

AMERICAN STUDIES PHOTOGRAPHS BY JIM DOW





# **American Studies**

**By Jim Dow**

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**This PDF of American Studies is only a preview of the entire book.  
To see the complete version, please contact Nina Ventura,  
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With an Introduction by n r ier

A S BOO  
in association with the Center for Documentary Studies

**pH** powerHouse Books Brooklyn, NY

What I love about Jim Dow’s pictures is that they’re not kidding. We live, as we know, in a vision “The shining city on a hill” or “The last, best hope of mankind” or “Zion” — in other words, America. The vision never ends, though it flickers, and though we rethink it and reimagine it in every generation. Dow’s photographs accept the vision at face value and piece it together in fragments of perfect clarity. In wordless ways America continually describes its vision to us, dropping broad hints about what its citi’ens are expected to be. With these photographs Dow catches the hints latent in do’ens of American settings, almost all of them temporarily unoccupied. The absence he finds is rich with suggestion about the parts we are supposed to portray in the dream.

And when I say his pictures aren’t kidding, I mean they avoid the danger that exists in recording such hints and signs — a danger having do with kitsch. Years ago when I was writing a book about the Great Plains, people were constantly asking me if I’d seen the World’s Largest Ball of String, in a small town in Kansas. The World’s Largest Ball of String may be remarkable, but I didn’t want to see it, because of the difficulty of describing it without playing to the kitsch-appreciating strain in all of us — i.e., to a kind of easy superiority. There’s no World’s Largest Ball of String in Dow’s photographs, no superiority, no wry chuckles from a more refined altitude. Aspects of his photographs are funny, maybe even hilarious, but that’s only noted in passing. He’s more interested in what the American vision is, or was, and in the scary open-endedness of our identity.

“America is a didactic country,” Saul Steinberg, the artist, used to say. Dow’s pictures capture didactic messages so detached as to be almost orphic “Save,” “Buy,” “Shape,” “Sealy,” “Shrimp Cocktail,” “Watch for Opening.” Throngs of ghosts fill his empty Masonic temples, courtrooms, stages, and pool halls, but the human simulacra he records are even more tantali’ing. The happy waiters and vacationers of roadside signage may overwhelm us with how far we

would have to go to be them, but what about the bathing-suited giantesses baring their teeth in pleasure, and the temptresses on barroom signs — How could anybody, male or female, live up to these dames — The point, Dow seems to say, is that we can’t — we only aspire, forever.

Any dream has its flip-side nightmare, and by now we know our dream’s opposite maybe better than the dream itself. Seen after a slight double take, many of Dow’s pictures reconfigure themselves into possibly sinister enigmas, places where something went or is about to go horribly wrong. The gas station in Dallas —“GAS,” “RENTALS”—sits there wide open like a store that was just robbed — the wonderfully odd *Airline — o o r s — e s — u r n* begs for one more piece of narrative to complete it, maybe some connection to Charlie Starkweather and his getaway. Dow’s barbecue places — *e l l u e i o n — r* —, with their delicious smells somehow inhering in the photograph, touch us with their fragility — they’re just the sort of places — atrina washed away. Empty shoeshine chairs resemble a cleaned-up crime scene — wasn’t Carmine Galante shot to death in that chair on the left, back in ’79 — and then suddenly don’t resemble it, and are just shoeshine chairs again. Yet even after the nightmare goes away it can’t be unlearned.

From a certain perspective, something *h* s gone wrong in these pictures — most of the places and signs they record probably don’t exist anymore. The earliest photograph in this collection dates from 1968. During Dow’s long career America changed. Nowadays you rarely see truly local postcards in non-metro places, and business owners are less likely to make — or hire local artists to make—their own signs. Global franchises have taken over just about everywhere. Ordinary folks may have become disinclined to contribute their own visual interpretations of the American dream, knowing that mega-corporations have teams of experts on the job. Maybe what gives Dow’s Coca-Cola sign its power is Coke’s sameness through every change — It was, is now, and always shall be.

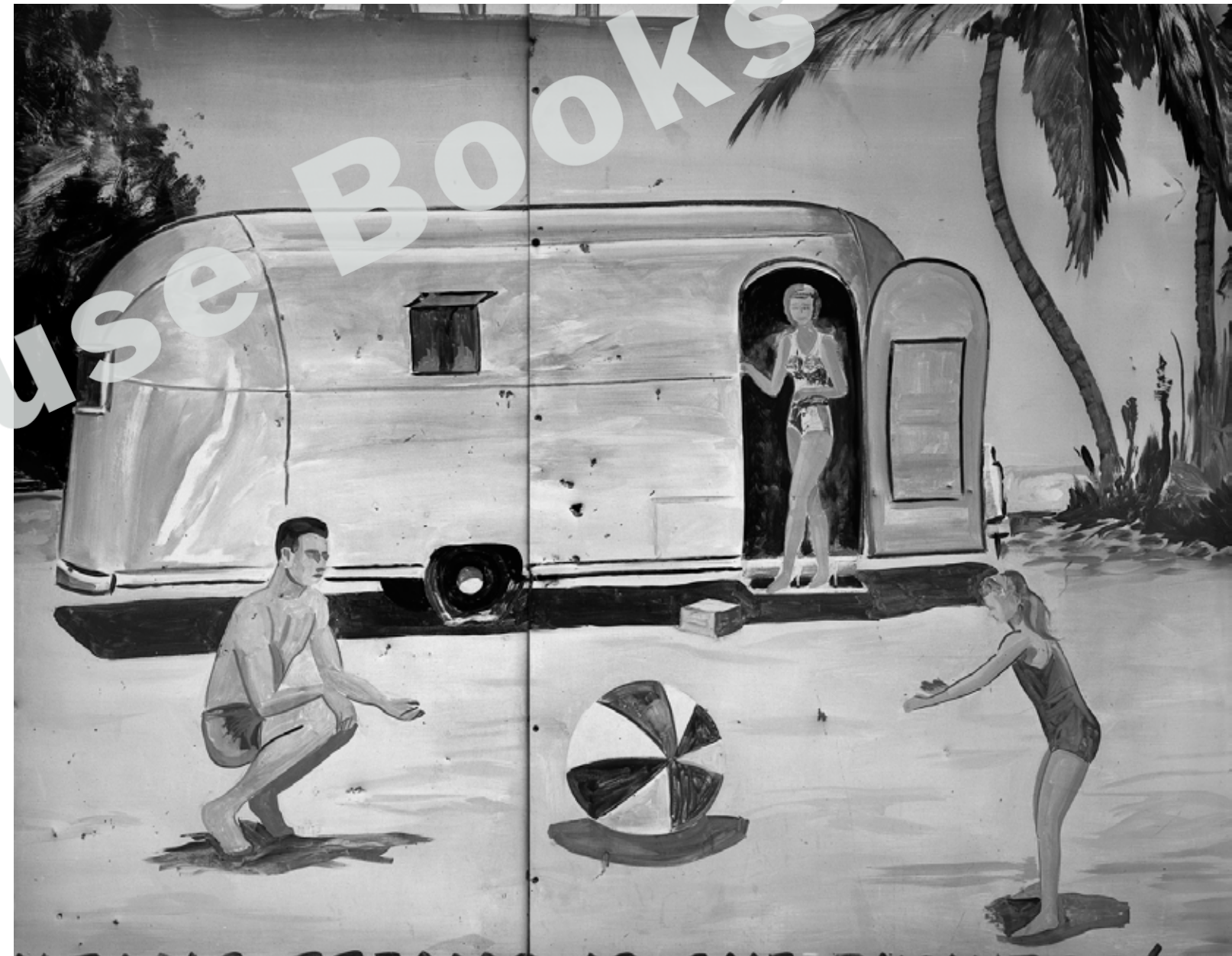


Jim Dow and I are about the same age. I can remember the first slice of pi’ ’a and McDonald’s hamburger I ever ate, and the first tattoo I ever saw. When I was young, almost nobody where I lived—small-town Ohio—sported tattoos. A friend got a rose tattooed on his upper arm one summer during high school, and I was shocked. Now you see tattoos everywhere, on everybody. Today most pro athletes look as if someone doodled all over them while on the phone. It seems to me that in our lifetime, the American vision or dream or whatever it is has moved from mostly public to mostly private areas of expression. The pictures at the end of the book—the intricately painted taco trucks, with their civic or historic themes—are interesting in this regard, because after the era of depicting the dream ourselves in our public buildings and on our roadside signs, we began to paint it on our vehicles. In the 1980s, seaside or mountain utopias, in glorious colors, began appearing on the sides of people’s vans. Mobile panoramas would be part of this trend. And more recently—as my theory goes—we have shifted our realm of visual statement to the entirely personal—our tattoos—many of which are often hidden under clothes.

