

Vacant Eden: Roadside Treasures of the Sonoran Desert

Abigail Gumbiner, Carol Hayden and Jim Heimann
(Los Angeles, Calif.: Balcony Press, 1997)
96 pages, 100 color photographs, \$23.50 softcover
Reviewed by Douglas Towne

“Why don’t you head out to the interstate and relax for a few days at the Motel 6,” instructed my department chair when I arrived to claim my teaching assistantship at the University of Arizona. I nodded affably and departed, with no intention of following his directive.

For the past two days, I’d been navigating from Denver to Tucson, through the picturesque and mysterious Southwest, my head full of Kerouac. I refueled at all-night gas stations in the middle of nowhere, passed tent revivals set up in Indian country and bought snacks at general stores that doubled as Greyhound depots. Reverting to franchised mediocrity was out of the question.

Seeking lodging, I motored to the old highway strip called “Miracle Mile” and settled in for the night at the Quail Inn. This was a wise decision for a budding commercial archeologist, as this stretch of roadside would prove to be a treasure trove of wonders, many of which are spectacularly captured in the book, *Vacant Eden*.

Published almost a decade ago, the book consists mainly of motel-related images taken in the stunning, clear desert light. Like many of us, the photographers (Abigail Gumbiner and Carol Hayden) originally fixated on the signage of the motels, taking many appealing photographs of these advertising beacons.

It’s the “other” motel shots though, that make this book a visual wonder.

The photographers write, “As we repeatedly returned to the sites, more subtle details of the buildings emerged: swimming pools (often empty), lonely rusted furniture, back-lot discards, decorations and amusing oddities began to suggest additional art forms.” These are scenes most would rush past without realizing that these subject matters reveal as much about this strip—both past and present—as their neon signs. These images show how cool these establishments once were and how much has been lost by their demise. My favorite image is of a stack of stained, tattered mattresses piled outside (Plate 79); a scene difficult to compose a beautiful photo of, though Carol Hayden does.

Despite the visual blight apparent in so many of the photos, Tucson was a good place to document the pre-interstate

roadside in the 1990s. As Jim Heimann notes in the literate introduction, the city was eclipsed by Phoenix and Route 66 to the north and was “...a town bypassed and off the beaten track of tourism and commerce, its inadvertent isolation has allowed its recent past to dissipate at an informal rate, preserving many mid-century icons that have disappeared in other places throughout the West.”

Still, the book confirms an important tale: the staggering rate of change along the American roadside. By the time work on the book was started, many of the most notable Tucson motels—such as the spectacular Marilyn Motel that featured a blonde, bikini-clad lady on its sign, capitalizing perhaps inadvertently on the fame of the late Norma Jean—had been razed. Even more disconcerting are the establishments featured in *Vacant Eden* that have since disappeared: the Tropicana Motor Hotel, the Apache Tears Motel, the Round-Up Motel, the Bucking Bronco Court, and the list goes on.

Population is surging in places like Tucson, to the extent that even the old motel strips are being redeveloped. Shiny new businesses are replacing those sometimes venerable, often run-down, and occasionally dangerous places immortalized in this book.

With this change, the photographers describe their feelings concerning modern travel. “We sensed a profound loss of the originality and adventure which travel once promised. On the interstates, everything—restaurants, motels, gas stations, and rest stops—seems to look, taste, feel, and smell the same. Even the signage has become standardized so that no matter where you go, you’re always in the same place.”

The authors end this potential swan song to roadside Tucson poetically. Heimann says, “With para-

disse lost, we may all be faced with vacant Edens.” Gumbiner and Hayden comment, “In the long run, though, the promise of The Paradise Lodge will become Paradise Lost, as the beautiful old motels disappear into our neon sunset.”

If, indeed, *Vacant Eden* is a last look through the rear view mirror at the remains of roadside artifacts of the Sonoran Desert—the ragged survivors of which are ripe for demolition—it does so impressively. The strip couldn’t expect a better send off.

Douglas Towne’s artwork was recently featured in the Romance of the West: Nostalgic Images by Arizona Artists exhibit at the Tohono Chul Park Gallery in Tucson, Arizona. ●

