

VLACHOS' VIEWS

America through the lens of PAUL VLACHOS

The theme for this month is "Big Signs." Of course, is a theme ever needed? And, in fact, if we step back a bit, isn't it always the same theme with me? You could say that the grand theme is me driving around, escaping my life, and finding stuff out on the Great American Road that I like. If that's facile, so be it. But I do have sub-themes, and the stuff that I like usually organizes itself nicely into little subsets without me having to even think about it. I like signs, I like old motels, I like corrugated metal buildings, to name just a few subsets. Laundromats, car washes, tire repair shops. I have always been a bit dim when it comes to grand themes, abstract ideas, and organizing logic, so I hesitate to try to gather all of this stuff under one big schema. It may be as simple as what I first said: it's all stuff I find out on the road or when I'm driving around, and this is what makes me happy. I should have shut up when I was ahead. The theme for this month is "Big Signs."

1. Arizona - 2012

I used to be unable to pass one of those "Indian Souvenir" tourist traps without going in and looking around. It's always been clear that they are full of fake stuff, but they have always held a weird psychic pull on me. I can pass them by now, but it's still hard to resist their billboards. This one is not that old - it was most likely repainted not long ago, but the message is vintage, straight out of the 1940s or 50s, at the latest. Clear, direct and to the point. It's kind of brilliant, in a way. Who wakes up in the morning and thinks "I need to get moccasins for my entire family?" Yes, who can pass this sign without at least considering the idea? I'm sure that, more than once, a mini van has pulled out of their parking lot with the entire family happily wearing their new moccasins and singing some road songs. Do families still sing songs together on the road while they roll down the highway?



2. Louisiana - 2012

I have not eaten meat in many years. I won't go into the reasons why, but it was just something that happened slowly. That being said, it has become increasingly difficult to resist the lure of the BBQ places down south, especially in the back country, where you can smell the smoke before you see the sign. That was not the case with this truck sign. In fact, I did not even see the actual place, or perhaps I was moving too fast to look for it. This was on old US 90 and I was trying to make time on my way back east, so all I could do was stop, run through the knee-high weeds, grab a few shots and then move on. Move on home, back east, where the BBQ has no pull on me. Maybe a sense of place - location, context, origin - maybe this is important when it comes to food. Maybe the pizza at a storefront in Brooklyn tastes better because it's on a corner in Brooklyn. Then again, the water has a lot to do with it and so does the grizzled old guy working that dough. Maybe Nora's Tacos, on the same US 90 in the small town of Sabinal, Texas, is so good because you eat it in the dusty parking lot? Then again, Nora is a damned good cook. She would do well anywhere. Anyway, you get my drift, right? All I'm saying is that, the next time I'm winding down one of those backroads in Alabama or Mississippi or Louisiana and I smell that smell - THAT smell - it may be hard not to go and stand in front of the menu board out front and think hard thoughts about the meaning of life.



3. Goldfield, Nevada - 2016

Goldfield, the little ghost town that never died. I doubt I'm the first to celebrate Goldfield or this sign. It's one of those towns you have to take in slowly because the local speed limit suddenly goes from 70 miles per hour down to 20 as soon as you hit the edge of town. It's a dramatic drop and you always get the feeling that somebody is watching you to make sure you obey the law. Not that this town screams "law and order." Far from it. You also feel as though anything could happen in Goldfield, and it probably does, but you're not likely to see it as you cruise through town at 20 miles per hour. You'd have to hang out here for at least a few days, maybe a few months. I'm sure it's not as sleepy a place as they would like the rest of us to believe.





4. Organ, New Mexico - 2016

This sign doesn't look that big from here, but it's big. It's just that the sky is bigger. The sign once said "Organ Mountain Lodge," and the remnants of this old travelers court are right by the side of the road, along with the hulk of a coffee shop. I'd love to find out more about what happened here, the history of this place. It's on the road from Las Cruces to Alamogordo and it's easy to just fly by without stopping, as you're on a steepening hill and the instinct is to just keep going. Of course, in this modern age of the Internet and "all information, all the time, for all people," it's easy enough to google the place. One of the first hits is the listing on eBay for a postcard that has already been sold. It shows a photo of the whole complex in the mid-60s and, on the rear of the card, is this description: "Organ Mountain Lodge is housed in an old rambling building that was a stage stop and restaurant in the days when Organ was a rip-roaring mining town in the late 1800's. Rebuilt by Geo. Chandler in 1948, this fine facility is located on Hiway 70 - 82 between Las Cruces and White Sands in New Mexico." Oh, how I miss the copy on the back of old postcards.



5. Brooklyn, New York - 2016

Because big signs are not limited to billboards on big highways or small towns, I include this detail - still pretty big - from a huge sign on Atlantic Avenue, in Brooklyn, New York. This sign towers over a tire repair place, and I'm not sure who "Sherita" is, but I think about her every time I drive by. New York City is losing - has already lost, actually - most of our great old signage. It's no longer "the city that never sleeps." Most lot of the late night places are dying. It's "the city that eats itself." It always has, to some degree. New York has never shied away from destroying itself in order to make itself better. Does anybody remember "we had to destroy the village in order to save it?" In the process of destroying itself, though, it seems to lose more and more of itself as time goes by. Go search for some old photos of the original Penn Station and compare them to Madison Square Garden. The only reason Sherita remains is that she has lived on this sign in Brooklyn for all these years, but I have a feeling Sherita may soon be making way for some generic, glass-walled luxury condominiums. "Progress" - the gift that keeps on killing.

PAUL VLACHOS lives in New York City



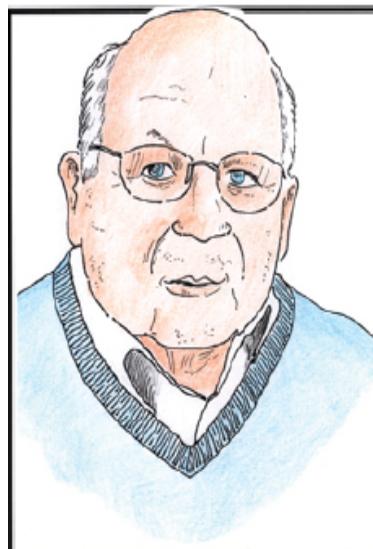
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