

C H U C K B I D D L E

S I G N S

M A R K P E R R O T T

S I G N S

CHUCK BIDDLE

MARK PERROTT

June 22 - August 26, 2017 | Concept Art Gallery

S I G N S

FAR FROM THE INSTANT gratification of instagram and facebook, Charles Biddle and Mark Perrott steadfastly pursue their practice of photographing neon signs. Theirs is a consuming passion, bordering on obsession, that seeps from their art into their lives

and back again. To tell the story of a time and a place through these objects that are fast disappearing, travel is organized around sightings or tales of old signs. Then they photograph them in various states and stages and dig up their histories. The process goes beyond recording and documenting to become a history that preserves a way of life.

Their works navigate the interstices between street photography and photo-journalism, two prominent modes in twentieth-century photography. Their signs are as evocative as the American working class presented by Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange, the individuals caught in the animated city scenes of Robert Frank, or the up-close-and-personal images of Nan Goldin's world. Signs become surrogates for people, with their shots combining the spirit and experiential qualities of street photography and the detailed focus of photo journalism. Their photographs defy time and categorization.

Neon signs and advertising have gone hand-in-hand from the very beginning. Georges Claude introduced colored light as architectural accents on the Grand Palais in Paris for the 1910 Salon de l'Automobile. Advances allowing a thinner tube that could be bent led to widespread use, and neon, once again connected with cars, made its first US appearance in the early 1920s at a Packard dealership in California. The ensuing explosion of neon signs is tied to a growing economy and consumer base as well as America's pursuit of increased mechanization. The desire for efficiency fostered a love of a streamlined aesthetic and new materials in the period between the world wars. Times Square and the Sunset and Las Vegas Strips took neon to the extreme with signs competing to dominate the skyline, yet a lot of signs advertised family or small town businesses, many located along the nation's highways. They showed pride of ownership and mass commercialism at the same time, and their histories are populated with artists and craftsmen, robber barons and movie studios. As today's new technologies erase traces of the past, Biddle and Perrott preserve the last stages of neon signs with clear eyes. These relics evoke past histories and memories, places and times.

Personal memories fuel Biddle's fascination with neon signs. He grew up in the Monongahela Valley in an apartment above his family's restaurant, The Gondolier, which was marked by a neon sign. It was almost like a family member with its own set of memories. When he became an artist, he started taking photographs of neon signs, first using them as preparatory studies for time-intensive and highly detailed colored pencil drawings. He commemorated hotels, bars, movie theaters, and restaurants in images that paralleled the work of contemporary realistic artists whose paintings resembled photographs. With the introduction of R prints in the 1990s, he finally found an acceptable color process that allowed the photographs to stand on their own. In images usually taken at twilight, when mother nature contributed technicolor light effects that both compete and complement the man-made neon colors, he mines the history of neon signs.

Perrott shares Biddle's interest in the history and form of the signs, but he photographs them in black and white which emphasizes the graphic quality of the letters. The large letters are complemented by the functional struts of the signs, standing out against the sky. Perrott's signs form one series in his work, standing beside his iconic images of Pittsburgh's steel mills before they disappeared, as they reveal a site's history and ownership advertised large scale. Reveling in the detritus left behind at abandoned sites, such as Eastern State Penitentiary, Allegheny County Jail, and White Swan Park, Perrott makes history out of the quiet details. This close at subjects he has captured over the years. In each and every work, he captures humanity.

While working separately and with different goals, Biddle and Perrott have created works that gain importance and meaning when seen together.

Vicky A Clark

Independent Curator

CHUCK BIDDLE IS AN ARTIST/PHOTOGRAPHER and a native of Western Pennsylvania. He loved the neon sign at his family's Gondolier restaurant in West Elizabeth, but has never found a photo of it. He has, from time to time, made pilgrimages to the neon mecca of Wildwood, New Jersey, and through America's heartland, in search of glowing survivors. "I have photographed signs for the better part of 30 years, all the while watching the mid-20th century heyday of neon disappear. What the losses have taught me is an appreciation for those signs that have endured the twists of fate and continue to serve their purpose with timeless design and the bonus of a shared history."

