

Best in Show

Joshua Lutz's Meadowlands

Published by powerHouse Books

Review By R.C. Baker

The 50 large-format photographs in this fascinating volume about New Jersey's Meadowlands have no captions or explanations beyond an introduction by nature writer Robert Sullivan (if authoring the tome *Rats: Observations on the History and Habitat of the City's Most Unwanted Inhabitants* counts as writing about nature). Sullivan's observation that "the Meadowlands is a morbid place, no matter how sunny things get" sets the tone for this visual essay that began 10 years ago, ostensibly as a search for Jimmy Hoffa's remains. What Lutz discovered instead, amid the 32 square miles of haphazardly developed swamp, were such trenchant images as a jet taking off from Newark airport — a blurred streak between fall-tinted



willow leaves and a shiny cell-phone tower. Nature constantly jousts with man-made structures in these photos of concrete and steel geometries assailed by scrubby trees and rust. Although the Teamster boss is nowhere to be found, plenty of lost souls are captured by Lutz's lens. A priest traipses through waist-high weeds, though whether he's in search of the body in the mud of another photograph or is some vague perp himself pretty much depends on your mood. A pink neon sign for the Delayed Cares Motel might be a chapter heading for this photographic novel; the parking lot is mostly empty, but other shots — of a sullen blonde ignoring the man in the bed beside her, or of a pregnant girl staring at a gas station from her motel-room door — imply that cares can be put off for only so long. And then there's a young woman with stout R. Crumb legs and a miniskirt leaning into the driver's-side window of a black Audi; the action happens in the middle distance, as if caught on an FBI surveillance tape, on a stretch of road running through rubble-clotted landfill. All grays and browns, it's as if the ground itself has developed mesothelioma. While the deadpan vistas of past-their-prime liquor stores and YMCAs recall Stephen Shore's road trips and the fraught liaisons suggest Jeff Wall's staged dramas, Lutz also simply allows the Garden State's enervated weirdness to star as itself. A summer throng mills about Giants Stadium, but the stage is cropped out in favor of lighting rigs and speaker towers — whether the act is Springsteen or Bon Jovi, there seems little doubt the Sopranos are skimming a piece of the gate.