

# You're in Trouble if You're Eating Your Own Seed Corn

Chris Verene interviewed by A.M. Homes

A. M. Homes: What the hell have you been up to?

Chris Verene: Continuing several projects, the largest of which is ongoing in Galesburg, Illinois. There are many friends and family up there who I visit all of the time. Sometimes it's about taking pictures and sometimes it isn't, but I'm there a lot. I might be going out to New Mexico because a couple of the people in the story have been traveling with a carnival. Whether it's Galesburg or not I just follow the stories. And when I'm not doing that I'm in New York and sometimes teaching. I rehearse with Cordero, my indie-rock/Latin-rock group, and I'm taking drum lessons. The rest of my time has been spent working on the SELF-ESTEEM SALON project. The salon scheduled for April in New York is going to be the biggest and most elaborate one. SELF-ESTEEM is going to be a book called *Self-Esteem*, which is partly derived from the actions that we've done. The general matter of the book is the way in which photographs of people can be such a positive and emotionally changing experience and why so many people have a negative experience with photography. What we're doing at most of the performances is putting people through a dramatic psychotherapeutic process that results in a portrait, which they

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A. M. HOMES is the author of the novels *Music for Torching*, *The End of Alice*, *In a Country of Mothers*, *Jack*, the short story collection *The Safety of Objects*, and the artists book *Appendix A*. Her new collection of stories, *Things You Should Know*, will be published by Harper Collins this fall.

receive weeks later; this portrait could be hung in their home in place of a mirror. The idea is that this raises their self-esteem and changes their life in some way.

AH: Can you talk about the origin of the SELF-ESTEEM SALON—how it got started and what it means to you?

CV: With my personality as Cheri Nevers, it's really her mission to make people feel good about themselves. As Chris Verene what I can do with my photography can't be reduced to just that, which is sort of why I created an alter ego who makes it her business to create a one-to-one relationship in which someone's portrait is made and they look fantastic and they become a star and they can share that with the world. But I also see it as a talent that I'm blessed with and I want to change the world's ideas about beauty, one person at a time. And I think that by putting more photographs out into the world I am able to show beautiful people in lovely situations, to serve a greater good. This is why I work with the plus-size model industry in my fashion work.

AH: Can you talk a little bit about the importance of being a star or being made into a star or being seen?

CV: It's really not for everyone, but I do look for my target audience. A lot of times the participants are people that are photographed a lot or are known personalities, but they have some deep-rooted psychological problems with their appearance and their self, their soul. The upcoming salon is more about our staff treating the client to a lovely soul-searching experience than it is about being photographed.