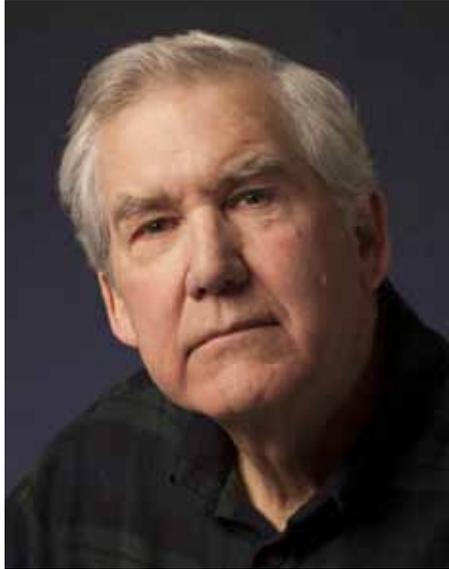
NEON SIGNS

Neon signs have been a continuous thread through my life since childhood. My early years were spent living over the Gondolier Restaurant, founded by my parents in 1955, the name and cuisine derived from my mother's Italian heritage.

Two architects and a sign company brought my parents' dream to reality in mid-20th century modern design and materials. Chrome, boomerang formica, plate glass, blonde wood, and an open plan defined the work space for my family and our patrons. Recessed lighting and corner spotlights made the building appear as if it had landed from another planet. Our neon sign was a presence from the road and the dining room, owing to the view through the large front windows. It was bold, hypnotic and beautiful, with the optimism and progressive attitude of my parents evident in porcelain enamel, glass and light. It bathed everything within reach in color, making our white gravel lot shimmer in red, as some kind of exotic terrain. I loved that environment, in all its' dramatic and unconventional glory.

Like a touchstone, I've thought of our sign so many times when I've pointed a camera at a surviving, and in many cases thriving example from the same period. It's been a gift and a great privilege to experience American life through all manner of neon signs from region to region, coast to coast. For four decades I have sought to make work that makes the most of that opportunity.





PITTSBURGH NATIVE MARK PERROTT has worked as a professional photographer for the past fifty years. The rooftop signs he's photographed carry the power of words, sometimes paradoxically, like GOODYEAR in Akron, Ohio honoring a corporation that has virtually abandoned its host city; and sometimes mysteriously, like DIVINE LORRAINE, that sits atop a formally empty, and mostly vandalized building, just north of center city Philadelphia. All these words had straightforward meanings for their contemporary 1930's culture, as America's muscle-bound industrial revolution neared its end. Time has given these signs new meanings for us today.

ROOFTOP SIGNS

For more than 100 years the Edgar Thomson Works, Andrew Carnegie's first steel mill, belched smoke and fire along the banks of the Monongahela River in Braddock, Pennsylvania, just outside of Pittsburgh. As if the glowing red-orange sky from the Bessemer furnaces were not enough to identify its presence, a 10 foot tall by 200 foot long sign was erected on the roof, leaving no doubt as to the identity of this industrial leviathan.

Rooftop signs like these used to be common, proclaiming well-known consumer and industrial products and corporations. Their scale was intended to dominate the landscape and reinforce the name recognition of companies like DOMINO SUGAR in Baltimore, MD; GOODYEAR TIRE, in Akron, Ohio; GOLD MEDAL FLOUR in Minneapolis, MN; and lend an air of importance to regional companies like DIME SAVINGS BANK, in Brooklyn, N.Y., and SHELDON CORRUGATED PAPER PRODUCTS, Secaucus, N.J. Many of these signs have suffered the same fate as the Edgar Thompson Works sign, when the companies they so proudly stood for were merged or closed, or the buildings that supported them were remodeled or demolished.