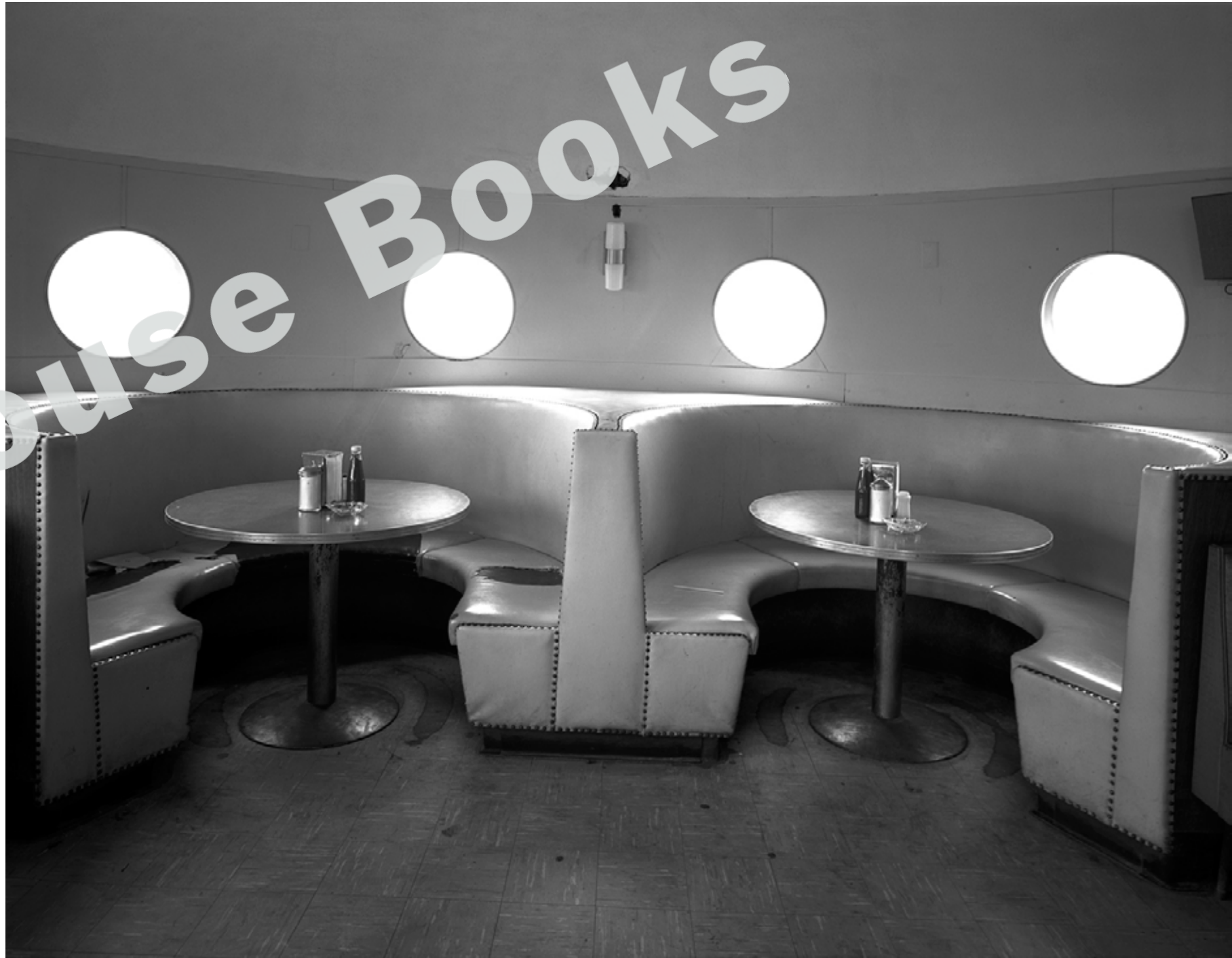
The emptiness of the places Dow photographs implies their eventual abandonment, and our own. A chill of impermanence shudders through it all. The signs will be painted over, the minor league ballparks torn down. The barbershops and diners and bars will morph into other businesses, maybe ones less directly comforting. Even without the encouragement of the smiling giantess in the bathing suit, the pursuit of happiness will proceed, though we may not know exactly how or where. In typical American style, we will be on our own, making it up again as we go. The affection and respect and clarity and stillness and vision in these photographs provide reason to hope that we will come up with something good.

