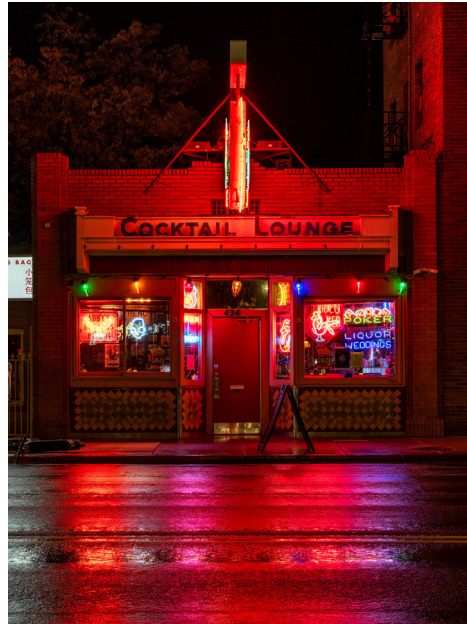


The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present, Nevada Roadsides: Northern Routes, an exhibition by Emily Najera, at the Courthouse Gallery from October 2, 2024 – January 30, 2025. CCAI extends its sincere appreciation to the artist, the city courthouse, and to all those involved with the exhibition. In addition, CCAI thanks our commissioned writer, Alicia Barber, who provided the following essay.

Arresting Imagery – Emotional Heft

*“Roads are a record of those who have gone before....” - Rebecca Solnit, from
Wanderlust: A History of Walking*



*Abby's Highway 40 Bar, Reno, Nevada
U.S. Route 40, pigment print, 20"x16", 2023*

A cocktail lounge resplendent in neon radiates a fiery crimson glow that spills out into the rain-dampened street.

A steepled church, all weathered wood and peeling paint, wearily brandishes a cockeyed weathervane touting the year 1888.

A roadside motel roofed in barreled red tile proclaims “WELCOME” and “VACANCY” while a gleaming high-rise casino and multi-story parking structure loom in the distance.

Emily Najera calls herself a visual storyteller, and the description could not be more apt. Individually, each of her photographs conjures up its own dramatic scene, pulling the viewer in with arresting imagery and emotional heft. Viewed together, they convey a powerfully poignant narrative about the ever-changing American landscape.

The modes of documentation and storytelling may initially seem oppositional, if you consider the goal of documentary to be the creation of an objective record, and stories as the products of the imagination. But in Najera’s photographs, as in the most engaging visual or narrative documentary work, the two are inextricably intertwined.



Historic Hazen Market, U.S. Route 50, pigment print, 20"x16", 2023

To be sure, each image she produces is a document of an authentic place captured at a precise moment. Each stands alone as an independent record of something both enduring and ephemeral, at risk of dramatic alteration or even erasure at any time. Indeed, some of her subjects may already have vanished forever from the landscape. The elevation of these records into the realm of story emerges from the photographer's singular point of view, a constellation of carefully crafted choices regarding everything from subject selection to perspective, angle, timing, and tone.

For Najera, most of these visual stories center on architecture and the built environment, a fascination since her teenage years in Michigan. That's also when she was gifted her first camera, a Vivitar 35mm SLR. In the years to follow, she continued to experiment with equipment and subjects, gradually shifting from film to digital photography and turning her gaze to the urban landscapes of the American West while pursuing her MFA at the University of Nevada, Reno.

Today, her inspirations stem not just from physical places but from other artists whose work explores similar terrain. As Najera explains, "I'm deeply influenced by photographers who capture the essence of Americana and document the transformation of urban landscapes. One notable example is Camilo José Vergara, whose work on American cities like Detroit, Chicago, and Harlem highlights the evolving nature of these environments. His approach resonates with my own passion for capturing buildings and their stories, as they reflect both history and change."

