily beautiful images of Pacific Northwest timber towns; or Paul Shambroom's scenes of town squares, parks and other public spaces that use obsolete military weapons as monuments, you sense what Egan's getting at.

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Egan, an associate director and curator at the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College Chicago, casts her 18 artists as "cultural documentarians" whom she sees "taking an artistic approach — whether objective or subjective — to understanding a particular society and culture, in this case the United States of America." In this respect they toil in a photographic tradition dating back to the Great Depression of "reflecting in a documentary way, or questioning in an artistic way, the zeitgeist."

Egan has pulled together a genuinely broad selection of photographers and video artists whose subjects, approaches and temperaments reflect and question our own zeitgeist in compelling ways. She's also willing to include work whose tone seems at odds with her title — hence, perhaps, the question mark at the end.

Take Erika Larsen's beautiful, respectful photos of child hunters. Many artists might have stressed the ominous undertones in images of children with guns. That's not what's going on with Larsen, a contributing photographer to *Field & Stream* magazine. Her child hunters seem compassionate, wise beyond their years and mystically connected with the earth. Nothing about these images says "road to nowhere," unless you consider the fact that children who, as Egan puts it, "are working parts of nature" are increasingly rare.

Larsen's sensitive portraits are hilariously offset by photos from Greg Stimac's *Recoil* series. Always taken at the moment a shooter opens fire, they depict an opposite type of gun culture in which companions underscores the discrepancy between Stimac's hobbyists and Larsen's hunters. Stimac also has a similarly deadpan series depicting all kinds of people mowing all kinds of lawns — from tiny weed-infested plots to lush landscapes surrounding posh houses.

### Resources

#### THE ROAD TO NOWHERE?

- **When:** 11 a.m.-6 p.m. today-Sunday
- **Where:** Winter Street Studios, 2101 Winter; 713-223-5522
- **FotoFest 2010 Biennial:** For a list of participating spaces, visit [www.fotofest.org](http://www.fotofest.org).

people kill nothing but time at unregulated rifle ranges. The interaction between the shooters and their often-bored companions underscores the discrepancy between Stimac's hobbyists and Larsen's hunters. Stimac also has a similarly deadpan series depicting all kinds of people mowing all kinds of lawns — from tiny weed-infested plots to lush landscapes surrounding posh houses.

Greta Pratt's portraits of day laborers clad in Statue of Liberty costumes against bleak urban backgrounds, Tim Davis' photos of illuminated retail signs reflected off residential windows, An-My Lê's images of Marine combat rehearsals in Southern California's Mojave Desert — against which tanks and soldiers often look like toys — and Trevor Paglen's photos of classified U.S. satellites in what he calls *The Other Night Sky* further round out this absorbing show's cultural documentary impulse.

Alternately funny, poignant, unnerving and affectionate, *The Road to Nowhere?* is another winner in the official FotoFest lineup.

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