
THE REAL WEST

With Route 66 as her inspiration,
Maggie Walker Nelson paints authentic stories
of small-town life that capture a rapidly changing world.

By Kristin Hoerth

When Maggie Walker Nelson was young, her family took summer road trips from their home in Cincinnati, Ohio, to Amarillo, Texas, to visit her mother's family. Their route took them across Indiana and Illinois to St. Louis, then through Missouri into Oklahoma and the Texas Panhandle. "I remember my dad pointing out landmarks along the way," says Nelson. "He'd say things like, 'Take a good look, kids, it's the St. Louis Gateway Arch.' And I remember we always stopped at the famous McDonald's that crosses over the highway," she adds, referring to a large service plaza in northeastern Oklahoma.

It wasn't until years later, though, that Nelson realized that those road trips had provided her earliest exposure to Route 66—the famous roadway that inspires much of her current artwork. Since then, she has taken countless road trips of her own on different sections of the Mother Road (as American writer John Steinbeck called it),

endlessly fascinated with its distinctive imagery. "I love the old signs, the neon and the slightly shabby buildings," Nelson says. "It's always been partially in ruins, but I'm intrigued by that sense of lost dreams. I wonder, Why did people come here in the first place? What happened that made them leave?" Considering those questions in oil paint has become Nelson's latest artistic mission.

EARLY ILLUSTRATIONS

During Nelson's childhood, drawing was a constant activity in her life. "Markers, colored pencils, crayons, paint—whatever was available, I've always created with it," she says. "Drawing was calming and relaxing for me. I wasn't a kid who sat still often, but I could sit and draw for hours."

Nelson's maternal grandmother—a preacher's wife who took up painting late in life—offered early encouragement during those annual summer visits. "I wanted to be just like her," Nelson says. "She was a quiet, kind person, and

On the Road, Route 66 (oil on canvas, 60x48)





LEFT
Needles
 (oil on canvas,
 60x48)

OPPOSITE TOP
Groom Gas Station
 (oil on canvas,
 16x20)

OPPOSITE BOTTOM
John and Charley
 (oil on canvas,
 48x72)

art was like a little window into her life.”

By the time Nelson graduated from high school, her family had moved to Amarillo to be near her mother’s relatives. She enrolled in a local junior college that had a small art department, thinking she would become a scientific illustrator. “I was into botany, so I thought I’d travel the world, discover new plants and draw them,” Nelson says.

Nelson later transferred to West Texas A&M University, in Canyon, Texas. When her geology professor learned of her interest in illustration, he offered her a position to create artwork for faculty research papers and to work as a teaching assistant. “I realized that there was absolutely no creativity in being a scientific illustrator, but I really liked teaching my fellow students about science,” she says.

“That’s when I made the switch to become a teacher.” She earned her bachelor’s degree in art, completed a teaching certificate and began teaching high-school art classes. During this time, she and her sister would often take drives on the weekends, setting out from Amarillo in all directions. “I thought we were escaping, getting out of town,” she says. “We were driving on Route 66 the whole time without really thinking about it.”

CONNECTING WITH VIEWERS

Meanwhile, Nelson and several of her art-teacher friends opened a small gallery at the Sunset Center, a shopping-mall-turned-art-center in Amarillo. “We decided to put on a new show every month for the First Friday art walk,”



she says, “which gave me a purpose and a deadline for creating my art.”

Nelson says those years were a time of significant growth. “That experience helped me get over the fear of showing my work, and I started selling for the first time,” she says. “I got a lot of positive reactions, and it made me want to do something in the arts professionally.”

That feedback also prompted the artist to think about the way viewers interacted with her paintings. “I asked myself, Why am I painting these subjects?” she says. “I’m painting them because they’re stories from my life, but I’m also painting them to share them, so I should make something people feel comfortable viewing. That’s why I gravitate toward representational work. There are layers of meaning, but people can understand my paintings at face value.”