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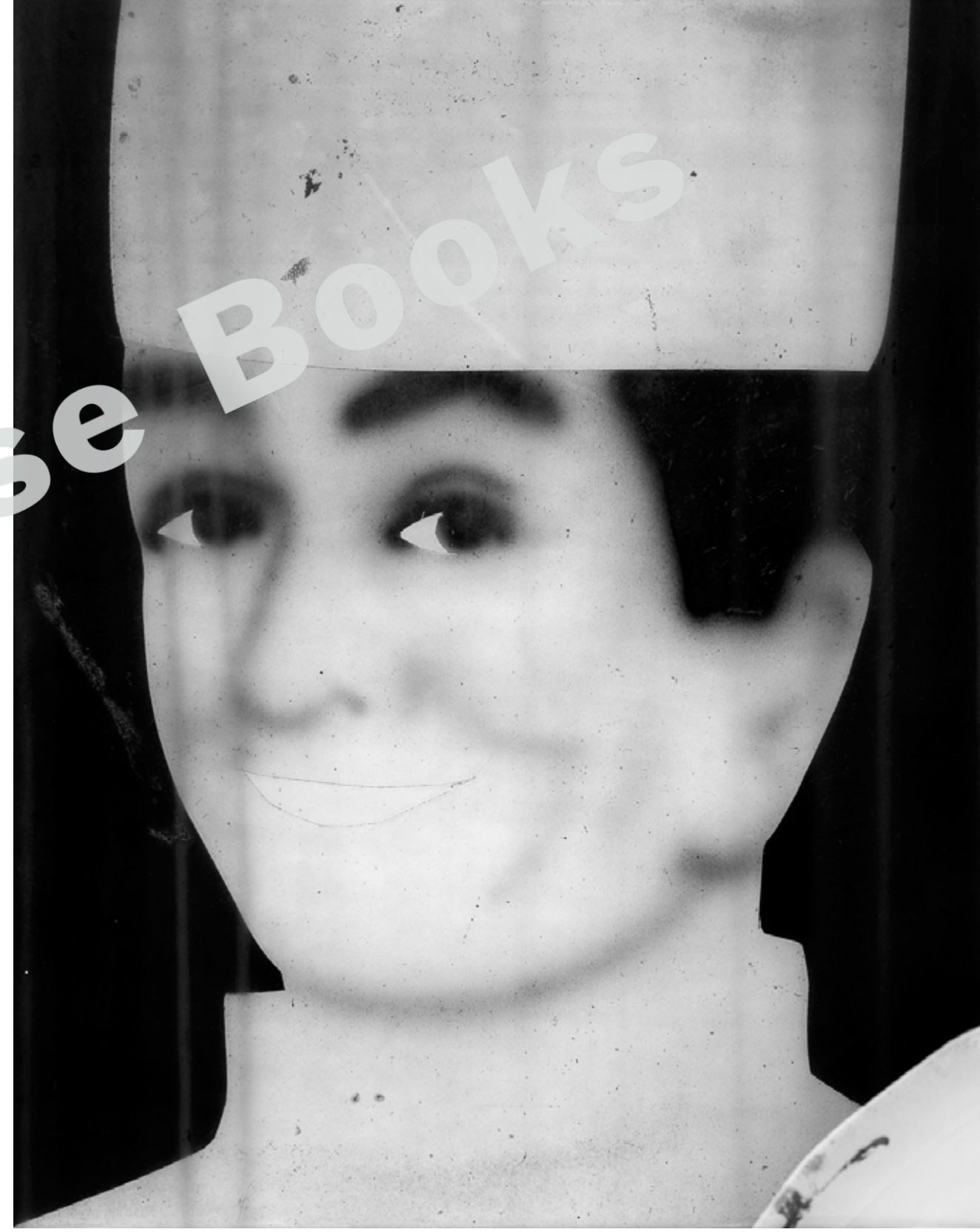
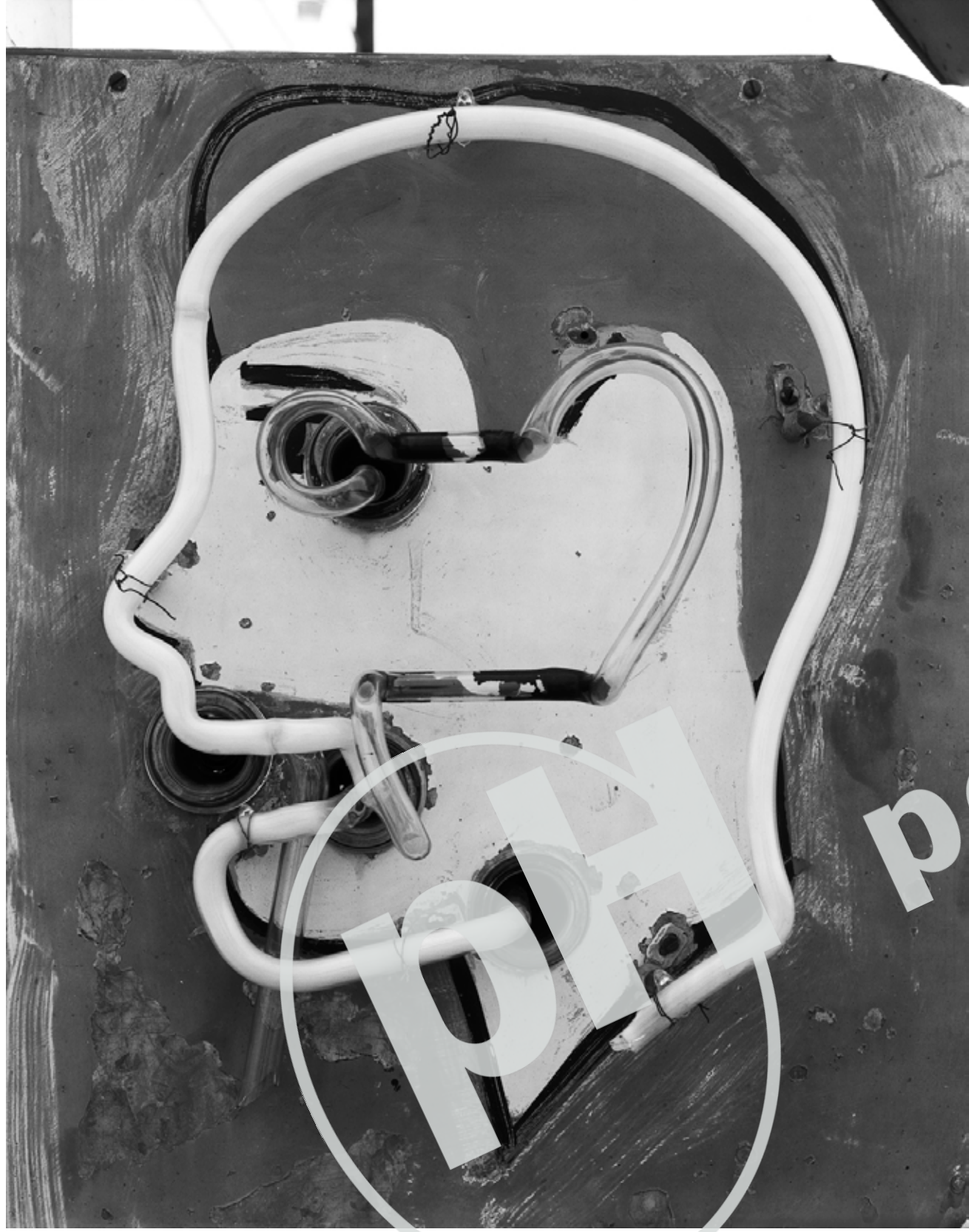








