

***Readymade: American Roadside Artifacts***

Photography by Jeff Brouws, essays by various authors

(San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2003)

Color & black and white photos, 9 x 6, 272 pp., \$24.95 hardcover

Reviewed by Douglas Towne

The antithesis of the open road, my bureaucratic workplace is rather lifeless and certainly not fertile ground for discovering new commercial archeology publications. Imagine the surprise when the staid atmosphere of my grey cubicle was recently interrupted by an excited work associate gushing about the new roadside book, *Readymades*. Gesticulating wildly with the publication's press release in hand, she insisted I pick it up pronto. From her breathless spiel, I determined she had discovered the book, set out by store management as a conversation piece, while shopping for home furnishings. Evanescing as quickly as she had appeared; her whirlwind performance left me perplexed. The reflective impulse to ignore the recommendation however, was eventually trumped by my inquisitiveness as to what could instill so much animation in a government employee.

I'm delighted to confirm that, indeed, *Readymades* is a visual feast—and more! The book covers ten roadside subjects, each with a slew of photos and a brief introductory essay. Jeff Brouws's photography, either color or black and white depending on the topic, is the focus of the publication. The photos are of a minimalist style with the subject isolated from its environment, framed as a distinct object. With the images deliberately sparse in terms of content, Brouws treats his subjects as readymade are found in the landscape. Hence the book title, *Readymades*.

This fresh approach works well as most objects carry the photo without the need for extraneous clutter. Particularly striking are the images of abandoned gas stations, dilapidated drive-in theatres, and aging trailers whose black and white format makes them appear even more forlorn. Subject matter in color that strays from typical roadside genre (partially painted pickup trucks, vibrant-hued residential homes, and various farm structures) similarly grabbed my attention. Also pleasing are the photographs that deviate from Brouws' minimalist methods. They are of roadside signs which are cropped for an often humorous, always interesting, effect.

Brouws' photographic method disappoints only with topics such as railroad boxcars, whose charm, I think, is dependent not on their "readymade" mass-produced form but the railroad company logos decorating them and their rail yard setting. The boxcars featured are rusted relics parked in bland backdrops and fail to excite this train buff.

The text accompanying roadside “picture books” is often second rate and painful to read alongside stunning photographs. Thankfully, *Readymades* refutes this stereotype. Brouws proves a competent author, writing interesting essays about his childhood in a San Francisco suburb and retracing Ed Rusha’s subjects in the classic *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* across the country.

Perhaps wisely though, he delegates the bulk of the writing to an assemblage of talented individuals, with Phil Patton being the most recognized name. The result is a diverse collection of well-executed essays that delightfully weave personal experiences with insightful observations about the subject. Especially noteworthy is the essay introducing sign images by D.J. Waldie, a city planner in the L.A. suburb of Lakewood. A somewhat eccentric figure (a southern California native who never learned to drive), Waldie knits Shakespeare, Thomas Jefferson, and Walt Whitman into a composition that pushes the envelope of roadside analysis, but in an accessible style that anyone ordering a “blue plate special” would enjoy.

Though far from the highway, I was in roadside nirvana perusing *Readymades*. My enthusiasm for the work increased with every page—I couldn’t wait to see which slice of Americana photographer Jeff Brouws would focus on next. That is, until I came to the final chapter. Its imagery, at first merely nondescript, became increasingly alarming in its consequences. Panicked, I rushed to the computer and dashed off this frantic email to our new SCA president:

Dear Carrie,

I have seen the future of commercial archeology and it ain’t pretty! When the remaining roadside eccentricities are well documented, what will the SCA focus on? Please tell me the last chapter of *Readymades* isn’t any indication....

With hesitation, I’ll reveal the theme of the final chapter—storage units. Yes, storage units.

Personally, I can’t recall ever being enamored of a storage unit. Others must feel similarly as this architectural category was overlooked as a focus of membership interest in the impressive SCA recruitment brochure recently designed by Frank Brusco. Perhaps storage units lack inherent charm. Or maybe I’ve just sacrificed one—too—many Saturdays helping friends stuff them with “treasures” such as tattered sofas. Either way, no matter how impressive the photography, my interest waned because of the subject matter.

But let’s not quibble about storage units and the future of commercial archeology when the majority of *Readymades* is such a delight. Its imagery provides fresh impressions of roadside artifacts and the succinct essays might even be the highlight of the offering. This well executed book underscores the improving

quality of roadside publications, but isn't what I'd consider a groundbreaking effort...unless, of course, storage units become the next focal point of the commercial archeology crowd.

Residing in the Valley of the Sun, Douglas Towne is book review editor of the SCA Journal. When not documenting vanishing Americana or chasing badminton shuttlecocks (he was a double gold medalist at the Arizona Olympics), he's seeking fresh SCA voices for future book reviews. With firm guidance from his better half, he's a recovering pack rat though never to the extent that required leasing a storage unit.