“I LIKE THESE ABANDONED PLACES BECAUSE I’M FREE TO BE MYSELF IN THEM.”

—MAGGIE WALKER NELSON



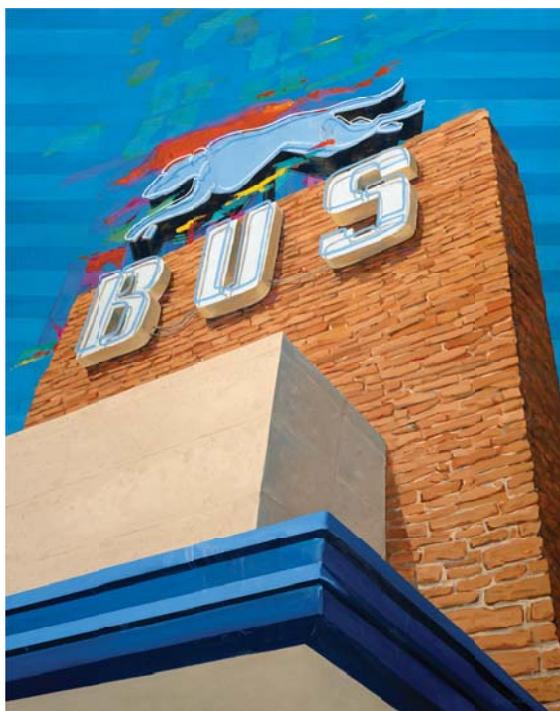


FOLLOWING DREAMS

Nelson continued teaching for nine years, but it was challenging to live on a teacher's salary— and equally challenging to serve as a department head at her school. "I didn't know how to manage a budget or people," she says. "I also wanted to become a full-time artist, but I didn't know how."

Nelson went back to school not for an MFA, but for an MBA, at Texas Tech University, in 2016. "I learned so much that I apply to my career today," she says, "like how to get my work in front of people, how to sell it and how to keep my costs down. Learning about management has helped me tremendously."

After completing her degree, Nelson worked as a business consultant for a year before giving birth to her daughter, Abby, and son, Reid. Having children spurred her to finally act on her dream of becoming a full-time professional artist. "I suddenly realized how quickly time was passing," she says. "I also realized that I needed to follow my own dreams if I was going to tell my kids to follow theirs."



ABOVE
Nonfiction
(oil on canvas,
48x60)

LEFT
Bus Stop
(oil on canvas,
60x48)

OPPOSITE
Eat
(oil on canvas,
60x48)



THE MOTHER ROAD AT 100

Route 66 holds an iconic place in American history. It began to take shape in the 1920s and was officially designated a Chicago-to-Los Angeles route in 1926, although it wasn't completely paved until 1938. Publicity efforts encouraged Americans to take Route 66 to the 1932 Summer Olympics, in Los Angeles. During the Dust Bowl in the 1930s, farming families headed west along the route for agricultural jobs in California. In the postwar years, 66 became the main route for vacationers heading to the California coast, and there was a sharp increase in tourism along the road.

After President Eisenhower signed the Interstate Highway Act in 1956, Route 66 gradually began to be replaced by the highway system we know today. Still, Route 66 had become an enduring fixture in American pop culture, with starring roles in everything from John Steinbeck's novel, "The Grapes of Wrath," to Bobby Troup's song "(Get Your Kicks on) Route 66" to the "Route 66" TV drama of the early 1960s.