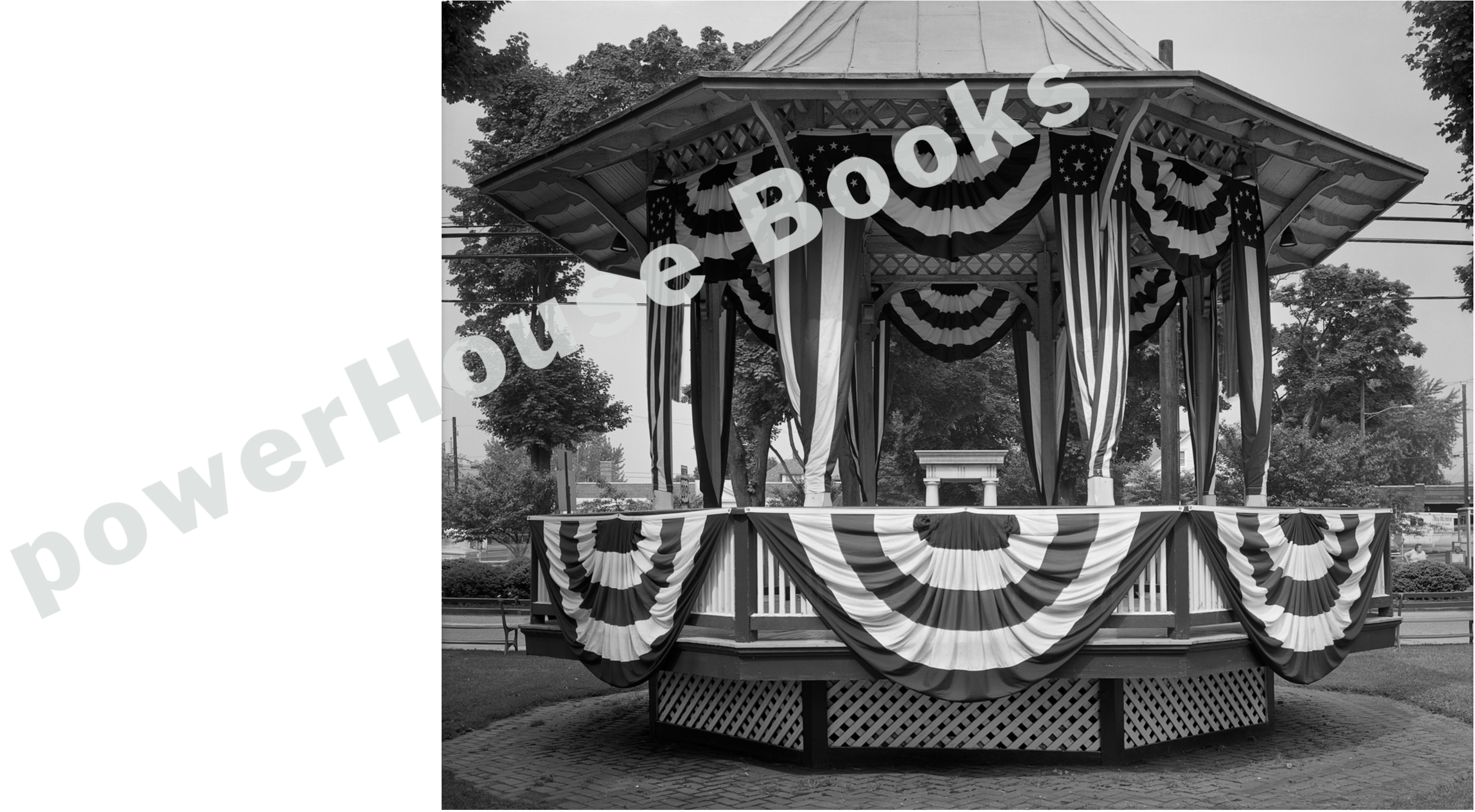












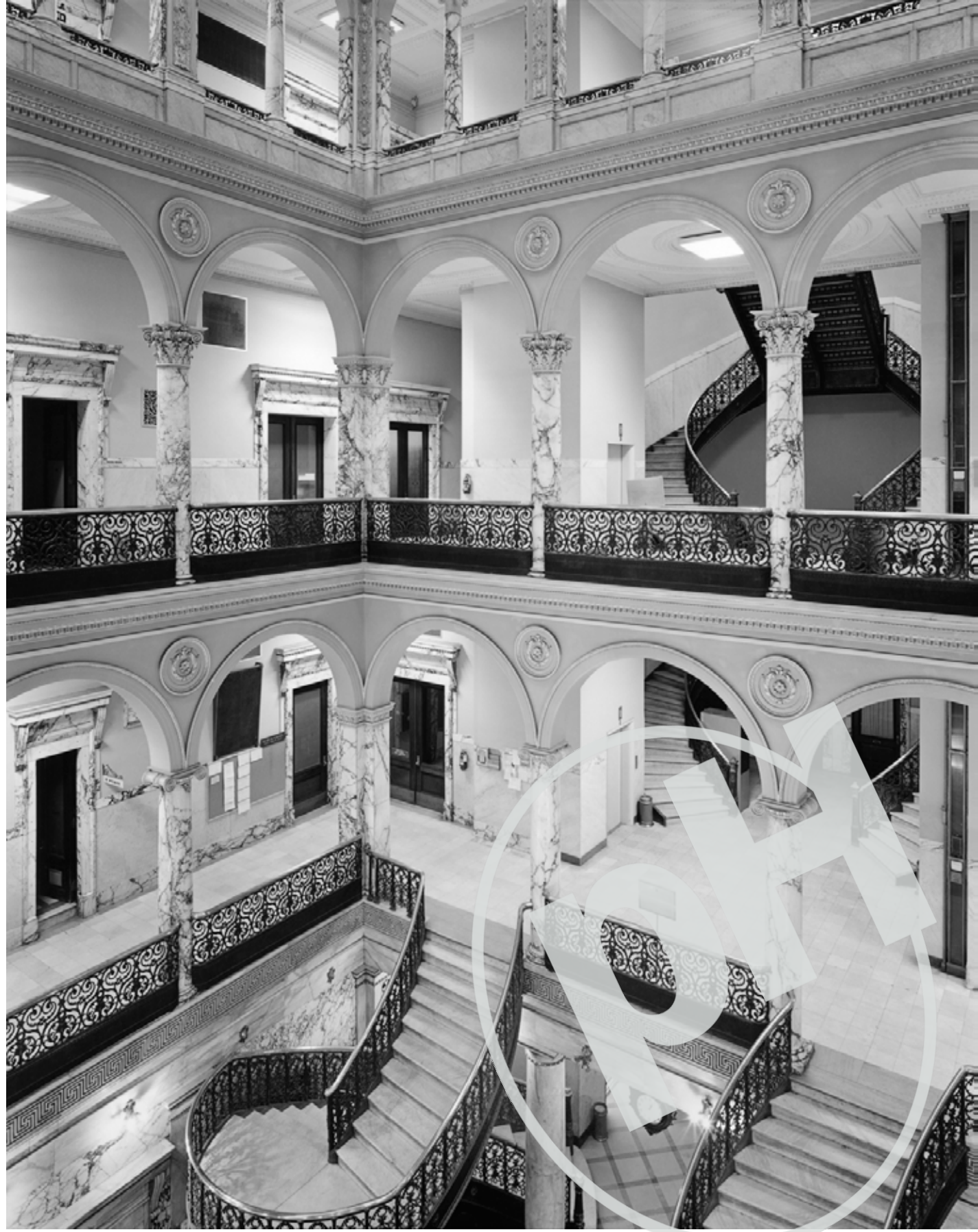


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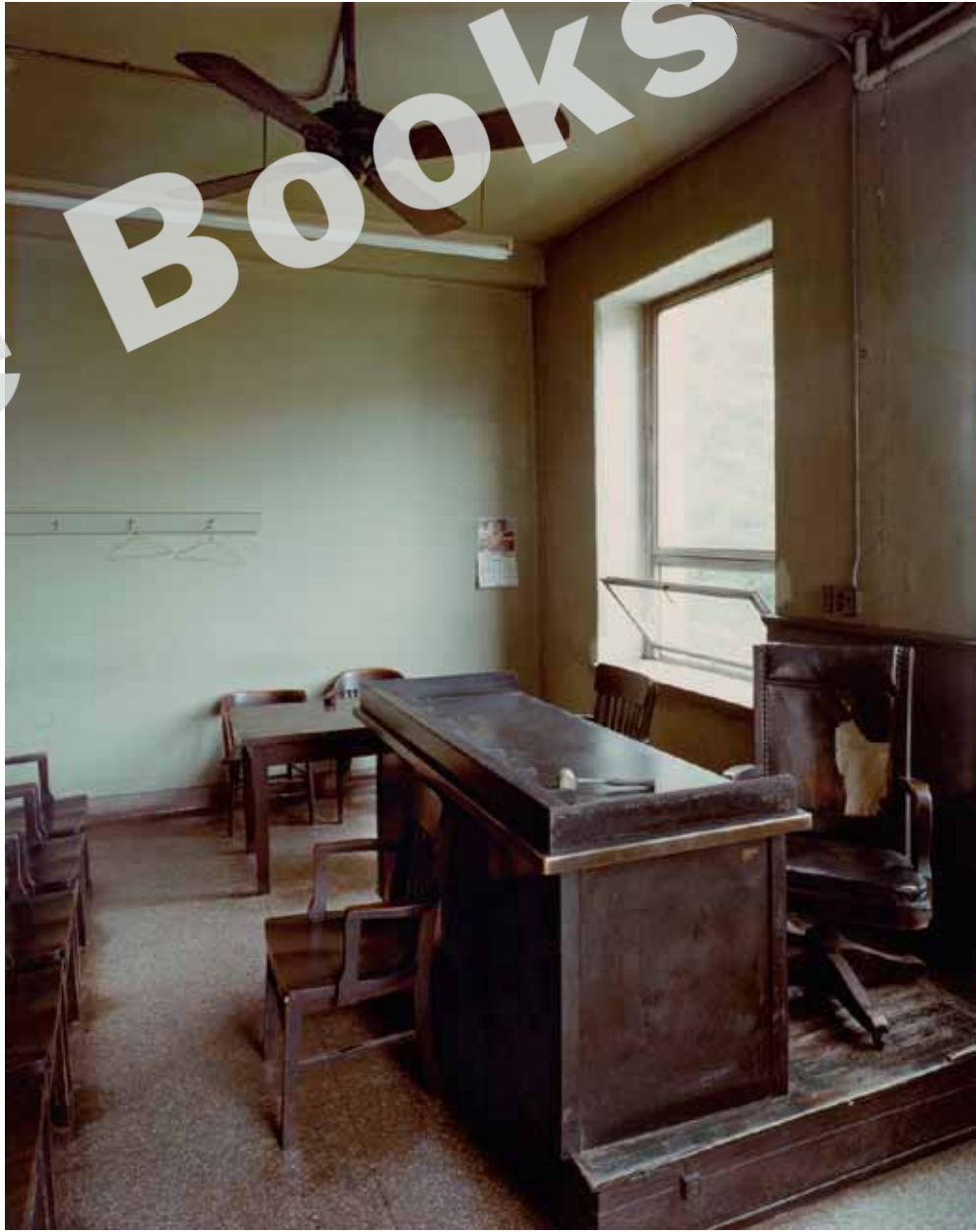




