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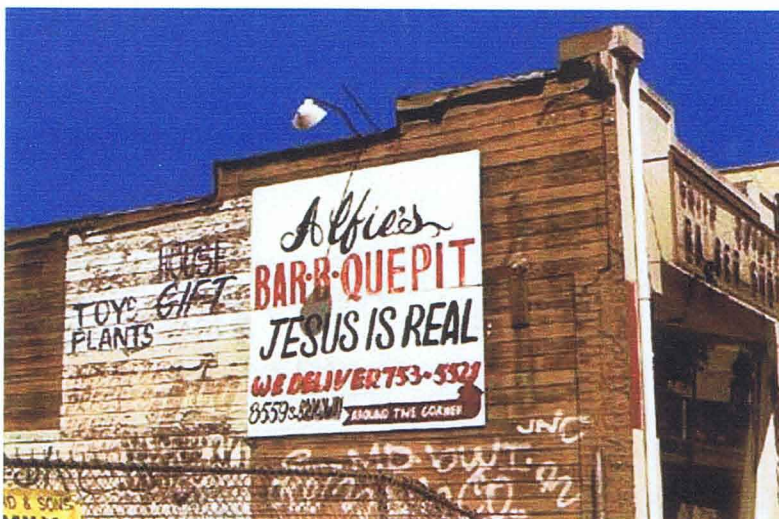


Books in Brief

McMurtry revisits Duane Moore, a Roman army doctor proves charming, and Jesus saves on highways across the country.

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From Sam Fentress's 'Bible Road'

WEB-EXCLUSIVE COMMENTARY

By Malcolm Jones
Newsweek
Updated: 6:22 a.m. CT March 16, 2007

March 16, 2007 - **'When the Light Goes' by Larry McMurtry**

This is the fourth novel McMurtry has written about Duane Moore. All right, "The Last Picture Show" wasn't just about Duane, and "Texasville" was also an ensemble piece of sorts, but "Duane's Depressed" and now "When the Light Fails"

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amateur sleuth, which begin when he autopsies a dead woman pulled from a nearby river, are drolly rendered. And his low-key romance—so low key that he's the last to realize it is a romance—with a local woman who loathes her Roman overlords is both comic and touching at once. The highest praise I can offer this wonderfully entertaining portrait of the Roman Empire at its most far-flung is that I hope Downie is planning a series. Ruso is too good a character for just one book.

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From Sam Fentress's 'Bible Road'

'Bible Road' by Sam Fentress

Here's how good this book of photographs is: I have no idea if Sam Fentress is a Christian—of any stripe—or not. He might be a nonbeliever. He could be a holy roller. There is simply no way to tell from looking at his pictures. Which gives some inkling of how dispassionate they are. Whoever took these photographs of roadside testimony (JESUS SAVES and all the variations) did so with no ax to grind, no point of view to push. What the photographer does have is a keen set of eyes for the American landscape, both the part built by humans and the natural world with which the manmade part coexists so

uneasily. And while there is no mockery here, there are plenty of occasions for a smile: Hail Marys in the form of Burma Shave signs, pictures of Jesus on spare-tire covers, scripture on truck mudflaps and the numerous signs blending religious exhortations and sales pitches for more earthly wares: JESUS SAID YE MUST BE BORN AGAIN JOHN 3-7 AREA SIZE RUG SALE 20% OFF. But long after you've stopped smiling, you'll still be thinking about the zeal that pushed people to proclaim their faith on every conceivable surface available to them. And once you get over remarking on the subject matter, you'll stop and notice just what a fine, understated photographer Fentress is.

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Finding Religion Across America

In His New Book, Photographer Sam Fentress Documents Thousands Of Religious Signs Throughout The U.S.

NEW YORK, April 5, 2007

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This is a photo from Sam Fentress' photography book "Bible Road," for which he traveled the United States in search of religious signs. (Sam Fentress, from "Bible Road")

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Sam Fentress traveled across the United States in search of religious signs for his book "Bible Road."



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(CBS) Photographer Sam Fentress always keeps his eyes on the road — actually the side of the road, looking for a particular slice of Americana: Those ubiquitous roadside tributes and testimonials to Jesus.

"It's more prevalent in the South and Midwest, I think," Fentress told CBS News correspondent Jerry Bowen on Sunday Morning. "It's more prevalent in inner cities than in suburbs. When you find the upscale malls, this stuff is usually not around. I haven't found [any] in Beverly Hills here."

We brought Fentress back to Los Angeles to South Central where years ago the "Shout" sign at a now-abandoned storefront church grabbed his attention. North of Cincinnati, it was a quarter horse atop a silo, and in the Washington D.C. suburbs, a beauty shop.

Fentress has been traveling across the United States in search of religious signs for a quarter of a century. He's taken thousands of photographs from along the highways, inner cities and American farmland.

His project has culminated in "Bible Road: Signs of Faith in the American Landscape," a book of his photography.

Photos: "Bible Road: Signs of Faith in the American Landscape"

Some are simple messages on cinder block. Others fuse folk art and faith. For example, he took one photo of Jesus knocking on a door in the shape of a heart.

"It was in a small town called Fertile, Mo. I went up and talked to the lady who had put it up and she said that she did it so that if somebody was coming around the curb on that country road on a Saturday night and they were drunk, they might look at that sign and think, 'What, what's what? I, I maybe oughta change my life.'"

He received his bachelor's degree from Princeton and his M.F.A. from the Art Institute of Chicago. In 1979, he was awarded an Emerging Artist Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. A Detroit native, he was a lapsed Methodist who found religion. As he traveled America photographing architecture (his real job), he developed a passion for these roadside/street side testimonials. While he rarely met the people behind the messages, he thinks of them as rebels with a cause.

"I think a lot of the pictures are perhaps making up in the public landscape for what they might not be hearing from the pulpit, perhaps," Fentress said. "I think that there's a certain, 'I'm gonna take this into my own hands' aspect for some of the people who put these messages out there."

And the message is in the eye of the beholder — a slice of America at 60 miles an hour, or perhaps something far deeper.

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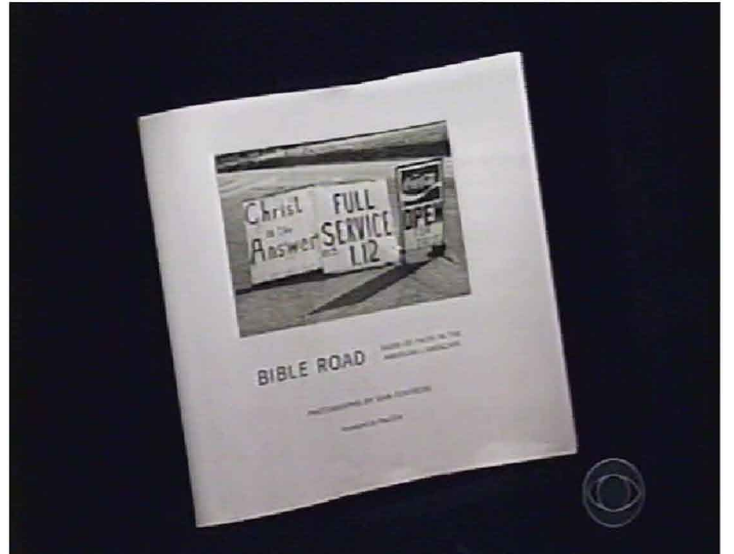
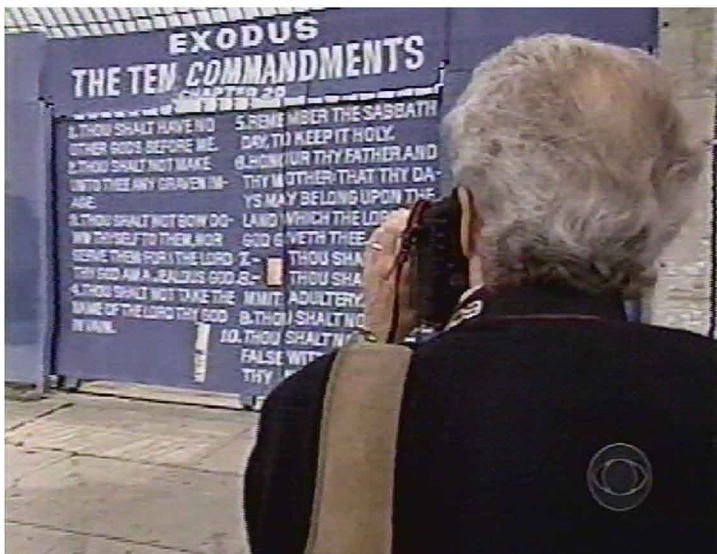
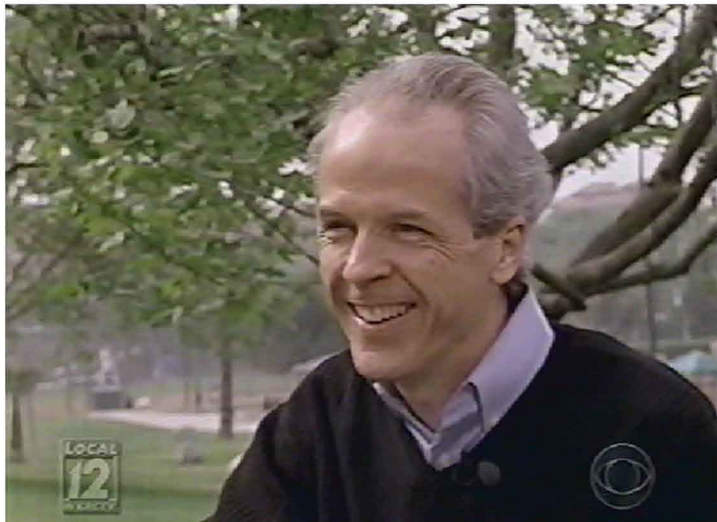
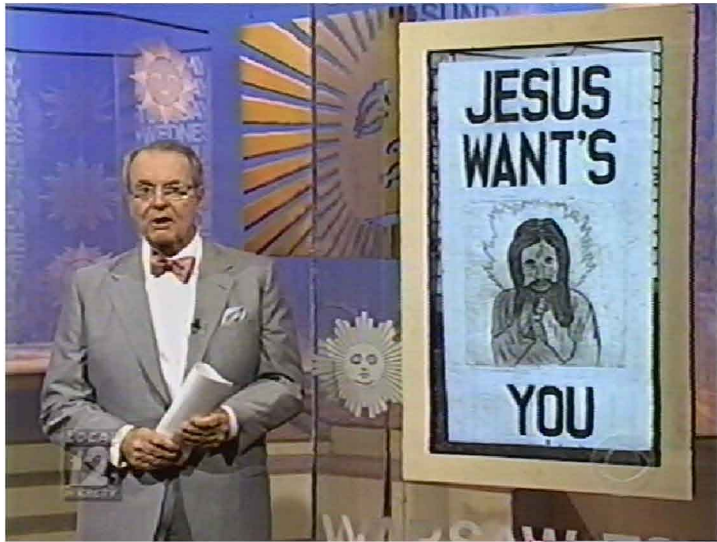
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Driving Down Bible Road, Camera in Hand



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May 23, 2007

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Photographer Sam Fentress sees signs.

For more than 20 years, he has been shooting religious-themed, hand-crafted signs — from church billboards to biblical quotations in salon windows.

He joins Farai Chideya to discuss his new book, *Bible Road: Signs of Faith in the American Landscape* and the deep well of spirituality in African-American communities.



Sam Fentress

A Saint Louis storefront in 1984, as photographed for the book *Bible Road*.

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*Heard on News & Notes*text size [A](#) [A](#) [A](#)*May 23, 2007* - FARAI CHIDEYA, host:

Sam Fentress has its eye on religion in America - for real. He photographs the makeshift messages that Christians post in public spaces. Some of his favorite shots have come on the streets of black America.

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Mr. SAM FENTRESS (Photographer): As a matter of fact, when I'm driving around, I often look for Martin Luther King Boulevard because it's a safe bet that there's something interesting.

CHIDEYA: One photo in Sam Fentress' new book, "Bible Road," features a sign painted on the window of a beauty salon. It shows the head of a black woman with a lovely hairdo. Beneath her is printed Matthew 6:33. That's a scripture from the famous Sermon on the Mount, and in that sermon, Jesus says not to worry about what you're going to wear.

Mr. FENTRESS: It's interesting that the hair salon owner is sort of advertising against her main service.

CHIDEYA: Sam Fentress is a practicing Catholic. He's been taking these pictures for 26 years. His unusual began with a day job. As an architectural photographer, he was always on the road.

Mr. FENTRESS: I do sort of think of it as America from the dashboard. But when I started out with this, I had probably the same preconception that a lot of people might, that it's a Bible Belt phenomenon, that it's going away, it's of the past only. But as I got out to more and more regions, I found the subject everywhere that I went, not just the Bible Belt. That was amazing to me.

CHIDEYA: Does this way of expressing faith on signboards and sometimes with misspellings influence how you see faith? And I guess what I mean by that is, do you see faith differently because of all the

ways that people are trying so hard to make a statement, even if quite literally they're statements are not quite what they intended?

Mr. FENTRESS: I have a great respect for the gutsiness of these people. There's a lot of emotion here. There's a lot of chutzpah, people taking big risks, putting something out there in public, something that's considered not right to talk about.

One of the most interesting things that I found was just how Americans will use anything - whether it's the mud flaps on their truck or a pedestrian crossing sign or a billboard, their beauty salon window - to express their faith.

CHIDEYA: A lonely image of Jesus Christ and multiple, multiple, multiple, multiple beer signs on a really raggedy store...

Mr. FENTRESS: Lots of beer.

CHIDEYA: Jesus is kind of outnumbered. You've got one, Miller Genuine Draft, with these two African-American men and the sign, which is a Society of St. Vincent DePaul sign, it says every poor man has potential. And to me, it just cuts to the quick of this messaging that comes at people when they're economically vulnerable.

Mr. FENTRESS: This was on Mack Avenue in Detroit in the early '90s, and I hope that I have photographed it in a neutral way that allows the viewer to have their own interpretations. But my personal interpretation is, well, one side of the photograph is perhaps about using potential and the others about losing potential.

CHIDEYA: It could make you feel co-opted if you were someone, for example, who either didn't agree in this particular brand of Christianity or religion, or that you were someone who wasn't a believer. I mean, did you recognize that there might be some tension in that?

Mr. FENTRESS: Yes, and I think that's a tension that goes through the whole book. When you photograph something like this and put it in a book, it turns down the volume and it's a silent experience. And you can take it or leave it. And the way I hoped that I've approached the subject matter is in a way that respects the religious belief or a lack of religious belief of anybody who's looking at it; that this is a documentary project and it defines, describes, explores something that's really out there in the American landscape that a lot of people find interesting whether or not they are believers.

CHIDEYA: All right. So you've got in the nation's capital, very appropriate in some ways, stop - a big octagonal stop sign - hell has no exit. What does that say to you?

Mr. FENTRESS: I love this picture. It's one of my favorites. I was in the D.C. area to photograph a commercial job, and I had some spare time so I talked to some policemen in McDonald's downtown and they said, well, you might go over to this neighborhood near the Potomac, but you really shouldn't go there. It's a big drug area; it's very sort of dangerous, especially walking around with a camera.

Well, I went in anyway and I found this sign. And I understood it to be perhaps somebody talking to drug dealers and saying, don't be in our neighborhood or stop doing what you're doing. There are other repercussions besides possibly getting arrested that are everlasting. It looks like a speed limit sign with the same sort of lettering and black border around it. So it has an official sort of look, as if the

government is endorsing this religious view.

CHIDEYA: Did you ever find instances of the signs being vandalized?

Mr. FENTRESS: Definitely. There's a lot of signs in the Midwest that just say: Trust Jesus. I'm guessing that it's a trucker who has stopped over and over at different highway overpasses and used blue spray paint to spray-paint the words trust Jesus on one of the columns supporting the bridge.

And over the years, I've seen the sort of a circle with the line through it covering that message, or seen that message juxtaposed with somebody who is responding to it, saying maybe they've written the word don't, so it's now don't trust Jesus. There are also just a bunch of situations where the people have scrubbed them clean. I guess that's a whole sub-genre of this large group of photographs that I've taken.

CHIDEYA: That was photographer Sam Fentress. And you can see a video presentation of some of the photos in his new book, "Bible Road." Just go to our Web site at npr.org/news-es.

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In 'Bible Road,' traveling photographer captures roadside religion

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Enlarge By Sam Fentress, "Bible Road"

Photographer Sam Fentress snapped this building in San Diego for his recent book of roadside religious images across America.

By Shona Crabtree, Religion News Service

Sam Fentress has spent the past 25 years crisscrossing America's highways and byways, stopping along the way to snap shots of religious signs in every state except Hawaii. He found everything from John 3:3 on a farm silo in Ohio to "Obey God or Burn" scratched into a rock in Harlem.

Together, his photographs capture the gamut of Christian religious expression in America. Now, nearly 150 of those images are collected in his recent book, *Bible Road: Signs of Faith in the American Landscape*.

The story of his images — thousands collected over a lifetime — begins with Fentress' religious and intellectual experiences in college.

Fentress, 52, was raised a Methodist in Nashville, but by the time he attended Princeton University, he had fallen away from his faith and was more interested in yoga, Taoism and Jack Kerouac.

"Everything," he said, "except reading the Bible."

Fentress' interest in religion and got him reading the Bible again. While he was teaching after graduate school, a student brought in a photograph of a barn covered in Scripture verses. Fentress was stunned.