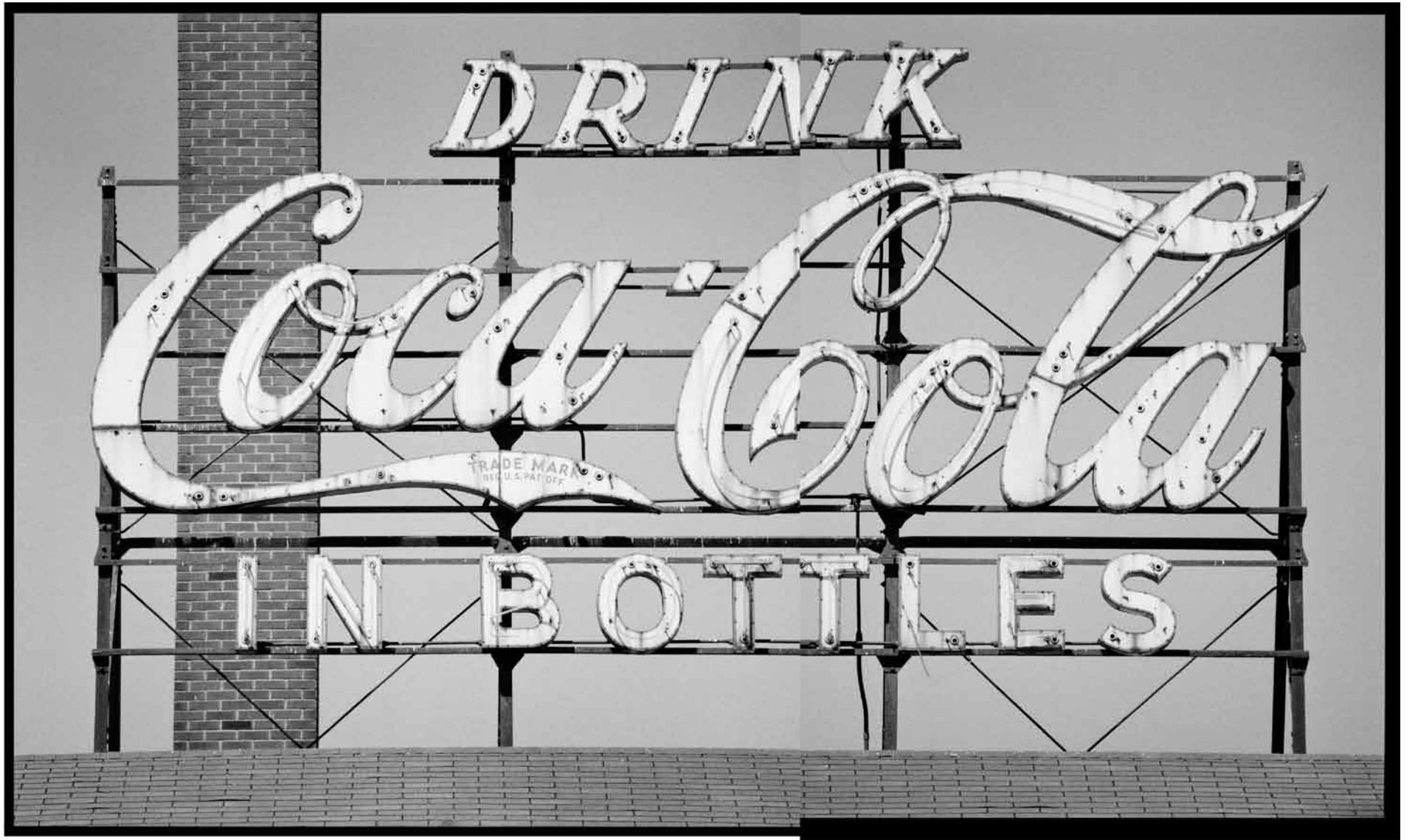
Over the past 20 years I have been crisscrossing the country in an effort to document as many of these magnificent roof-mounted signs as I can, before they too succumb to the ravages of time and the inevitability of modernization.

