

## Going, going...

Santa Fe photographer chronicles abandonment of the West

by Lisa Polisar

Is there such a thing as reverse Manifest Destiny? For photographer Steve Fitch, the answer is a definitive "yes." Off he goes, with his notebook and camera, digging up the figurative graves of ghosts haunting the American plains. But how does he do it? How do you exhume a ghost? By finding its last known residence ... and in this case, the residence *is* the ghost.

An assistant art professor at the College of Santa Fe, Fitch is a keen observer and inhabitant of a secret world — the vanishing American West. In his upcoming photographic exhibition, *Gone: Photographs of Abandonment on the High Plains*, he uses some unlikely subject matter for his study — dance halls, schools, abandoned honky-tonks, old saloons and rotted-out buildings. These unlikely monuments chronicle Fitch's riveting exposé on the abandonment of the high plains, as its dwellers have manifested a new destiny of coastal emancipation with more jobs, wealth and opportunities for ladder-climbing.

Abandonment, in the context of residual fears and psychological baggage, is the buzzword of the past decade. But the abandonment that Fitch studies depicts a less psychological and more socio-cultural phenomenon. In these pictures, household items, furniture, clothing and decorative items have been transformed into "litter" — part of the epitaph of America's forgotten cultures. Fitch's photographs capture much more than just physical abandonment — they probe the emotional realm of true loneliness, a characteristic inherent in Old West stereotypes. The phrase "Old West" conjures images of busy, dusty, small town saloons with piano playing in the background and saloon girls lavishly draped over grim poker players. But the realities of the American West were often poverty, homelessness, loneliness and, yes, abandonment.

The innovative mechanics of Fitch's process includes long exposures — 16 minutes or more — to capture the stillness and light that feeds in through the closed, cracked shades and disintegrating curtains. The image of crumbling walls is a common thread throughout many of these works, sug-



"Living room in a house near Ludlow, eastern Colorado, July 6, 1999." all photos by Steve Fitch



"Bathroom in a house in Model, eastern Colorado, February 11, 1994" is slowly losing its mismatched wallpaper; the shelves have been stripped clean; debris litters the sink; and a headless religious statue prays on the toilet tank.

gesting an interplay of opposing themes. In various places and structures, we see houses with peeling paint and living rooms with exfoliating wallpaper. The duality here is that the artist's interest is decay and isolation, yet his subjects somehow depict a process of movement and regeneration that is very much alive.

Fitch approaches this particular genre of photojournalism like a homicide detective sniffing around a crime scene. He walks the "grid" to get a glimpse of each object and artifact left at the frozen scene, and then uses other objects in the area — calendars, clocks especially — to try to "reconstruct" the scene of the crime — in this case, the abandonment of a structure — and which events led up to this conclusion. He looks at what else was happening in the world, in the country, politically and socially, as an indirect way of getting to the truth. Sort of like a modern day Sherlock Holmes, Fitch uses his observation of finely tuned, minute details of a scene, things his camera lens can

observe but the human eye might not, to reassemble the details of people's lives as lived in these forgotten, forsaken places.

Are we a shallow culture? Do we latch onto things, cultures and fads only to carelessly discard them years later when our interests change? Fitch deviates from the more traditional forms of photographic art by moving beyond the romanticism of beauty in the West. Instead, he approaches this art form as a curious historian — hellbent on telling the real tragedy of these structures and revealing what they inevitably express about our civilization's capricious movements and constantly reshaping values and desires.

The most significant aspect of the exhibition is the connection to history — an act of reviving forgotten Western towns. These include ghost towns from New Mexico (Ancho, Causey, Wheatland, Ocate, Concepcion, Tecolote, Corona and Vaughn) as well as North Dakota, Montana, Texas and Wyoming.

Fitch's work shows a fascination with different stages of abandonment. "One kitchen," he writes in his book *Gone: Photographs of the Abandonment on the High Plains* (UNM Press, 2003) "had plates on the table and dishes in the sink as if the people left one morning intending to return that evening ... This is how our no-longer occupied kitchens and living rooms and

bedrooms would appear over time, as nature and entropy began the gradual process of reclaiming what we had temporarily claimed." The varied photographs in this exhibition reveal Fitch's ambivalence with the process of photographing abandoned homes. "I was trespassing into other peoples' spaces — I was a voyeur ... Sometimes I felt guilty about this because the houses felt so tangibly personal. Those marks on the refrigerator door were a family's grimy fingerprints layered over perhaps a generation of time ... but I also felt that I was called to do it, that I was on a mission. I was giving them lasting meaning and importance — paying homage to the passing of time." **CW**

*Gone: Photographs of Abandonment on the High Plains*, featuring 40 color photographs by Steve Fitch, opens at the Marion Center for Photographic Arts at the College of Santa Fe, 1600 St. Michael's Drive, in Santa Fe, 473-6341. Fitch gives a talk from 4 to 5pm, a public reception and book signing follow from 5 to 7pm. *Gone* is on display through Sept. 12.



"Honky-Tonk, near Vaughn, eastern New Mexico, May 21, 1991" features a door shot full of holes and a defaced mural.