"It just knocked my socks off as a picture," he said. "The boldness of the farmer in covering the roof, the sides — every square foot of the barn had some sort of Bible quote, Old Testament, New Testament, Gospels, Epistles, Revelation."

At some point in the late '70s or early '80s, Fentress noticed the farmer wasn't alone. Wherever he looked, he saw religious signs along the roadside. He started to methodically photograph thousands of such images over the next two decades. Somewhere along the line, he also became a Catholic.

Fentress has Master of Arts degree from the Art Institute of Chicago and his work is collected by museums, including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the St. Louis Art Museum.

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Fentress says the religious roadside signage is particularly American, given the First Amendment's guarantees of freedom of speech and religion and the country's religious diversity.

"Americans are told they can say whatever they want," he said. And people feel free to say it — or perhaps, show it — whether on their front lawn, barn or business.

Fentress said he was intrigued by the juxtaposition of landscape and religious message. Some of his images capture signs on businesses, which he attributed to a capitalist tendency to co-opt religion into something that can be marketed and sold. But he also recognized the religious impulse to spread the good news wherever possible.

In Las Vegas, he spotted Glorified Bodies Inc., a collision repair shop with the Christian fish symbol on its sign post. He noted the relationship between Jesus' resurrected body, as described in the New Testament, and restoring damaged cars.

Other times, the messages work in opposition. One of Fentress' favorite photographs is Matthew 6:33 stenciled on the window of a beauty parlor just below a woman with a sassy haircut. He notes that Matthew 6:33 — thick in the middle of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount — actually refers to not worrying about earthly material goods like food, clothing and, presumably, haircuts, he said.

Fentress said there are more roadside signs per square mile in the South, for example, than the Northeast. When he began the project, Fentress thought the Bible Belt would dominate as a region of religious expression.

"In Vermont, you're not going to have quite the same sort of depth of gutsiness as in Mississippi," he said of his original assumptions.

Nonetheless, he found his images nationwide. Fentress said he thinks of the photographs on an "intensity scale" loosely related to the End Times. In the Northeast, he said, "the flavor of them can be even more intense" than the South, noting the photograph of rocks etched with the words "Obey God or Burn" was found in Harlem, not Mississippi or Tennessee.

What's more, rural areas don't necessarily trump cities for religious expression, he said. He found the most photos near his home in St. Louis; Los Angeles came in second, he said.

Fentress' wife, Elizabeth, and their six children were instrumental in pointing out signs during family road trips. His daughters spotted the image taken closest to home — about 100 yards from the house — of a red car with the Gospel of John written on it.

Fentress said he edited the photos for what was interesting both theologically and aesthetically. Fentress does not see himself as an evangelizer by giving the images a wider audience; he hopes the book will interest believers and non-believers alike.

"I hope it has, at least at the beginning on first look, a sense of being dispassionate and detached and open to whatever belief somebody brings to it," he said. "Here's something that goes on in America in a certain subset of our culture."

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In The Mail

12 Mar 2007 05:57 pm



A diverting and fascinating glimpse into American public religiosity: "[Bible Road: Signs of Faith in the American Landscape](#)". The photographs of roadside religious messages speak for themselves, but Paul Elie has written a typically elegant introduction as well.

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BIBLE ROAD

SIGNS OF FAITH IN THE
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PHOTOGRAPHS BY SAM FENTRESS

Foreword by Paul Elie

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A Review of Religion, Politics & Culture

APRIL 20, 2007



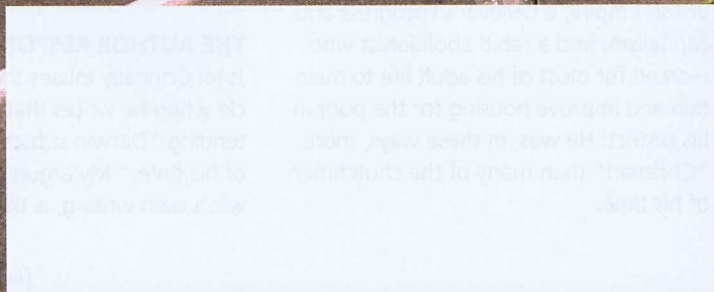
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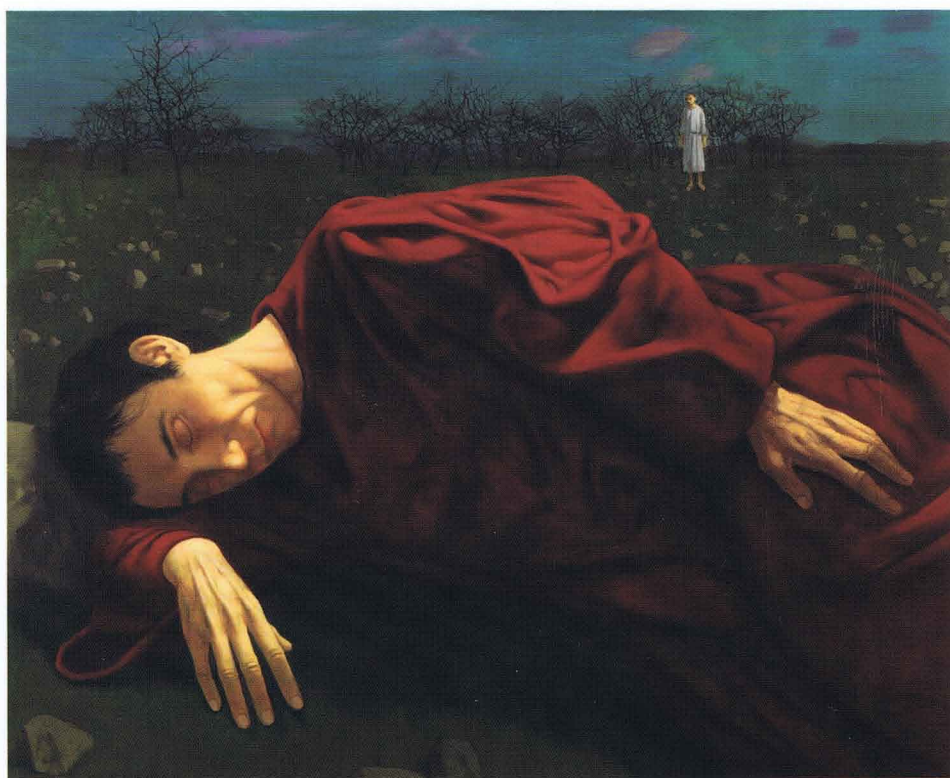
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Book Review

Being Shown the Way

Bible Road: Signs of Faith in the American Landscape

By Sam Fentress

David and Charles, 2007.

I GREW UP outside Portage, Ohio, on an acre with corn fields on three sides and the county highway on the fourth. On our disused barn was a painted advertisement: CHEW MAIL POUCH TOBACCO TREAT YOURSELF TO THE BEST. The enduring letters on the creviced, deteriorating wood appealed to me as a design-hungry teenager, and the huge words (even when they became only half legible as sections of the wall fell in) made our place easy to find. But the sign felt like more than an interesting (and useful) antique. It was part of the strangely moving if often crude scenery: the waiting fields, the stark billboards, the many churches, the hopeful and despairing trailer parks—everything I couldn't get enough of riding my bike among and looking at.

In Sam Fentress's collection of photographs, *Bible Road*, I came across one of an abandoned barn painted with interlaced sentences about Jesus Christ, love, repentance, and belief. It might have been the barn of my old backyard, only with the New Testament words I was constantly hearing and seeing back then. Looking at the photograph, I realized what had been most wrenching to me about the American landscape. America isn't just there, isn't just a place to live in, enjoy, exploit, decorate, and it isn't fundamentally a container of tradition either. It's an arena of dreams and exhortations, in which advertising sits companionably beside evangelical messages, a place existing

more in the future than in the present or past. As in *The Great Gatsby*, it can easily be a stage, even for those of us who are suspicious of material and social ambitions: spiritual ambitions commonly stand in for or combine with these. In Europe, God calls to saints. In America, God calls to everyone.

Fentress, an architectural photographer, started documenting roadside signs in 1979 (several of his photos appeared in *Image* issue 16) and drew on travels in forty-nine states. He shows a variety of media and messages, many distinctly American. In the Southwest, for instance, mural art and cartoons compete with European painting and sculpture as influences on public images of the Virgin Mary. When she is flat, bright, and with little hint of elusiveness or sorrow, she is the counterpart of the new, confrontational Protestant Jesus. (One hand-drawn sign in *Bible Road* spoofs the Uncle Sam army recruitment poster: JESUS WANT'S YOU [*sic*].)

Most of the messages, however, are words alone, and evince the deeply scriptural character of American religion. The Hebrew YAHWEH ELOHIM ("God is Lord"), scrawled on the pillar of an overpass, is a haunting token of the venerability of our preference for words as a link to the divine. As is often the case in Fentress's photos, the luminousness is echoing, empty, and the evidence of ordinary activities sparse. It feels as if the truck passing near YAHWEH ELOHIM is the only vehicle for miles and, in itself, has a spiritual mission. God is un-embodied, just the Word, yet fills the land with power and destiny. The barrenness and at the same time the purposefulness of the road and whatever borders it are a constant theme, as messages rise from the scruffy

yards of struggling small towns, from ugly commercial strips, from distressed or distressingly neat farmland, and—in a favorite instance for me—from the poison-green lawn and spotless prefab wall of an Ohio chemical plant. Other nations have had the idea that this world is only a hard road that leads into another. We have actually built and lived that idea.

We have done this in some startlingly literal ways. My father, a professor at Bowling Green State University, often fought with the Ohio legislature over their—to him, laughable—spending preference for highways over education: they were just paying for people to move on and get out more easily. But of course education is a parallel American obsession, as I and many of my classmates proved. We decamped to out-of-state universities, and then to far-flung and unlikely careers. I found myself doing investigative journalism in post-apartheid South Africa and translating the Roman novel *Satyricon* at the same time. Another Bowling Green High School alumna was running a hotel in Central Africa when last I heard. An alumnus was heading the advertising division of a well-known multinational. It isn't alienation from the religious strivings of our past; it's integral to them.

A photographer's particular interests—in what best shows emotion, character, and ideology—invite thinking about the *why* as well as the *what* in a spiritual culture. Why are we Americans so abstract, so rhetorical, so striving, and so aggressive in our religion—and in so much else?

I remember some of the conversations we primary school pupils had during recess. Who among us had “taken the Lord's name in vain,” said “Goddamn” or just “God” and was therefore irrevocably headed for hell? But what if older children had led us to sin in that way, before we understood the cost? Opinion was divided, but all were nervous, and the nervousness was well motivated. One

girl's Sunday school teacher had played for the class a tape recording of hideous shrieks and reported that these were the voices of souls in hell. Some of us expressed skepticism about the recording as documentary evidence, but said there could be no question about hell itself. We were so driven to vindicate this message that—this horrifies me today—once at a slumber party, we crept to the phone after midnight, got numbers at random out of the directory, and made a survey of salvation in Wood County. Tellingly, the Christians we contacted were bemused but not angry. We reached a Muslim who was hurt and bewildered at our smug forecast for his eternal future. How could we just assume that we alone possessed the truth, he pleaded? We were merciless: the truth was simply the truth, and he must accept it or suffer the consequences.

But through those years, and even on that night, I was secretly fighting to believe, and at fourteen I left the Methodist Church. It was only much later, among Christians who didn't judge or pressure me, that my experiences of loss and survival, community needs and individual purpose, could yield a sense of grace. As a Quaker, I have met many fellow refugees from mainline Christianity, people whose early chances of recognizing God were wasted or destroyed by the same age-old contest between outward authority and inner integrity, which seems futile for religious aims except in desperate cases—of hopelessness, of helplessness, of isolation. “This person was once in a bad enough state to be susceptible to such an approach,” I think whenever I'm the target of particularly clumsy proselytizing.

But the aura of desperate cases in many of the Fentress photos makes me more sympathetic toward the people who brought me up, and toward mainline believers generally. Christianity truly (and often literally) comes from the ground up in America. When I look at these

images, I think of how, in Europe, sources of personal authority—without which people cannot stay sane—tend to be in some degree attached to the land: they are ancestral homes, and families and groups of friends and careers that never move. Personal authority in America often comes from religion, and though we attach it to the land in some ingenious ways—this book covers only a few of the physical ways—it can all seem rather arbitrary. The American habit of summoning authority from practically nowhere may go a long way toward explaining the headiness, the insistence of the summons. And summoning from nowhere naturally appeals to those who have nothing.

In Fentress's photos, American Christians cry out wherever and however they can: through blocks of concrete in a field, for example, one word spray-painted on each block, or through hand-lettered plywood nailed on trees. On a bicycle, which appears to be packed with a homeless person's possessions, hangs a sign with a Bible citation and a warning. On the back of one of those slightly bowed, walking stick figures that mark pedestrian crossings, someone has stenciled a cross. A battered car with painted exhortations on its sides has a full-size wooden cross riveted to its top.

Christians may place religious messages on the signs for their businesses—Fentress shows a number of instances. Perhaps

they do so less from a wish to exploit the marketplace's religious sympathies than from a belief that livelihood comes from God and must in turn serve God: no piece of property, least of all one that supports a Christian family, should be spared in spreading the Good News. In any case, evangelical friends tell me that a believer must endure the jeers of the cynical at his public testimony. But the popular notion that humorlessness clings to this tough-mindedness is certainly not borne out by this book. On an auto body shop sign, PRAISE THE LORD ANYWAY! reverberates merrily on the homiletics of old tracts and old gravestones. For its Pauline theological reach, I like GLORIFIED BODIES COLLISION REPAIR CENTER.

Most of all, I like the neon signs declaring Jesus to be the light of the world. In one example (in Lampe, Missouri, no less), the play on "light" is only part of a well-thought-out joke: at first glance, the wedge shape, the vivid colors, and especially the glowing yellow star made me think of an old-fashioned motel or diner sign; then I realized that no physical facility is being advertised. But the sign does signal a destination where rest and nourishment can be found. There is even, in the star, a symbol of the long journey to Jesus. The image spoke to me of the deep resourcefulness and liveliness of Christianity in America.

—*Reviewed by Sarah Ruden*

Forthcoming in Image....

The art of Ruth Weisberg and Barry Krammes

Paul Mariani on Gerard Manley Hopkins

Claire Holley on songwriting and parenthood

Fiction by A.G. Mojtabai and Lynda Sexson

Poetry by Ilya Kaminsky and Stuart Dybek

SIGNS OF FAITH

Finding Jesus

on America's Bible Road. Photography by Sam Fentress



IN FAYETTEVILLE, ARKANSAS, there is an abandoned barn that saves lives. Years ago the man who owned the barn covered it with now-faded Bible verses in big block letters, including Mark 1:15 in the King James: THE TIME IS FULFILLED, AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS AT HAND: REPENT YE, AND BELIEVE THE GOSPEL. The barn owner hoped passing motorists would see the Word of God as they traveled along a new highway. He left the rest to the Holy Spirit.

In 1981, a student at the University of Arkansas took a picture of the barn as part of a class assignment. His professor, Sam Fentress, was teaching photography for the first time. The photo was put up during a critique session. "It bowled me over. I was stunned," says Fentress. "I was just ripe to be impressed by it."

Seeing that photo set in motion a 25-year-long photographic odyssey across 49 states, during which Fentress produced an archive of several thousand similar images. Last year, Fentress published a collection of these images, *Bible Road: Signs of Faith in the American Landscape*. Speaking with CT, he told the story of how these images provided a way for him to share his love of photography, and of the sign's messages, with others.

For this project, Fentress decided to use the documentary style of Walker Evans, the Great Depression-era photographer. "I wanted to work in that tradition to let an atheist come to the work and not feel like there was nothing for him or her, or [for] a Muslim or Jew or Protestant or Catholic. The work would have something for everybody."

After gathering thousands of photographs, Fentress attempted to publish a collection of his images. The editor and founder of *First Things*, Richard John Neuhaus, among others, caught the same vision and helped Fentress get a grant to further his work. After many rejection letters, Fentress finally secured a publisher. But the British marketing department didn't get it. "They were going to put it in the humor section of the bookstore. I don't mind if people laugh, but it's not a book that goes in the humor department, I hope."

In the end, Fentress says he followed America's Bible Road all the way to personal faith. "I respect the freedom of the atheist who remains an atheist. But I am laying out the evidence. It's testimony."

Wasta, South Dakota 1998



Fayetteville, Arkansas 1997

'When I finally went back and photographed the barn I had seen in the student's photo, it was 17 years later. The guy who painted it was dead, I believe. His daughter told me how he wanted the barn to preach to people.'



