

At 66



Sleeping in the tent: The Wigwam Motel, Holbrook, Arizona
Image from the reviewed book

by Freddy Langer, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, March 14, 2013

Sometimes you need a reason to take a trip, an impetus – maybe just a whim, like the one Rosemarie Zens had the first time she decided to journey Route 66. In the year 1966 it almost seemed the obvious thing to do, but it was also in keeping with the times. Those were days of optimism and new beginnings, when people had the firm belief, as Zens writes today, that anything was possible, “the personalized forms of protest, resistance and emancipation.” She still has her travel journal containing thoughts like these and new vocabulary she picked up along the way. As she leafs through it, also perusing the lyrics of country and rock songs she has scribbled in the margins with their ideas of “political, sexual and spiritual liberation”, a new idea occurs to her “to recapture the spirit of life in the 1960s by means of remembering/ repetition/ travel.” She will take the trip once again. Drive across America one more time on this most myth-shrouded of all roads. And on the way she’ll celebrate her sixty-sixth birthday. Number games are a wonderful thing. And sometimes they make for intriguing arguments.

Rosemarie Zens is a poet. “Als gingen wir vorüber” (“As Though Passing By”) is the name of one of her volumes of poetry. And now that she has chosen the medium of photography, almost exclusively, for her photobook “Journeying 66,” while alas writing far too little, the title of the poetry book would also have made a fitting name for these image sequences, because that’s what they’re all about – things passing by. And not about driving by, even if now and again the outline of the car door or a reflection in the side mirror can be seen in some of the shots. Zens speaks of the feeling of flow while driving, the intoxication, the dissolving of boundaries. “The road,” she writes, “that’s me.” It almost sounds like Walt Whitman.

Rosemarie Zens does not gaze with a nostalgic eye at the motels and shops and gas stations along the country road, delighting in the gleaming chrome of sports cars and motorcycles. What she shows are towns where time has come to a standstill. The dream of mobility,

America's great promise of salvation, echoes in her images mainly through the absence of human subjects. Here are dusty, arid deserts, the yawning abyss of the Grand Canyon, or a burned-down shack by the side of the road – a ruin evermore. "Save Main Street" is scrawled on the wall of a derelict theater in the middle of nowhere – and also: "If we build it, they will come." But those who come never stay – they just pass by.
(Translated by Jennifer Taylor)

"Journeying 66" by Rosemarie Zens

With an epilog by Wolfgang Zurborn. Kehrer Verlag, Heidelberg 2012
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