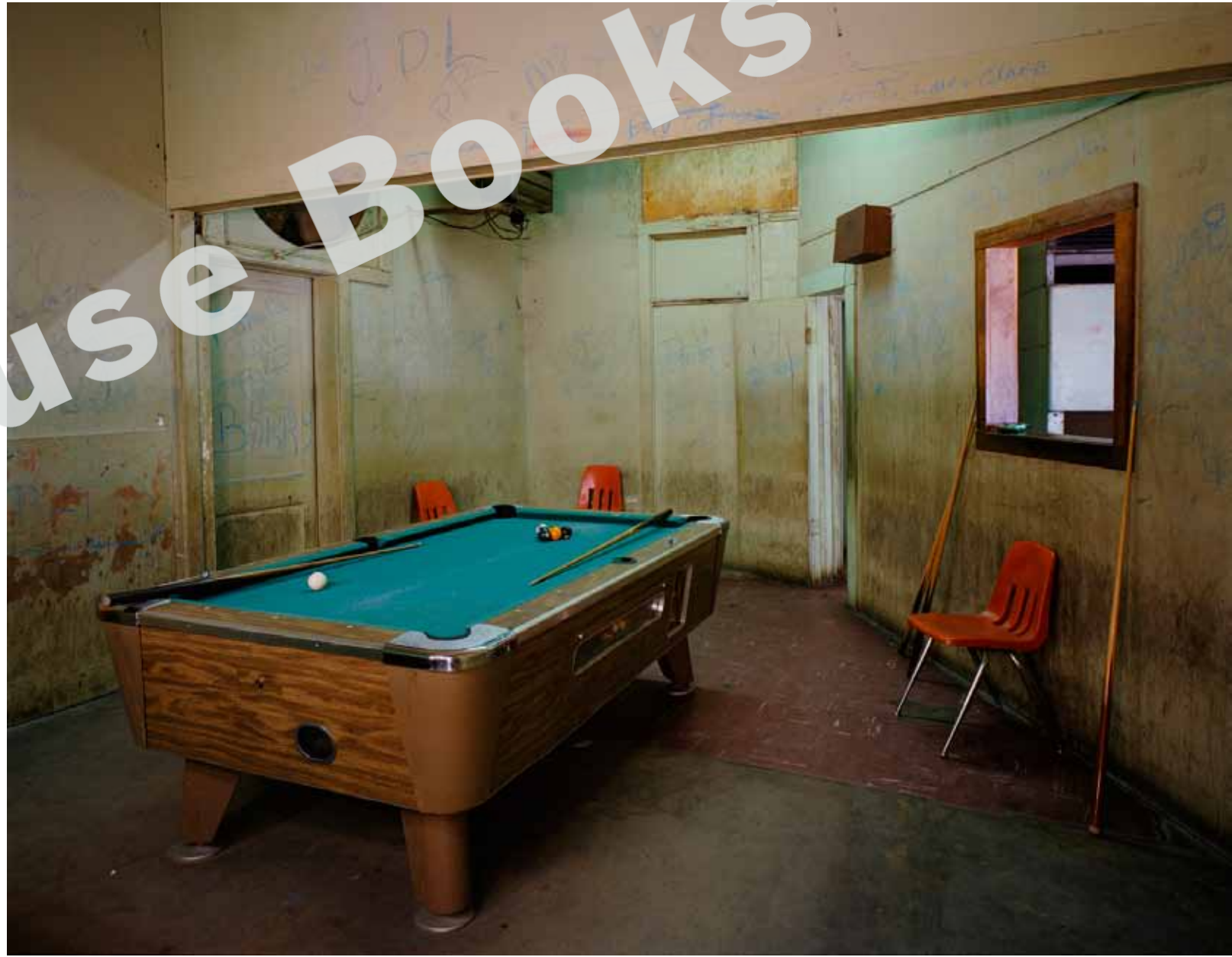
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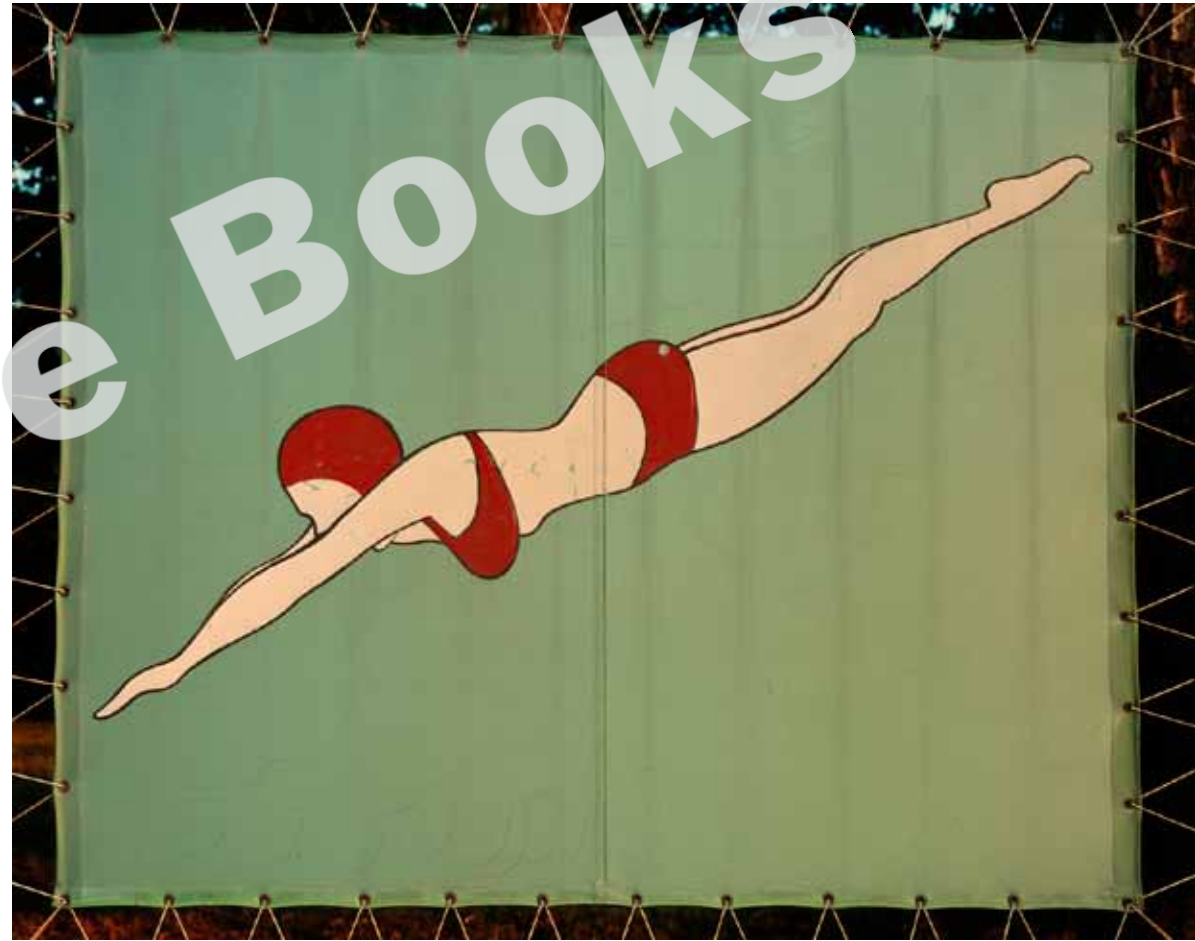