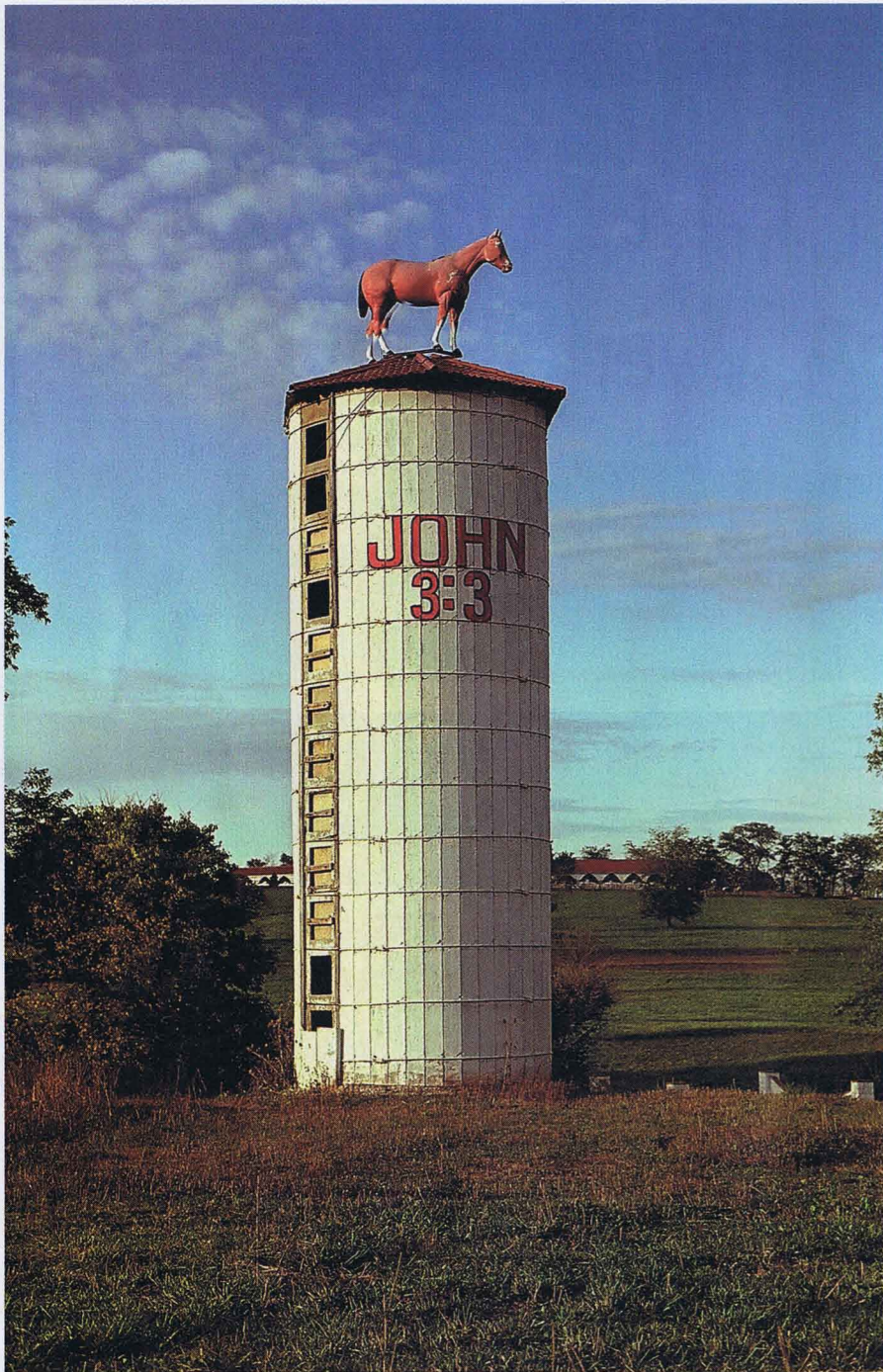
Palma, Kentucky 1984



Phoenix, Arizona 1997



San Antonio, Texas 2001



Monroe, Ohio 1992



Los Angeles, California 1995

'I went into a store in Johnson City, Tennessee, where I was living alone. A man said, "Do you know Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?" I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to say, "No." But I didn't want to say, "Yes." It stuck with me for a long time. The signs work that way for me, when they're talking to me—encouraging, sometimes threatening, questioning.'



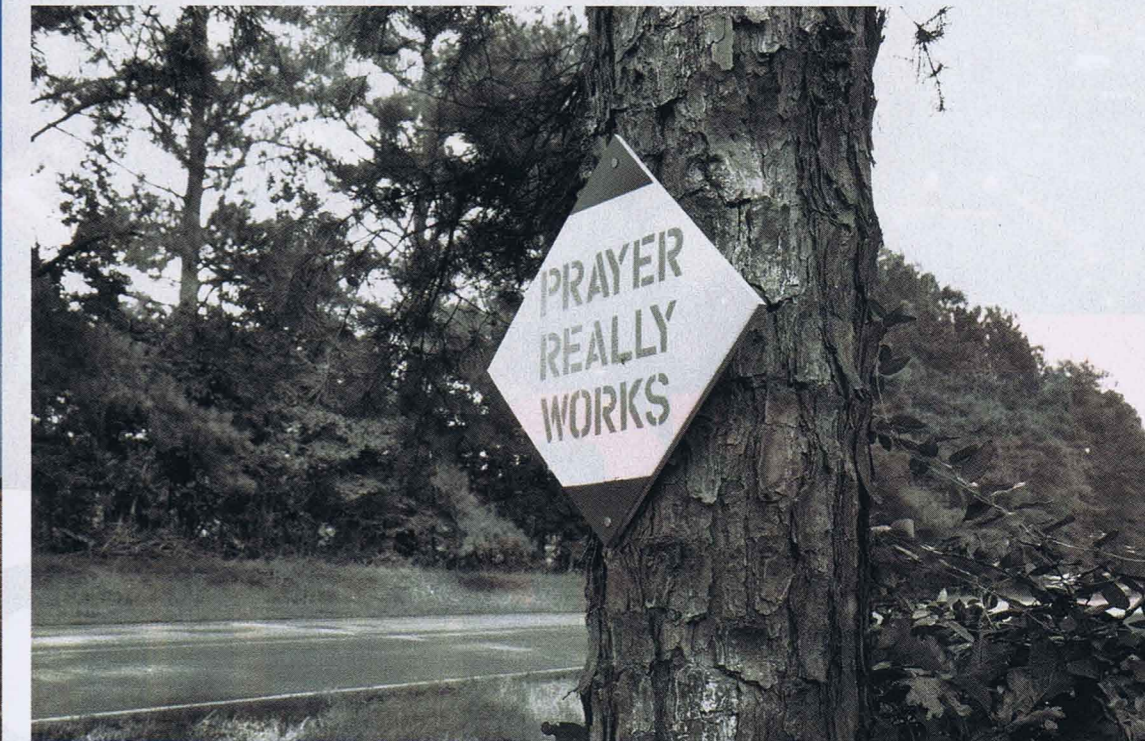
Esto, Florida 2000



Milford, Nebraska 1999



Prattville, Alabama 1995

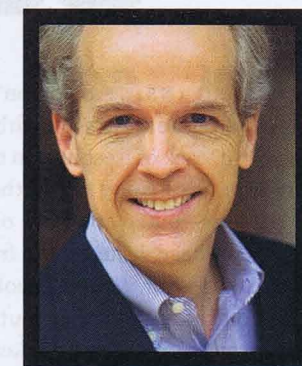


Adaton, Mississippi 1992



Fertile, Missouri 1981

'I met the woman who put up Jesus knocking at the door. Her name was Hazel Barton, and it was her only sculpture. She had wanted the sign to read, A LATCH YOU MUST OPEN—the idea being you have to cooperate with grace. You have to open that door. You can't just wait for him to knock it down. But she wasn't tall enough to get to that part of the sign.'



Sam Fentress is an architectural photographer who makes his home in St. Louis, Missouri, with his wife, Betsy, and six children.

FIRST THINGS

GOD AND EVOLUTION

Avery Cardinal Dulles

ECONOMICS AS EUGENICS

Philip Jenkins

CHRISTIAN, MUSLIM, JEW

Spengler

ON ALASDAIR MACINTYRE

Stanley Hauerwas

ALSO: Alan Jacobs reads the highway signs • Colleen Carroll Campbell examines feminist spirituality • George McKenna looks at religious politics • Gilbert Meilaender on persons • Gary Anderson on what the apostles saw

The Public Square
Richard John Neuhaus

Reading the Signs

Alan Jacobs

Church Signs Across America
by Steve and Pam Paulson
Overlook, 162 pages, \$19.95

*Bible Road: Signs of Faith in the
American Landscape*
by Sam Fentress
David & Charles, 159 pages, \$29.99

I will always remember the day I discovered the concept of irony—not the word; that would come much later. But when I did learn the word, a smile of recognition spread across my face and an image came to my mind.

I was perhaps six or seven years old. It was a hot summer's day in Birmingham, Alabama, and I was making my more-or-less daily pilgrimage to Snappy's Service Station to get a Coke. A new Chevron emporium stood nearby, but its Cokes came only from a modern coin-operated machine. At Snappy's you had to fish them out of a big red waist-high cooler with a sliding glass door on top, and then you had to pay at the register, but it was worth it because the drinks often were slightly slushy with ice. My friends and I scorned the modern machines.

But as I approached Snappy's on my banana-seated red bike, my mood of anticipation was suddenly broken, and I braked to a quick stop. There in front of the station a car had crashed into a light post—and, to judge from the condition of the car's front end, had done so at a significant rate of speed. No one was in the car or nearby, nor, as I watched, did any ambulance or police car turn up, so perhaps the accident had happened some time earlier. The only movement at the scene came from the rectangular plate dangling by a single bolt from the front of the car, swaying a little in the hot breeze. It read GOD IS MY CO-PILOT.

ALAN JACOBS is professor of English at Wheaton College and author of *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C.S. Lewis*.

Aside from the discovery of irony, I had also learned how much meaning can be crammed into just a few words, at least if the circumstances are right. And it is a belief in the power of brevity that underlies the strange activities described in two new books of photographs: *Church Signs Across America* by Steve and Pam Paulson and *Bible Road: Signs of Faith in the American Landscape* by Sam Fentress. Both books are entertaining and occasionally quite funny, but when I put them down I was surprised to discover how sad I had just become. I think there was just too much irony.

To judge by the content of these books, church signs are more likely to strive for humor than ones put up by individuals. That may have something to do with the fact that many churches come with signboards, and those boards have to be filled up—so why not fill them with something funny? Plus a church can seem a little uncared for if the sign isn't changed once in a while. So not all the signs photographically collected by the Paulsons suggest that great care was taken in their making. After you look through a few dozen of them, though, you start noticing patterns, and one of the pleasures of perusing *Church Signs Across America* is the organizational game you can end up playing. So herewith are my core principles of categorization:

Religious or Nonreligious: There are 162 photographs in the Paulsons' book, and roughly a fourth of them have no religious content whatsoever. Some

defy my taxonomic skills, either because they're on the borderline (PLAN AHEAD—IT WAS NOT RAINING WHEN NOAH BUILT THE ARK has a biblical reference but no necessary spiritual meaning) or because they're incomprehensible: What does CHECK UP BEFORE YOU CHECK OUT mean? Did it get transplanted from the dentist's office? To judge from these signs, Americans have two primary shortcomings: We talk too much, and we don't smile enough. There are many variations on these themes: A CLOSED MOUTH GATHERS NO FOOT, for instance, and IF SOMEONE IS WITHOUT A SMILE, GIVE THEM YOURS.

But variety is the spice of church-sign life. We also get financial advice (A BUDGET HELPS US TO LIVE BELOW OUR YEARNINGS), assistance in child-rearing (ONE WAY TO MAKE CHILDREN MISERABLE IS TO GIVE THEM EVERYTHING THEY WANT!), and general guidance for relationships (BEST WAY TO HAVE THE LAST WORD: APOLOGIZE). As I reflect on the wisdom dispensed in these nugget-size units, I wonder whether such signs fairly represent the teaching that goes on in their churches, or whether they are evangelistic ploys based on the principle that you begin by giving people something helpfully nonthreatening and then, once you've caught their interest, hit them with the gospel. Alas, there's no way to tell. But it's interesting to note that, if the Paulsons' book is a reliable guide, you're just as likely to get a vague moral uplift from an Assembly of God or a Southern Baptist church as from a Unitarian or an Episcopal one.

Humorous or Serious: Most of the signs want to be funny, though in varying ways. The humor tends to be pretty genial, with far too much reliance on bad puns, but sarcasm and even plain bitterness make their appearances. The pastor of the Wesleyan church in Smyrna, Delaware, must have struggled through one too many stewardship campaigns by the time he made the sign reading TITHE IF YOU LOVE JESUS! ANYONE CAN HONK! I wonder what kinds of sermons you hear in the First Assembly of God of Valdosta, Georgia, which proudly bears the message ETERNITY: SMOKING OR NONSMOKING. And I have to admire the person who has simply had enough of the whole pithy-saying enterprise: SIGN BROKEN—MESSAGE INSIDE THIS SUNDAY.

Biblical or Nonbiblical: I was surprised to see that in the whole of the Paulsons' book only a half-dozen signs were composed of Bible verses—including one church in Corinth, Kentucky, which cut the Gordian knot of ever-changing signage by erecting a permanent

red-brick diptych with the Ten Commandments engraved on it. (Here we stand, we can do no other.) The Paulsons do show us a few vague biblical references, like the one that reads DON'T GIVE UP! MOSES WAS ONCE A BASKET CASE!—a message that assumes a little more biblical literacy than seems to me warranted. But, in general, the sign makers shy away from the Bible. I wonder if the Paulsons' collection is representative in this respect: Did they not bother to record many biblical signs because they wished to highlight human, um, creativity?

Positive or Negative: Perhaps some subdividing is called for here, since the positive messages can be words of encouragement, reassurance, or exhortation, while the negative ones can take the form of warning or blunt threat. Though, again, there is the occasional sarcasm (WHAT PART OF "THOU SHALT NOT" DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND?), the negativity tends to be pretty earnest and preoccupied with the likelihood of the Second Coming; the encouragement and exhortation are likewise earnest but in a more lighthearted you-can-do-it kind of way.

Reading through *Church Signs Across America*, I found myself asking which of these churches I would attend if I had to decide on the basis of the signs alone—omitting, since I am a Protestant, the Catholic ones, though not without regret, since the only sayings of great Christians in the whole book are found on Catholic churches. (I must say that LORD, MAKE ME AN INSTRUMENT OF YOUR PEACE and OUR HEARTS ARE RESTLESS UNTIL THEY FIND THEIR REST IN YOU look a little funny in all caps.) In general I was more attracted to the negative ones. Their pugnaciousness suggests a certain indifference to public opinion that is, or at least can be, commendable in a Christian community. Plus, I know that I would never, ever attend a church that had used its sign space to encourage me to smile more often. But, despite my Eeyorish inclination, I could not suppress a grin at one of the saccharine ones: IF GOD HAD A REFRIGERATOR, YOUR PICTURE WOULD BE ON IT.

If the church signs can seem perfunctory at times, the religious signs in barbershop windows—or on the blank brick walls of garages, barns, or even private houses—don't need to be there. No one would miss them if they were absent, which yields them a fierce immediacy. The people who create them are probably a little too intense for humor: You hope not to end up waiting in line with one of them at the DMV, and you don't want one to take the stool next to yours at the local diner.

This urgency gives a tense energy to all these signs, even the seemingly casual and funny ones. It's nearly palpable, the sign makers' fear that we will pass by, at speed, focused on other things—worldly things that keep God far from our minds—and their conviction that only something exceptionally vivid has a chance of catching our attention. It's the visual equivalent of shouting. Flannery O'Connor once defended her own methods of fiction writing by saying that "to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large startling figures." These signs are like that, and, indeed, the title of one of O'Connor's most famous stories, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," is borrowed from a billboard encouraging people to drive safely.

The photographs by Sam Fentress powerfully capture this intensity. *Bible Road* is a very different book from *Church Signs Across America*, in large part because the Paulsons stood in front of a lot of signs and took snapshots of them, whereas Fentress is a gifted artist whose photographs embrace the varying moods and textures of the many distinctly American scenes he portrays. (Several of these photographs first appeared in the October 2001 issue of *FIRST THINGS*.)

JESUS THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD reads one of the messages Fentress captures. In fluorescent lighting exactly like that on a cheap motel—there's even a slightly tilted bright yellow star in one corner—the image is set in the evening sky, wrapped in the deep purple of the last moments of dusk. (The light shone in the darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not.) Fentress' pictures are often in just this way sympathetic with their subjects: They cooperate with and even accentuate the mood of the signs themselves. When the message is blunt and stark, so too is the photograph. Here's what Fentress saw in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1985, on a rented lit-from-within sign with black letters stuck on:

JESUS SAID YE MUST BE
BORN AGAIN JOHN 3-7
AREA SIZE RUG SALE
20% OFF

A simple straightforward message from a simple straightforward world. Fentress shot it with black-and-white film and allowed the sign to fill nearly the whole frame.

In contrast to the Paulsons' church signs, Fentress' images—on buses, on the signs of interstate-exit truck stops, on telephone poles, on flat rocks, on almost anything—are overwhelmingly biblical, as his title suggests. Even where they are not direct quotations, they refer to biblical events or teachings, or they name the

names of God, or—as on a carefully but amateurishly hand-painted message planted on a roadside in Prattville, Alabama—they just say READ THE BIBLE.

The simplicity intensifies the urgency: Sometimes you get the sense that people could write only a few words, or even one word, before being taken hostage by criminals, or dying of some strange blood disease, or suffering abduction by aliens. Someone has spray-painted on a stainless-steel electrical box, "God says, Faith Without Work Dead"—this distinctive medium allows the use of non-capital letters, though it would have been nice if the painter had been attentive to certain other matters, like the distinction between "work" and "works." Elsewhere we see a flat stone outcrop on an Alaskan roadside bearing in white paint or chalk the single name JESUS. On the facing page there's another slab of rock, this one somewhere in Harlem, with shakier and much smaller lettering: OBEY GOD OR BURN it reads, and the writer, with the precision of the insane, has ended the sentence with a neat white period.

