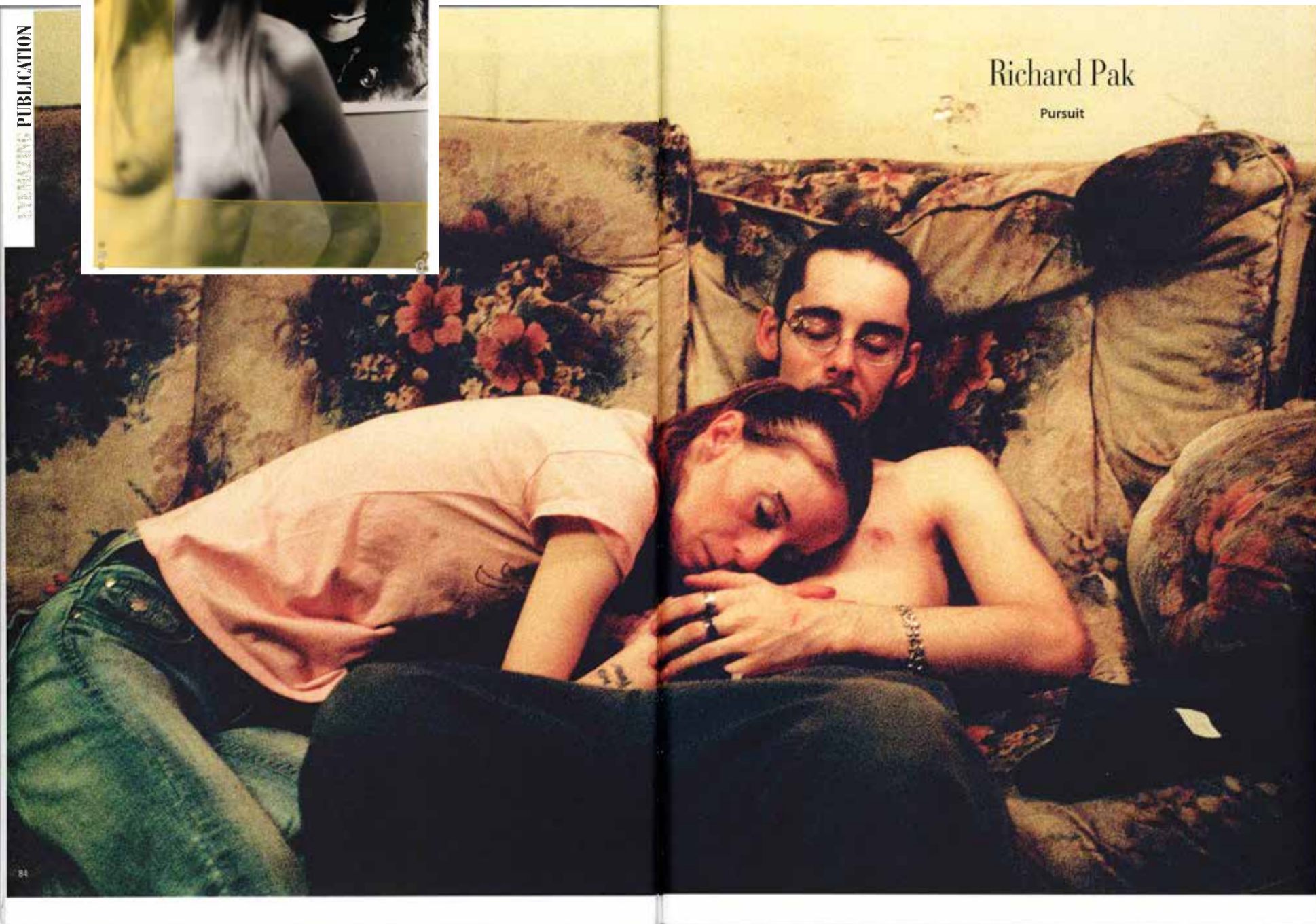




Richard Pak

Pursuit



French photographer Richard Pak produced this series by going to the United States every year from 2003 to 2009, taking the Declaration of Independence that mentions each person's right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" as his common thread.

Although sensitive to a purely documentary American photography heritage, Richard Pak's work is closer to his imagination, influenced by New Hollywood movies and American literature.

Pak's series, *Pursuit*, is a chronicle of daily life experienced from the inside and was produced with the help and trust of those who welcomed the photographer into the boundary of their private lives.

Pursuit shows a disenchanted America, but one imbued with tenderness and empathy for its protagonists.

Alongside the photographic work, Richard Pak wrote about some of his encounters, gathered under the title *Please, come again*. Following are extracts from this

Please, come again (extracts)

(...) I'm meeting Krystal to photograph her. She's behind her bar, chain smoking between the drinks she serves to the few clients that are already here in the early afternoon. They are all grouped together with the boss round the shuffleboard table playing one-s-one for \$5 a game. The eyesiner round her big eyes a bit darker, and her lipstick a bit brighter, earrings and other small details make me guess straightaway that Krystal hasn't changed her mind. She tells me, in a confidential tone, that she called her mother to find out the name of the guy who had photographed her: it was some Richard Avedon and the book was called *The American West*, or something like that. Rings a bell?

