

## Sarah Lyon's Moby Dick

by Brian Allnutt

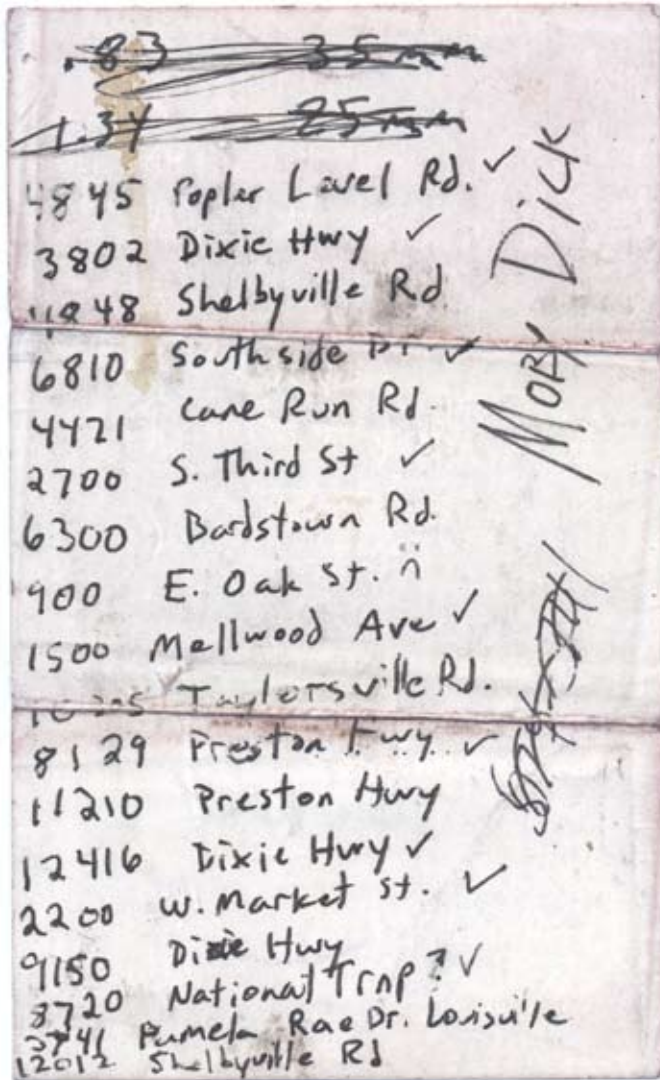
2007

I've known about Sarah's Moby Dick project for a long time and on two occasions I've gone out with her to take photographs. One time we stopped to drink beers in a church parking lot in Jeffersontown. When we got to the restaurant she wanted to photograph, the lights went out. But after a 26 ounce can of Fosters, taking pictures seemed beside the point. And in a sense these photographs and all the work that Sarah does comes second to her primary interest: adventure. And that's fine with me. Everything that one creates is a by-product of life and how one chooses to live it. In this context, the Moby Dick pictures take on a special significance as a jumping-off point. I'm reminded of the Whaleman's Chapel that Ishmael visits before shipping out on the Pequod. The preacher climbs up into the pulpit on a ship's ladder and then pulls it up after him, ready to isolate himself from the world in order to deliver the word of God. Ishmael says, "I could not suspect him of courting notoriety by any mere tricks of the stage. No, thought I, there must be some sober reason for this thing; furthermore it must symbolize something unseen." What these photographs, displayed in light-boxes, symbolize is unclear. But they were chosen for a reason and their resonance is undeniable. In some ways they appear as advertisements, promising a "Whale of Sandwich." And in other ways they're almost votive, like the Moby Dick buried in snow. They are personalized versions of the fast-food behemoth. I'm tempted to take one home and put some candles in front of it and maybe a picture of Jim Morrison. Maybe that's the idea.



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There's something a little subversive about trying to preserve images of a landscape that is meant to be disposable. These are places that are here for us, but they are not by us. Furthermore the occurrence of corporate espionage has made it



moby dick list

above the whale was a small lighthouse that would surely have come loose if lassoed. Behind the restaurant was a church with a cross in the window made of blue and white lights that looked like televisions. On the other side of us was a defunct

impossible to take photographs inside any major retailer, unless one does so surreptitiously. When people ask Sarah what she's doing when she's taking photographs, she says, "School project." It's best not to admit that you're an artist if you can avoid it.

That first night, shooting Moby Dick on Dixie Highway, we ate at the restaurant and then drove around for a while, waiting for the place to close. There were some funny things on the menu, the "Muncher" which costs only a dollar and seventy cents and the "1<sup>st</sup> Mate's Meal." It's easy to feel a sense of empathy for whatever genius created this chain of restaurants. Everything about them suggests some sort of unknown magic. There's a restaurant by my house whose billboard reads, "No Games, No Prizes, Just More Fish," is this meant to suggest that inside happy meals are being transformed into catfish fillets or the mysterious "Muncher"? I like to think so.

Driving around Louisville's South End, Sarah told me about an experience she had had in high school. There was a camera on a light post in the parking lot to keep kids from smoking. One night her friend lassoed it with a rope and dragged it down. When they looked at the camera, they found that it was hollow inside. The kids had been tricked into policing themselves. This is suggestive of so much of the artifice that pervades sub-urban America. It's not so much that people are powerless over their environment; it's more that they are coerced into surrendering what power they have.

At Moby Dick, Sarah set up her camera and we stood in the cold with the traffic whizzing by behind our backs. The restaurant had a white whale on it with an awning on either side. Perched

miniature golf course. The hut where they used to rent the clubs had been turned into a pawnshop and check-cashing place. In this shifting world of strip malls it was easy to think of documentation as an act of resistance against the a-historical.

Try and imagine what's behind Wal-Mart or Target and it's almost scary. These buildings come from nowhere and point to nothing beyond them. Beyond Wal-Mart there may very well be another Wal-Mart waiting to take it's place. Moby Dick seems inspired and strangely human against the backdrop of these kinds of places. When I asked Sarah why she had started taking these pictures she said, "I don't remember." But later she said, "There's just something about going after Moby Dick. At night they look like spaceships." I know what she means. It's nearly impossible to talk about the Moby Dick without lapsing into metaphor. Historically it exists somewhere between the eponymous novel of Herman Melville and the Parliament Funkadelic Mothership.

Of course, for a land locked place like Kentucky, anything having to do with the ocean has a built in appeal. This explains Jimmy Buffet and the tiki-torches we put in our backyards come summertime. But it's not really the ocean people want; it's the edge of the ocean. They want to see the point where earth, air and water meet, where life's possibility finds its greatest physical expression. As Melville and Coleridge have expressed, the ocean itself is a dessert. In order for the mariner to continue, she needs to possess a certain faith that there is something out there in the ocean's indistinguishable vastness or that land will eventually appear on the horizon. Forgive me if I wax poetic for a moment here and say that if the camel is the ship of the dessert than Moby Dick is the camel of the blacktop. On the edge of town, awash in darkness, Sarah and I stood under the great whale and contemplated the possibilities for two castaways such as us. Could we get away with creating something new out of these empty forms in overlooked places? Nobody seemed to be paying attention.



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