Signs like this are created and then left to find such audiences as they may. They are not meant to be revised or erased. Others are scarcely less permanent: An old barn covered with fading Bible verses *could* be painted over and remessaged, but that's not likely. Looking at the signs that Fentress captures, one gets the sense that their makers decided to say the single most important thing they could think of and leave it at that. A notable exception to this rule is a house in Winchester, Missouri, that Fentress photographed four times in 1987 and 1988. Though the scene hardly varies—it's one end of the aluminum-sided house, with two rectangular windows over two garage doors—signs of changing seasons are visible: A barbecue grill appears in one photo; a big stack of firewood in another.

And in each photograph there's a different message, displayed in foot-high black letters affixed to the siding: IF SINGLE, DON'T ACT LIKE YOU'RE MARRIED. IF MARRIED, DON'T ACT LIKE YOU'RE SINGLE; then IF YOU'RE NOT TOTALLY SAVED, YOU ARE TOTALLY LOST. READ JOHN CHAPTER 3; then ALCOHOL, DRUGS, SEX AND SUICIDE ONLY ADD TO YOUR TROUBLES. JESUS IS THE ONLY ANSWER; and finally LORD, GIVE ME COURAGE TO PART WITH WHAT I HOLD DEAR, IF IT SEPARATES ME FROM YOU.

I stared at the page with these four messages for a long time before I realized that someone had turned the side of his house into a vast analogue to a blog. Like a

blog, this house records a person's thoughts, whether those thoughts are directed toward the author or toward the audience; as on a blog, the recorded thoughts are available for anyone to read who happens to pass by. One difference between this inscribed house and the average blog is that the house inscriber knows that "you're" has an apostrophe and can spell "separates." But an even bigger difference is that a blog retains all its previous posts, while this technology demands that each new entry eliminate its predecessors. Sam Fentress' photos help remedy that deficiency, but one does not learn from Fentress how often the message was changed. Maybe these four messages are but a tiny selection; maybe the message was renewed daily and over the course of weeks or months covered all the categories I listed earlier in my inventory of church signs: exhortation, reassurance, warning, threat. . . . I wouldn't expect many laughs, though.

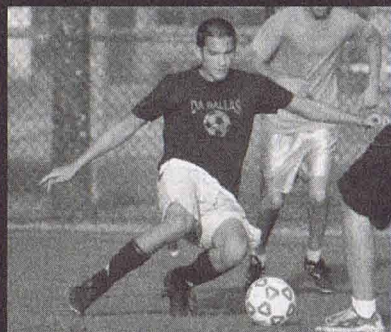
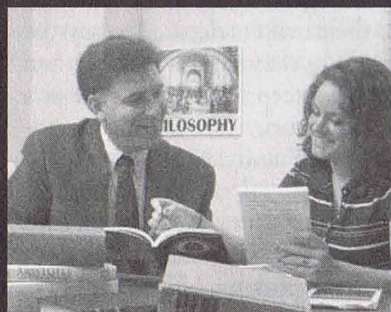
Thinking about what I have called the urgency of these messages—even the ridiculous jokes on the church signs suggest a clown's insistence, a look-at-me

pleading—I am inclined to reconsider something I said at the outset of this essay. Maybe it's not "a belief in the power of brevity" prompting these signs. Maybe it's a panicky recognition that sometimes brevity is all you get: *Tell us the meaning of life in no more than ten words.* If brevity is the soul of wit, perhaps desperation is the soul of brevity.

The people who write apocalyptic or consoling or hortatory messages on their houses and barns, or nail them to their fence posts, might well tell you stories, long stories if they had any opportunity at all to do so. They would weave for you tales of God's wrath or love, and of how their lives were transformed by the very knowledge that they now are pleased to share with you.

But they never get that chance. So they shout at us and draw large startling figures for us as we speed by. The writers stay put, or at least their signs do, while we zoom through town, nearly unrecognizable blurs who may not have sense enough to ask the only question that really matters: What must I do to be saved? FT

AVE MARIA UNIVERSITY



TO BE WISE MEANS
TO KNOW THAT THE
SOLIDITY OF A HOUSE
DEPENDS ON THE CHOICE
OF A FOUNDATION.
DO NOT BE AFRAID TO
BE WISE, THAT IS TO SAY,
DO NOT BE AFRAID TO
BUILD ON THE ROCK.

Pope Benedict XVI



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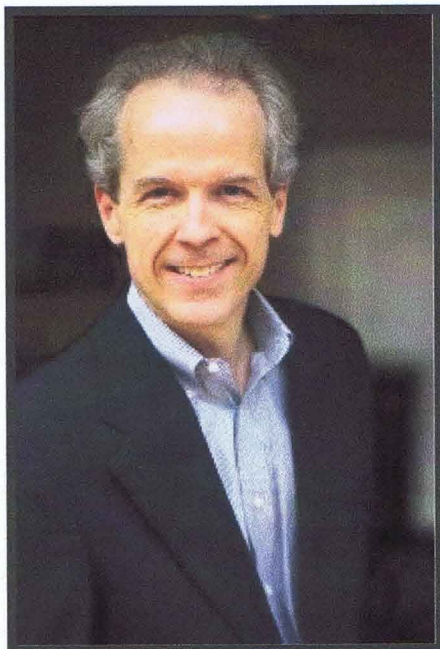
NAPLES, FLORIDA

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I M A G E

CELEBRATING 20 YEARS

A R T • F A I T H • M Y S T E R Y



ARTIST OF THE MONTH: MARCH 2008

Sam Fentress

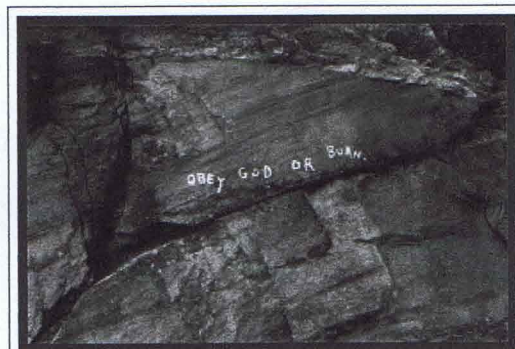
In the seventies and eighties, we saw our share of roadside religious signs from the back seat of our family's Datsun station wagon. As you speed by in your car, there's a temptation to distance yourself from people who make billboards that say things like *Are You Telling Anyone about Jesus Christ?* and *Obey God or Burn*. But when Sam Fentress looks at America, he does not roll his eyes. For the last twenty-five years, on the highways, rural roads, and city streets of forty-nine states, he has been photographing religious signs—on barns, freeway underpasses, telephone poles, and storefronts, in stencil, hand lettering, neon, spray paint, marquee type, and stencil. And not with the dispassionate or ironizing eye of a documentarian. Instead, by deploying all the tools of

photography—meticulous composition, depth of field and landscape, the play of light, the isolating effect of the frame—Fentress gives these messages a dignity

that is chilling. As you page through *Bible Road*, the book that collects over 150 of these photos, the cumulative effect becomes haunting: Sam Fentress sees a passion in America that transcends regionalism, kitsch, and denomination. The fervor appears everywhere, in cities and in the country, blue states and red. Seen through Fentress's lens, the messages—*Thou God Seest Me*; *The Eyes of the Lord Are In Every Place Beholding Good and Evil*; or just *Jesus* painted on a cracked wall—become so starkly poignant that we can't dismiss them as quirky backwoods religion or a product of the

chaotic lives of the urban poor. The buildings and landscapes testify that life in our country is not easy, though occasionally it is painfully beautiful. The landscape is ravaged and glorious; the signs are weather beaten; the cities are clotted with advertisements, trash, and decay; the paths to the doors of the small rural churches are grown high with weeds.

Everywhere, under all circumstances, people are moved to make signs. At times, the images provoke a smile (*Mower Sales / Salvation Is Free*), but in Fentress's eyes, the gestures are never pathetic. He dwells on these acts of writing with loving attention and without condescension. As Paul Elie writes in the introduction, by photographing these signs, Fentress transfigures them.



Harlem 1990.

Read Sam Fentress' essay *Signs of the Kingdom: Roadside Religious Signs* from [Image 16](#) [here](#).

Sam Fentress' Current Projects

I hope to be able to publish more photography books, with pictures from various series: people and portraits, still life, architecture, landscape, and a series of abstract photographs made from moving cars at night. Some of these series are recent interests, some have pictures from thirty years ago and last month.

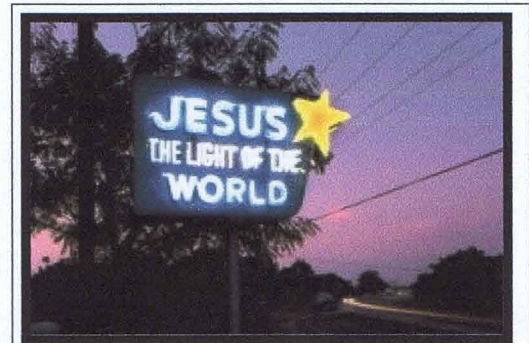
Biography

Sam Fentress was raised in Nashville and Detroit and in 1977 graduated from Princeton University with Emmet Gowin as his teacher and mentor. His artistic work led in 1978 to his being named one of the youngest recipients of an Emerging Artist grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1980 he received a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Art Institute of Chicago.

In 1981 he began making documentary photographs of religious messages along the American road, eventually traveling to 49 states building a body of work containing thousands of images. Photographs from this series have been in solo and group exhibitions at O.K. Harris in New York, Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco, the Art Institute of Chicago, and Afterimage Gallery in Dallas. His 2007 documentary photography book *Bible Road: Signs of Faith in the American Landscape* (David & Charles) led to interviews on CBS News Sunday Morning and NPR News and Notes. The book was covered in First Things, Commonweal, Image, the Houston Chronicle, and USA Today and Newsweek online. Photographs from this series are included in the following public and private collections: The Art Institute of Chicago, Bruce and Nancy Berman, Bibliotheque Nationale de France, Center for Documentary Studies/Duke University, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Mississippi Museum of Art, Princeton University Art Museum, Saint Louis Art Museum. Fentress lives with his wife Betsy and their six children in St. Louis.



Suitland, Maryland. 2001.

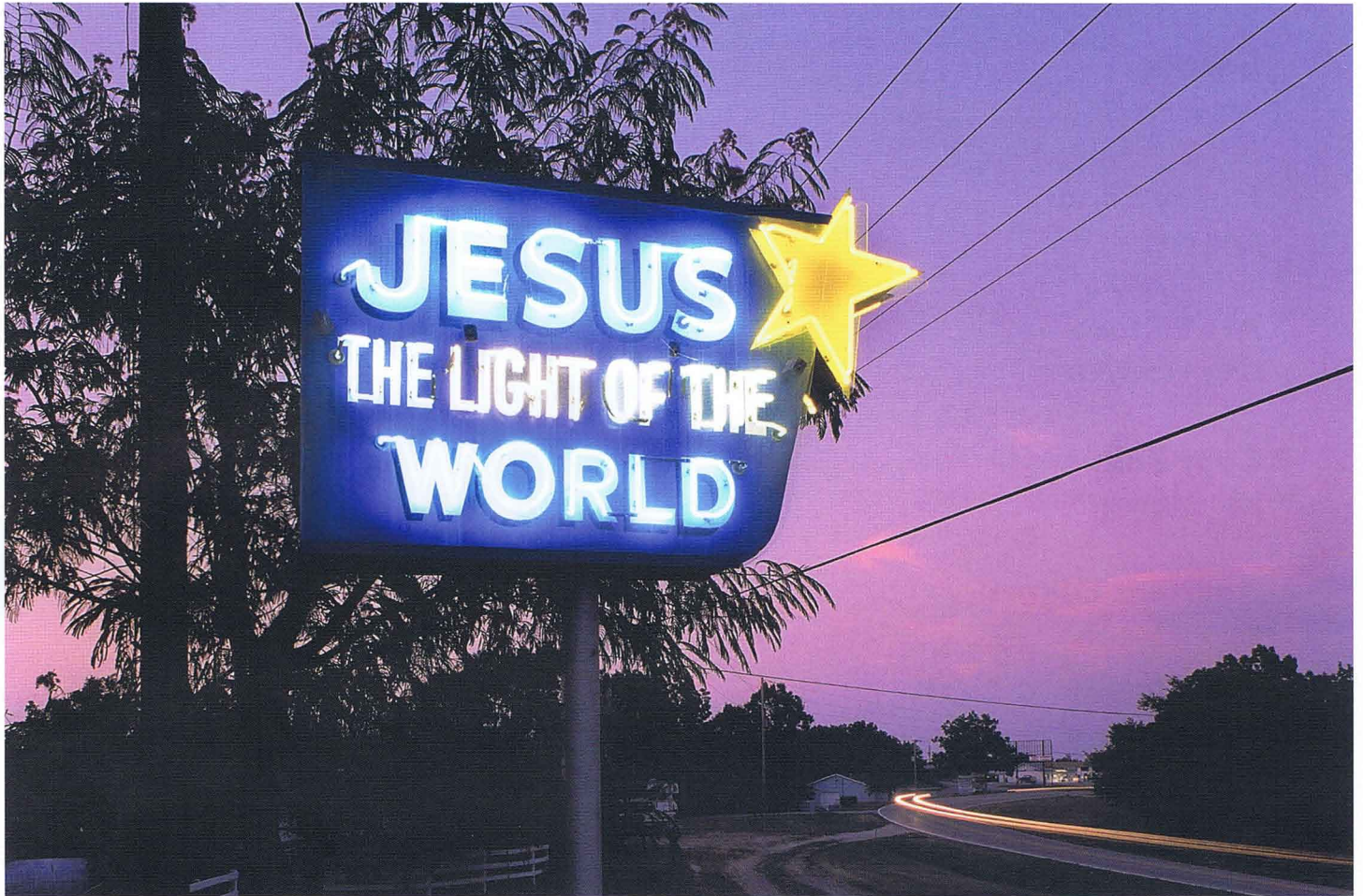


Lampe, Missouri. 1997.

THE CRESSET

A review of literature, the arts, and public affairs

Lent 2008



Understanding Our Place in God's Creation
James R. Skillen

The Heritage of Luther's Hymns in the Western Rite
Amy C. Schifrin

Remembrance Days
Albert Louis Zambone

Normative Lutheran Piety
Frank C. Senn

Good and Bad Ways to Think About Religion and Politics
Robert Benne



books

Sam Fentress. *Bible Road: Signs of Faith in the American Landscape*. Cincinnati: David & Charles, 2007.

SAM FENTRESS'S MESMERIZING new book, *Bible Road: Signs of Faith in the American Landscape*, comes as a wonderful relief. Ours is a moment saturated with analyses of religion, much of it sadly simplistic, as both our domestic politics in this presidential season and our foreign policy seem to pivot on making distinctions between good religion and bad. Such tendencies accentuate trends already evident in far too many journalistic and scholarly treatments of religion, which often reduce faith to economic, psychological, or political phenomena, and people of faith to saints or fanatics. Sam Fentress, an award-winning photographer trained at Princeton and the Art Institute of Chicago, will have none of this. His book of photographs, taken over twenty-five years, depicts America religious life without moralizing, distinction-making, or sociological scrutiny. He does this with only images of signs—handmade road signs, billboards, graffiti, murals, storefront advertisements, and other inscriptions of Christian faith seen along the way. The

book contains a brief, meditative foreword by Paul Elie and an even briefer Afterword by Fentress explaining the genesis of the project, but otherwise the only text in the book—other than the words captured in each image—is a simple caption indicating the place and date of each of the one hundred and fifty photographs. Birmingham, Alabama 1995. Waxhaw, North Carolina 1985. Oakland, California 1998.

The French sociologist and semiotician Roland Barthes observed in his 1981 book *Camera Lucida*, “In the Photograph, the event is never transcended for the sake of something else . . . it is the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency,” (4) and Fentress’s images certainly bear this out. These pictures show us the varieties of American Christianity in all their beauty and lived particularity. Though the book contains almost no images of human beings, every page resonates with humanity. The words are the subject of these images in the way a human face is the subject of a portrait, an instantaneous impression of a lifetime of worry and joy. The signs in each photograph stand along roadways, tacked to trees or scrawled on overpasses, asking to be read and understood by

passersby, presented as proclamations of faith, as calls to revival, as markers of identity, as inspiration, cries for forgiveness, warnings, hope. Fentress’s photographs, on the other hand, only ask to be witnessed. “Jesus. Hope” says a telephone pole; “Trust Jesus,” a mailbox; “Prayer Really Works,” a tree.

Many of the images portray the seamless interweaving of sacred and profane in modern America, and Fentress clearly delights in capturing the interplay of signs representing, especially, the commercial and the pious. “Repent Final Warning” declares a homemade sign beneath the power lines in Georgia. Inches below, on the same pole, using the same stenciling, we see the much more comforting call for “Mack’s Bar-B-Que,” on I-95 at Highway 144. Alfie’s barbeque in Los Angeles tells us “Jesus Is Real” while MY-T Burger in Pasadena, Texas, proclaims on the marquee, “Praise the Lord. Burger & Fries, 99 [cents].” Fentress gives us these images not as juxtapositions, nor to decry some defamation of the pure and sacred by the crassly capitalistic, but rather to show us faith as it actually happens in the reality of lived lives. If we did not praise the Lord when buying or selling burg-

ers and fries, and repent when driving to the barbeque stand, when would we?

