



Michael Abatemarco | For The New Mexican

OR THE HIGHWAY

Photographer Steve Fitch captures America's road-tripping past

Along America's two-lane highways one still sees the vestiges of bygone eras. The motels lit by neon signs, roadside attractions, and drive-in theaters form a part of our culture. Some have long been abandoned, others are still in use, hanging on in an age of chain hotels, multiplexes, and a vast network of interstate highways. These are the subjects that interest photographer Steve Fitch, whose exhibition *Highway Culture* opens at Photo-eye Gallery on Saturday, Feb. 25. "Most of my pictures are dealing with the disappearing two-lane highway," Fitch told *Pasatiempo*. A lot of my pictures are of motels and signs. They're pre-franchise signs, you know; they're not the Holiday Inns and the Motel 6s. In a way, a lot of my work has been a homage to what it was like to travel on the highway when I was growing up as a kid in the '50s."

Highway Culture draws from work spanning 40 years in Fitch's career, including images from his series *Diesels and Dinosaurs*, black-and-white photographs,

many shot at night with long exposures, neon being the primary source of light. The project culminated in a book of the same name published in 1976. Fitch's interest in neon went beyond photography, and he began working with it as a sculptor in the early 1980s. "My own pieces have an influence from neon signs like along Route 66, but they incorporate my own ideas and designs. I have them installed outdoors because I love the way neon looks outdoors. There's actually going to be one small piece in my show at Photo-eye. I like to make neon arrows. I've really been influenced by a lot of the arrows on various signs. So, there's going to be one neon arrow in the gallery."

In addition to the neon and black-and-white prints, *Highway Culture* includes images from more recent series such as *Llano Estacado*, featuring radio towers Fitch shot in eastern New Mexico and west Texas. Fitch worked with five other photographers on the project, which was partially funded by Texas Tech University. Fitch shot the series on film with an 8 x 10 view

camera. "I plan to keep shooting film as long as I can keep getting it. But I am going to do more with the digital camera. There's a lot of possibilities, I think."

Although many of Fitch's projects share the colloquial parlance of Americana, telling of a world out of time, all but one, a body of work called simply *Gone*, represent a culture that is still here, even if it's vanishing. "Some of my pictures get referred to as nostalgic, but I don't see it exactly that way. They were still going. Even the two-lane highways still existed. There was a sixth sense I had that this was important to be photographing, but it wasn't completely conscious." In *Gone*, images of abandoned homes in the Great Plains complete with the lingering personal effects of the former inhabitants, the photographs are haunted with an eerie presence. The images are not included at the Photo-eye show, but they are collected in a book published by University of New Mexico Press in 2003. "They're all interior photographs that deal with the way the Plains got settled, got homesteaded, and so many people discovered they couldn't make a living, so, gradually ever since, the Great Plains were getting abandoned. People are still leaving. A lot of times there would be all this stuff still inside. It was like people walked away one morning and never came back. The last picture in the book is a kitchen in North Dakota. There's dishes in the sink, coffee and food left on the table. It had been abandoned for 25 years before I came by and, yet, everything's still right there."

Some images in *Highway Culture* are from work Fitch calls *Vernacular Assemblages*, grids of motel signs, ranch signs, and drive-in theaters. "I'm a collector. When I was a kid I would collect everything you could collect: stamps, insects, coins. To some extent my photography is a form of collecting. You can collect and you can compare; I can put them all right next to each other. I love that aspect of photography." One grid presents 12 images of drive-in movie screens. Common to all the images on the grid are the white, rectangular screens, but the structures built to hold them are varied. All of them, even those that are torn or shredded, are still standing, all but forgotten relics from the past. "They've really died out. I think at the peak in the late '50s there was something like 6,000 drive-ins. A couple of years ago I heard the number was down to something like 500, and I think it's even gotten lower than that. The funny thing is, there is a sort of revival going on. Recently, I visited two or three in Texas that are going strong."

Before getting his masters from the University of New Mexico in 1978, Fitch studied anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley in the early '70s. In some ways, his work is a study, a documenting of a culture that is part of but also separate from the contemporary world. "Any more than an anthropologist, looking back at the Mayans or the Anasazi — it's not exactly nostalgia to be interested in those cultures — it's partly an interest in history, an interest in the past. I do make pictures with an eye toward history. These are important to our culture." ◀

details

- ▼ Steve Fitch: *Highway Culture*
- ▼ Opening reception 3 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 25; through April 7
- ▼ Photo-eye Gallery, 376-A Garcia Street, 988-5152