

VLACHOS' VIEWS

America through the lens of PAUL VLACHOS



Tucson, Arizona - 2014. Here's the fantasy - I see this sign and think of a strip club, maybe a fashion show runway, neither one of which I'm familiar with. But it's 2014 and I can search the internet for this place. Sure enough, I find it on Yelp, described by its denizens as a "dive bar" that has good kimchee. I never thought I would see the day where dive bars were fetishized and sought out, but such is the nature of this generation's search for "authenticity." I won't go on about that here. This joint looks older than the hipster generation, though, and my next thought is "might there be an airport nearby?" I unfold my digital map and, sure enough, Davis-Monthan air force base sits right there and a runway terminates not far from this bar. My guess is that the current ownership bought it from the past owner, kept the name, and added kimchee to the menu. Had I been the original owner, I might have named it the "Sonic Boom Bar and Grill," but that's just me and there are more than a few good reasons why I should not own a bar. In this photo, I like the Christmas lights on the left, upper corner and the string of rope lights, artfully draped, across the top. I once was able to visit the "boneyard" - where they mothball old war-planes at Davis-Monthan. That was back in the mid '90s, when The Runway was probably a legitimate dive bar that had never heard of kimchee

Tucumcari, New Mexico - 2012. This is a big arrow on a small outbuilding. The "drive thru" here - and I really like it when people use "thru" for "through" - is really just a looping turn and an open window. This arrow does not loop, though. It's authoritative and I like the colors. I would have tried to squeeze my paintbrush inside those two conduits near the tip of the arrow, but I'm compulsive that way. That's probably a good reason I did not end up as a sign painter, that damned perfectionism. This place was next to Rubees, a fantastic Mexican restaurant in Tucumcari that sold absolutely transcendent breakfast burritos. These burritos were exceptional. They would dissolve in my mouth and transport me to another place, and then I would transport myself back to the takeout window and buy another. Always buying another when I didn't really need to. I would go miles out of my way to get those little suckers at Rubees. Then, just a few years ago, I was going through Tucumcari, having deluded myself that I was going there to shoot motel signs, but not-too-secretly planning to pig out on breakfast burritos, when I slowly drove over the curb at Rubees and discovered that they had closed down. In my sadness, I drove around the building twice, photographed this arrow once, told a sad story to my dog, and then quietly rolled out of town and back onto the heartless interstate, hungry and defeated.



Uvalde, Texas - 2013. I like Uvalde. I like southwest Texas. It's still fairly unvarnished. I wanted to say "honest," but I don't know it well enough to call it honest, although I call it honest in a visual sense. It has not been modernized to the detriment of its history, nor has it been sold down the river of gentrification. I don't think that would happen here even if they wanted that to happen, and I don't really believe they would want that to happen. But I am just an itinerant Yankee who passes through these Texas towns, admires the view, and then moves on. This arrow is beautiful. The bricks, the colors, the ladder, the blue drainpipe. I loved discovering this one and then finding a way to shoot it. I suspect that it's not as old as I would like it to be, but I could be wrong. Why do I say that? The accent on the "e," for one thing. For another, the red is awfully bright, and red is the color most prone to fading and disappearing. Then again, this arrow is in a narrow alley, wide enough for only one vehicle to pass through, and this alley also runs on a north/south axis, so it might be spared from that southern Texas sun. And maybe it's just an old arrow that's been repainted and, the last time someone did it, they added an accent, not realizing that "Cafe" - with no accent - has a long, glorious history as a moniker in this country. And maybe it doesn't matter. I like this wall a lot. It made me happy when I first found it. I may go visit it again the next time I pass through Uvalde.