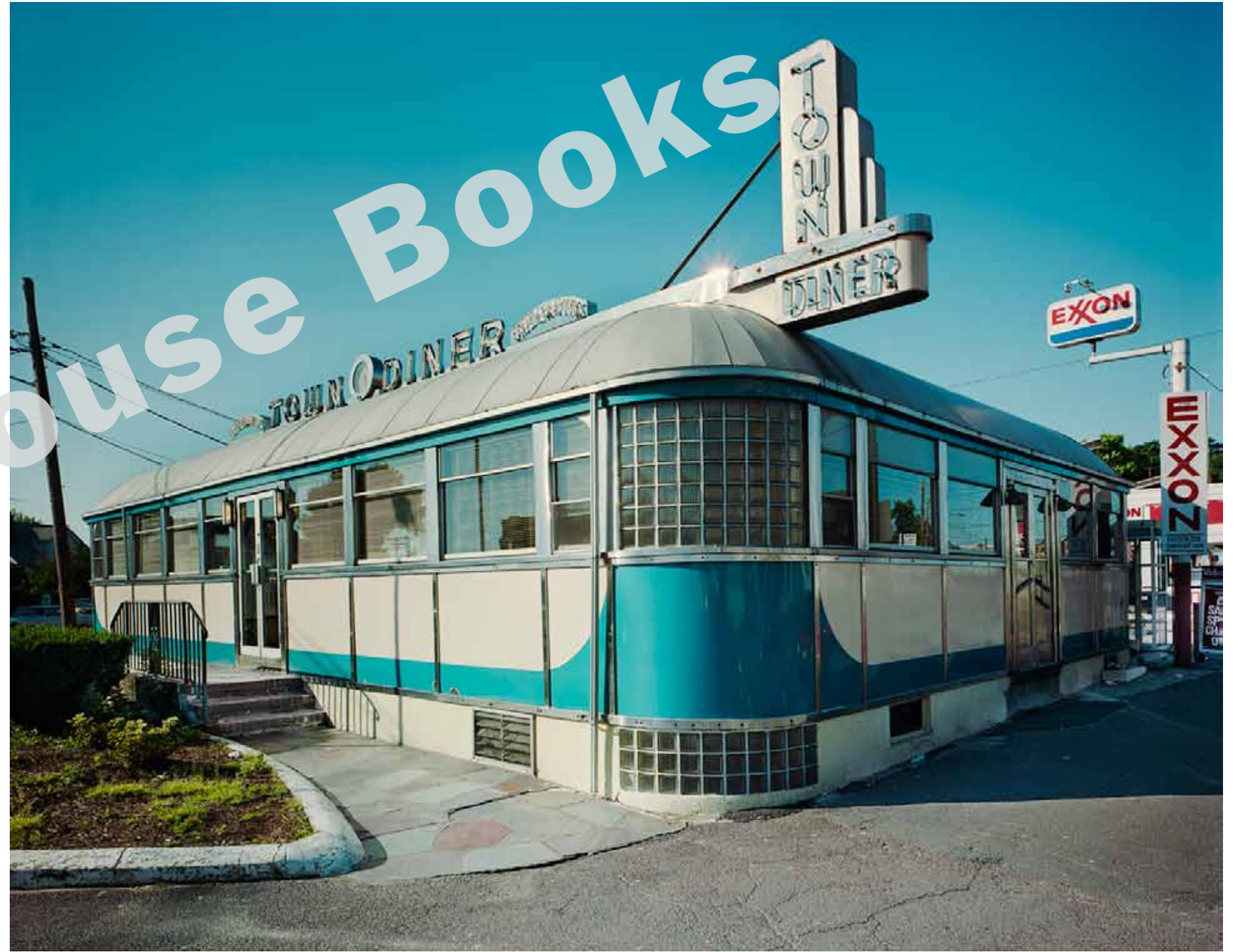








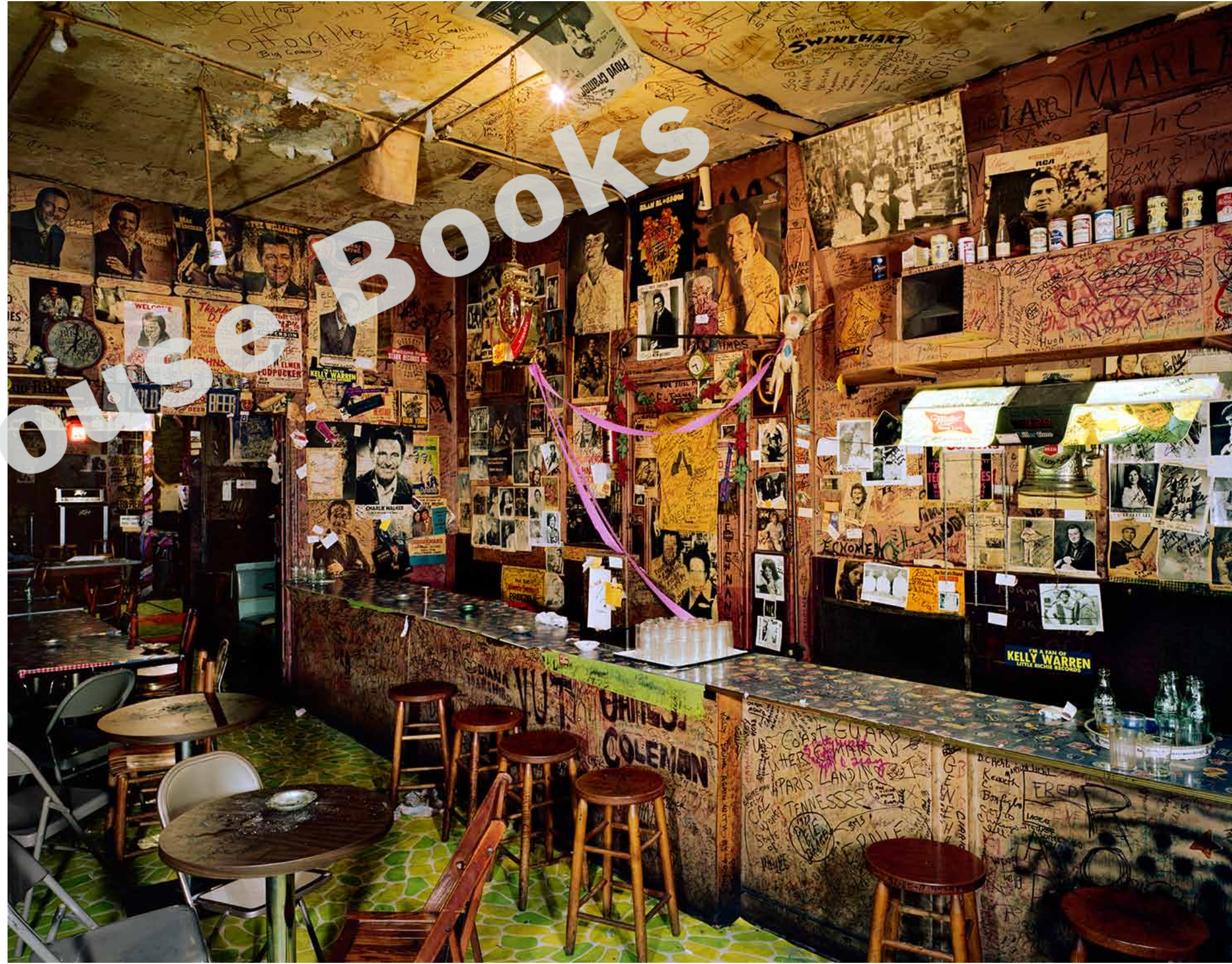




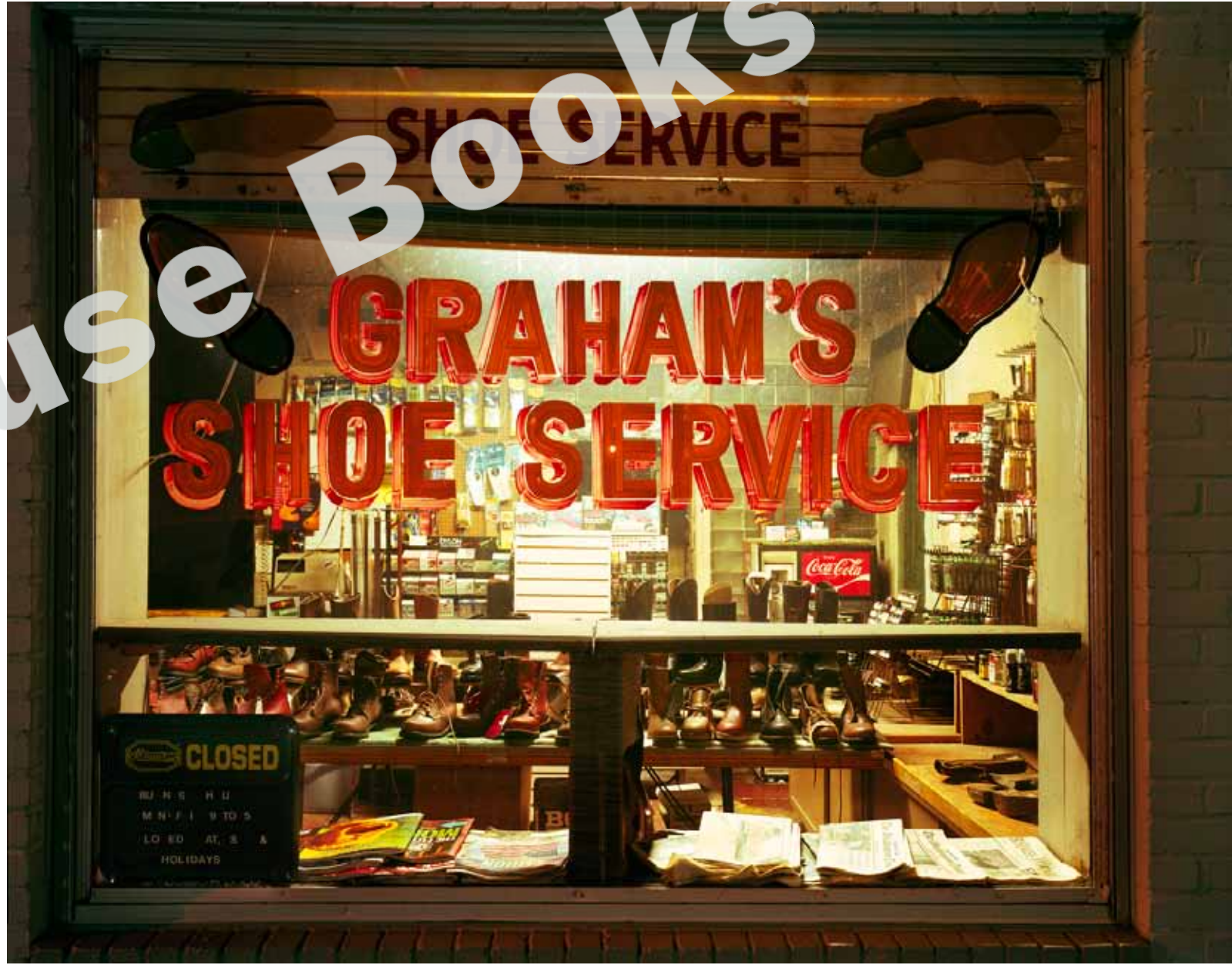
























