



GINA FERAZZI Los Angeles Times

ROAD TRIP: Writer Mercedes Helnwein, left, filmmaker Beth Riesgraf and photographer Alex Prager traveled through Middle America, staying in motels and collecting material for their exhibit.

UNGALLERY

Rooms with a view of America's heartland

A photographer, filmmaker and writer capture life on the road in 'America Motel.'

By JESSICA GELT
Special to The Times

"PEOPLE always say that you have to see Europe," says writer Mercedes Helnwein, her red hair shining in the fading sunlight of a sweltering Los Angeles afternoon. "Well, it's just as important to get out and see America."

Helnwein lounges at a Los Feliz coffee shop with photographer Alex Prager and filmmaker Beth Riesgraf. The trio are recounting the two sweat-soaked weeks they spent last summer crammed in a Dodge Neon documenting life in the tiny towns that dot the swollen belly and

aching heart of Middle America.

The results of this grinding effort will be showcased Saturday in a multimedia art installation called "America Motel," staged at a hotel of the same name in Lincoln Heights. Jason Lee, who's previously headed up about 10 such events featuring local artists, will act as co-host.

The decision to hold their exhibition at a motel came after the women stayed in a particularly bizarre motel in Kentucky. "The place was in the middle of nowhere," Prager says. "Everything in it clashed with everything else in the most perfect way."

Finding a local motel willing to play host to the event, however, took some legwork. "We think there's weird prostitution going on at most motels," Prager confides. But eventually they hit on the America Motel, which feels strikingly similar to the places where they bedded down during their road trip. It is fittingly located just off the freeway, amid the bleak industrial landscape on the outskirts of

downtown Los Angeles. Seven ground-level rooms in the motel's two grim beige stucco buildings will be the staging ground.

Although each woman focused on a separate project in her respective medium — photography, film and writing — there is a striking cohesion to the final product, attributable to their shared experiences.

Each morning they pulled out a well-worn map and circled the places they wanted to visit. Sometimes they would just veer off the highway onto winding dirt roads until they came across

'America Motel'

Where: America Motel, Lincoln Heights. Call for address, guest list.

When: Saturday, 8 p.m.

Cost: Free

Info: (323) 663-8543.
Reservations required.

someone or someplace interesting.

"In Kansas we met a man named Emler who invited us to stay at his house," Prager says. "He and his wife had an extra bedroom, and he was really curious about us."

Riesgraf laughs and raises her eyebrows. "There wasn't an ounce of pervert in him," Prager insists. "I wouldn't have locked my bedroom door if I stayed." Then she mentions that Emler was dressed head to toe in "camo gear."

Prager, by contrast, looks quintessentially L.A. in a short lemon-yellow Izod dress, large wraparound sunglasses and bleached-blond hair pulled back in a stylish tangle at the nape of her neck. She is petite and bubbly, but her words have g-vity. Her photographs reveal a keen eye for the shining and the bizarre — a bit Annie Leibovitz, a bit Diane Arbus.

Her 18-picture series includes acres of abandoned cars in Kentucky and a young black girl in Mississippi washing her windshield, an "I Love Jesus" air freshener dangling from the car's rearview mirror. In several photos, she captures the details of Americana, such as a plaque depicting an old woman sporting bouffant hair and tinted glasses, with the words "Dorothy Fulton, head banker" inscribed on a brass plate. An image of the denim-shorts-clad prosthetic legs of a man sitting at a diner counter in Arizona borders on abstract.

she was 14, she picked up a copy of "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" and became obsessed with America and the Mississippi River. "I'm a huge blues fan, so Mississippi had become a mythical place for me," she says. "Just being there and breathing in the humidity and thinking 'Robert Johnson was here' — it was so exciting."

The women listened to the blues on the road, and the restless, seductive qualities of America's heartland came to play a major role in their work, culminating in how they're presenting it this weekend.

Prager's photos, mounted in gaudy faux-gold frames, will hang on the walls in all seven motel rooms while Riesgraf's 28-minute documentary, "Far Away Swimming Pool," plays in stag-

gered loops on the TV screens. Instead of a Gideon Bible on the bedside table, America Motel guests can peruse a copy of Heinrich's "Devil Got Religion." Out in the parking lot, which will be carpeted with Astroturf, guests can gather, drink and listen to country and blues music.

Lee, who is Riesgraf's boyfriend of three years, is co-hosting America Motel with his business partner, Chris Pastras. Lee, a diligent collector of work by new artists, says he's never encountered an installation like this one, where subject and setting are so intertwined.

"It's good to get people to come to downtown L.A.," said Lee. "And it's interesting that people will be sitting on the motel beds watching Beth's film and looking at Alex's pictures."