

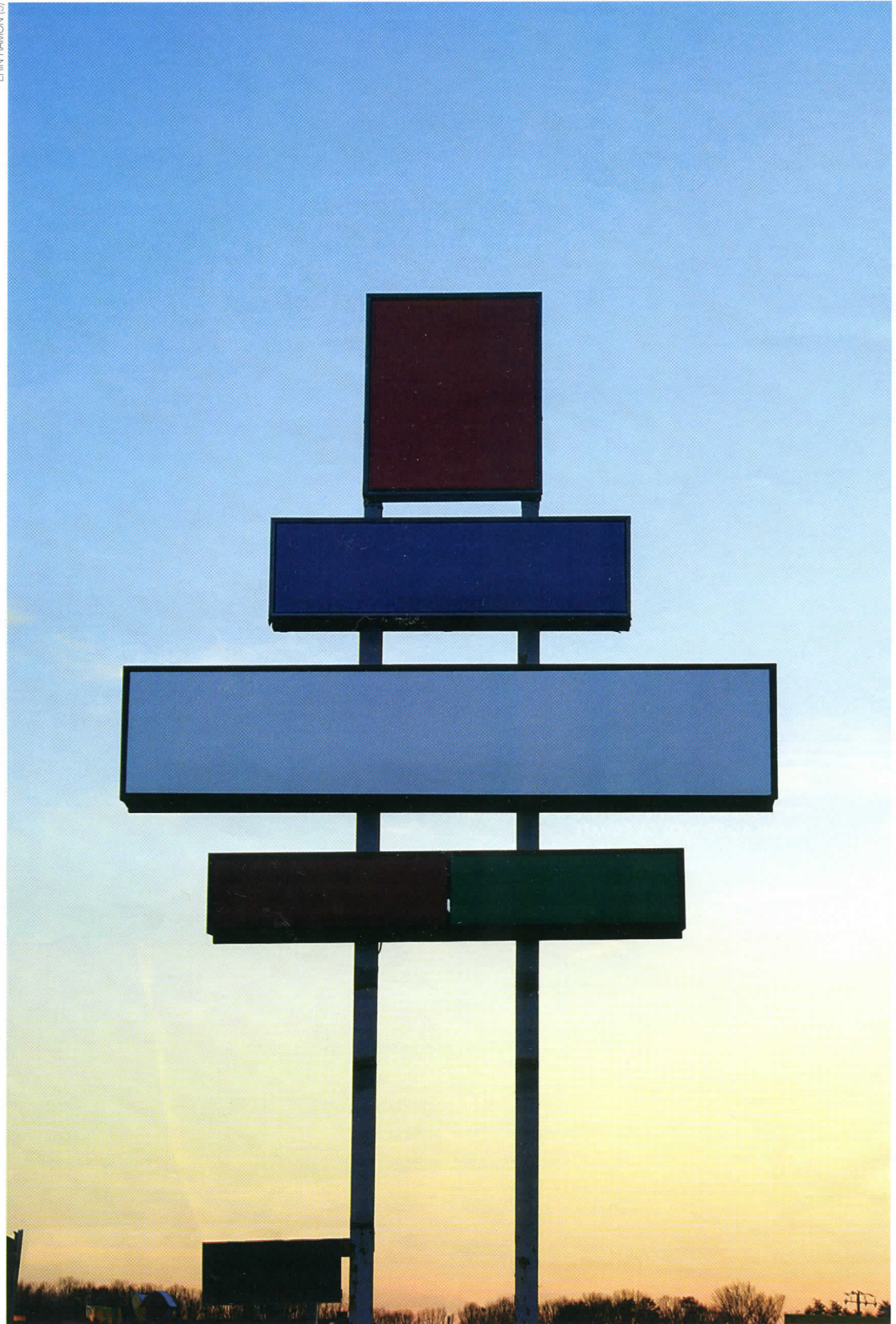
Right and
opposite: Five
of Erin
Ramon's
altered signs.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIN RAMON

