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Sign language

By Amy Alexander

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Harlan's photographs preserve the art of hand-painted signage from Baton Rouge's past.

Veni Harlan was driving a road she'd gone down enough times to have it memorized. Except that on this day, the sun was dropping, and its rays skittered across a corrugated, hand-painted sign, illuminating it in a brand-new way. The image snagged Harlan's photographic eye.

She pulled off of North St. and began snapping photos as fast as she could, wondering how she could fully grasp the beauty of that Dolphin's Used Tire Shop sign in the sunset, with its block type and swiftly airbrushed tire kicked straight out of the artist's imagination. Harlan, an award-winning graphic designer and photographer by trade, began to notice more hand-painted signs around town.

"It hit me," she says. "I felt a sense of urgency to go photograph this stuff."

There was Club Rose Night Club with its colorful stars, North Street Barber's striped pole, The Water Hole with its proclamation, "IOU Lord," in red. Ethel's Snack Shack bragged, in curled script, "The Original Recipe for Red Bean Rice."

Harlan snapped and shot. Then she put together a Web site titled *The Signs Project* featuring signs from all over Baton Rouge. Many no longer exist. New businesses come in and paint over the last shop's signs, and the process is fine art, in Harlan's mind.

"It's really ephemeral," she says.

Take a walk through Harlan's Southdowns bungalow, and it's clear she's attracted to the alchemy that happens when industry meets imagination. Antique fans she's collected line one shelf. A short, New Orleans-style wrought-iron fence holds her boisterous dogs in a sunken room off the dining room. A line of prayer candles glows behind the kitchen sink.

"I like going between worlds," she says.

Harlan, 50, grew up in Baton Rouge, where her family ran the Barq's bottling plant before it was bought by Coca-Cola in 1999. Her face lights up as she describes mixing the secret formula that made her family's brew and riding Barq's trucks through parts of town her debutante friends had never seen, dropping cases of the stuff at Mom-and-Pop grocery stores.

Harlan started to believe in the beauty and dignity of the everyday. For the signs project she launched in 2007, Harlan did a bit of sleuthing to find out about the people who made them. She sometimes has to ask around to find out about sign painters with names like Preacher Man and Wayne Jones. She includes profiles of some of the artists on her site.

Harlan has been asked whether the artist is the one who paints the sign or herself, when she snaps photos of them and shares them with others. The questions don't frighten Harlan or make her back away from her "treasure hunts," as she calls them. Rather, they are a chance to talk about what makes art, well, art.

For Harlan, art happens more often than people think, and every person, she says, is a creative force.

"At first glance," she says, "people miss the beauty." web.mac.com/veniharlan/signsofbatonrouge