

JERRY BECK

"SOUVENIR HIGHWAY"

Capp Street Project

San Francisco

May 31 - June 27, 1987

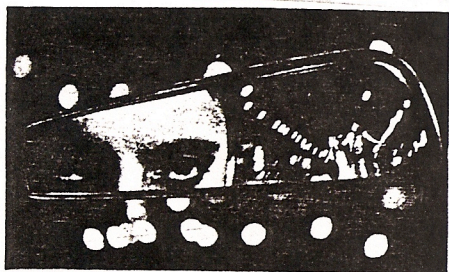
Americana is in, in case you hadn't noticed. Everyone's doing art or telling true stories about it, some more successfully than others. Jerry Beck, a sculptor and installation artist from Boston, and the latest artist-in-residence at the Capp Street Project, does it well.

Beck's Americana material was gathered during a nine-day cross-country journey from the east to the west coast—and it's not just a vast amount of things but the right things.

In an environment that represented one of the most ambitious pieces ever seen at Capp Street (even the roof played a part in it), the artist packed just about every metaphor, reference and visual image you can imagine concerning the American landscape as seen from your speeding car. It was *On The Road* revisited. It was tacky and funny and sad. We've all been there. The piece made sense.

It started outside, up a sharp ramp made to look like a highway with yellow lines down the middle. A picture of a bored-looking toll-taker sat behind the glass. There were coins and an old styrofoam cup scattered in front of him. As you came in, you were greeted by a highway divider standing guard around some sacks of asphalt. Car keys were hanging off it—time to begin the trip. The wall was covered with plush maroon velveteen, and was adorned with a bad painting of a stretch limo. Along the walls, sod had been planted, the sort of yellow, carbon monoxide-choked grass you find on freeway shoulders.

Then came rows of country mailboxes, some with little scenes inside. Fragrant tree-stumps greeted you as you entered the Midwest. Trees are being transformed into condos, or so says the artist, who tacked architectural plans on the wall and constructed little cardboard houses to make his point. On the floor, saw-blades sat atop wood chips.



Billboard Image from *Souvenir Highway*

In the Southwest, tumbleweeds were blowing in the wind, generated by two fans. Barbed wire, sand and a large snake led the way to an Indian site, complete with fake teepee and "real smoke signals" from an electric stove. For 25 cents you could listen to "live Indian war chants." (Beck has a keen eye for the commercialization of culture.)

There was also an electric train running on rails that sat on barbecue charcoal, a wonderful scenic site littered with garbage, and a splendid motel room that even smelled like disinfectant. With its Gideon Bible opened under a dreary lamp, its double beds and ugly bedspreads, the orange polyester curtains, the TV with its inane programs you watch because there's nothing else to do, the layers of faded wallpaper, the chewed-up armchair and pea-green carpet, it was the sleazy motel incarnate.

The roof was set up like a drive-in (on Saturday nights you could watch films under the stars). The adjoining gas station came with stacks of old tires and a red pump.

There's more, but I'm running out of space. Beck's work attests to an intelligent mind that ferrets out details and captures the smallest idiosyncracies. My only complaint with this installation had to do with his treatment of San Francisco. He apparently ran out of time, and simply put up a peace sign with wings. Then again, maybe that is San Francisco.

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