

# M+B

## MUSÉE

### Andrew Bush Eye on the Road

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**LANA J. LEE:** *You started taking the photographs that became Vector Portraits in 1989. When you started this series, what ideas were you concerned with and where did you imagine that this series would lead you?*

**ANDREW BUSH:** Initially, I was just floundering around in the world with a camera. Living in Los Angeles, I was captivated by how people interacted as a result of driving, so I began experimenting with taking pictures while driving.

It seemed strange that we exist in this very private interior, almost a living room, while circulating in such a public way. I began to read a lot of Pierre Bourdieu and Paul Virillio to try to better understand how society had come to be shaped as it is.

Also, it was exciting to make these photos, to pursue and maneuver my car in order to make a photo. It was a kind of "street photography" suitable for the type of city Los Angeles is. It was voyeuristic as much as any photography made within the public sphere of the world, but this was being framed by traveling the same direction and speed as the driver next to me. The backdrop against which the other driver was being portrayed was rapidly changing. I began making videos while also making the stills.

**LJL:** *How did you decide whom to photograph when on the road? Was it a random process or would there be anything specific that would catch your attention?*

**AB:** First, I needed to master the technique, and any driver providing an opportunity for making a photo I would make a photo of. As I became more adept, I was able to respond to details and gestures, like the color of the car or wave of a hand, or something that might seem eccentric about a person. Depending on the type of traffic, this method allowed for the making of many photos of many drivers. It was a somewhat daring way of working, and in order to stay in practice I had to keep doing it. It was exhilarating and exhausting. I usually made these photos over time in spurts of one-week intervals.

**LJL:** *Can you tell me more about your technique?*

**AB:** It is hard enough walking around and making photos, and of course you want to keep your eye on the road, so making photos while driving made things more difficult. I need to juggle a lot of balls before I can concentrate (it helps me concentrate), so in many ways I found it safer to be doing this than to just be driving. At that time it was still frowned upon to not look through the viewfinder when making a photo, but when you realize that you can encounter the photo you are looking for partially through displacing yourself from the camera and finding it in editing, much more territory can be covered. As everyone knows now, you

Portrait by Rob Becker. All images Courtesy Julie Saul Gallery, New York.

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don't even have to be a witness in the world to see the world, you can travel through Google street view. These photos were the starting point for thinking about how we relate to each other and the world while moving unnaturally fast and for asking very basic questions like: Why do we drive? What is so addictive about being in a car and going fast? It is not just about getting places sooner; the ride itself is enjoyable. The most drooled over is the technology that allows you to go extremely fast, to be invisible and to still be in complete control. Stealth technology.

There is also the sense of experiences being compressed by going fast because we are seeing much more than we would otherwise if we were simply walking, which gives us a kind of natural gauge of time for encountering the world.

The more I drove, the more I dissected the psychology of the environment in which we are driving. What do the road designers and traffic controllers and highway safety people allow us to see? In Los Angeles and the rest of the country, the roads became corridors for outdoor advertising.

Roads became the perfect place to deliver a consumer message. Because we are so focused on driving and lost in the privacy of our thoughts, it is monotonous to the point we welcome a distraction. It is the perfect environment for advertising. If you drive 20 miles and see only 30 signs they become markers in the mind. I began to think about outdoor advertising: how it came into existence, and why it seems to have a visual monopoly on the roads. Why are there not stretches of road with the express purpose of showing images produced by artists? We have public radio station, TV, and museums to walk into. Part of this public space needs to be developed for the express purpose of showing art. A benefactor, whether private or public, needs to step forward and create areas where there are 13-20 consecutive billboard type structures within a mile for creating and showing visual art.

In the last 50 years, artists have used billboards, but it has been in the form of being rented or given as part of a public service; nothing has been created for the sole purpose of showing art. It seems more relevant now when magazines and newspapers are folding. They allowed for the possibility of encountering images gradually and repeatedly just by the nature of their being an object laying around in our environments that could be encountered, that there be another venue where an image or images might

*Andrew Bush. Man driving southwest at approximately 72 mph on Interstate 40 in Arizona on an afternoon of the July 4th weekend on 1989 (possibly with an air conditioner malfunction).*

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be encountered repeatedly. Everyone is making images and circulating them, but there are those who spend their lives thinking about what images mean, who as editors and curators can provide a distillation of where meaning is coalescing and share those choices with a greater public.

