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THE WANDERER

GABRIEL JONES IS A REAL LIFE NOWHERE MAN

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Photography's history is scattered with *flâneurs*, wanderers who capture the city and its uncanny alienations. Eugène Atget strolled the empty boulevards of a deserted Paris, stealing moments of urban life likened by some to mysterious murder scenes. The surrealists, who venerated Atget, also photographed the city's bizarre juxtapositions. Wolfgang Tillmans, the German photographer who rose to fame during the '80s grunge movement, snaps images of rotting fruit, random party-goers and dirty laundry.

Tillmans' engagement with the seemingly banal has strongly influenced Gabriel Jones, who photographed the eight covers for The Arcade Fire's new album, *The Suburbs*. "I like being in a state of wandering," says Jones, 36, "a state of slight removal from reality." On each cover, an empty car is shot from the back in front of a typically suburban house. One image in the booklet features a palm tree in black and white; another shows the band members as black silhouettes against a suburban backdrop. The colors are washed out, as if the images had been dug out from an old wooden chest. The photos are grainy, and the colors, shades of blood red, acid green and burnt orange, are bathed in a cold light, slightly surreal, as if painted on the negative. We wonder what is happening, what is about to happen. Jones, who grew up in the suburbs of Montreal and moved to New York at 26, often likes to create this uncertain tension in his work. His photographs play with the limit between reality and fiction, the banal and the eerie, the nostalgic and the uncanny.

"The Arcade Fire covers are strongly inspired by Hitchcock," says Jones, in his slow, soft, Quebec-accented French, brushing his silver hair with one hand. "Hitchcock created tension with absolutely nothing. It's the absence of content that creates tension." For *The Suburbs*, Jones photographed Texan houses and landscapes, then shot the car in retro-projection in studio, as they did in Hitchcock's day. He retouched his images using a "secret recipe." The photographic claim to realism vanishes, the constructed image and artificial lighting provokes a twisted sense of nostalgia. Perhaps a story – a cinematic narrative – is about to start. "I start imagining stories when I see his enigmatic pictures," says Vincent Morisset, the art director of the Arcade Fire cover, who grew up



with Jones in the suburb of Chateaugay. "His images move me." But in the end the images aren't about the car or the house or the suburbs; they're about a certain feeling of emptiness, of displacement, of alienation.

Jones calls this the "absence," or the "silence" in the image. He likes to let it lie there. It mirrors his own identity crisis. His mother moved to Quebec from a small English-speaking Canadian village for unknown reasons and was never able to adapt; his grandfather immigrated to New York from Italy on an illegal boat and changed the family name for mysterious reasons. Jones doesn't feel at home in Montreal, New York or anywhere else. "The absence of identity, the impossible task of understanding patriotism, the impossibility of feeling at home anywhere are important themes for me," says the artist.

For his curating debut at Brooklyn's Invisible Dog Gallery in October Jones created the Pseudonym Project, where artists, famous and unknown, created works under pseudonyms. The purpose of the exhibition was to destabilize the viewer by stripping away common art-world references.

This sensory confusion is threaded throughout Jones' work. He is mainly known for his *Somewhere On Time* series, where subjects pause against unidentifiable urban settings. The models, their bodies tense, seem distressed, as if facing catastrophe. By distancing the viewer from the image, says Jones, he destabilizes her and turns her into a voyeur or a witness of some strange event.

This series, like several others, takes place in a fictionalized space. Paradoxically, for *Somewhere on Time*, he actually went to London, Warsaw, Paris, New York and Montreal, asking strangers to pause for him in random settings. But he then deleted all identifying elements of the cities, rendering them anonymous. Jones often finds inspiration in travel then obliterates local references. This parallels his own nomadic state, traveling everywhere but not being able to find a home. In fact, Jones has just moved from New York to Paris, where he will be showing his Pseudonym Project with a new group of artists in 2011. "Anyway, I know that with a heavy accent, one is always a stranger wherever one goes," he says.