

VLACHOS' VIEWS

America through the lens of PAUL VLACHOS



There's a big, slow curve as you come in to Bishop, California from the north, on U.S. 395. It's a beautiful highway and, by the time you have gotten to the outskirts of town and need to start slowing down, you have already passed through a few classic speed traps. When you hit this curve, you're almost on the main drag and you should be doing no more than 30 miles per hour. People seem to obey that speed here, so I can only assume that there has been ruthless enforcement in the past. This Shell station is the first gas on that side of town - there's a Shell station on the south side of town that used to be a Texaco. There's also a Giggling Springs market that sells gasoline AND has free wifi you can jump on to, but that's in the middle of town and it's more of a hassle to park there. This Shell station is not the friendliest, but it's easy, there are working restrooms, and it suffices if you are looking for a bit of privacy. Or, simply, if you're feeling anti-social. It's easy to speak to no one at this gas station. I'm dedicating this first photo to all the lonely late night filling stations, which is what this installment of photos in this very issue of the Zephyr is about. This photo is from 2007.

Another Shell station, but halfway across the country and further south. This is on the outskirts of Montgomery, Alabama. This day had been a long day in May. That's one reason I like to take road trips in May and June - you get so much daylight. I was trying to not be my usual, fanatical drive-all-day self on this trip out of respect to Meghan, my girlfriend and passenger, but this was the run home and we knew we'd have to do a few long-haul days. This was one of them. We got up at dawn, possibly in Texas, I don't remember exactly, and we drove that whole, long summer day. By the time we got to Montgomery, it was dark, we were tired, and we just wanted to find a nice motel for the night. That turned out to be more difficult than I had planned, which sometimes happens. It was a bit too warm to sleep in the van, so we ended up hitting more than a few exits on the interstate through town. I won't go into the sordid details of what we saw in some of these places, but I'll share this photo, which I had to stop and shoot even though I was exhausted, and I'll post the next one, which is from the next exit down and near where we actually stayed.



you're working in a place like this, though, it's different. People are popping in all night. You know some of them, but most are strangers and they move through quickly. I have not worked in a gas station, but I did work in my share of register jobs and late-night joints and I can only say that I would go into a certain kind of protective shell and become kind of robotic in my interactions with people, not due to fatigue, but more to protect my psyche. You can only be so nice and so real to so many strangers during any given shift.

Yes, this was the next exit down from the previous photo. The clouds look similar if you squint hard enough. They do to me, at least. This is also from 2013 in Alabama in the United States of America but, aside from the modern architecture and technology, it could really be any late night gas station in almost any decade. The simultaneous beacons of hope and alienation are both glowing into the night. The pause, when you're on a trip and you pull into one of these places, the pause can be so many things, but it's usually just a pause - you're there for gas, for a bathroom, for a coke, to stretch your legs. Then you move on. When you're working in a place like this, though, it's different. People are popping in all night. You know some of them, but most are strangers and they move through quickly. I have not worked in a gas station, but I did work in my share of register jobs and late-night joints and I can only say that I would go into a certain kind of protective shell and become kind of robotic in my interactions with people, not due to fatigue, but more to protect my psyche. You can only be so nice and so real to so many strangers during any given shift. Yes, this was the next exit down from the previous photo. The clouds look similar if you squint hard enough. They do to me, at least. This is also from 2013 in Alabama in the United States of America but, aside from the modern architecture and technology, it could really be any late night gas station in almost any decade. The simultaneous beacons of hope and alienation are both glowing into the night. The pause, when you're on a trip and you pull into one of these places, the pause can be so many things, but it's usually just a pause - you're there for gas, for a bathroom, for a coke, to stretch your legs. Then you move on. When



Austin, Nevada - 2010. Austin is a very small town on Highway 50, for those of you unfamiliar with the place. It can feel a bit remote, even though you can now get cell signals in Austin and you can even pump gas at night, when the station closes. This was not always the case, even at the beginning of this century. I have a bit of a survivalist's mindset, I cannot lie. I'm not sure where it came from, but I like to stock up on stuff that I need and stuff that I enjoy. I can go into more details, but it would get dull rather quickly. I mention it, though, as a preface to stating that I always like to top off on gas. I could wax on about how it's nice to take a break while driving, how it's a fun way to see the country and, justifiably, how it's a necessity for any photographer who likes to photograph gas stations. I could go on like this for a while, finding more reasonable justifications for why I like to top off on gas but, honestly, I just like to know that I always have a full tank of gas. I ran out of gas once, with my father, when I was 11 years old and we were in a rental Ford Pinto on the New Jersey Turnpike. I cannot pin this compulsion on that one episode, even though it made a big impression on me. No, I just like to top off. THAT BEING SAID, Austin is so remote that, even if I have half a tank left and I know that Fallon is just 2 hours west and Eureka is only an hour east, I will still breathe a sigh of relief and pull into a station in Austin to get gas. It's almost always THIS station, on the western edge of town, just after you have climbed the curvy hill where they shot a sequence from the original "Vanishing Point," in 1971. That was always a favorite movie of mine and, when I realized one day in the 90's that they had shot that scene in Austin, it made me smile. There's another station in town, but that one doesn't do it for me.



This little station, tucked between a few buildings way up in Harlem, on 145th Street in Manhattan, is not that different from most of the cookie-cutter Shell stations you find in any state. The main building is obviously older, but Shell's station rehabilitation team did a pretty good job getting the signage up to date and getting the canopy to fit in. I guess what I like about it is how the canopy just fits in. Like everything else in Gotham City, there's not a lot of wiggle room. When did big canopies become de rigeur? Did some bean counters discover, at some point in the late 20th Century, that people were more likely to buy gas at a place where the rain didn't hit them? It makes sense, of course. Or did it coincide with the disappearance of full service, of attendants who'd pump the gas for you while you remained in the car? As far as I know, there are only two states in the country where you are not allowed to pump your own gas - Oregon and New Jersey. I have heard a couple of apocryphal stories about this, but I have yet to read or hear about the true reasons.

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