Fentress's humor sparkles throughout. He gives us a yard sign advertising lawn mowers for sale across the street from one announcing, "Salvation Is Free." In the cover image, of a gas station front lot, a hand-painted board proclaims "Christ is the Answer," next to another board, also homemade, with similar black letters against a white field; "Full Service Reg. 1.12," it reads, prompting one to wonder just who indeed provides full service. For all the humor in these images, Fentress manages to let us smile without demanding that we leer or mock. Indeed, we are not even asked to evaluate or analyze. These are images of beauty, humanity, and life, rather than testaments to consumerism, poverty, apocalypticism, revivalism, devotion to the Virgin, or any other phenomenon scholars or journalists might fruitfully, or fruitlessly, dissect. Fentress's pictures simply want to be experienced. "Look," he says. "Look."

Those images that do ask us to think do so not as sociology but much more intimately, as neighbors peering over a fence, observing the full particularity and contingency that Barthes reminds us to watch for. A large, sturdy sign along a rural highway in North Carolina, at a bend in the road near a stand of trees, reads "Jesus Wept." This verse is famous among generations of Sunday school trivia buffs as the shortest in the Bible—but why put it on a sign? What is the desired response? Did Jesus weep because of my sins? Must I repent? (You know, there was that time...) Is it a prophetic social rebuke, a denouncement of injustice? Does Jesus weep for the trees no longer here? For the unborn children who never took a breath? For those growing up in poverty in this land of plenty? Or is it a confession? On this, as on every page, we are left to wonder who, why, when. We imagine a face in a workshop, carefully peering down at sketched-out letters; or a group gathered in a church basement debating color, spac-

ing, size. These are lives as full of anger, love, guilt, and hate as our own. "Become a Catholic," a voiceless voice tells us, in graffiti amid the gang tags on an abandoned building in Harlem. "Hail Mary—Full Of Grace" begins the first two of fifteen signs perched on a barbed-wire fence in Missouri. "Pray For Us Sinners—Now And At The Hour—Of Our Death Amen—KC Council 5898" the series concludes. Which one of us used a boarded up storefront in St. Louis to cry out, "God Forgive Me. I have Sined. Give Me The BLOOD of JESUS. I AM Sorry. Please Send THE HOLY GHOST. Amen"?

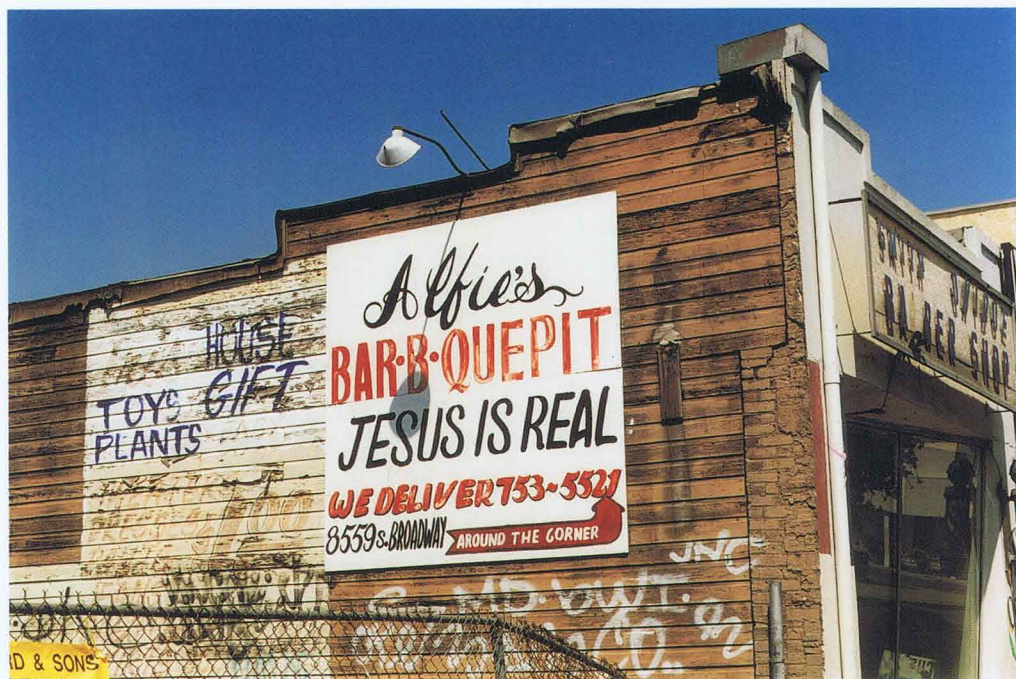
The collection of photographs in this book represents a wide array of Christian sentiment from locations across the country, as Fentress traversed forty-nine states in his decades of work on this project. Yet in spite of this wonderful catalog of faith, the impression that lingers is one of beauty. The brilliant blue sky and deep green grass that frame the yellow corrugated factory of the United States Plastics Corp. The streak of taillights and the fading crimson sunset behind a neon sign declaring "Jesus The Light Of The World." The play of shadows in a used hubcap lot. *Bible Road* is a book to be enjoyed, a book of sadness and hope, wonder, and delight.

Matthew S. Hedstrom
Princeton University



Palma, Kentucky 1984.

I M A G E



Annie Dillard: Advice for Young Writers

Fiction by Doris Betts

The Art of Mark Cazalet

An Interview with Sue Miller

Sally Fitzgerald on Flannery's Happy Endings

Poetry by Diane Glancy

Roadside Religious Signs



DoubleTake



TOP: Palma, Kentucky, 1984
 MIDDLE: San Diego, California, 1995
 BOTTOM: Memphis, Tennessee, 1991
 OPPOSITE: Jasper, Alabama, 1987

Sam Fentress began in earnest to photograph religious messages and signs appearing in often unlikely places in the summer of 1981 while traveling as a salesman in Missouri and Kentucky. Since that time, he has photographed roadside testimonies in over thirty other states across the country. Some passersby take exception to the mixing of spiritual and commercial messages, Fentress says, but he believes the signs were made with the best of intentions. "It reminds me of a joke I heard once about a guy who goes to confession and asks, 'Father, is it OK if I smoke while I pray?' And the priest says, 'No, my son.' But when the next guy comes in and asks, 'Father, is it OK if I pray while I smoke?' the priest says, 'Sure, that's fine.'"

1 New York PRESS

APRIL 21-27, 1993

NEW YORK'S FREE WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

VOL. 6, NO. 16



Palma, Kentucky. 1984

LORD OF THE FRIES

BY JOHN STRAUSBAUGH

*Jesus lives.
Jesus saves.
Jesus serves up
ham 'n' eggs,
every morning 7 to 9.*

I made that up. But if a road sign like that existed, Sam Fentress would have a picture of it. He's photographed hundreds of others very like it. He's got a picture of a sign outside a place called MY-T BURGER that says: 16»

Christianity and Commerce Meet on the Open Road

4/21

WE WONDER IF ALL OUR WIDE-EYED ARTIST friends who lobbied us so mercilessly about what a great new friend they'd found in Bill Clinton have noted that his Justice Department wants to revive the hated "standards of decency" clause imposed on the NEA by Bush's people. The four artists whose grants were revoked by the Bush NEA (because their work was openly gay or otherwise "offensive") challenged the constitutionality of the decency clause and won—rightly, we'd say—first in U.S. District Court, then in the U.S. Court of Appeals last summer. Now Clinton's Justice Department has asked Appeals to reconsider that decision. How's that for payback?

★

SUDS OF THE GODS: WITH ANHEUSER-Busch spending upwards of \$40 million for the exclusive Olympic rights for its beers, what'll be the price tag for promo privileges on the Greek "We Are Happy to Serve You" coffee cups (a delivery truck for which we've already spotted with a tagline hyping the games in Greece coming in the year 2000) if the games are indeed awarded to that country?

★

WHO'S RESPONSIBLE? HAND-WRITTEN SIGN at Jones (aka Jone's) Diner on Lafayette St.: *Hot chilly \$1.75.*

★

WALKING ON SPRING ST. JUST WEST OF Broadway last week we caught the con man in action *again*—third time at this location, with the same pitch: locked out of his apartment, needs money for a cab to get his spare key, blah blah. That routine is extremely played out around here. He should consider relocating until a real acting gig comes through.

★

WE'RE SCRATCHING OUR HEADS OVER THIS press release for an ongoing dance series called *Women... & Beyond*. Huh? This month featuring the choreography of Mark Dendy. *Huh?*

★

WE WERE IN THE THUNDERING HERD RUSHING from Grand Central down to the Number 7 platform when we heard a favorite tune ahead. A busking violin student was playing the Interlude from *Cavalleria Rusticana*, and doing a good job of it. It drew us across the platform and we gratefully poured a handful of change into his case. He paid us back with a big grin and an encore.

★

SAM FENTRESS

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Spring Has Sprung

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And one on a storefront that says:

*John The Baptist
Flats Fixed*

And another that says:

*God Is Love
Bennie's Snacks*

The first-glance, not so subliminal message here—that God loves Bennie's Snacks—makes it a great example of a peculiarly American form of advertising, the ultimate in celebrity endorsements, where Christianity and commerce meet in the upright and crossbeam of a crucifix. That conjunction is one theme in an exhibition of 59 Fentress photographs, *Signs of Jesus*, at O.K. Harris gallery through—sorry—this Sat., April 24.

Fentress is a St. Louis commercial photographer who makes his living taking pictures of architecture. Along the road he sees signs of Jesus in all sorts of places. Sometimes they're humorous, sometimes anguished. In execution they range from professional billboard art to graffiti scrawls. What they're not, in Fentress' opinion, is Folk Art or Outsider Art or kitsch, though he knows a lot of viewers will see them that way.

Quietly challenging viewers' assumptions is one of his aims. When I was at the exhibition two women, New Yawkers with the brisk air of experienced gallery-hoppers, swept into the room, glanced at the walls, and breezed out agreeing that "obviously he's spent a lot of time in Texas."

"I enjoy countering that idea that this is just below the Mason-Dixon Line," Fentress says. If the ladies had checked the titles list, they'd have seen that Fentress finds these things everywhere—in 30 states so far, many far from Dixie, including three photos in the exhibit that were taken in New York City, one in Queens and two in Harlem.

It's a point he makes subtly in how he frames his shots to show settings. Sometimes it's rural. *Way* rural in the case of a flat and desolate field with a large white billboard reared up on it and just the word *JESUS* in enormous letters. Or the weatherbeaten two-plank cross practically lost in overgrowth on the side of some little country road. Across the arms in handpainted letters it warns *Storms Ahead!* Down the vertical stem it says:

*Anchor
on
the
Rock*

In other photos the setting is urban or industrial. Aluminum-sided warehouses and parked tractor trailers with *Christ is the Answer* emblazoned on them; an old bomb of a sedan parked on a city street, with biblical quotes written all over it; some heartrending graffiti painted on a boarded-up storefront in

LORD OF THE FRIES

Christianity and Commerce Meet on the Open Road

BY JOHN STRAUSBAUGH



Waxhaw, North Carolina. 1985

letters that literally bleed, crying:

*God Forgive Me.
I have Sined.
Give Me The
BLOOD of JESUS
I Am Sorry.
PLEASE SEND,*

*The Holy Ghost
Amen.*

He's even got some suburban examples. In the St. Louis suburbs there's a split-level house that wears huge messages on the white siding over the garage. They're done in that

kind of replaceable marquee lettering, only these letters are handmade of wood. One sign shouts:

*ALCOHOL, DRUGS, SEX AND SUICIDE
ONLY ADD TO YOUR TROUBLES. JESUS IS
THE ONLY ANSWER.*

"The man who does it," Fentress tells me, "has been doing it since about 1970—weekly. Every Friday or Saturday he gets up on a ladder and moves those letters around." An estimated 60,000 motorists see these messages every day.

Fentress doesn't push much autobiographical information, but his background does add some insights. He grew up in Nashville. ("Uh-huh," the gallery-hoppers nod.) He studied at Princeton and the Art Institute of Chicago. This was through the late-70s, and he took in the art and theory that was in vogue then—Minimalism in gallery art, a deadpan Marxism in the architectural/industrial studies of influential photographers. Meanwhile, on his own he was studying the biblical subject matter in Rembrandt's etchings.

Infuse those dispassionate industrial/architectural studies with some very literal bible material, and out come Fentress' photos.

Still, he says, "The first one I did I wasn't really looking for it. It was in the context of street photography in Chicago when I was in graduate school at the Art Institute. I took a picture, probably in 1980, of a Toyota that was parked on the street with a cross, a real cross, bolted to the roof. On the side of the car were the words 'The Christians Are Coming, The Christians Are Coming.'"

The next year he was teaching at the University of Arkansas and a student brought in a picture of a barn covered in scriptural quotes. "I don't think he thought very much about it," but it started Fentress thinking about a series of his own. That summer, "driving around being a traveling salesman for a medical radio program my father [a doctor] was trying to get off the ground, I was in small towns in Kentucky and Missouri" and started seeing, and shooting, religious signs.

He's taken "maybe 1000" photos by now. "A lot are not very interesting," he says, but there are somewhere around 200 "that I like a lot." Sometimes he'll take a trip specifically to look for signs, like a drive around Texas. ("Uh-huh.") Other times he'll be traveling on business and just happen to spot one, like the time he was heading out to LaGuardia and saw a good church sign in Queens. He still has family in Nashville, which means a lot of back and forth. "I've done it just about every possible route you could take, a lot of back roads."

One assumption people often bring to this stuff is that it's all a fundamentalist Protestant mode of expression. Fentress grants that it does seem to reflect the "iconoclastic roots" of Protestantism—all that tearing down of churches and defacing of statuary during the Reformation—as well as the fundamentalist emphasis on the written word and direct scrip-

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tural citation.

But if so, Catholics have learned how to do it too. He's got photos of those professional billboards for St. Jude and the Virgin Mary's 800 number. And a funny series showing handpainted road signs that spell out the Hail Mary a phrase at a time, like Burma Shave signs.

And although he hasn't photoed any yet, he's sure there must be similar signage where the messages are Jewish or Muslim or whatever. Certainly there are recurrent Old Testament references and others which, "if you just subtract what you come to it assuming," could apply in a lot of directions. One of his creepier shots is of a warning painted in block letters on the side of a rock in Morningside Heights: **OBEY GOD OR BURN.**

"Obey God or Burn' could quite easily be Islamic," he observes.

Fentress tells me he doesn't go out of his way to meet the people who make the signs, though "a lot of people have come out and asked if I'm saved."

Is he?

"I hope so," he says. Then adds: "I became a Catholic while doing this series." Raised

Protestant, he'd become "an agnostic and/or atheist in high school or college. When I started doing these photos I was reading Catholic theology like Thomas Aquinas. Mostly at first I was just interested in the epistemology." He'd only known American Protestant epistemology, with what he says are its relativistic views on the nature of truth and knowledge. Reading up on the Catholic-Aquinian idea that there is objective truth, "initially I was just interested in the boldness of the idea. After a few years of much struggle I... 'poped' I guess."

Which helps to explain why Fentress takes his material seriously. In a real sense he's documenting a working-out, in peculiarly American terms and terrain, of a roots-up epistemology. How do we know Jesus is love? How do we know we're saved? We read it at the gas station, on the side of a barn, at the burger joint.

In some of the handmade things he's photographed there's a bizarre juxtaposition of materials that has that surrealist sensibility, intentional or not, that attracts attention to Outsider Art. In one photo a white silo stands out on a flat farm, with what appears to be a

full-size lawn-sculpture horse standing up on the top of it. Down the side of the silo, in huge block script, is painted:

**JOHN
3:3**

I ask Fentress what that horse is doing up there. It looks like something out of Magritte. And how is it related to John 3:3? I'm trying to remember if the horse is John's evangelist symbol. There's the eagle, the bull...

Fentress cuts me off. "It's a quarter-horse farm," he deadpans. And John 3 is one of the favorite bible chapters among Born Again Christians. "There are a lot of advertising jingles in it" for Born Agains, is how Fentress puts it. It's the one where Jesus tells Nicodemus the Pharisee things like "Verily verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3) and "Ye must be born again" (John 3:7).

Another picture shows one of those little fake-stone grottoes people sometimes put on their lawns. This one, in Fertile, Mo., has a statuette of Jesus appearing to knock on a red, heart-shaped door; over it in big scrolled letters it cries *Let Me In*. You can see what's

intended, but on another level it's kind of a vision of the Lord as a family pet left out in the rain.

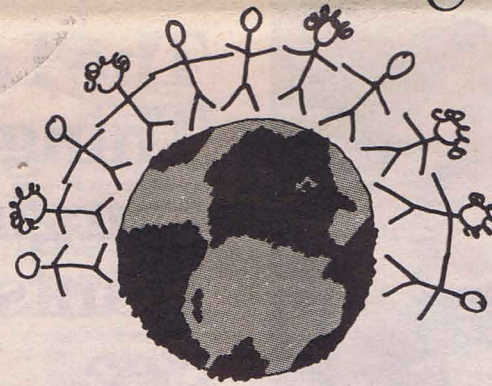
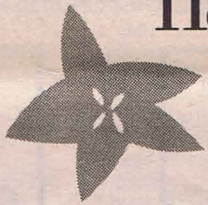
Fentress resists any urge to call this Outsider Art. "I think the woman who put that up thought of it as a sign and a piece of evangelism first and foremost," he insists, "and art way down the list, if at all." He's uncomfortable with any "self-congratulatory, rationalist" view of these things as kitsch. "It's just documentation of a real phenomenon out there."