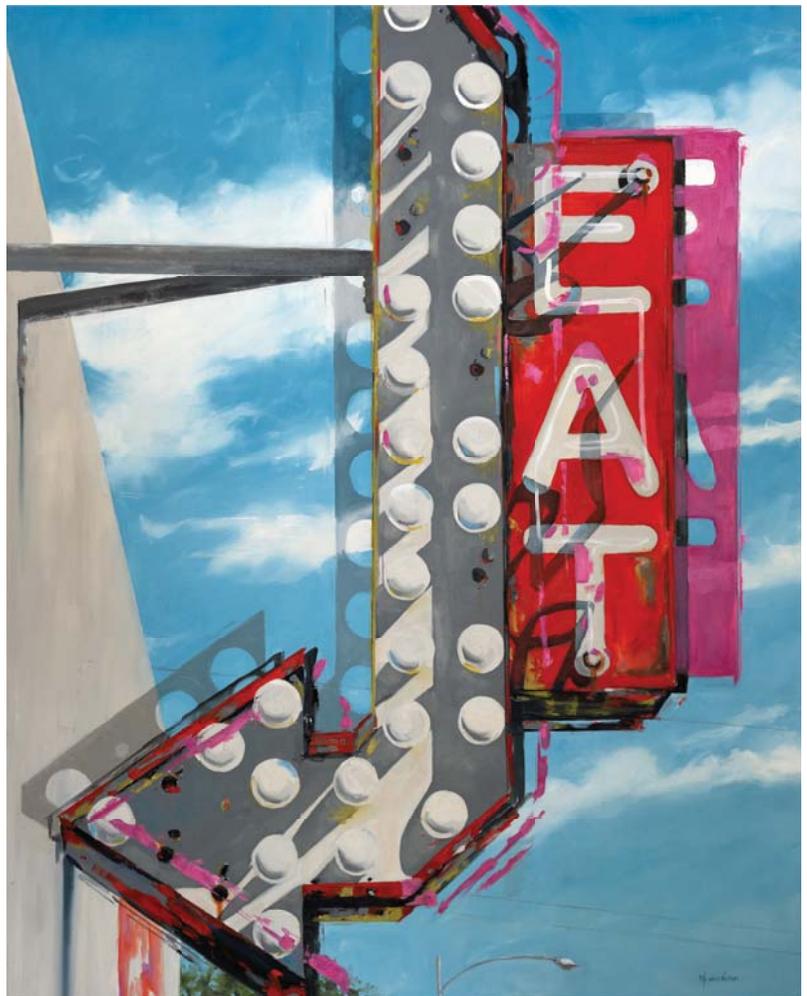
To celebrate 100 years since the road's beginning, states along the route are planning celebrations throughout 2026. Visit route66centennial.org for an overview.

PAST AND PRESENT

The passage of time is a key element in Nelson's paintings of Route 66. "We have a limited amount of time to capture the American West the way it is today," the artist says. "Things are changing so fast, and I want people to understand what's happening in this moment. We have buildings from the past that help us remember how things used to be, but at the same time, we're living in the present, with all our technology and artificial intelligence. It's today, but in some of these towns, it simultaneously feels like it's 50 or 60 years ago. There's a huge contrast between the two that I want to capture in my work."

Part of the way Nelson captures that tension is with artistic effects she calls "glitching." This emerges in subjects like the neon sign in her painting *Eat* (below), which appears to have been caught flickering in two different spots. Or it might be brightly colored bars running across the canvas, as seen in the recently completed *Needles* (page 44), that are reminiscent of the bars that used to show up on old television sets when the broadcast signal was lost temporarily. For Nelson, these effects represent "how memories can get stuck in loops," she says. "They're metaphors for how the past and present coexist in the West."

Sometimes the deserted buildings and faded signs Nelson paints can feel a bit desolate and lonely, which might make them seem unappealing. In her work, though, it's quite the opposite. "I like these abandoned places because





ABOVE
Silo (oil on
canvas, 60x48)

BELOW
Prickly Pear Cactus
(oil on canvas, 48x60)

OPPOSITE
Cowboy (oil on
canvas, 60x48)



I'm free to be myself in them," she says. "They're my secret hiding spots, and they begin to feel like friends. When I paint their portraits and share them with people, there's so much happiness in that."