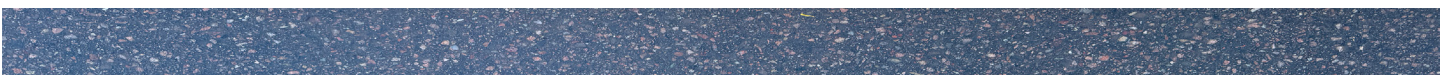
Vergara's cityscapes, compiled in works including *American Ruins* (1999) and *The New American Ghetto* (1995), document landscapes from the 1970s to the present. This is photography with purpose and pathos, directing the viewer's gaze to subjects viewed by many as signs of civic failure or impediments to progress. And yet even in states of neglect and decay, these landscapes are endowed by the artist with dignity and even beauty through photographs that serve as both respectful recognition and critical commentary.

Najera also cites the influence of photographers (and contemporaries) Berenice Abbott and Walker Evans, both of whom documented a changing 20th century America. Evans' influence can be seen in part in Najera's attraction to the vernacular landscape, the modest spaces and places of everyday life—the barber shops, churches, cafés, and Main Streets of close-knit, sometimes struggling communities.

Berenice Abbott's collection *Changing New York* (1940) documented the built environment of the city before and during the Great Depression. Mostly unpopulated, her photographs of streetscapes, buildings, bridges, and other landmarks recorded a city both changed and changing, as the traditional landscape of the nineteenth century was rapidly being razed and replaced by skyscrapers and other harbingers of the modern era.



Historic Steel Railroad Bridge in Wadsworth, Nevada, U.S. Route 40, pigment print, 16"x20", 2024



Nevada Roadsides

As demonstrated in *Nevada Roadsides*, Najera is similarly drawn to landscapes in the crosshairs of change, whether gradual or imminent. The roadsides from which this exhibit takes its name are found along two of the state's historic highways, U.S. 40 and U.S. 50. Precursors to the modern interstate system initiated in the 1950s, they were either sidestepped or sidelined by it, leaving their edges lined with structures hearkening a bygone era.

That does not make this a study of desolation and abandonment, however. Nevada has always been a landscape of wide-open spaces punctuated by clusters of community. Its story is one of booms and busts, where a sudden ore discovery could lead to the founding of a mining camp that quickly blossomed into a nascent town, spurring the hurried construction of roads and railroad lines to transport resources and people to and from remote places like Austin, Eureka, Belmont, and Goldfield.

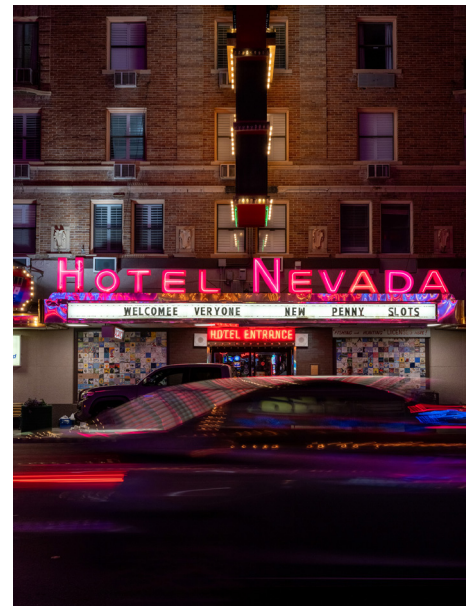
It is also a landscape westward travelers have long sought passage through, full of communities birthed as stations, junctions, and crossroads like Wadsworth, Reno, Hazen, and Las Vegas. Some lasted only years, vanishing as suddenly as they appeared. Some hung on, blessed with permanence by their location on a route that led somewhere people still wanted to go. Some generated new enticements for settlement like irrigated agriculture, gambling, revived mining interests, or the simple pleasures of a rural life.

Those who traverse these historic routes today become immediately conscious of how the roads serve as lifelines stitching these far-flung communities together. While the modern interstate privileges the destination, these roads reward the journey. Highway 50 may be commonly known as "The Loneliest Road in America," but those who travel it are not alone. Here are found communities where residents and visitors continue to live, work, worship, play, and gather. Along historic U.S. 40, the rural periodically gives way to the urban, producing sometimes uneasy juxtapositions of old and new.