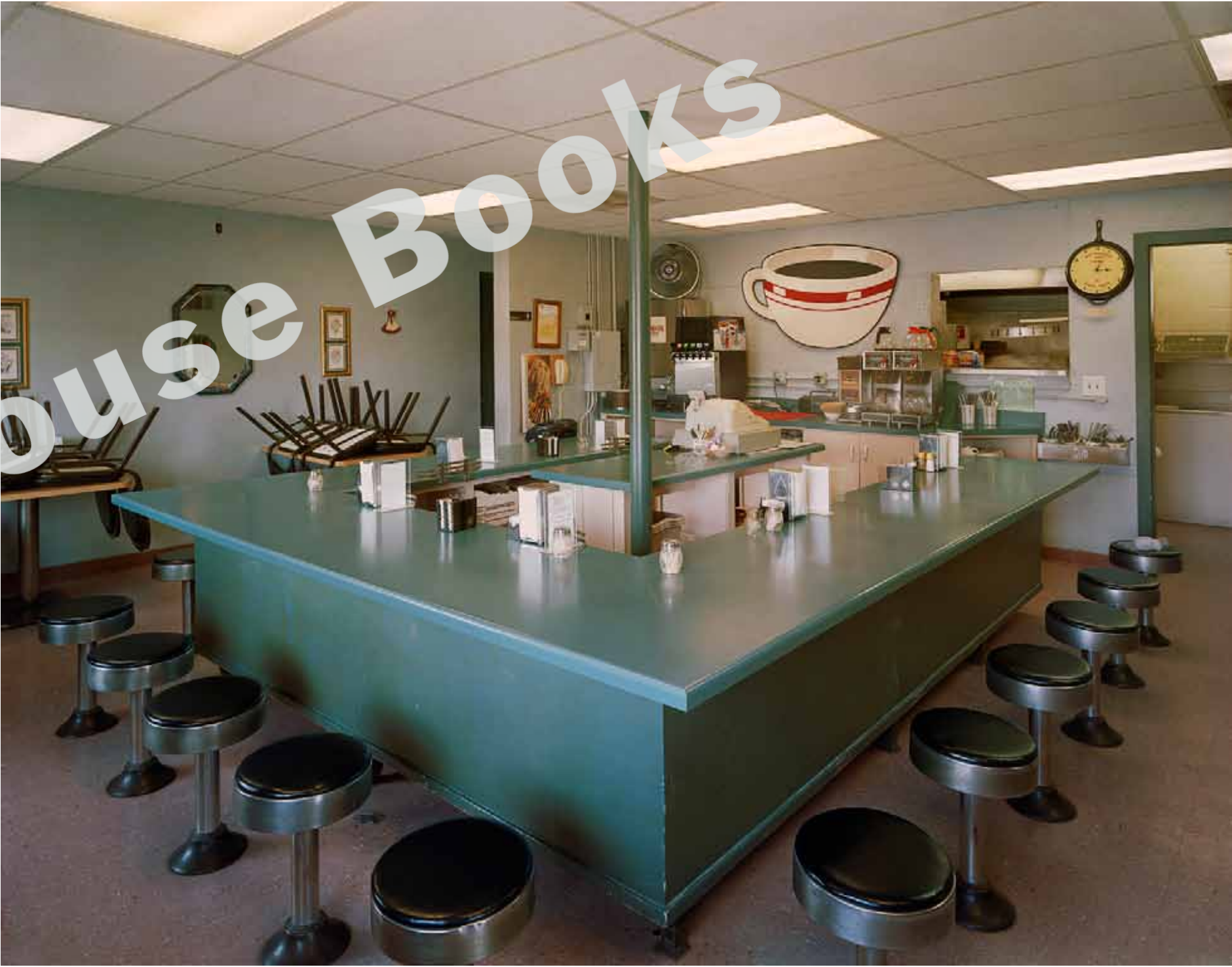






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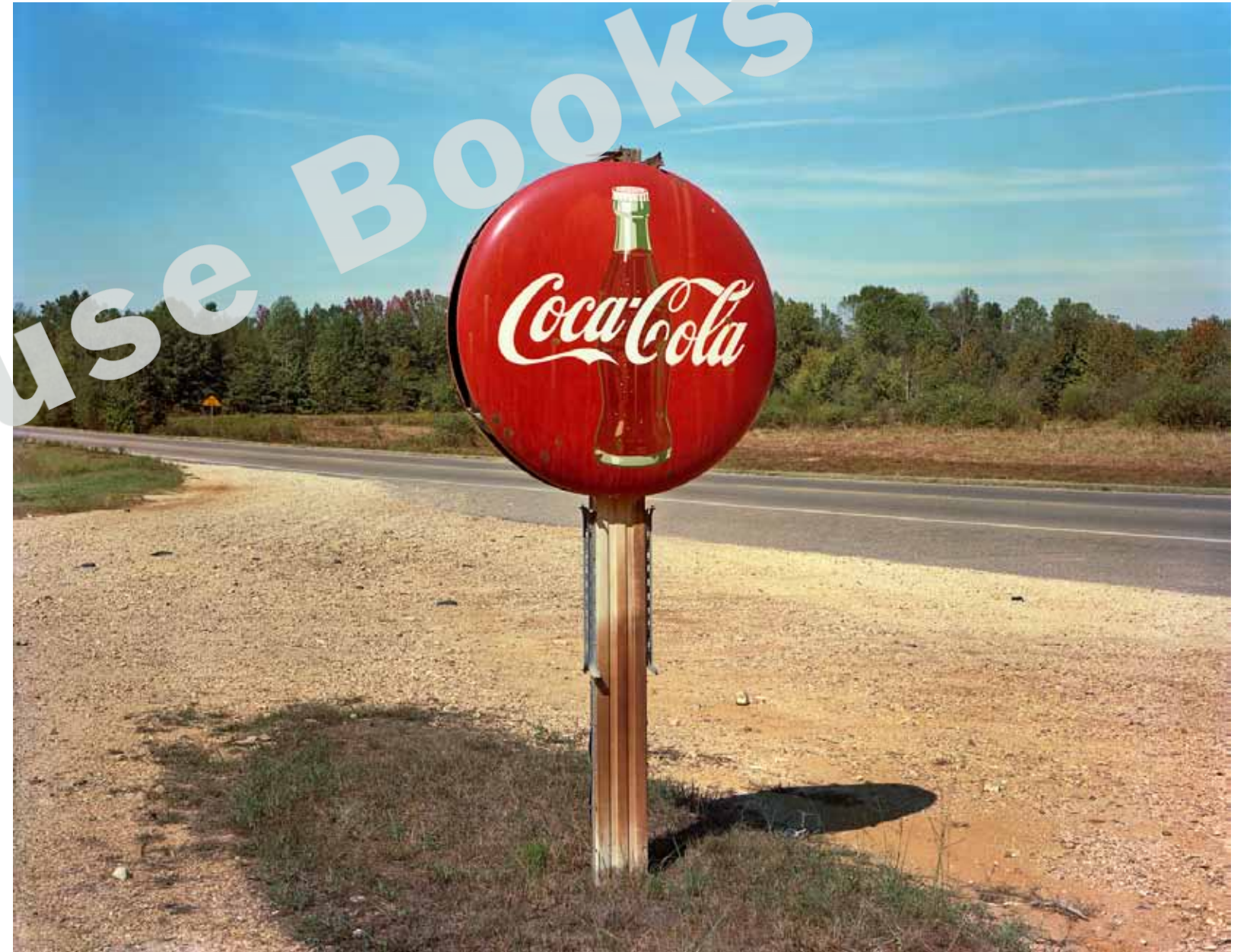
