



"It'll Do Motel, Highway 66, Grants, New Mexico, January 11, 1982" is a type-C print by photographer and neon artist Steve Fitch.



Artist and UNM professor Ellen Babcock's free verse was an installation at the Tradewinds Poetry Project site on Albuquerque's Central Avenue.



"American Motel: Green shower, Room 31, 2004" is an archival pigment print by Eric Cousineau.

# MOTHER ROAD AND HER NEON

EXHIBIT TAKES A LOOK AT ROADSIDES ALONG ROUTE 66

## Art Issues



MALIN WILSON-POWELL  
For the Journal

Most exhibitions are a finale, a presentation that follows years of making, sifting, planning, reviewing, framing. In an adventuresome reversal of this norm, the current exhibition at the Governor's Gallery announces the beginning of a project focusing on historic U.S. Route 66.

The ephemeral hopes and wishes for a grand "large-scale interdisciplinary project" are tethered to reality and brought down to earth by the substantive work of photographer and neon artist Steve Fitch. Fitch never disappoints with his keen eye. He is a maestro of photography and he has been driving American highways with a penchant for the vernacular roadside since the early 1970s. He began his first project after graduating from the University of California at Berkeley in 1971 with a bachelor's degree in anthropology. The result was a delightful monograph of all manner of quirky roadside attractions published in 1976 titled "Diesels and Dinosaurs."

For this exhibition, Fitch recombines photographs of Route 66 motel signs from 1979 through 2007 into three vertical grids of 12 images (four images high by three images wide). A colorist at heart, Fitch exploits fundamental properties of the grid. This includes balancing and stabilizing dynamic diagonals of the individual photographs, along with side-by-side juxtaposition for comparing of sky tones, sign configurations, as well as amplifying and reverberating visual echoes. His "Relics: Motel Sign" grids celebrate the once-upon-a-time in America when small towns and rural communities were oases on the 2,400 mile route from Chicago to Los Angeles. Along this historic highway mom-and-pop business sprang up to serve successive waves of migration. Even before it was the first highway to be completely

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"Relics: Motel Signs 1980-2007, 2010" is an archival inkjet print by photographer and neon artist Steve Fitch.

COURTESY THE ARTIST



# Exhibit Looks at Road Side

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paved in 1938, it was the main road for Dust Bowl families migrating westward, and then in the 1940s, California attracted hundreds of thousands who were heading for work in war-related industries. Almost every small community had its own local sign shops to design, engineer and fabricate neon signs for Main Street, which was also Route 66. However, it was during the 1950s when families piled into their cars for a vacation in the west that Route 66 became a string of thoroughly American roadside extravaganzas, including the likes of hamburger-shaped restaurants, teepee-shaped motels, and Indian curio shops.

By 1981, Fitch became so interested in the artistic possibilities of neon he learned to fabricate his own neon pieces, and here we see the kinds of signs that inspired him. While in daylight the signs boast such fundamental allures as hot water and cool refrigeration, at night there was the magic of illuminated pink rabbit ears, or a rocket ship with a blinking trail, or a hot red cowboy on his bucking bronco with lasso flashing. Neon is a medium of the night, when the weary traveler is looking for a place to rest, and there are two Fitch single-image nighttime photographs in this exhibition. Both are iconic, but there is particular pathos in his "It'll Do Motel, Highway 66, Grants, New Mexico, January 11, 1982," a place landscaped with painted tires and gravel that attracted the owner of a faded blue Ford pickup to pass the night in a squat box of a room.

The spare compositions of painter Beau Carey, a 2010 master's in fine arts graduate from the University of New Mexico, also ache with desolation. His oil on canvas titled "Petroglyph," 2009, is a dry, flat expanse, drained of color, bleak in the extreme. Has he painted a derelict subdivision? The dusty, thin application of pigment suggests the wispy, insubstantial grasp on reality of the developer who might dream-up such a scheme. Who would build it? Who would come? Who would stay? And, if they did, what would they do?

The works of four artists are installed in the gallery along with an invitation by artist-coordinator Ellen Babcock to participate in the "Friends of the Orphan Signs" public art project in Albuquerque. In 1937, then-Gov. Arthur T. Hannett rerouted and straightened Route 66 to bypass Santa Fe; ostensibly to punish politicians called the "Santa Fe Ring." Not only did this save travelers four hours motoring through New Mexico, it increased Albuquerque's roadside commerce and Route 66 (aka Central Avenue) became a microcosm of American signs.

## If you go

**WHAT:** "Motels and Motion on the Mother Road: To Begin a People's Survey of Route 66"

**WHERE:** Governor's Gallery, Fourth Floor, State Capitol,

**WHEN:** Through April 8.

**HOURS:** 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday

**COST:** Free

**CONTACT:** (505) 476-5058 or [nmartmuseum.org](http://nmartmuseum.org)

An "orphan sign" is a historic preservation term that refers to an old sign that's lost its building. At the gallery, there are templates for visitors who are so inclined to use in redesigning the Royal Hotel Sign to become a public sculpture, as well as a template for the Tradewinds motel sign, a place now dedicated to short drive-by poems. The first orphan sign project was The El Sarape sign (at 4119 Central near Nob Hill), a collaboration between University of New Mexico graduate students and Art Club students at Highland High School that is now a permanent piece of public sculpture.

In the fall of 2009 artist Ellen Babcock, an assistant professor at UNM, founded the "Friends" organization to repurpose signs in Albuquerque's International District that stretches along Eastern Central Avenue. Everyone is welcome to submit ideas.

Additional pieces on view are four lushly pigmented color photographs of motel room interiors by Eric Cousineau. These slightly off-kilter details simultaneously evoke sumptuousness as well as the hollow sounds of an empty room. Three composite color photographs by Elia Kovanen are from thousands of images made at dawn in Route 66 motels in and around Albuquerque. Titled "details of a reconstructed memory of a fictional abstract motel on route 66" they seem direct descendants of Robert Smithson's 1969-72 tongue-in-cheek, disembodied slide show "Hotel Palenque," showing a modest, decrepit Mexican motel in the perpetual "beautiful" process of decay.

Coinciding with the new residents in the Governor's office, this exhibition similarly reflects the inauguration of ambitious plans for the future mitigated by the reality of what's already in place. The installation itself is a modest, understated, elegant still point in the middle of grand swirling plans for a project in its infancy. As always, time will tell.