And if some of it makes you smile, Fentress says, maybe it was meant to. Maybe, he says, the humor is intentional in a sign that says *Christ is the Answer—Full Service*. Certainly it is in another that exhorts you to *Fight Truth Decay* by reading your bible. A motif he's photoed in several locations is an image of Jesus posing like Uncle Sam, saying *Jesus Wants YOU!* or the variant *Jesus Want's YOU*. On one level it's a mildly disturbing reminder of how Christianity and patriotism are equated in this country. On the other hand it's just a little joke. And in the land of drive-in churches, evangelical strippers and Mitzvah vans, the Lord obviously has a sense of humor.

★

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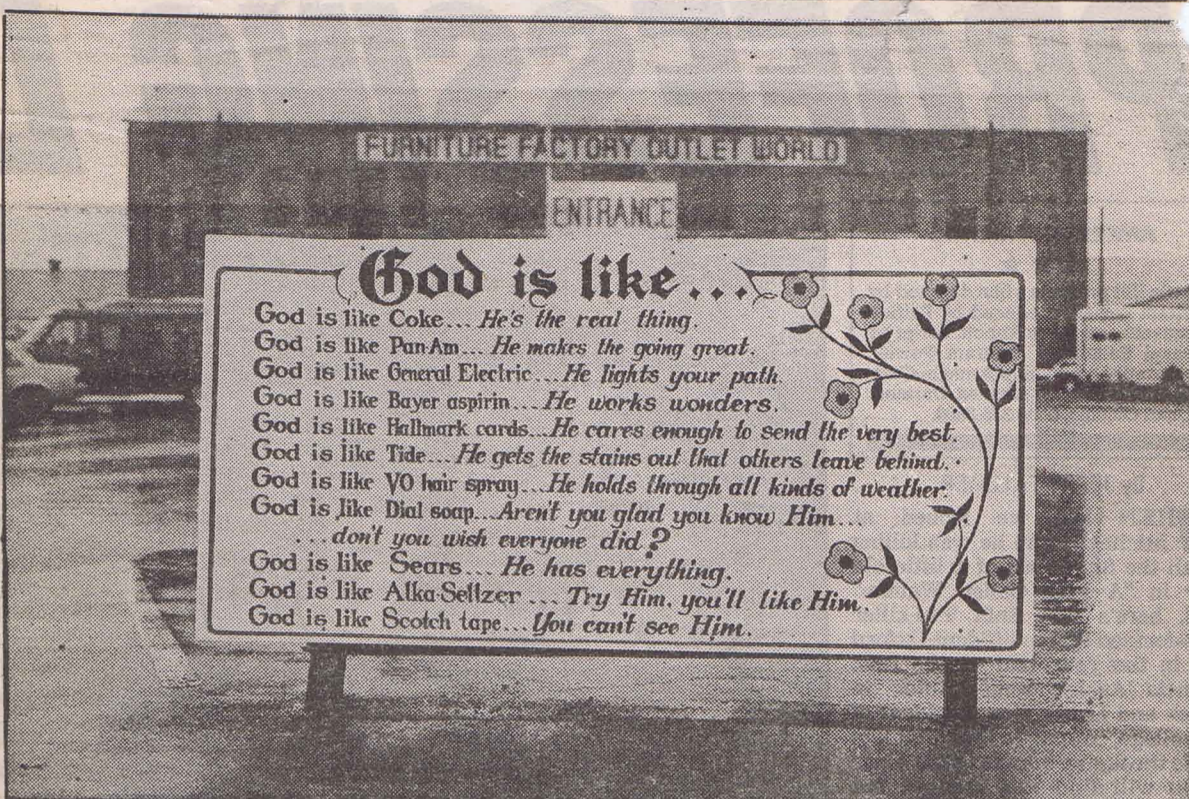
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AT 12TH ST.

4:15, 6:15, 8:15, 10:15, 12:15AM



THAT OLD SIGN RELIGION: Sign in Waxhaw, N.C., part of roadside religion series snapped by photographer Sam Fentress and on view at O.K. Harris on West Broadway.

They brake for Jesus

IN 1980 a graduate student of photography in Chicago saw a Toyota driving along with a wooden cross bolted to its roof and a sign on its side: "The Christians are coming. The Christians are coming..." He whipped out his camera and took a picture of it.

"Then in 1981," says Sam Fentress, "I was working for my father [a Detroit doctor] as a salesman, trying to sell — there is a distinction — commercials for a five-minute medical program." The doctor's son was driving around through Missouri on this project when, rounding a curve at a place called Fertile, he suddenly came across a roadside sign of a life-sized Christ knocking on a door that was also a big red heart. "Let Me In," is what Christ was saying in capital letters. "I went and talked to the woman who put it up," Fentress says. "She told me that her idea was if somebody was coming around that curve drunk on a Saturday night, they'd look at it and it might change their life." She also told him that she'd wanted the sign to read: "A Latch You Must Open," but that her son, the only one who could reach that high, instead wrote: "Let Me In."



FENTRESS

EYE ON ART

JERRY TALLMER



In any event, aspiring photographer Fentress, who has since become successful architectural photographer Fentress, had a new vein to pursue: religious signs of the American roadside. The current show at the O.K. Harris Gallery of 59 examples of what he saw and shot along this line between the years 1981-88 will give you pause, and cause, to think many deep and a few ironic thoughts — it did me. In their visual and compositional purity they may even give you cause to think on Walker Evans.

"Well, I studied Walker Evans in college," said Fentress. "And Diane Arbus and Robert Frank and Lee Friedlander. But I also have an interest in religious art, in Rembrandt and medieval manuscripts and that donor art where somebody gets into a picture with the Virgin and Christ. I see that as an early version of PR."

Shall we look at some pictures? A huge moving van passing through Nashville, 10-wheeler or more, trumpeting all the length of its side: "CHRIST IS THE ANSWER."

In Jasper, Ala., a giant Shell pump-price tree in the form of a cross (crucifix?), the gasoline choices — Regular, Unleaded, Premium, Diesel — in a line resembling extended arms, the Shell insignia itself as the bowed head. "Station of the Cross" was

the title suggested for this one by David Ribar, curator of an earlier Fentress show.

"Obey God or Burn" — this in whitewash on a rock in Morning-side Heights, New York City.

"Jesus Said Ye Must Be Born Again / John 3 - 7 / Area Size Rug Sale 20% Off" — this by the side of the road in Jackson, Miss. "My wife saw that one," says Fentress, whose wife, mother of their three small daughters, is writer Elizabeth Connell. "I would have missed it. I was looking the other way, for restaurants. I said: 'I gotta do it.' She said: 'Not till after dinner.'"

"Hail Mary ... full of grace ... the Lord is with thee ..." etc., in eight sequential signs, Burma Shave style in Starkenburg, Mo. "I'm just old enough to remember Burma Shave," says Fentress. "A Monroe, Ohio, silo with 'John 3.3' on its side and a horse sculpted on its top.

On a house in Queens, N.Y.: "Mother ... spends all her money on crack ... Jesus said ..."

Sign on the siding above the garage of a neat white house beside the road in Winchester, Mo.: "Alcohol, Drugs and Suicide Only Add to Your Troubles. Jesus Is the Only Answer." The owner of the house told Fentress he'd put letter tracks above that garage back in 1970 and had changed the message every week since, all those years. "He also told me: 'I believe 60,000 cars pass here every day.'"

Natural question, justifiable, one hopes, under the circumstances: What might be the Fentress faith?

"Raised as a Methodist [between Detroit and St. Louis]. Then, in high school and college, agnostic and atheist. And wound up being a Roman Catholic." Churchgoing? Wobble of hand: "Regularly."

He takes his Catholicism seriously, however — "and as a Catholic, I'm not so sure I see these things ironically. But I'm willing to accept that a lot of people see this work as camp or kitsch."

A very serious, attractive young man of 37, Sam Fentress. I'm not sure how Pat Buchanan would view these images, but I know how Sinclair Lewis would have, and how I do.

O.K. Harris, 383 West Broadway, (212) 431-3600, to April 24.

Jazz benefits for fan

THREE jazz institutions are holding benefit performances over the next several weeks to help longtime jazz fan Allyson Paul — who has been stricken with leukemia — pay her medical bills.

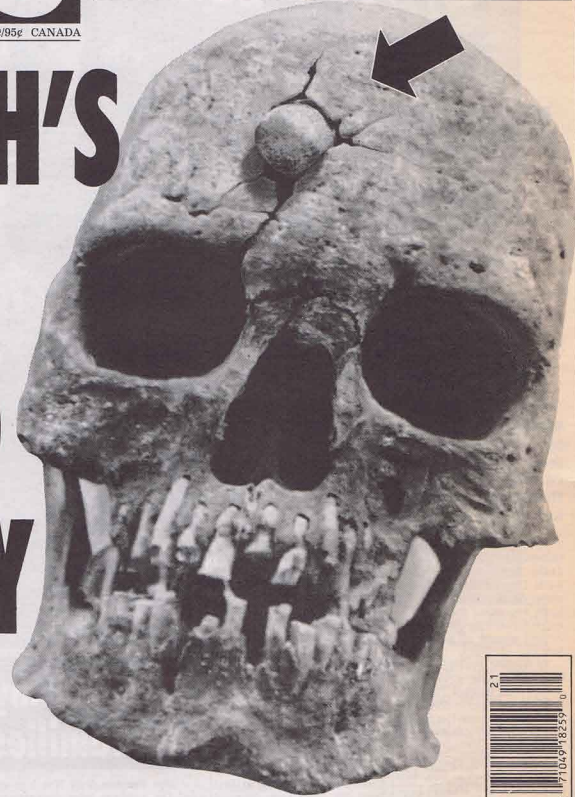
More than 50 jazz musicians will perform at three clubs where Paul worked as a waitress for many years. The first benefit will take place Sunday from 4 to 7 p.m. at the Village Vanguard, 178 Seventh Ave. South, (212) 255-4037, and feature such world-renown musicians as David Murray, George Coleman, Pharoah Sanders and John Hicks.

On April 18 from 10 p.m. on, a benefit at Bradley's, 70 University Place, (212) 473-9900, will feature Tommy Flanagan, Joanne Brackeen, Cedar Walton, Roy Hargrove, Al Grey and Randy Brecker.

The last of the three benefits will happen on April 19 at Sweet Basil, 88 Seventh Ave. South, (212) 242-1785, from 9 p.m. on, and include the Gil Evans Orchestra, Darryl Jones and Oliva Le'Avanae.

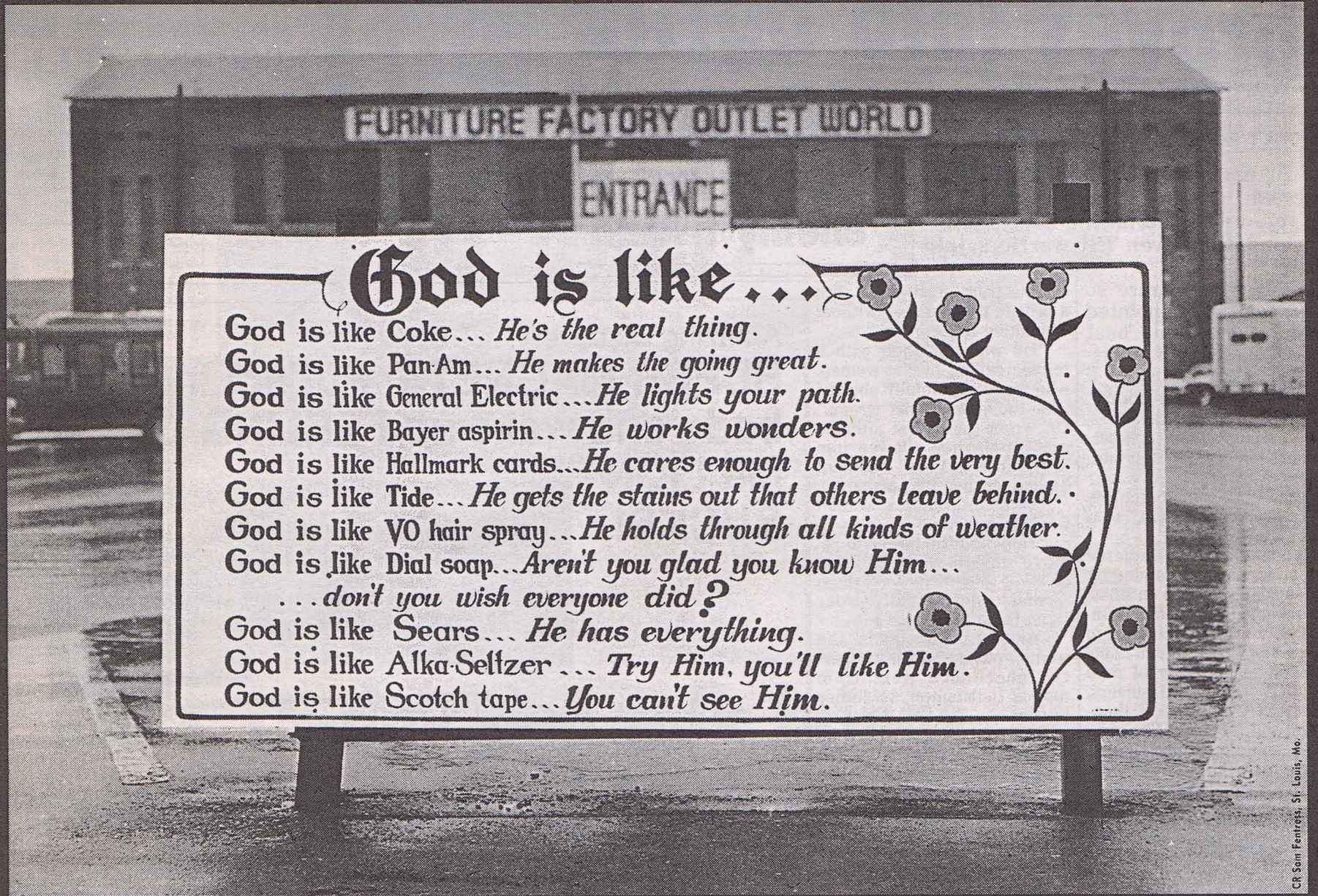
Stone from David's slingshot
still stuck in giant's forehead!

GOLIATH'S SKULL FOUND IN HOLY LAND!



Dramatic discovery proves Bible story is true!

A message from Heaven!



God is like...

- God is like Coke... *He's the real thing.*
- God is like Pan-Am... *He makes the going great.*
- God is like General Electric... *He lights your path.*
- God is like Bayer aspirin... *He works wonders.*
- God is like Hallmark cards... *He cares enough to send the very best.*
- God is like Tide... *He gets the stains out that others leave behind.*
- God is like VO hair spray... *He holds through all kinds of weather.*
- God is like Dial soap... *Aren't you glad you know Him...*
- ... *don't you wish everyone did?*
- God is like Sears... *He has everything.*
- God is like Alka-Seltzer... *Try Him, you'll like Him.*
- God is like Scotch tape... *You can't see Him.*

If you've topped the age of 50, you have no trouble remembering those great Burma Shave signs that, back in the '30s and '40s, were strung along our roadways from coast to coast. They sure helped keep us youngsters entertained.

Well, that was then and this is now, and along comes St. Louis photographer Sam Fentress who, since 1981, has been gathering photographs of religious signs that have pretty much re-

placed those great Burma Shave signs of yore.

Some are funny, all are heartwarming...like the "God is like" sign snapped by Fentress in Waxhaw, N.C. See if you can add to the list. Here's one: God is like a Maidenform bra...He won't let you down!

Come to think of it, "God is like" would make a great car game for the kids the next time they start getting antsy in the backseat. It's worth a try.

Russian town cancels annual Buddy Holly Day!

The tiny Russian hamlet of Udokan has cancelled its 9th annual Buddy Holly Day — because vandals destroyed the town's 12-foot bronze statue of the famous U.S. rock star!

"The festival just wouldn't be the

same without the giant statue," disappointed organizer Vladimir Kolovoi said. "Instead of spending any money on the festival we're going to use it to fix up the statue so we can have our Buddy Holly Day again next year."

HOW TO GET HITCHED IF YOU'RE OVER 35!

If you're getting up in years and still haven't gotten hitched, author Barbra Lovenheim has some interesting marriage stats for you.

In her new book *Beating the Marriage Odds: When You Are Smart, Single and Over 35*, the writer uses National Center for Health Statistics figures to tell you what your chances are:

Ages 35 to 39 — 46 percent of men will marry, 38 percent of women will.

Over 40 — 33 percent of men

will marry, and only 24 percent of women will.

"It's difficult for single women to find partners as they get older because there are fewer men available," Miss Lovenheim says.

But her statistics do point out that more women over 35 are beating the odds by marrying younger men — about a 20 percent increase over the past 17 years.



Photographer Sam Fentress

Praise the Lord and pass the mustard:

Photographer finds God is still for sale by a highway near you



"Pasadena, Texas. 1988"

— Sam Fentress

By MICHAEL J. FARRELL

One day, in Chicago, Sam Fentress saw a car with an incongruous cross bolted to the roof. Being a photographer, he quickly took a photo, but the picture "languished on a contact sheet" for a year or more.