To make the most of the daylight I decide to photograph her by the door that leads to a back alley. I knock it open with a stone, give Krystal a few instructions and then photograph her. After only a few minutes the boss, who seems really upset, comes over and starts shouting at us, blaming us for making the bar cold. He has a point. It puts a premature end to our session but I'm confident that I've got what I was looking for. Talking to Krystal, he spits out a: "If you wanna do her, take him home," and leaves. Her cold, austere mask crumples and gives way to a deep sadness, and she starts crying, apologising over and over for her boss's attitude. I try to reassure her and say I'm used to this kind of reaction, she confides in me that she has had enough of working for a dickhead anyway and that it is high time she resigned.

At around 6pm we head off to photograph a couple Ginni is friends with in a suburb of Richmond. On the way, when we have nearly got there, her friend calls a taxi to say no: to come after all. She has had an argument with her husband about the shoot. I drive while Ginni tries to untangle the whys and where-

fores of the story. I drive round the subdivided lots, stopping here and there to photograph the rows of identical houses under a rainy sky. A vigilant couple watch me from their doorstep, obviously wondering whether to let the police know about this stranger right in the middle of their street. But we leave to go and get Christine before I get an answer. She ended up packing her suitcase and taking refuge in a depressing restaurant in the neighbouring shopping mall. When we meet up with her, she's on her second glass of Chardonnay and doesn't seem too shaken. Her control freak of a husband, who had initially agreed that I could photograph both of them, had suddenly changed his mind, and had forbidden her from getting involved in this little game. It was the final straw and she left, slamming the door behind her. We eat and drink and have a laugh despite everything. Before we go our separate ways, and while Ginni has gone out, Christine starts crying and cursing her idiot of a husband, who she stopped studying for and gave up on her childhood dreams. I listen, silent, attentive and powerless, a reluctant hero of a Carver short story that, whether rightly or wrongly, I don't photograph.

That evening Perry and I are both lounging on the old sofa in the half-lit of the living room. I've lost count of the number of snorts he's injected into himself. I stick to my strict diet of beer and joints. My mind is vaguely foggy but I try and make conversation anyway. He seems to be making a superhuman effort with every word he says in a distant and monotonous voice, and I only understand half of it. I still manage to piece together the broad lines of his life from these snippets. It got ugly pretty early on when he was about five. One afternoon he was playing by a pool with his parents. He playfully pushed his father, who fell in the water and died instantly, of a heart attack or something. Several years after having literally killed his father, his mother remarried. But his step-father was the archetypal bastard, alcoholic and violent. And he gets beaten more than he should with large whips of a belt. As a teenager, unsurprisingly, he started taking drugs. He dreamt of becoming a professional fisherman, ever won some local competitions, but the spiral of drugs quickly put an end to that. I listen to him and wait for the next but Perry has fallen asleep, as if reminiscing has finally knocked him out. I take his beer away before it spills and I clumsily climb up into the hammock.

I go back to Clyde's who isn't there, no more than is Brian, the neighbour. It is very hot and I wait in the shade of the trailer, sipping one of the cold beers I've bought. A kid comes and tells me that Clyde won't be long now. I make the most of him being there and ask him to introduce me to some of the other inhabitants from this dead end lost in the middle of the Appalachians. He agrees and we go along the dirt dry path together that leads us away from the road. We go past a row of pens where scrawny dogs bark relentlessly. Flanked by my young guide, I go up to a mobile home where a woman and her daughter are waiting in silence in the shade of an awning. I introduce myself and explain what brings me here. I'm not

really sure they fit in my project, but I photograph them nevertheless, so as not to upset them. Della first, then her daughter Vicki. The saint of her blue mongrel eyes betrays a superfluous chromosome. She coyly pretends not to want to, but lets her mother convince her and behind her shyness I can see her pride at being photographed. For the whole time, the kid that brought me along watches us, squatting, slightly in the background with his eyes wide open, determined not to miss anything of this scene that's so different from his everyday life. Suddenly a man, who I guess is his father, turns up on a quad bike and with an unequivocal look, tells him to get into the sea. They leave instantly and without a word in a cloud of dust. Della and I chat. Her husband, who didn't want to be photographed, has joined us. They hardly own anything, not even a car, and survive by farming the landlord's field. Vicki is, in effect, too "slow" to go to school, and as they can't afford to put her in a special school she spends her days at home. They offer me coffee and I offer them cigarettes. Della smokes her cigarette, as you would savour a cigar. She confides in me her dream of leaving this place in the back of beyond to start over, anywhere. Or, even better, get in her car and drive without ever stopping. She is touching, and even more so as we both know that she will never do it. She offers me more coffee but it's time for me to go. I give them what's left of my pack of smokes and we say goodbye. While hugging Della whispers into my ear, "Please come again," like a cry for help that still brings a lump to my throat.

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