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GLOBAL NEWS READING: Lauren Greenfield's materialism chronicles

“Generation Wealth”, the artist and film-maker’s latest project, is a **portrait** of **narcissism**, greed and **excess**

Prospero

Aug 16th 2018by Y.F. | NEW YORK

Lauren Greenfield is a **documentarian** of American **aspiration** and **excess**. *Over three decades* she has taken hundreds of thousands of photographs of wealthy housewives, **plastic-surgery addicts**, **porn** stars, nightclubs, **strip** clubs, young girls with eating **disorders**, children who grew up rich and children who **strive** to look rich.¹ Her work is a portrait of the spread of an “**image-obsessed** culture” and a **trove** of **flamboyant consumption**. “Generation Wealth”, a recent documentary film, is the last part of a **multimedia** project of the same title *that includes a coffee-table book* (Phaidon, \$75) and last year’s exhibition at the International Centre of Photography. This work has made Ms Greenfield’s name as the “**foremost** visual **chronicler** of the **plutocracy**”.

¹ (she) (has taken) (hundreds of thousands of photographs of A, B, C, D, E....)

The project is wide-ranging, the artist argues, because materialism has become more **crass**, more **common** and more global over the course of her career. It is “getting worse and worse and more extreme almost in an **exponential** way,” she says in a telephone interview. “The way *media has exploded*, the way *globalism has exploded*, the way *tech has exploded*—kind of put everything *I was looking at on steroids*.”² Through social media and reality television, images of **luxury** and wealth have become more **ubiquitous**.

“This idea of keeping up with the Joneses became keeping up with the **Kardashians**,” Ms Greenfield says. “[And] the more you see those images the more you want those things.” *While her work may seem to feed into that desire*, it also casts a **surrealist** shadow over its **subjects**. The viewer understands that there is something **uncanny** about them *even as they go about their everyday lives*.



*Because her work is most interested in those who “desire to be wealthy, at any cost”, it brings **disparate** characters into conversation. In the film **the viewer** hears the **testimony** of a bus driver from Georgia whose **addiction** to **cosmetic** surgery*

bankrupted her and **alienated** her family. They observe Kacey Jordan, a former **porn** actress and sex worker, and her efforts to create a different life for herself (she made headlines for receiving \$30,000 to “party” with Charlie Sheen). Ms Greenfield profiles a businessman living in **exile** in Germany *after being **indicted** in America for his illegal financial **transactions***, and meets other individuals whose **extravagant** lifestyles were **upended** by the financial **crash** in 2008. All of these figures are **reckoning** with their past, *either openly regretful or just painfully lost*.

Ms Greenfield sees the financial crisis as a **watershed** moment, exposing the economic forces *that*

² (The way .., the way .., the way..) (... put) (everything..) [*on steroids*].

allowed such **unchecked indulgence** and **rampant** consumerism. “We saw...that if you lent people money they can achieve that lifestyle even if they can’t pay that money back,” she says. She wonders how much has changed.

Yet she is keenly aware *that she is not* **impervious** to those **urges** and **yearnings**; success is a moving target for her as much as her **cast**. She grew up *in* a **high achieving**, upper-middle-class family in **Venice Beach**—when it was still an **edgy** bohemian **enclave**—*with* parents who created communes and subscribed to the progressive **ethos** of 1970s California.³

Many of her **peers** at the private Crossroads High School in Santa Monica were significantly wealthier and more materialistic, and it is easy to see how her work has been **informed** by negotiating these different worlds. “Sometimes when I’m looking at something I have trouble stopping too, I want more.” she says. “In a way it drives my work to be *in depth* and *complete* and *expansive*; on the other hand it also leads me to overproduce.”

“Generation Wealth”, on the whole, prioritizes volume rather than depth; it aims for **poignancy** but ultimately **beguiles** with its **perversity**. It also revisits issues that Ms Greenfield has already succeeded in probing. “Queen of Versailles”, her documentary film from 2011, achieved the vision the artist claims for the rest of her work, *tying together wealth, beauty, ageing, sexuality, fame and class*. **Ostensibly** about a couple in Orlando seeking to build the biggest home in America, the film is one of the most **insightful** takes on the financial crisis and the American dream. “Generation Wealth” portrays shallow desires across an **enormous spectrum**. But “Queen of Versailles” more successfully delivered the kind of complexity and poignancy for which Ms Greenfield seems to **strive**.

³ She grew up [*in ...*][*with...*].