BRINGING IDEAS TO LIFE

When Nelson is out on the road, her artistic process begins with taking what she calls "a billion photos." She tries to catch a scene from multiple angles and at various times of day. She sometimes does a quick sketch, too, while sitting in her car, to capture how it feels to be in that place.

The next step is the one Nelson enjoys most of all: coming up with ideas for compositions, a process that often begins in her mind's eye and then progresses to her sketchbook. "I might be conjuring up images in my head while I'm doing dishes or playing with different approaches while I'm at my son's football game," she says. "For me, that's the fun. That's the creative work."

Once Nelson has a sketch she's happy with, she looks through her photo references and selects the ones that best match her composition. She may choose a sign from one photo, a background from another, and cactus or clouds from still others. Using Photoshop, she cuts out pieces of each photo and then roughly collages them together. "They're not pretty," she says. "It's like cutting up printed photos with scissors and gluing them together; that's essentially what I'm doing in Photoshop."

With her reference ready, Nelson prepares her canvas by dividing it into thirds horizontally and vertically. Then she draws her composition, concentrating on making it feel the way the place felt to her when she was there. Next, she tones her canvas, covering everything except the sky. "I don't like my underpainting to show through in the sky," she says. "The air in the West is fresh and clear, so I want the sky to feel like that, too. I want it to contrast with the spaces below, which are usually rusty and dusty."

Finally, Nelson begins applying paint, working quickly from back to front and dark to light. She doesn't labor over her brushstrokes. "I'm eager to see a painting come to life," she says. "Then I want to finish it and move on to the next one. I have all these ideas, and I've got a lot of work to do to bring them to life."



“OUR STORIES ARE IMPORTANT ... CHIPPED PAINT, BROKEN NEON, WARTS AND ALL.” —MAGGIE WALKER NELSON

THE TELLING OF AUTHENTIC STORIES

In her quest for expediency, Nelson keeps her materials simple and straightforward. She buys stretched museum canvases off the rack from Michael’s or Hobby Lobby. She uses Winsor & Newton oils in large tubes—“I don’t want to feel like I have to skimp,” she says. Her palette consists of cadmium red, cadmium yellow, ultramarine, cerulean blue, titanium white, alizarin crimson, viridian and dioxazine purple. She uses tear-off paper palettes and inexpensive brushes, which she rarely cleans between paintings.

Nelson prefers to work on a large scale, often choosing 48x60-inch canvases. Part of that is because the western landscape is vast and broad, she says, making it suited to a grand approach. Also, she likes to include details in the buildings and signs she paints, but she doesn’t want to fuss with tiny brushes. “The bigger I make them, the faster I can paint them,” she notes.

All these choices support Nelson’s sense of urgency. “I don’t wait for inspiration,” she says. “I just show up and start working, every single day. Buildings and signs are being vandalized, and they’re being taken down because people don’t recognize their cultural importance. I want to preserve the historical record. I don’t want anyone forgetting about us out here. Our stories are important, and I want to represent us authentically— chipped paint, broken neon, warts and all.”

Kristin Hoerth is a freelance arts writer and the former editor-in-chief of Southwest Art magazine.



MEET THE ARTIST

Maggie Walker Nelson (mwalkernelson.com) grew up along Route 66, primarily in Amarillo, Texas, and nearby small towns. She earned a bachelor’s degree in art at West Texas A&M University, got her teaching certificate, taught high-school art for almost a decade and then earned an MBA at Texas Tech University. Today she paints large-scale oils that capture the rapidly changing landscape along one of the country’s most fabled highways. Nelson’s “West (of Eden)” series recently toured museums and art centers in the Southwest over a year, including a stop at the National Steinbeck Center, in Salinas, Calif. Her latest series, “Visions of Route 66,” will visit numerous communities in 2026 for the roadway’s centennial celebrations. Nelson is also writing *The Most Excellent Illustrated Girls’ Guide to Route 66*, a book that combines travel advice with her paintings and illustrations.