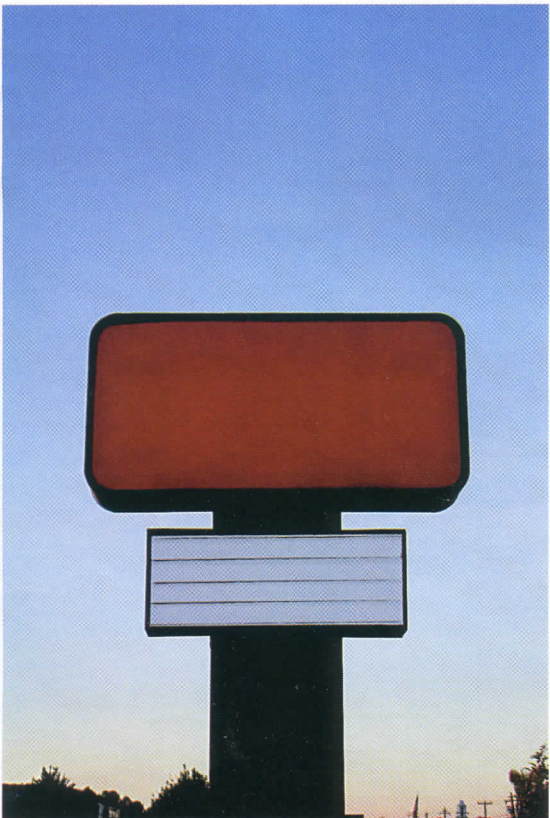
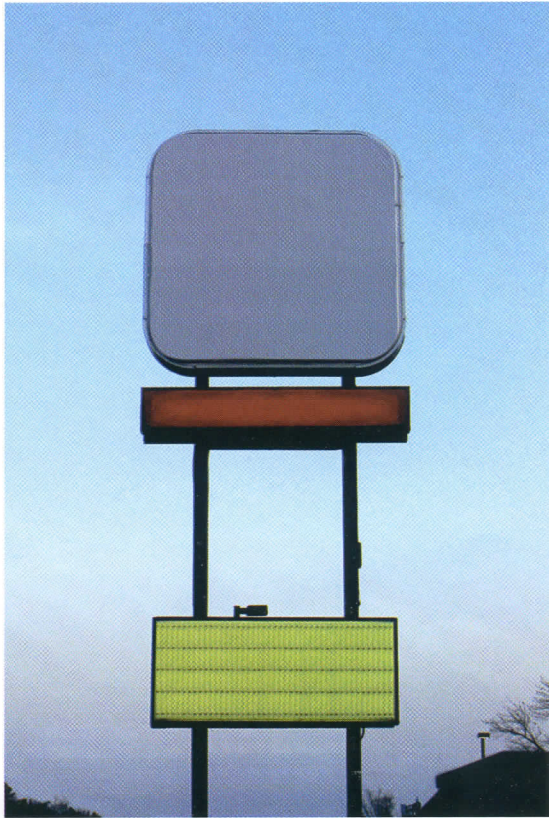
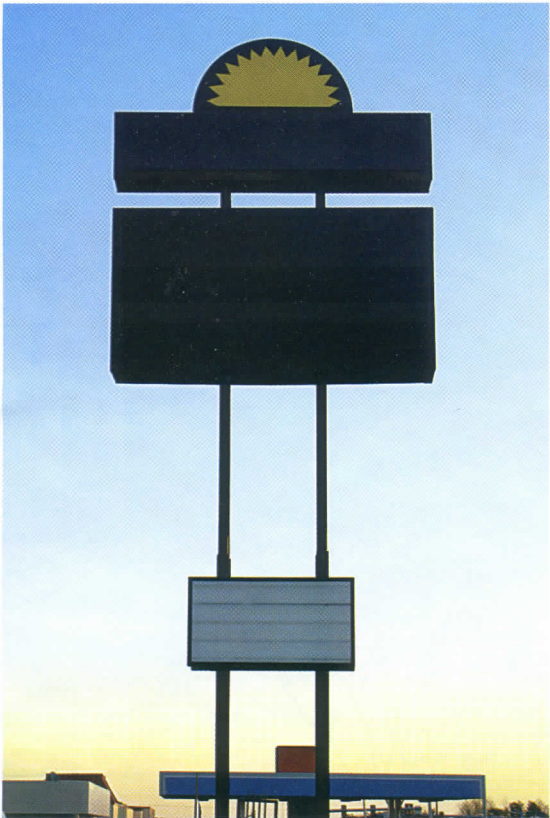
Commercial signage is part of our cultural road map. This is especially true in franchised America: When you feel the urge for a hamburger, are desperate for a cheap place to sleep, or need a lube, you keep an eye out for the distinctive shapes and colors of those particular businesses' signs. Chain stores (or motels, or restaurants) hardly have to spell out their names.

That's the idea behind Erin Ramon's clever photographs of freestanding roadside signs. Ramon, who created the images as part of her coursework at Virginia Commonwealth University, shoots her subjects in the neutral, new-objectivity manner of German industrial photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher: all straight-on, parallel to the picture plane, and always with the pale blue sky of dusk behind them. She captures them with a Canon EOS Digital Rebel XT, but rather than rely on the camera's power to render detail, her images succeed by virtue of the *absence* of important information. Ramon uses Photoshop to

ERIN RAMON (5)



SIGN LANGUAGE



seamlessly remove the name of the actual business.

This leads viewers to realize that they might not really need those words to identify the business. A sign that Ramon has blanked out except for a rising sun logo at the top is clearly soliciting customers for a Days Inn motel. A sign for Waffle House telegraphs its name with six yellow squares on the first line and five on the second, as if waiting for Vanna White to turn them around to reveal each letter.

Some of the images do, in fact, become a guessing game. Isn't that rounded, bloodred rectangle the emblem for a certain steak house? And doesn't that sign with four stacked rectangles belong to a bowling alley? When, as in these cases, the identification becomes less certain, Ramon's images get interesting, in a frustrating sort of way. The sign seems familiar but you can't quite identify the business. And then you realize what a complex mental matrix consumer culture has ingrained in us all.

STUDENT PORTFOLIOS

Words seem superfluous when Erin Ramon's meticulously altered signs tell you what you need to know. By Russell Hart