It also languished in his mind. Other expressions of public piety began to intrude on his attention in the late 1970s, so he started taking other pictures. They became the "Signs of Jesus" series of photographs. They are on exhibition at the O.K. Harris Gallery in New York until April 24.

An urban billboard announces:

God is like Coke: He's the real thing.

God is like Pan Am: He makes the going great. ...

God is like Tide: He gets the stains

Michael Farrell is NCR's senior editor.

out that others leave behind.

God is like VO-5 hair spray: He holds through all kinds of weather. ...

God is like Alka Seltzer: Try him, you'll like him.

And more of the same. Behind the billboard is a building with a big sign, "Furniture Factory Outlet World." God and mammon jousting for attention.

In front of factories or in roadside cornfields, selling God is as American as apple pie. Fentress has chased the signs across 30 states. His photos tell of the human hankering to persuade others to think as we do.

As the gallery press release puts it, "In a weird mix of evangelical brio and Madison Avenue savvy, American businessmen, homeowners and preachers have colored the landscape with their sometimes fiery, sometimes gentle messages of salvation."

Although born in Detroit, Fentress grew up in that other mecca of popular culture, Nashville. He went to Prince-

ton to be a lawyer but took an optional course in photography, which immediately torpedoed his legal career. He studied at the Art Institute of Chicago. He taught for a while. He now photographs architecture for a living.

But along the way, on the back roads of America, he was struck by the signs of the times. Flannery O'Connor said of the South that while it may not be Christ-

Asked about Catholics, Fentress cites, without missing a beat, a series of 12 signs along an Illinois road depicting the Hail Mary.

centered, it certainly is Christ-haunted. This applies to the entire country, says Fentress.

Although he does not search for the sign-writers (many are hit-and-run artists), he has met many of the God-haunted.

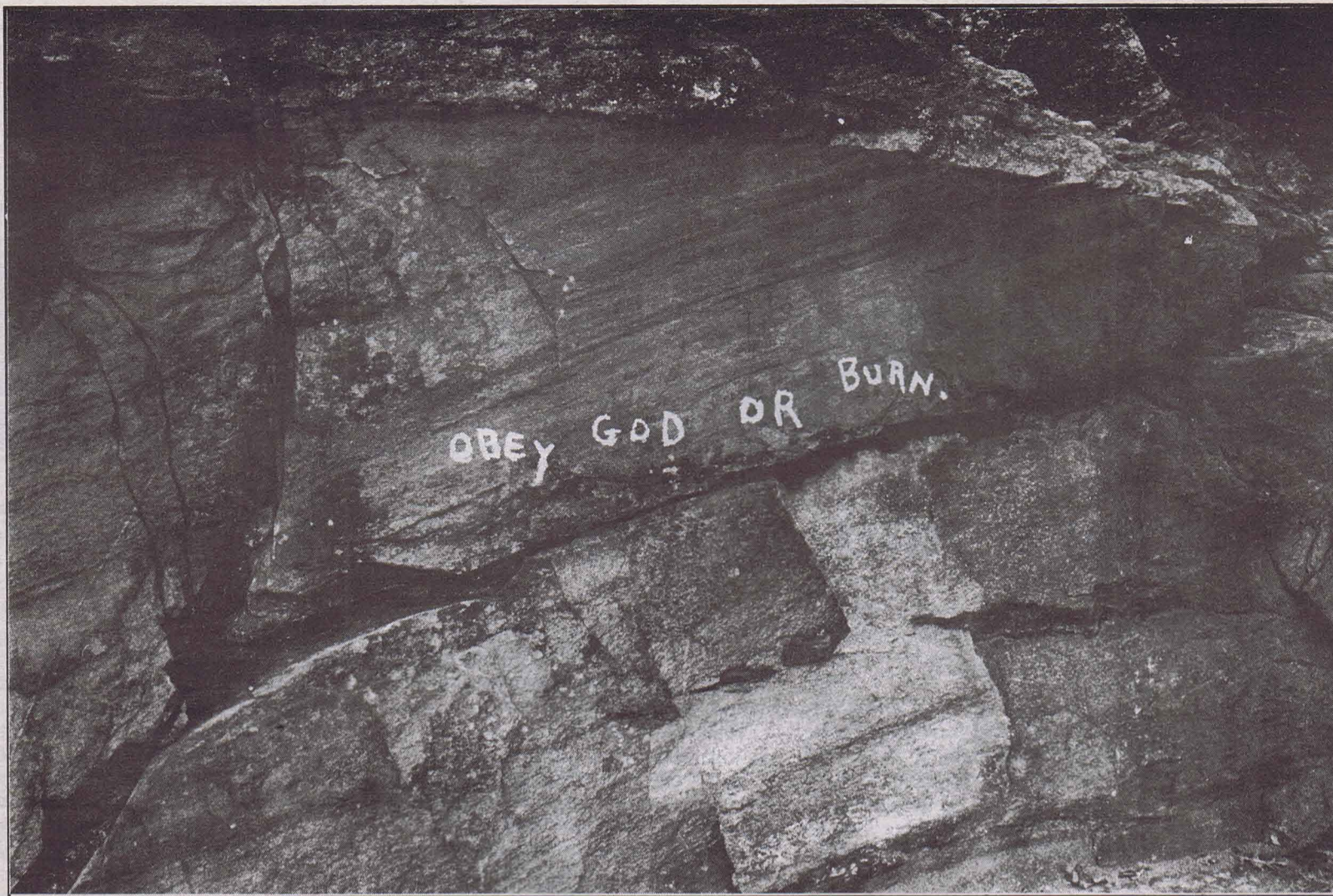
Sometimes "they'll come out to see if I'm saved," he says.

At B.E. Salee's Jesus Way Goat Corral in Tennessee, Fentress' wife had to stay in the car because of the unambiguous sign by the driveway: "Holiness or hell. Within these confines is holy ground. Please put on some clothes and cover your nakedness. Before entering, women of all ages arrayed in pants, shorts or dresses that expose the knee not admitted. Repent or perish!"

Salee, who raised "stud goats," allowed Fentress to photograph the slogans on his VW van, the signs nailed to trees, the "God Hates Sin" sticker on his hat. What struck Fentress especially was how "serene" Salee was, a secure man who knew where his moral compass pointed.

Fentress, on the phone from his St. Louis home, talks with unvarnished respect for the folk artists. He refuses to lump them into any category, though he concedes most are not mainstream.

Asked about Catholics, he cites, without missing a beat, a series of 12 signs along an Illinois road depicting



the Hail Mary. Many signs are primitive, naive. Or weak on spelling, such as "God forgive me. I have sined. ..."

For the aesthete there is a twofold artistry, that of the wayside sign and that of the photo. Fentress was in art school in the heyday of what was called minimalism, a superficial, dead-end aesthetic where surface was king and content spurned.

Fentress, not surprisingly, swam against that tide, although his is no mushy aesthetic either. "I don't reject the theory that says art can have an extra-aesthetic purpose," he concedes craftily, "... I'm interested in the way the message and the photo interact."

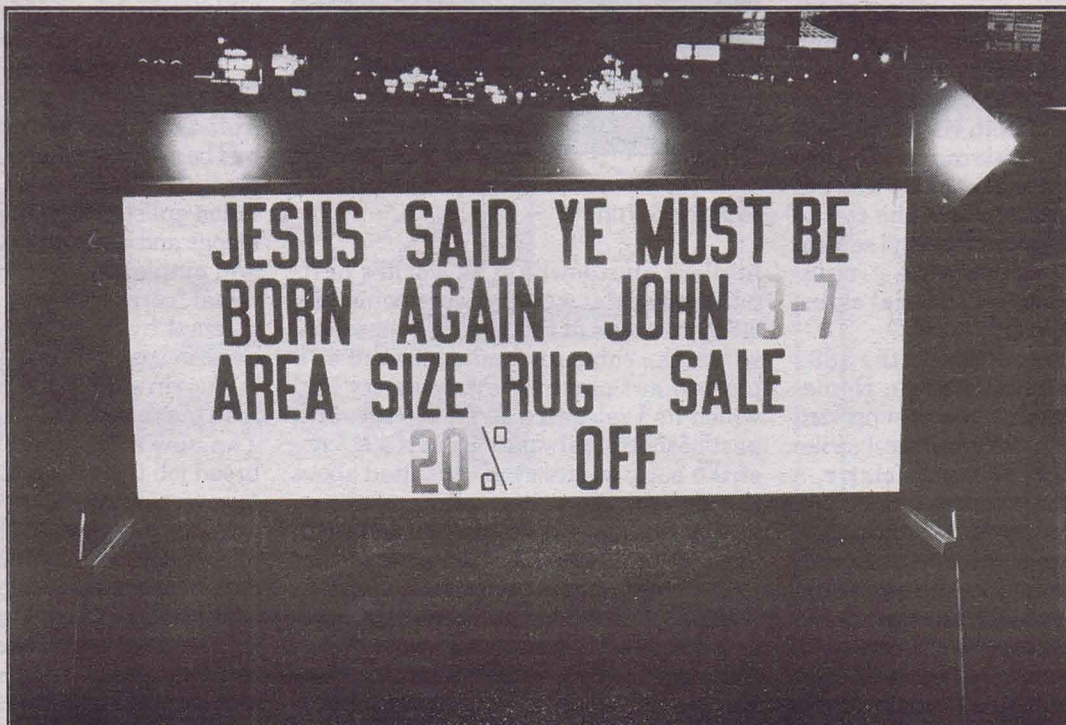
As for the message, Fentress is only too eager to wax theological. The wayside artists, after all, have left a rich legacy to ruminate on, intense contemporary echoes of the *mane, thecal, phares* of the Old Testament. Fentress drops

the names of such authors as Oscar Romero, Josemaria Escrivá and Josef Pieper.

Within a few years of starting the "Signs of Jesus" series, he became a Catholic, although he makes no explicit connection between the two.

Says he, "At the time I started taking the pictures, I was looking at Rembrandt etchings from the Bible, and reading Thomas Aquinas, and listening to Talking Heads (a punk rock group). These led to a sort of fascination with the boldness of the proclamation and the messages."

That was the early 1980s. He has no regrets. "You might call me a 'falling toward' (as distinct from fallen-away) Catholic." ■



— Sam Fentress

Top: "Harlem, 1990"

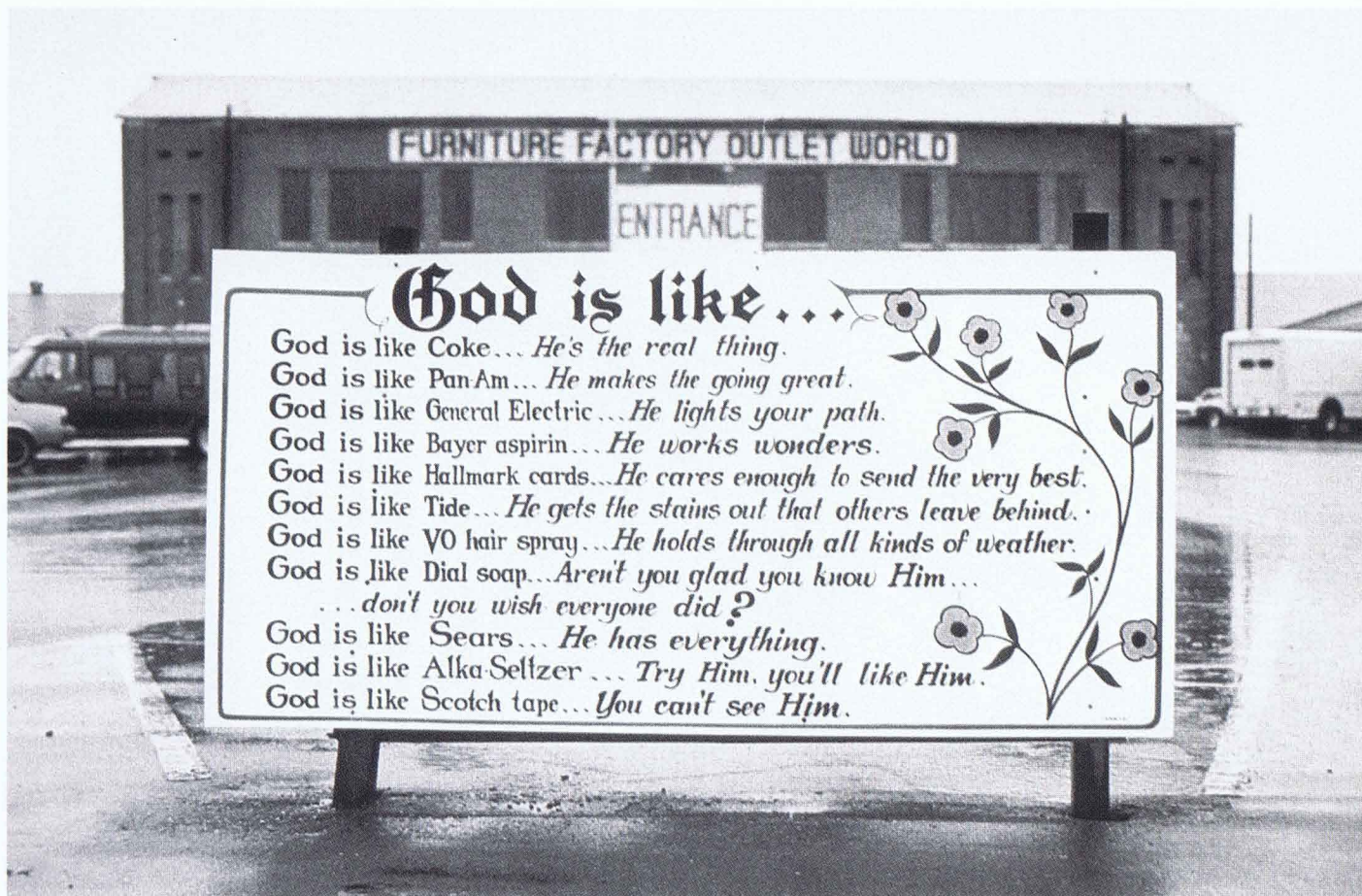
Middle: "Fertile, Missouri, 1981"

Bottom: "Jackson, Mississippi, 1985"

Signs of Jesus: Photographs by Sam Fentress

The Fine Arts Center/Cheekwood

April 8–May 21, 1989



Waxhaw, North Carolina 1985 silverprint

The south is a region of the country long noted for the religious devotion of its inhabitants. Two highly visible fundamentalist branches of religion have distinctly southern roots: The United Church of Christ and The Southern Baptist Convention. Among the smaller offshoots of fundamentalism in the region are The Seventh-Day Adventists, The Disciples of Christ, The Assemblies of God, The Jehovah's Witnesses, and The African Methodist Church, to name but a few. All of these faiths are found throughout the United States, primarily in rural areas, but they are concentrated most strongly in the South.

While the particulars of worship in each of these churches varies, many members share a tendency to make public witness of their faith, in simple, absolute terms, excluding any further argument. Some members go one step further, making their public

witness in the form of window or yard displays, billboards, and signs. These are often posted in conspicuously public places and are filled with warnings, advice and admonitions inspired by the words of the Bible.

The craft of these signs is generally no more than adequate and the sentiments voiced within seem touchingly simplistic to the more sophisticated mind. Like folk art, these signs are naive but sincere; crude but personally expressive. Their placement among business locations or near advertisements creates an amusing, disconcerting context for their message. Their presence as a legitimate part of "Americana" is often noted but seldom documented in depth or presented to the general public. The advent of the Interstate Highway System initially "condemned" most of these signs to "oblivion", but today not even the Interstates are free from their presence.

"Nowhere else in the world is religion wedded to public culture in quite the same way as Christianity is in America," says Sam Fentress, "where cars, flashing signs, gas stations, billboards, even graffiti reveal a strange union of the ways of Madison Avenue and the Way of the Cross. I am fascinated by the peculiar way some Americans try to graft signs of Christianity onto their businesses in order to sell their products, and the equally peculiar way others bring American advertising know-how into their attempts to sell Christianity."

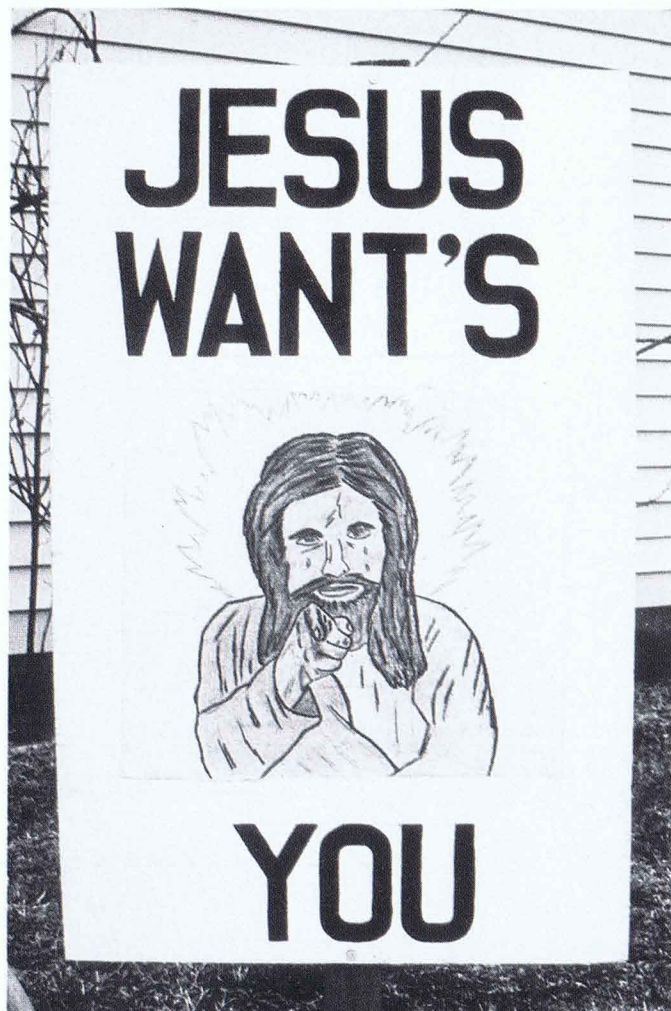
Photographer Sam Fentress (born in Detroit, currently living in St. Louis) has travelled in twenty-one states documenting the phenomena of "roadside evangelism". His images date from the past ten years, which suggest that the much-touted modernization of the South has done little to dampen vernacular religious expression. His first image in this series was the photo of the Volkswagen Beetle with a cross bolted to its roof. Subsequent images show toothpaste jingles, Army recruiting posters and Burma-Shave signs adapted and transformed to carry religious messages. Fentress believes these signs flow out of an intense individualism—even vigilantism—combined with a fervent piety, American business smarts and an acute awareness of the next world. He has spent time tracing the roots of this marriage of commerce and religion, finding its precedents in 18th-century American culture: "I find them in Johnathan Edward's spiritual sermons, such as "Sinners In The Hands Of An Angry God", as well as Benjamin Franklin's secular homilies in *Poor Richard's Almanac*."

