

The big picture: beauty amid the flipside of the American dream

French photographer Laura Henno captures life – and light – in an apocalyptic squat in the California desert



In the heart of the California desert, the photographer and film-maker Laura Henno immersed herself in Slab City, a vast, apocalyptic, open-air squat, symbolic of the flipside of the “American dream”.

Here, members of an almost exclusively white underclass – the excluded, the poor and those riddled with debt, drugs and drink – live without running water, sewers or electricity apart from the little they can generate with solar panels.

In this photograph, Revon, 21, who occupies half of the battered, bullet-riddled bus with her 55-year-old mother (the other half is occupied by a couple with two children), meets Michael, 27, a former marine and Iraq veteran who has recently arrived in Slab City.

Henno, whose first film, *Koropa*, followed people smugglers and migrants on the Comoros and won awards when released in 2016, specialises in documenting the lives of those who have fallen through the social net. This series, developed from a film entitled *Outremonde* (Underworld) after the novel by Don DeLillo, was produced during the two months that Henno lived in Slab City in 2017. Even in an apocalyptic nightmare, Henno finds light: Revon and Michael become friends, then lovers after she introduces them, and Dave, a former drug- and alcohol-addicted evangelical pastor, creates a community vegetable patch in the desert.

“I went back after a year and the bus in the picture was burned and Revon and Michael had gone their separate ways but the garden was growing,” Henno says. “There were even tomatoes. It was something beautiful in this hell: a Garden of Eden in the desert.”

Laura Henno: *Redemption*, part of the festival *Les Rencontres de la Photographie*, runs from 2 July to 26 August at the *Commanderie Sainte-Luce*, Arles, France