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Las Vegas, New Mexico - 2012. So much in Las Vegas seems to be falling apart, especially in the old section of town, near the train stop. I always try to stop at this town in northeast New Mexico, mainly for the fantastic hot springs nearby but, more and more, for the stuff that I like to photograph, the old stuff that's falling apart, as well as the old stuff that persists, survives and still thrives. This establishment no longer thrives. Honestly, I don't remember whether it was still in business or not when I took this photo, but I don't think it was. I keep studying this photo and find it oddly compelling. I'd like to think it's like Sophia Loren's face, which they used to describe as having mismatched parts, but somehow coming together in beauty. I'd like to say that, but it would not be true. I would not immediately jump to the word "beautiful" here. The broken Coors sign with the remnants of adhesive next to it, the glass brick window with crap piled behind it. The graffiti, the weathered strip of plywood, the odd pastel colors of the cinderblock, the jailhouse-door quality about the drive-up window. It's just another arrow, a more minimalist arrow, for sure, but just another arrow in just another small town. It feels more desperate, this arrow, as though the owner wants to shout out "This is it! This is the window!" Honestly, this photograph brings me down a bit, in a visceral way. At the same time, it fills me with a presence of the recent past, the 70's and 80's, maybe, when there was action around this window, in this parking lot, and people gathered and laughed and cried and fought. This wall is a mute witness to that time.



Del Rio, Texas - 2013 "Hot Pit Bar B Que" I am a sucker for a good steel building or a corrugated wall of some kind. Put some hand-painted words on it and I practically genuflect. Too bad the sun wasn't directly on it the day I shot this photo, but that happens sometimes when you're on the road - the sun is in the wrong place. You take the shot, anyway, but you vow to come back. It's always a good excuse. "The light will be better next time." But you always see new things every time you come back, so it's a good idea. A little bit like Heraclitus, who said "you can't put your foot in the same river twice." So it is with the Hot Pit. Here is what the local reviews have to say about it, and I'll just quote the headlines: "Let Down" (Apparently, the BBQ sauce had a strong vinegar taste.) "Possibly the best BBQ in Del Rio" or "Traditional Del Rio BBQ." This last review said it was a quiet place where people "mind their manners." This person also called the cole slaw "grassy." All interesting stuff. All indicators that the Internet is either the mankind's greatest single invention or the biggest flytrap of them all. Or both. Either way, this wall is in Del Rio, which always feels like a place just off the edge of the known universe to me. It's on U.S. 90, which has become one of my more beloved Federal highways. I like I-90, as well, but that's way, way up north and it's an interstate. This route is slower and more interesting. When it drops you in Del Rio, you are on the border with Mexico and it has that border town edge to it. It feels like there is dark stuff going on in the background. Maybe I just watched "Touch of Evil" too many times as a kid. Either way, when I'm in Del Rio, I feel like I'm far from home. Maybe the next time I go through, I should try staying a while.



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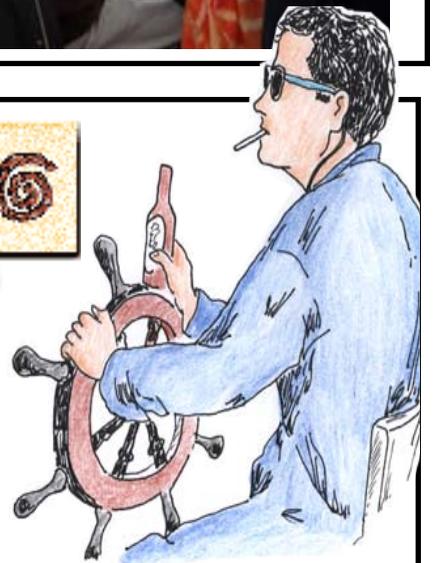
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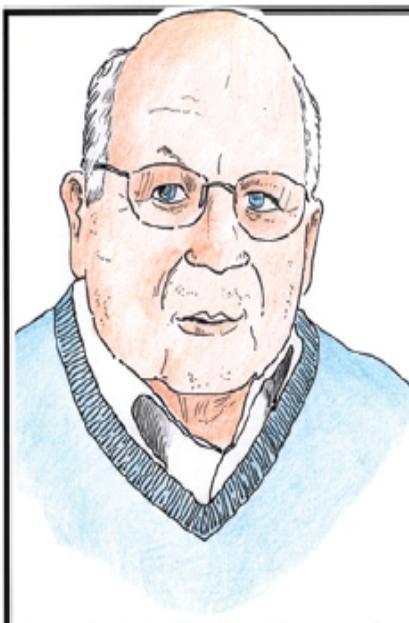


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