S I G N S

CHUCK BIDDLE

MARK PERROTT

TICKETS



◀ Chuck Biddle
Tickets, 2000

Mark Perrott
COCA COLA, 2011





◀ Mark Perrott
Divine Lorraine, 2007

Mark Perrott
Gold Medal Flour, 2009



Mark Perrott
Nonstops to New Yo, 1982



Mark Perrott
Gilbey's, 1988

Chuck Biddle
Baseball, 1998



Chuck Biddle
Caprice Motel, 2001





Mark Perrott
Marsh Wheeling, 2009

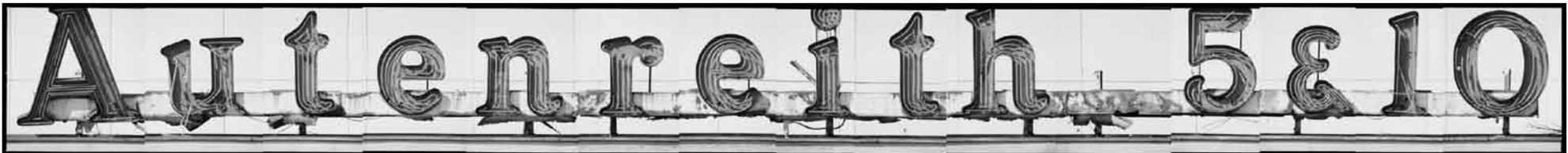
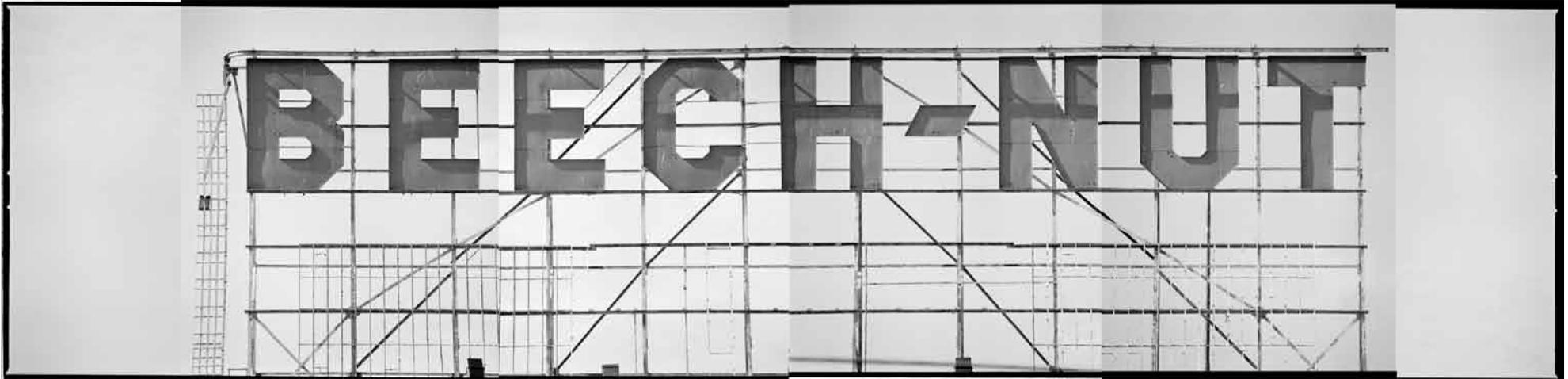


