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American Passages

An impressive road-traveling collage of the U.S. at the advent of the Obama era.

By ROBERT KOEHLER

Veteran Austrian documentary filmmaker Ruth Beckermann's "American Passages" is an impressive road-traveling collage of the U.S. at the advent of the Obama era. Although the film was ostensibly made to honor Robert Frank's famed 1958 photo essay, "The Americans," no knowledge of that work is necessary to grasp Beckermann's aims: snapshot cinematic views of a massive country in a moment in time, spanning races, classes and geographies like a peripatetic anthropologist. Pic has strong value as a time capsule, with fine prospects in fests, cable and vid.

An opening montage in Gotham the night of Obama's election sets a tone of victory and promise, which soon diminishes as Beckermann sends d.p.'s Antoine Parouty and Lisa Rinzier to venture across 10 additional, largely conservative states, almost entirely avoiding big cities. The choice seems odd, since the U.S. is becoming a predominantly urbanized nation; Beckermann also fails to meaningfully include Latino communities on her road trip, opting instead for a black-white racial picture that doesn't necessarily reflect current realities.

On the other hand, her timing as a foreigner in a country undergoing an economic earthquake couldn't be better. A man considering selling his home to be closer to his new job has now decided it's hardly a seller's market. Bobby Martin explains the ramifications of being one-quarter Creek Indian in Oklahoma. In an inner-city project, a child innocently asks, "Are we about to die?" A tour guide describes a sculpture display of 42 of the signers of the U.S. Constitution, in life-size scale. A lawyer claiming he wants to retire explains his peers make money only in very good and bad times.

And so goes the montage/collage as Beckermann and team roll across the Deep South (Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Georgia, Arkansas) to the Midwest (Oklahoma) to the West (Arizona and Nevada). That most of these are so-called "red" electoral states is a telling detail, and up for interpretation, but the landscape provides the filmmakers with a vast diversity of peoples, views and lifestyles, from high-roller pimps in Vegas to buttoned-up officials at the right-wing Christian Liberty U.

The film touches on themes including the American taste for risk (Vegas, foreclosures), transience (homeless folks, auctions at storage units), racial progress (Obama's election, black female judges and attorneys) and utopia (architecture visionary Paolo Soleri). The term American Dream is mentioned in passing (a historian observes that there's no such thing as "a French Dream" or "a German Dream"), but it's also thankfully not an obsession of this collage-portrait.

The sheer cinematic sense of mobility that "American Passages" conveys through its Johnny-on-the-spot camera approach and fast and fluid editing is perhaps Beckermann's finest achievement here, helping the film tap into the immediacy and energy of a nation at a moment in time. A Dee Dee Bridgewater rendition of Brecht-Weill's "Alabama Song" is an acute and smart music selection over end credits.

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