

## American Grit

Cheryl Dunn documents the irony of life in the U.S.

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Image courtesy of CityBeat

The young blonde girl in the photograph looks perplexed. She's standing in front of a bus called "Willie's Wiener Wagon," which is plastered with signs that read, "If You Don't Support Victory, You Don't Support Our Troops" and "Proud to be an American."

New York-based documentary filmmaker and photographer Cheryl Dunn took the photograph during the Bush years. "When I took it I was reacting to George Bush's, 'If you're not with us you're the enemy,' kind of mindset, that black-and-white definition of our politics under him."

As times changed, the photograph began to hold a different meaning for her. In light of the past year's election of Barack Obama, she asks, "Can I be — am I proud to be — an American again?"

Dunn doesn't flinch from the gritty, difficult side of life, as suggested by the title of her current show, *Spit & Peanut Shells: American Pictures*, at Country Club gallery in the West End.

"My pictures are pretty in your face," she says. "I'm always taking pictures of people living on the street, for instance. I'm really commenting on the socio-economic structure of our country, the circumstances we live in."

She continues, "Now with President Obama and the changes over the past year, people have to acknowledge who we are, what we do and what we don't do. It's OK and really healthy to acknowledge shitty things, because that's how they change."

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Dunn is an incisive documentarian of what's happening around her. She considers herself more storyteller than photographer, in part because of her filmmaker side. Her show weaves narratives through images. Unlike a traditional photography exhibition that encourages the contemplation of separate pictures, Dunn treats the show as an environment. Works suspend from the ceiling, hang on columns and lean on the walls, punctuated by large images of a chain-link fence silhouetted against a pink background.

According to Dunn, the fences serve as “another acknowledgment of something I think about my country. What we say we are and what we really are, as a whole, are totally different. It's like a pink fence — it's cool, it's sweet, but we don't want you here.” She objects to this mentality, stating, “Let's just be real, admit who we are and move forward.”

In addition to astute groupings of photographs, the show includes video work as well. Footage of a ticker-tape parade loops on a large projection screen, evoking the aura of an historical newsreel. Dunn's studio is located about a block from ground zero of the 9/11 attacks, which compelled her to document people on the street during the aftermath of the Twin Towers collapse.

“Protests, celebrations, terrorism — it all takes place a block from where I've lived and worked for the past 20 years,” she says.

Accompanying Dunn's show is an exhibition of paintings by Antonio Adams, a self-taught Cincinnati artist affiliated with Visionaries & Voices, which encourages the creative impulses of artists with disabilities. The pairing is appropriate, given Dunn's current documentary project about the Creative Growth Center in Oakland, Calif., the organization after which places like V&V are modeled.

Dunn says, “It's time we acknowledge that there's no right or wrong, no black and white, no normal and not normal. Nobody should be judged against some kind of prototype of what a human should be. People are afraid of what they don't understand. I'm hoping through art I can present some truths from the things that I've learned.”

SPIT & PEANUT SHELLS: AMERICAN PICTURES is on view at Country Club (424 Findlay St., West End, 513-792- 9744) through May 16. Get gallery details and find nearby bars and restaurants [here](#).