Chroniclers of the western landscape have often found themselves perched on that precipice between celebration and sorrow—celebration at what has been achieved, and sorrow for the world those achievements have swept away. Nineteenth-century photographers like Alfred A. Hart, commissioned to document the construction of the first transcontinental railroad, created visual records of Manifest Destiny in action, recording the very moments when those who paved the way for the American Dream simultaneously planted the seeds of destruction for the continent's vast wilderness and the traditional lifeways of those who inhabited it. There is a reason that the American West has been the chosen setting for some of our most morally complex dramatic tales and cultural allegories.



*Sunset Over Open Road Near Austin, Nevada,
U.S. Route 50, pigment print, 16"x20", 2023*



*Hotel Nevada Sign in Ely, U.S. Route 50,
pigment print, 20"x16", 2024*



Gas Station Near Cold Springs, Nevada, U.S. Hwy 395, pigment print, 16"x20", 2024

Produced a century after these historic highways themselves replaced the railroads in the realm of popular travel, Najera's photographs are not indulgently triumphant but reflective, revealing persistence along with neglect. They reveal places buffeted by forces in many ways beyond the control of those who created, inhabit, and treasure them. These are not the strongholds of power but places used and beloved by generations of everyday people.

And yet, people are generally not seen in these images. It's a conscious decision that stems in part from the artist's choice of timing. As Najera explains, "I prefer photographing early in the morning or at twilight, just before the sky turns completely black. This hour of fading light enhances the cinematic feel

I want for the buildings, giving them a unique presence."

That time of day helps explain why these photographs so often evoke the hush of stillness—not a deafening silence but the kind of stillness gently accompanied by the purr of a lone engine accelerating in the distance or the muffled beat of amplified music barely contained behind a barroom door.

People are not the visual focus here, and yet these are the most human of landscapes, suggesting the presence of figures moving about inside or hovering nearby, perhaps just outside the frame, like a stage set awaiting the actors' entrance. In their absence, we focus on the structures and settings, our eyes moving from light to darkness, roofline to window, beckoning sign to vivid purple sunset. The waning of the day often gives way to a glow emanating from within or imposed by a lone streetlight or a cacophony of neon. Some scenes are bathed in stark Nevada sunlight under skies of a brilliant blue or strewn with puffy white clouds. In each, we see something precious illuminated by the artist's attentive eye.


Composition and Collaboration

That careful attention to the lines and textures of these time-worn places makes Najera a natural ally and advocate of history and historic preservation—efforts that themselves stand at the intersection of documentation and story. In amplifying these landscapes, Emily Najera lavishes them with the attention they deserve, sometimes in their moment of greatest vulnerability.

Her subjects often occupy precarious positions—a row of stately 1890s Victorian houses in the path of a university campus' steady expansion or mid-century motels purchased by a millionaire developer intent on clearing entire city blocks to impart his own signature stamp. But here they take center stage, inviting us to populate the frame with generations who never questioned their right to exist but luxuriated in their warmth and welcome.



Abandoned House in Reno, Nevada, U.S. Route 40, The Old Lincoln Highway, pigment print, 16"x20", 2024



Najera's ability to capture the essence of places and infuse them with meaning has led some of the country's most esteemed news organizations including the New York Times, Washington Post, and National Public Radio to enlist her aid in telling stories of people and places throughout the country. Whether documenting Detroit's labored recovery, the uneven trajectories of historic train stations, or Nevada's own landscapes of innovation and transition, her images not only accompany and illustrate written stories but illuminate and expand them. We are invited not just to see but to actively look, think, and question.

Viewed collectively, these roadsides are places that have meant something important to people right up to the present day—people we will never meet, never know. But through Emily Najera's lens and the stories she tells with it, they gain meaning for us. We are privileged to stand in her place and ponder these landscapes through her eyes, and in that gaze, both they and we are transformed.

Alicia Barber
Reno, Nevada
October, 2024



Photo credit: Glenn Clemmer

Emily Najera



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