

61



American Beauty South

by David Houston

American beauty is a cliché that is in need of constant redefinition. That the phrase has survived, and even flourished, into the twenty-first century in academic circles and in the popular imagination reveals a deep-seated need for both unfettered nostalgia and a clear-cut myth of national identity to anchor our collective psyche. Language is often bound by place and time, and we could easily recount the evolution of the changing idea of American beauty from the sentimental innocence of the nineteenth century to the technological sublime of our current transitional moment. The myth of manifest destiny idealized the American landscape into a new Eden, an unending sublime landscape that was seemingly endless in its bountiful unfolding through the great westward expansion. This expansionist drive was followed by the laying of the railroads, the taming of nature through federal projects such as the Hoover Dam and the TVA, and more recently, a thoroughly commercialized sublime of media saturation. Today, American beauty has come to be defined by any, or all, of these parameters at once, a situation reflective of our pluralistic faltering historical moment.

The expansion of the concept of beauty beyond the idealized beauty of the Greeks, the divine beauty of the Middle Ages, or the romantic beauty outline by Edmund Burke in the eighteenth century opened the path for a particularly American notion of beauty divorced from traditional philosophical categories. America, after all, was the new world and needed a new structure and new concepts, the least of which was a new myth of the beautiful. Whether an idealized view of the land, the Gibson Girl, or the Tiffany lamp, the idea of American beauty that defined the new republic was unfailingly genteel and Protestant. Purged of the grit of life, American beauty and genteel idealization are so intertwined that it took nothing less than a social revolution to open the possibility for other ideas of beauty in the culture. The new beauty (or beauties) may be best described by Thelonius Monk's phrase "ugly beauty" the new notion of anti-genteel beauty that reshapes our experience of the world with collage-like incongruity or Zen-like minimalism. Burning the fog off American sentimentality and genteel acceptability, the new aesthetic of American beauty (espoused by jazz musicians, the post-war generation of American artists, beat poets and theorized by John Cage) asked us to open our eyes and ears to the unfathomable complexity of life itself. In choosing everyday life over the ideal, the new beauty rejected the refined sensibility of the drawing room and the formalization of the academy, and embraced common experience. This democratic expansion of beauty beyond the purity of the accepted and the ideal created a contextual framework that delighted in the incongruous, the hidden and the unresolvable, challenging artist and viewer alike to continually explore, create and respond to a rapidly changing world.

It took a Canadian expatriate artist like Jack Niven to explore the contemporary collage sensibility of the incongruous urban sprawl of Airline Drive outside of New Orleans in terms of art and American beauty. His project, *American Beauty, South*, brings together eight artists to utilize the exterior walls of almost forgotten suburban motels as aesthetic billboards. Once the major road going north out of the city, Airline Drive was the highway of death and redemption that provided the backdrop for the personal dramas of Earl Long, Bessie Smith and Jimmy Swaggart, to name three of the most obvious. This strip of low lying road and its roadside culture was made marginal by the new interstate highway and has drifted into the seedy neglect of many former vital American suburban spaces. These small motels, built originally by the New Orleans underworld as fronts for all manner of illegal activity have, after years of neglect, become revitalized by new owners, many of them Asian or Indian. Many have become residence motels for many of the workers pouring into New

Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

American Beauty, South is both an act of optimism and aesthetic guerilla warfare. These artworks literally turn the walls of these motels along a three-and-a-half-mile stretch of Airline Boulevard into a *plein aire* gallery. There, amid the cacophonous absurdity of incongruous suburban sprawl, these images hold their own as works of art dancing ambiguously with both their cluttered context and each manages to find its own autonomous individuality. Like the determined blades of grass that find daylight through this sea of asphalt and concrete, they are unexpected intrusions into an environment at once indifferent, but also receptive to one more image in a world that is a collage of time, place and meaning. This is the new American Beauty; American Beauty South (suggesting also a geographic distinction from American Beauty of the North, East and West). You need to be here to fully get it. If not, you get the concept. For many that is enough.

David Houston
New Orleans, 2008

David Houston is Chief Curator of Art at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans.