

MOTORISTS ALONG ALBUQUERQUE'S

Central Avenue are accustomed to cruising past derelict holdovers from Route 66's glory days, those ramshackle signs that identify businesses long shuttered. These days, however, they're encountering a new brand of public art that breathes new life into the neighborhood while drawing attention to its distinct identity. The nonprofit Friends of the Orphan Signs adopts these signs (called "orphans" in the historic preservation community), bringing together professional artists and the public to transform them from hollow, paint-chipped frames into art.

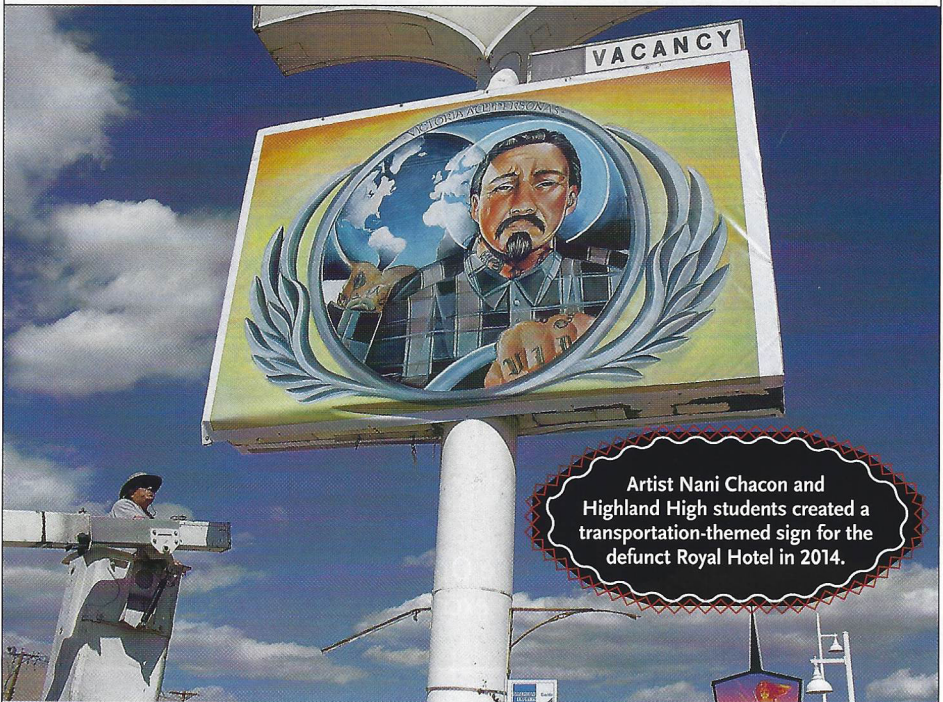
The signs are beautiful, especially amid the urban blight from which they spring, as well as thoughtful and divergent from the sea of commercial messaging typically found on such signs. The work is not historic preservation in the truest sense, as FOS doesn't return the signs to their previous identities but rather revitalizes them. "We are preserving vestiges of the past and keeping historic continuity and part of Albuquerque's identity," says executive director Ellen Babcock.

Since the group's 2010 incorporation, it has refurbished (sometimes literally, since the vintage signs are often in disrepair) a handful of signs across the city using grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, Albuquerque Public Art, and other foundations. Occasionally FOS works exclusively with a group of professional artists; other times it uses its educational arm to loop in students at local charter schools and Highland High School. For example, in 2012's *Revivir*, a billboard at 4119 Central Avenue, FOS members and

Revivir, a project with Highland High students funded by the CABQ public art program, 2012.

Artistic Orphanage

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Highland students created a sign that depicts a woman pouring water in front of the Sandia Mountains, rendered in bright hues that befit the Mother Road's vibe. As with many of FOS's projects, the image is a photo collage that is graphic enough to be "read" even as drivers speed past at 35 mph.

Many signs have more intricate details that can only be appreciated by pedestrians strolling Central Avenue or waiting for the bus. Passersby even contributed to one project at the former Trade Winds Motel, texting artistic snippets that FOS then posted on the reader board. Gems include "The bus is never closed to crazy" and "I clap for you in my head all the time."

FOS continues to lead workshops at Highland High during which the students experience true artistic experimentation, bringing signs from the idea stage to completion. A recent class collaborated on the theme of justice, creating and staging performances with picket signs, photographs of which will soon appear on another sign.

In keeping with Babcock's training and philosophies as an artist (she also teaches sculpture at UNM), the process is democratic. Members of the Harwood Art Center community contributed to the permanent installation of the Seedling sign outside the center's studio at Sixth and Mountain, creating the image of an owl floating in a rainbow of child-like brushwork and a menagerie that includes pandas and puffins dressed for a night on the town. In the group's latest project, a soon-to-be completed sign at Casa Barelvas, FOS held public workshops, gathering photographs and manipulating them as a group for the oval sign with low-draw LED lighting to be posted at the former Filling Station on Fourth Street.

The signs circumvent traditional art spaces and are immediately public and widely seen. "We're infusing the landscape with the mysterious, the surprising, the creative, the enlightening," artist Lindsey Fromm says.

—Ashley M. Biggers

friendsoftheorphansigns.org