

THE NEW YORK PHOTO REVIEW

ARE WE THERE YET?

Richard Benson

North South East West

Don Burmeister



Richard Benson, "Maryland" 2005



Richard Benson, "California" 2006

The show of travel pictures by veteran printer, book designer and photographer Richard Benson is as frustratingly oblique as the pictures themselves are gloriously and painstakingly crafted. Taken mostly in the U.S., the pictures are of ordinary every-day scenes, done mostly on those sunny, clear days that give a preternatural richness of color to even the most obscure street corner or sign.

The approach is straight-forward, and Benson sticks closely to the well-trodden tropes of American road photography: railroad scenes, vernacular architecture, old abandoned cars in the high plains, trees and street signs. The clarity of the images is startling, almost like that feeling of 'realness' you sometimes experience when you get out of your car after 8 or 12 hours on the interstate.

Walker Evans looms large in the bones of these pictures and you can often see the influence of Lee Friedlander in the choice of scenes, although they never quite reach the level of complexity and wit of the master (nobody does.) The "New Topographics" style of the 1970's, however, is the predominant mode. Many of the images look like simplified, albeit better printed, pictures from Benson's Yale colleague Stephen Shore.

There are no people in these pictures. This is a little disconcerting at first, but then, it is very much like traveling through America – lots of lawns and very few humans. It is this anonymous quality that makes these pictures in some ways an accurate portrayal of the American scene. Benson enforces this ambiguity by titling his pictures with only the most general of descriptors, 'California', 'Rhode Island' etc. The pictures, of course, are extremely specific, and this American traveler felt frustrated. I want to know exactly where each was taken, because I swear, I think I've been there myself.