

Fantasy fireplaces:
Hot and cool designs

Swept away:
Updating the updo

The holiday dinner:
A cultural melting pot

West Texas: Preserving
memories via photos

360 West

A FULL-CIRCLE VIEW OF WHERE WE LIVE

Present Tense:
That feeling you
get when you're
waiting to open
your gifts.
We're waiting
patiently for the
big day. Are you?

The Giving Season

\$3.95 December 2014





Donkey. March 2014; Farwell, Texas



Tex Randall. October 2014; Canyon, Texas

Looking West

By Laura Samuel Meyn Photos by Jill Johnson

A childhood in the Panhandle plus two decades in photojournalism translate to big, modern images of a photographer's beloved Texas.

A

dent ed disco ball hangs in a dark arena; an 18-wheeler has flames painted down the side; an agave points its spikes up to a big Texas sky. Photographer Jill Johnson's "West" exhibit, opening at Artspace111 this month, brings together images she shot during recent road trips through the Texas Panhandle. Arresting and stark, the 50-inch by 50-inch photos frame the ordinary as extraordinary. High school bleachers, a neon sign outside a bar, an old door — through Johnson's lens, they're given historic weight and graphic appeal.

"It's the details in life we zoom by every day and forget about," she says. "There's a lot of beauty to those things, and the West is full of so many iconic and old Americana relics that are missing in the cities."

Carefully captured on the square, medium-format film she shoots with her beloved 1999 Hasselblad 501 CM camera ("I love the addictive thwack of the camera when you hit the shutter"), none of the images are cropped, and nothing is by accident. "You have 12

pictures on a roll versus 5,000 in a digital card; because it's film, it forces you to think about composition, exposure," says Johnson. A longtime photojournalist in Fort Worth, she, like others, transitioned to digital for work but still feeds her love of film photography where the pace — and the process — is a bit slower. "It's also kind of a step back into how I learned, back to my roots. Growing up in West Texas, spending time in these big wheat fields, I fell in love with photography there."

Johnson was born in Muleshoe, where she continued to spend summers with her grandparents even after moving to Houston. By the time she was a teenager, she was working the family farms in the Panhandle — plowing, putting up fence, painting barns, feeding cattle, cleaning out chicken coops and moving irrigation pipe. "I was basically a hired hand," says Johnson. "On my downtime I'd run around and shoot pictures — the sky, these old buildings, horses, donkeys, the dirt, the sand, the wind, they almost became my sidekicks." Around the time she left for college, Johnson got her first real camera, a Pentax K1000 that her mom bought at a pawn shop.

"West" marks her first solo exhibition; it's the third installment of art photographs she has driven to West Texas to shoot. Following up "Tru-vue" and "The Roads," "West" continues her exploration of places like her hometown and other small towns with



Photographer Jill Johnson
Photo by Allison V. Smith

unforgettable names: Earth, Vega, Levelland, Happy and Hereford. "Every time I get in the car, I always end up wanting to go back that way and find those images from my past," she says.

Johnson is the only photographer represented among Artspace111's 26 artists. Gallery owner Margery Gossett points to the photographer's vibrancy, use of color and



Sands Motel. March 2014; Bovina, Texas

documentary chops to create images that draw the viewer in. "Each piece seems to tell a story about a moment that for some reason, no matter how far removed you are from West Texas, has a familiar quality. You seem to be able to tell your own story from the striking images she captures," says Gossett.

Johnson points out that the sky has a big presence in her work, and it looms large in her childhood memories, too; she remembers lying in the back of a wheat truck staring at the sky and looking up at it through her grandparents' car window as they drove her between farms. Johnson has printed most of her pieces for the exhibit large — over four-foot square — to give the viewer the feel of looking through a window.

"You step outside a house in West Texas, you can see for miles and miles. Part of my soul is definitely there," she says, adding of the images, "It's a fading Americana. That's another reason I shoot it — I want to make it last." **360**

THE DETAILS

Jill Johnson's "West" Opening reception, 5-8:30 p.m. Dec. 5. Exhibit runs through Jan. 31. Free. Artspace111, 111 Hampton St., Fort Worth; 817-692-3228 or artspace111.com. To see more of Johnson's work, visit jilljohnsonphoto.com.