

## Dallas photographer Misty Keasler captures the gritty side of Vegas

The 'Low Lands' exhibition at the Public Trust gallery captures the edge of the Strip, where the glitzy façade gives way to the gritty isolation of real life.

By Danielle Avram | Special Contributor - May 17, 2019



Troopers by Misty Keasler shows some of the performers from the Las Vegas Strip in a less-glitzy locale.

In 2015, photographer Misty Keasler and her husband, gallerist Brian Gibb, scheduled a much-needed trip to Las Vegas. The parents of two young children were looking forward to an adult's-only vacation, with daytime drinks by the pools and nights spent indulging at restaurants along the Strip.

Two tiny pink lines derailed those plans.

Newly pregnant with the couple's third child and unable to partake in the "what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas" mentality, Keasler found herself distanced from the crowds, drawn instead to the edge of the Las Vegas Strip, where the glitzy façade begins to fall apart and the gritty isolation of real life creeps in.

"I initially saw the trip as a way to completely unplug from home and to indulge in warm, fuzzy, self-centeredness that is the hallmark of the quintessential American vacation," she explains. "The surprise news changed that, allowing me the space to create. The people-watching was so much better than it would have been if we had beers in hand. And, of course, I had my camera."



Misty Keasler's *Angel & Steve* shows Las Vegas performers in a domestic setting, away from the glamour of the Strip.

The resulting body of work is "Low Lands," opening this weekend at The Public Trust, the gallery owned by Gibb. The exhibition features photographs taken along the outer edges of the Strip, alongside a series of portraits of Las Vegas performers in their homes, people who normally troll the Strip to pose with tourists — and who become strikingly out of place against the backdrop of domestic settings.

Keasler has made a career of breaking down fantasy, exposing the rather banal machinations behind structures designed to appease our deepest desires. She gained international fame with her series "Love Hotels," which documented the empty rooms of Japanese sex hotels, appearing forlorn and clinical when devoid of human presence.

"Haunt," the subject of a 2017 solo exhibition at the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, depicted the interiors of large-scale haunted houses and the fetishistic obsession we have with horror and death. An ongoing series titled "Half Life" investigates garbage dump-based communities in developing countries, generations of people living and working within the discarded remains of other people's luxury and excess.

Although her images are often devoid of people, Keasler considers her work to be about people: specifically what fuels us and makes us tick, and how we create systems and environments to feed these urges, if only temporarily.



A Las Vegas performer sits poolside in Misty Keasler's Christine.

"My focus is always people, perhaps most poignantly when there are no people in the photos. A photo without people often does so much more to describe the culture, and the people who inhabit and create it, than any actual portrait of a person," she says. "In so many ways, it's really all about material stuff. One end of it is elaborate decoration, for a variety of reasons, and the other is the end of things and the people who take care of it."

"Low Lands" straddles both of these aspects. Skirting depictions of the neon excess that predominantly defines Sin City, Keasler looks outward from the Strip, moving from the chain-link fences and hotel backsides that dot the periphery into the homes of performers who make their living posing for tourists.

While the landscapes are a decidedly pensive investigation of the outer limits of fantasy, the domestic portraits lend an air of we-know-this-is-ridiculous-but-why-the-hell-not acknowledgment. For most people, Las Vegas exists only in weekendlong bursts, debaucherous respites from real life. For these folks, the fantasy is real life.

## Details

Misty Keasler's "Low Lands" runs May 18 to June 22. Opening night is Saturday, May 18, from 6 to 9 p.m. Regular gallery hours are Thursday to Saturday from noon to 6 p.m., and by appointment. The Public Trust, 2042 Irving Blvd., Suite 130, Dallas.

Danielle Avram is a Dallas-based arts writer and curator.