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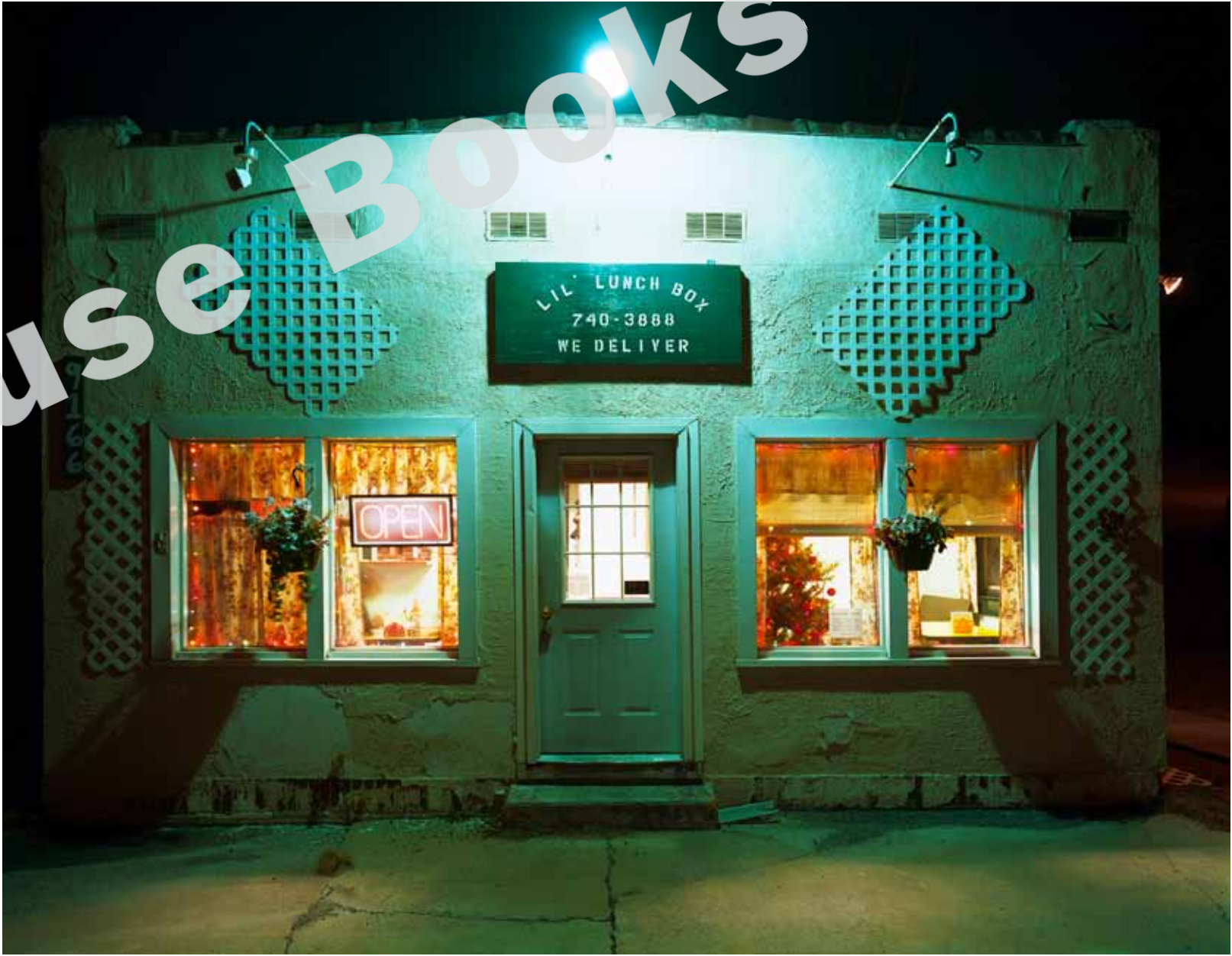














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