**LJL:** *How has that impacted your thoughts on the separation between public life and private life?*

**AB:** When I started this project in 1989, our notions of privacy were oriented around physical boundaries, of being seen or not seen, around the physical and tactile. Property ownership defines what is private. I own it. I can take it with me or I can put a fence around it and keep others out.

Now, it is information and the control of information that determines what is private and public knowledge. All the things like telephones and cars and thermostats that used to reside where we resided are now transmitting information telling others what we are doing and saying and what choices we are making. For the most part we are unaware or do not care if we are being tracked because we really don't feel it affecting us. It is not the same as walking through a doorway into another room where there are many people scrutinizing you. We don't know what other people know about us, what agencies are sifting through our texts and tracking our movements.

**LJL:** *How do you think vanity plays a part in your work, especially regarding the distinction between public and private?*

**AB:** I think my work to some extent shows the many ways people show themselves off in public, and so in that way it is about vanity. Whether it is driving down main street in your car or giving out a business card or having a Facebook page, we all want and need to use the tools that are part of the society in which we live, otherwise we are left out of the dialogue.

**LJL:** *In your Vector Portraits, you always record the speed the subject is travelling. Why did you think this was an important detail to record?*

**AB:** One doesn't understand speed in a still photo without certain visual cues, which is why there is always a spinning tire included in my pictures. Speed also suggests invisibility. The titles provide exact information but also some inexact information. They were meant to address the slippery ground of witnessed fact, where nothing can be pinned down. Also, we never really think how fast we are going from one minute to the next or at any particular time.

**LJL:** *What about the vehicles? Were they just meant to frame the subjects, or are they inextricably linked to the drivers?*

**AB:** Yes, the vehicles are intended to be part of the drivers, or clothing, that the driver is wearing.

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**LJL:** *How do you consider Vector Portraits different from conventional portrait?*

**AB:** It is very similar to studio portrait photography within a confined space. My car is the tripod and the studio is the car driving next to me, with the world as a backdrop. The flash separates the driver/ car from the world in the same manner that the speed of the car separates the driver from the world, or the studio takes the subject out of the world. Obviously, I cannot converse very easily with my subject.

**LJL:** *Your interest in anthropology and sociology is really apparent in your work. You seem really drawn to the technique of taking a high volume of similar photographs to emphasize all the little differences in each, almost in a scientific manner. Do you ever think of your projects as scientific experiments?*



Andrew Beah. Family portrait portraits at 11 mph. November 2001 near Yale Avenue in Tulsa, Oklahoma, at approximately 4:11 pm on the last day of 1991.

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**AB:** I considered these projects as a scientist considers collecting data in the field. For the Props Portraits series I wanted the subjects to appear to be in a studio while still being in the world. They hold objects, which have been used and circulated in the world, the functions of which we understand. They're not new, they're not packaged, and they don't come in bags. We rarely see someone carrying an unpackaged object. They are delivered to us. Seeing a person with an object, we begin to associate that person with some activity or some way of life, they become a dramatic figure without having to gesture or speech.

**LJL:** *What did the envelopes in your Envelopes B series represent?*

**AB:** They represented a more conceptual and abstract way of dealing with the questions I was asking myself about public and private space that I encountered in my car photos: how we travel, how we circulate our image, how that circulation accumulates preconceptions and expectations from the viewer. In the art world, you have someone who buys your work and puts it in their private space, and there's a silent communication between the artist and the patron. The artist and the gallery may be attended by explanations with words, and possibly through speech, but ultimately its meaning resides in the encounter with the object, its possession within a space, within the jurisdiction of ownership. I wanted to draw attention to the expectations that develop from our preconceptions surrounding the shape in which a message is delivered. The envelopes are framed in contact printing frames, a photographic tool for producing the latent image on a piece of paper. The device or frame itself is an object with spring clasps that allow it to be opened and closed. I wanted the subject of the photograph, the envelope, to extend its meaning into the object, the frame that held it, thereby making the photo into an object.