Chuck Biddle
Maple Drive-In, 2000
White House Submarines, 2015



Chuck Biddle
County Theater, 2016

Mark Perrott
Beech-Nut, 2009



Mark Perrott
Autenreith 5 & 10, 1990

Chuck Biddle ▶
Order of Moose, 1997



ORDER OF MOOSE



Moose Club





Chuck Biddle
Kelly's, 2009



Chuck Biddle
John's Grill, 2006

Chuck Biddle
Frolic Room, 1998



Chuck Biddle
La Casa, 2003





Mark Perrott
Sign Painter,
Neville Island
1988



Mark Perrott
Dime Savings Bank
2009



Mark Perrott
Mellon Bank
1976



Mark Perrott
Salem, The Kiss
1984



Chuck Biddle
Avenue Cafe, 1997



Chuck Biddle
Sea Shell Motel, 2001

Chuck Biddle
McGillin's, 2005



Chuck Biddle
Diamond Grille, 2011





Chuck Biddle
Clean Cars, 1998



Mark Perrott
Shelton Corrugated, 2009

Mark Perrott
Mulach Steel, 1995

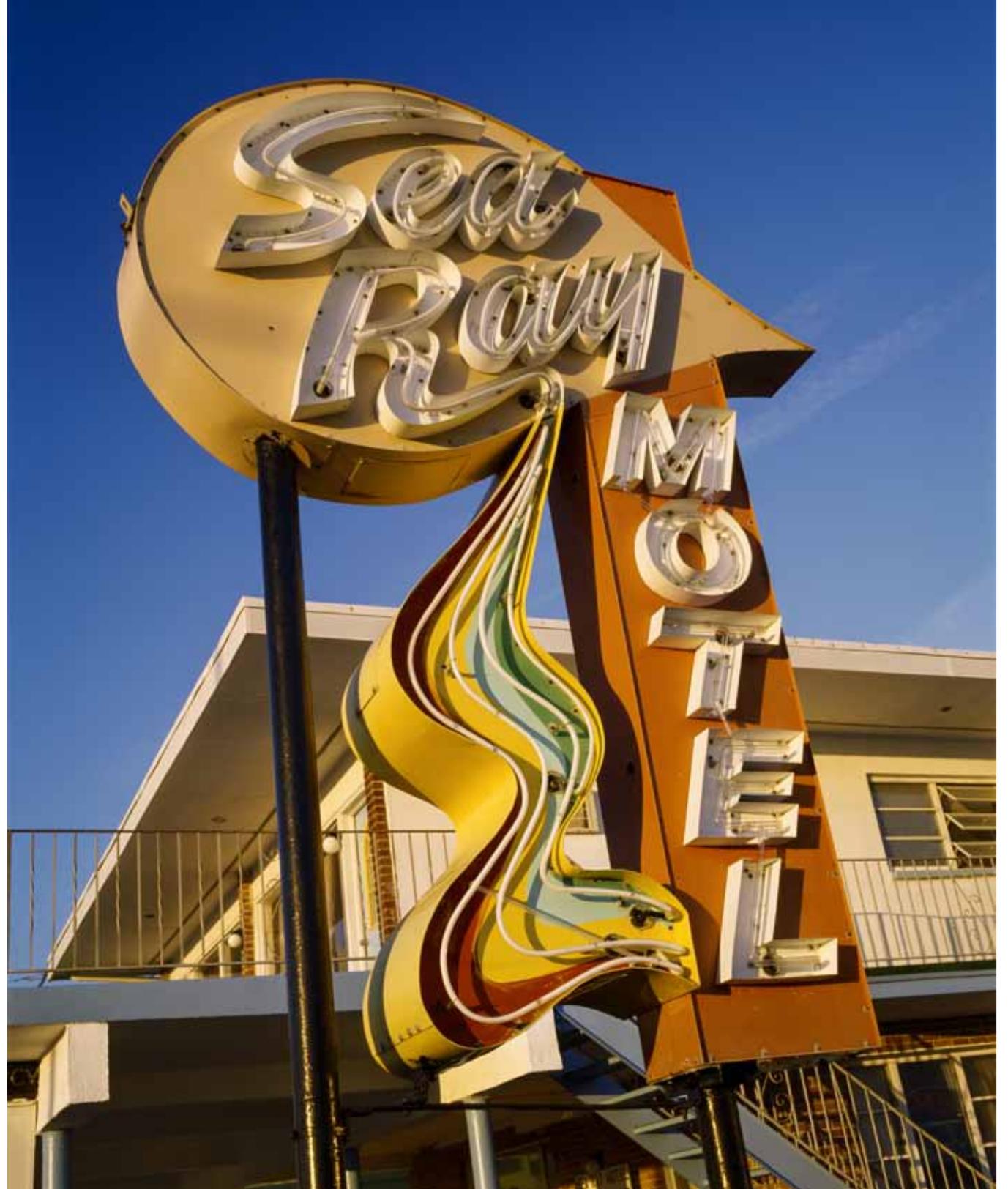


Mark Perrott
Motel, 2009



Mark Perrott
Downes Motel, 1996

Chuck Biddle
Sea Ray Motel, 2015



PARK
HOUSE



Chuck Biddle
Termini Pastries, 2016



Chuck Biddle
Parkwood Inn, 2005

◀ Chuck Biddle
Park House, 1998





◀ Chuck Biddle
F.O.E., 2003

Mark Perrott
Goodyear, 2007



Mark Perrott
Domino Sugars, 2007

Chuck Biddle
Drive-In Burgers, 2006



Chuck Biddle
Campus Theater, 2015



Chuck Biddle
Dr. Wilkinson's, 2006



Chuck Biddle
Garcia's Cafe, 1999





Chuck Biddle
Franklin Hotel, 1997

Chuck Biddle
Papa Milano, 1998



Chuck Biddle
Twilight Motel, 2001





Chuck Biddle
Bill's Golfland, 2009



Chuck Biddle
Aero, 1998



Mark Perrott
Grant Street, 1977

Mark Perrott
Gimbels, 1977





Mark Perrott
Walsh, 1988

Mark Perrott
Marlboro, 1986



Mark Perrott
Black Velvet/White Socks, 1986



Chuck Biddle
Horwath's, 1998





Chuck Biddle
To Go, 1997

Mark Perrott
Edgar Thomson Works, 1988







THANKS

Together, Chuck and Mark thank Concept Art Gallery, and especially Sam, Alison, Debbie, Daniel, John, Kaela, Kris, Marianne, Marshall, Mary Jo, and Phil, for the extraordinary opportunity to exhibit SIGNS in this long-standing and remarkable space. We are both grateful for Vicky Clark's SIGNS essay and her friendship life long. Thank you Tom Underiner for so many years of beautiful printing. Thank you Martha Wasik for taking our photographs and Vicky's words and creating this wonderful catalogue. And love and appreciation to Eileen and Joan for their every day gifts of patience and enthusiasm.

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Mark Perrott
Chuck, Breezewood, 1994