"My photographs document the continuing expression of this dual impulse in American culture. Somewhere at this moment there is probably a work crew erecting a cluster of three crosses, paid for by a retired industrial magnate from West Virginia who has funded hundreds of these same clusters and had them placed along roadsides in several states. And at the other end of the socio-economic scale, a man in Winchester, Missouri will go to his garage as usual, pick out a number of homemade wooden letters and hang a new evangelistic message from the tracks built onto the back of his house."

Of course, Fentress is not the type of photographer who shoots his subjects from a comfortable distance; he takes pains to find and talk with the signmakers whenever possible. I asked him to describe one of his more memorable experiences and he related the finding of B.E. Sallee's "Jesus Way Goat Corrals" near Cleveland, Tennessee: "My wife Betsy had to stay in the car as I wandered up the driveway alone past a sign proclaiming:

HOLINESS OR HELL

Within these confines is holy ground.
Please put on some clothes and cover
your nakedness. Before entering,
women of all ages arrayed in pants,
shorts or dresses that expose the knee
not admitted. Repent or perish!



Owensboro, Kentucky 1984 silverprint

I met Mr. Sallee, who graciously moved his pickup and VW van out of the garage so I could photograph them. I took more pictures of signs nailed to trees and was then allowed to photograph the Ten Commandments on a wall in the back of his den. I heard my wife approaching outside and thought: she's going to get us kicked out with her blue-jeans just as I'm about to photograph his hat that has the words GOD HATES SIN on it—but somehow she had put on a "legal" skirt and removed the forbidden jeans in our compact car. I got the rest of my pictures." Fentress added, almost as an afterthought: "Mr. Sallee had not read a paper, listened to a radio, or watched a TV in over twenty years. He was a very happy man; mysteriously serene."

The merger of pious religious sentiments with commerce and advertising always produces kitsch. The obvious absurdity of this kitsch is most clearly evidenced in the photograph of the parking lot billboard Fentress found in Waxhaw, North Carolina. On this sign God is compared to General Electric, Bayer Aspirin and Alka-Seltzer, among several other products. Why these particular products, one might ask; isn't this sign proof positive of the insidious power of advertising?

An equally humorous, poignantly inept sign proclaims: "JESUS WANT'S YOU". Flanked by these words is a naively painted portrait of Jesus, rendered in the pose of Uncle Sam found on Howard Chandler Christy's famous World War One recruiting poster. The portrait of Jesus seems all the more odd in that the traditional halo has been replaced by ragged flames, suggesting that in this instance, Jesus is not in the mood to hear any excuses!

A more subtle point of view is found in a photograph taken at night of a Shell gas-station outside Jasper, Alabama. (Might a fitting title for this image be "station of the cross"?) As one of several night shots included in this exhibition, the religious symbolism of a sign blazing like a "light shining in the darkness" is clearly presented. It seems obvious that this particular sign is shaped like a crucifix, but the subtlety arises from the placement of the Shell Oil Company logo in a manner which suggests a head over a body with outstretched arms. This schematic human figure stands proudly as the equivalent for the abstract "figure" of God himself, whose "face" we cannot see. Furthermore, the fish placed on each of the arms—containing the Greek version of the name "Jesus"—and the shell above them provide additional layers of symbolism, referring of course to the sea, and by extension all the Biblical stories in that connection. Finally, the prices for fuel mounted inside their square beacons provide a symmetry, balance and order to the sign and the symbol of the sign itself.

Sam Fentress has called our attention to a facet of American culture in these photographs which we often overlook or are unable to see. Like a naturalist, he has collected and preserved all manner of rare specimens, mounting them for our enjoyment and education. Though he is no stern moralist looking for Armageddon, he would happily make the claim that "Signs of Jesus are everywhere".

David Ribar
Curator of Exhibitions

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

- | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|------------------------------------|
| 1. Jefferson City, Missouri 1987 | 23. Pasadena, Texas 1988 | 45. Waxhaw, North Carolina 1985 |
| 2. Fort Worth, Texas 1988 | 24. Madison, Georgia 1983 | 46. Waxhaw, North Carolina 1985 |
| 3. Natchitoches, Louisiana 1988 | 25. Port Arthur, Texas 1988 | 47. Jackson, Mississippi 1985 |
| 4. Dallas, Texas 1988 | 26. Vergennes, Illinois 1982 | 48. Milan, Tennessee 1986 |
| 5. Bastrop, Louisiana 1985 | 27. Alvin, Texas 1988 | 49. St. Louis, Missouri 1988 |
| 6. near McDonald, Tennessee 1985 | 28. Lake Charles, Louisiana 1988 | 50. St. Louis, Missouri 1984 |
| 7. Ulah, North Carolina 1985 | 29. Roxboro, North Carolina 1985 | 51. St. Louis, Missouri 1988 |
| 8. Perry, Georgia 1987 | 30. Times Beach, Missouri 1986 | 52. St. Louis, Missouri 1987 |
| 9. Stockbridge, Georgia 1987 | 31. Jasper, Alabama 1987 | 53. Milan, Tennessee 1986 |
| 10. Camden, Alabama 1987 | 32. Carnigan, Georgia 1987 | 54. near Cleveland, Tennessee 1985 |
| 11. Murphy, North Carolina 1985 | 33. Drakesboro, Kentucky 1984 | 55. Tybee Isle, Georgia 1987 |
| 12. Rockmart, Georgia 1987 | 34. Birmingham, Alabama 1987 | 56. Starckenburg, Missouri 1982 |
| 13. Eulonia, Georgia 1987 | 35. Baton Rouge, Louisiana 1984 | 57. Baton Rouge, Louisiana 1985 |
| 14. Supreme, Louisiana 1984 | 36. Bowling Green, Kentucky 1981 | 58. near Raymond, Illinois 1984 |
| 15. Owensboro, Kentucky 1984 | 37. west of Shawneetown, Illinois 1985 | 59. Fertile, Missouri 1981 |
| 16. Chicago, Illinois 1980 | 38. Shreveport, Louisiana 1988 | |
| 17. north of Wardell, Missouri 1985 | 39. Monroe, Louisiana 1985 | |
| 18. south of Murray, Kentucky 1982 | 40. Monroe, Louisiana 1985 | |
| 19. near Perryville, Missouri 1983 | 41. Chandler, Indiana 1985 | |
| 20. Wentzville, Missouri 1985 | 42. Winchester, Missouri 1988 | |
| 21. Palma, Kentucky 1984 | 43. Winchester, Missouri 1987 | |
| 22. Kansas city, Kansas 1987 | 44. Winchester, Missouri 1986 | |

All of the works in this exhibition are silverprints, except for #59, which is a C-print. All works are from the collection of the artist.

SAM FENTRESS

Education: 1980— MFA, School of the Art Institute of Chicago
1978— Independent Study at Princeton University with
Frederick Sommer and Emmet Gowin
1977— BA, Princeton University

Selected Exhibitions: 1988—“Current Works '88”, Society for Contemporary Photography,
Leady-Volkers Gallery, Kansas City, MO.
“Road and Roadside: American Photographs 1930-1987”,
Riverside Museum, Baton Rouge, LA.
“Road And Roadside: . . .”, San Francisco Museum of Art..
“Third Atlanta Photo Salon”, Nexus Contemporary Art Center, Atlanta, GA.
1987—“Road and Roadside: . . .”, The Art Institute of Chicago
(originating institution).
“Expressions of Faith”, Tell Gallery, Grand Canyon College, Phoenix, Arizona.
1983— One-Person Exhibition, Tarrant County JC, Ft. Worth, TX.
One-Person Exhibition, Sarratt Student Center,
Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN.
1982— One-Person Exhibition, Lindenwood College, St. Charles, MO.
1981—“Southern Eye/Southern Mind”, Memphis Academy of Art, Memphis, TN.
One-Person Exhibition, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, AK.

Grant Award: 1979— National Endowment for the Arts, Emerging Artist in Photography.

Sam Fentress resides in St. Louis, Missouri, where he works as a commercial architectural photographer. He has taught at Webster University in St. Louis, St. Louis Community College at Florissant Valley, and the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville. His works are found in numerous private collections, and in the collection of The Brooks Museum of Art in Memphis, Tennessee.



Jasper, Alabama 1987 silverprint

Photography



J.S. 91, Leaving Blackfoot, Idaho, 1956, by Robert Frank



Route 12, Wisconsin, 1968, by Danny Lyon

Hitting the road, studying the past, spoofing the present

What: Three photography exhibits

Where: Art Institute of Chicago
How much: \$4.50 for adults, \$2.25 for students and seniors, free on Tuesdays

By Abigail Foerstner

Americans have been hitting the road ever since the first pioneers headed West in their covered wagons. Sure, camper vans and superhighways have hortened the trip, but nothing has dented the spirit of rolling through state after state until you come up against something really big, like an ocean.

The "Road and Roadside: American Photographs, 1930-1986" exhibit at the Art Institute of Chicago through Sept. 13 commemorates this spirit with approximately 90 photographs guaranteed to leave viewers pulling out their cross-country maps in the way home.

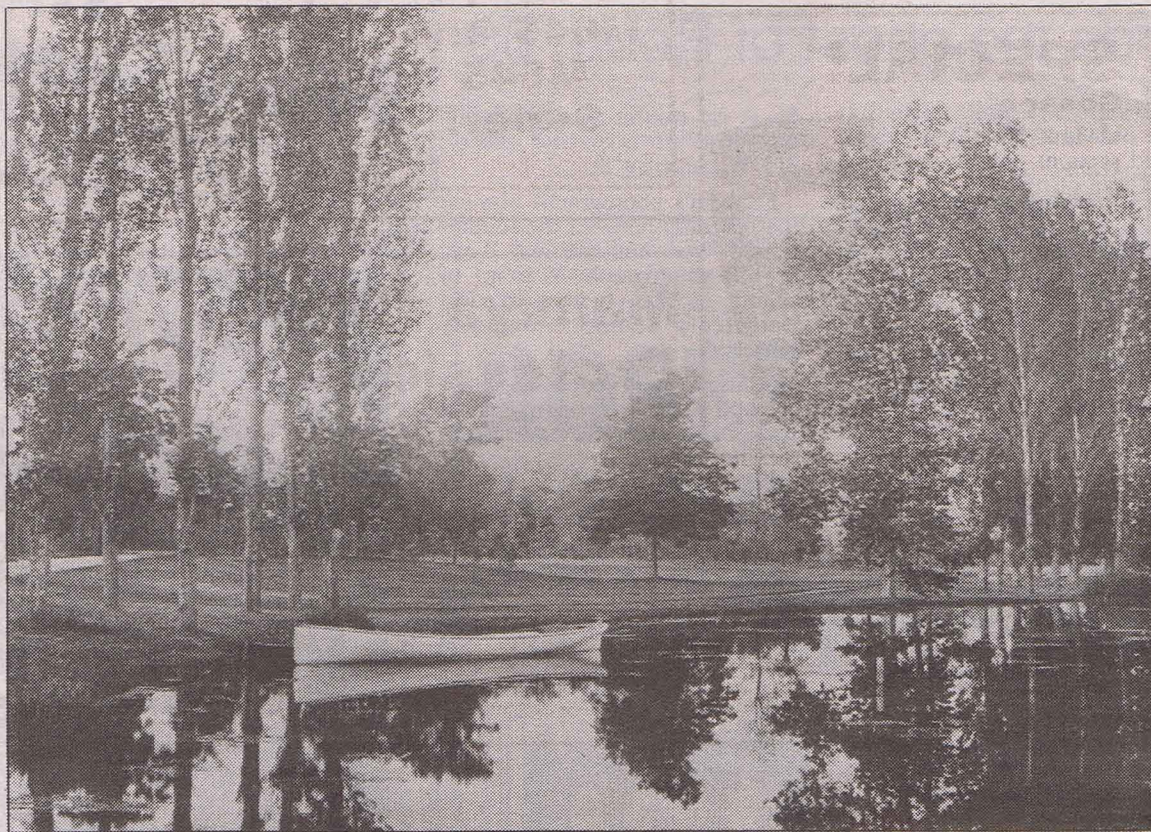
The panoramic view of the road, splitting the land in a leadlong reach toward an infinite horizon, provides the obvious common denominator for many of these images but with a constantly changing set of cultural tropes.

In southern Illinois, for instance, Sam Fentress photographed a row of placards that each contain a phrase of a prayer. The golden arches of a roadside McDonald's crown the phrase "full of grace."

The road splits the manmade monuments of grain elevators and utility lines just as lightning splits the cosmic sky above it in a Frank Gohlke photograph taken in Texas in 1975.

A morning mist in Minnesota hrouds even a huge semitrailer ruck in an ethereal touch in Stuart Klipper's photograph of Route 61 winding along Lake Superior in Minnesota.

Robert Frank suggests a foreoding road to nowhere in sever-



Landscape, 1858, albumen print, by Charles Marville

al of his images included in the exhibit from his "The Americans" series. David Plowden suggests a highway of promise that connects to a heritage of small towns and whitewashed churches in his landscape of a winding road in North Dakota. Steve Fitch fills his humorous "Diesels and Dinosaurs" photographs with the glitzy signs and statues that qualify as the folk art of roadside stops.

Other photographers with work in the show include Margaret Bourke-White, Harry Callahan, Paul Caponigro, Lee Friedlander, Dorothea Lange, Danny Lyon, Joel Meyerowitz and Edward Weston. Chicago-based artists represented include Plowden, Tom Arndt, Patty Carroll, Barbara Ciurej, Peter Hales, Ken Josephson, Lindsay Lochman,

Nathan Lerner, Melissa Pinney and Robert Thall.

"Almost every American photographer has a little body of work that deals with the road. You could address the whole history of our culture with that work," says Rhondal McKinney, a photographer who also teaches at Illinois State University at Normal. McKinney guest curated the exhibit with Russ Harris, assistant to the curator of the Art Institute's photography department.

"Since cameras are so easily portable, roads and roadsides became much more the province of photographers than any other artists," McKinney says.

Though most of the images in the show are contemporary, several date back to the 1930s, when Lange photographed the roads of

despair traveled by Dust Bowl refugees in the Great Depression. Motorcycle riders, small-town restaurants that promise home cooking and cars with lots of chrome spill through the photographs from the 1950s and 1960s. Next come the superhighways and their instant villages of motor lodges and fast food chains that tend to make roadsides a thousand miles apart look practically indistinguishable.

Thall photographed such a village at the Int. Hwy. 80 interchange in Amana, Ia. The Amana Colonies, seven communities established under principles of religious communism in the mid-19th Century, have since become tourist attractions off the still rustic U.S. Hwy. 6 a few miles north of Int. 80. But Int. 80 boasts its own "Little Amana"

with an array of colony-style restaurants and stores.

Like Thall's other black and white images in the show, the brightly lit oasis is set against a country landscape at twilight.

Such spots resemble "little ships out in the dark ocean," Thall says. "It's difficult to photograph in a rural area where the horizon controls" the scene, Thall says. "But at dusk the values change. You see little things out in the middle of nowhere."

Thall, a teacher at Columbia College who has photographed architecture across the country, says he most often takes his "road" photographs while on the road doing other work. He photographed Little Amana, for instance, because he was staying at a motel there while taking pictures of the real Amana homes and work places and other historic buildings in Iowa for the U.S. Department of the Interior. Among his current projects is a commission to photograph terracotta architecture in Chicago for the Canadian Center for Architecture.

But Carroll sought out the road for its own sake, veering off the superhighways during the last 15 years to capture the small motels fogged in the glow of their own neon signs. Carroll says trips to Florida that she has made every year since childhood inspired her project.

The little roadside motels with their fairy tale decor were built to model "someone's fantasy of what it means to be on vacation," says Carroll. "They tended to be sort of lonely places even though they're decorated."

Carroll's cibachrome prints emphasize the bold blush of neon lighting that pierces through the drawn draperies that cover the windows of the motel cubicles at night.

"Every year I think I'm done with this project, but it just keeps growing," says Carroll, who

Continued on page 90