





# SIGNS OF THE TIMES

By Lorraine A. DarConte

Susan Berger's Americana projects search for what we all have in common.

From identical beauty supply storefronts in Savannah, GA, and Austin, TX, to beautiful jogging paths in Philadelphia, PA, photographer Susan Berger is all about documenting the common thread between U.S. cities.

Her two recent projects are *Private Memories in Public Places* and *Martin Luther King Blvd.* The first documents roadside memorials, while the second compares streets named for the most famous civil rights leader in cities and towns across the country.

According to Berger, one project led to the other—while photographing for the memorial project in rural Kentucky, she saw an exit sign for Martin Luther King (MLK) Drive. "I wondered what a street in Kentucky with that name could possibly look like," says Berger, who considered a street named for Martin Luther King Jr. more appropriate in a big city than a rural area. "That set me to wondering what MLK streets looked like in other parts of the country and how they were [both] different and the same."

## Finding MLK

Berger began planning her project online with a list of places with streets named after MLK, which can be found in towns and cities from Seattle to Chicago to New Jersey, and even in other countries (there are 10 in Italy alone). She then divided the country into segments that she could easily travel. Before hitting the road, Berger also researched the streets on Google Earth to see what they looked like, allowing her to do some pre-project editing.

She attempted to begin in Tucson, AZ, where she lives, but found the city does not have a street bearing the minister's name. "There is an MLK Circle in Phoenix; it's a cul-de-sac and the street sign says, 'Dead End: Martin Luther King.'" Because Arizona was the last state to declare Martin Luther King Day a



Seattle, WA 2010





US Hwy 2, Dodson, MT 2009

national holiday, Berger believes naming a cul-de-sac after King reflects that resistance. And she found Arizona wasn't the only state with that tension—it was a preview of things to come. "There was [also] a great deal of opposition to changing the name of a street in Portland," Berger says. "Business people were worried it indicated [that] it was a black neighborhood and their white customers wouldn't come."

Berger, who worked on the project for about two years, had no preconceived notions as to what she'd find while photographing. "My desire was simply to record what I found," she says. "I entered it with a totally open mind." However, she did expect the streets to be located in African-American communities, which they were for the most part (though some are now predominately Hispanic). She also expected the streets to be more populated. "I expected to see people walking along the streets, but what I found, for the most part, is that we've become a very mobile society," she says. "We drive; we don't walk."



Chicago, IL 2010





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As a Caucasian, Berger had concerns about her own point of view. "I had a conversation with myself along the way as to what drew my eye, what I chose to photograph, and what that said about me," she says. "Was I giving a full picture or a one-sided story—my side?"

Additionally, as a white woman photographing in African-American neighborhoods, people were suspicious of her until she told them about the project. "The women I met were far more suspicious than the men," says Berger, who believes they thought she was there to pass judgment. "When I told them what I was doing, they became very engaged and friendly." While MLK streets in some neighborhoods had signage like "No Loitering" and "Will Call Police," Berger found streets by the same name in beautiful residential areas of Galveston, TX, as well as Atlanta, GA, with lovely parks and manicured lawns.

Because Berger's recollection of the Civil Rights Movement (she was 20 years old when Dr. King passed away) is in black-and-white from newspaper and television reports of the time, she felt it appropriate to photograph the project using black-and-white film. The project conveys a sense of timelessness, as do her silver gelatin prints. "Normally I shoot

with a Hasselblad for the square format, but I bought a Mamiya 7 II, which is a sweet camera, especially for the project," Berger says. "I shot the first rolls of film using the Hasselblad, but I felt, if you're walking along a street, then the image needs to be horizontal (to capture more of it). The square format feels really portrait-y, and I wanted this to recall a different era, which called for a different camera." The project had its first major exhibition opening in January 2012, at the Griffin Museum in Winchester, MA.

### Rest Stops

In *Private Memories in Public Places*, Berger's goal was to document roadside memorials that marked sites where people had died, typically in auto accidents. While traveling with her partner, landscape photographer Robert Lanier, Berger noticed crosses and memorials along the road and wondered what spurred them. "I couldn't wrap my mind around why it was important to memorialize the place where the person died," she says. "I assumed the body was buried someplace else with a headstone. Why was it also important to memorialize the spot?"

After speaking with numerous people who laid out the sites about their motives—which included everything from honor, memory

## SUSAN BERGER

and the belief that the soul of the deceased hovers at the site—Berger concluded that the violence and suddenness of the deaths made the memorials important. She's also not convinced that the crosses, though Christian, always have a spiritual meaning. Instead, she feels their meaning is sometimes more akin to "X marks the spot."

Berger says the tradition began in Spain and slowly spread to North America. "Initially the memorial didn't mark where someone died. When there was a procession from a church to a graveyard, the flowers and crosses marked the spot where they stopped to rest with the casket."

Berger says that when she looks at the photographs, she's reminded of delight in finding the first memorial. Like the one she found on I-40 in Texas of a large metal silhouette of a cowboy and his horse, their heads hanging low. "They all look the same," she says. "They're all little white crosses on a metal pole. The number of crosses indicates the number of people who died. I photographed a memorial with four crosses that was erected in front of train tracks, and as I took the photo, a train sped by. That one image tells the whole story."

The memorial project was shown in a solo exhibition in Lishui, China. Works from the project also have been exhibited in group exhibitions at The Southeast Museum of Photography in Florida, which purchased five of the photographs for its permanent collection, and The Cleveland Museum of Art, which purchased three photographs for its permanent collection.

Though Berger considers both projects complete, she still adds images to them from time to time. For the future, she's contemplating a project she calls *Waiting* that documents people in the process of doing just that—waiting—for a light to turn green, a line to move, for life to move forward. "We spend so much time in our day waiting for this and that, often going into a kind of trance, unaware that others are watching us," explains Berger. "That's the moment I want to capture."

For more information on Susan Berger, visit: [www.susanbergerphotographs.com/](http://www.susanbergerphotographs.com/)

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