
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)

