

## 'No Lifeguard on Duty' dips into nostalgia

### ART REVIEW: Pools are focus of exhibit at Holly Johnson

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By CHARLES DEE MITCHELL / Special Contributor

Family vacations in the 1960s: Everybody piles into the car and takes off. Whatever wonders pass by the windshield during the day, the highlight of each evening is pulling into a new motel and getting that first glimpse of the pool. Is it a rectangle or kidney-shaped? Does it have a board or a slide?



Salton Sea by J. Bennett Fitts (2005; C-print, edition of six, 40 by 50 inches)

J. Bennett Fitts is a photographer too young to have experienced '60s car trips, and yet he seems determined to take all the nostalgia associated with those memories, put it in a box and nail it shut. His project, shot in 2005 and currently at Holly Johnson Gallery, is called "No Lifeguard on Duty," and it focuses almost exclusively on the empty swimming pools of abandoned motels.

His 40-by-50-inch color prints have the muted tones of receding memories. He works on overcast days or around either dawn or dusk, although given the subject matter, it is difficult to imagine that the sun is doing anything other than going down.

In *Jacksonville*, it could be that the pool has been drained for maintenance, since the buildings around it seem to be habitable and well-kept. More typical is the one in Huntington. Plastic furniture lies jumbled by the shallow end, and the blue walls of the empty pool have sprouted a healthy growth of algae. The fence surrounding the pool has been reinforced with two extra strands of wire to make access more difficult, although a portable basketball backboard has either fallen over or been

tipped to depress the wires at one point. Perhaps skateboarders have braved those algae-covered walls.

Not even the most desperate skater would consider going into most of these pools. In *Panama City Beach 3*, the pool has at least a foot of water that looks like sewage. And with a real ocean just a few yards away, you wonder who would have ever preferred the bleak, concrete oasis to the real thing.

Bodies of natural water are often in the background of Mr. Fitts' images. The pool in *North Shore* is an unusual flower shape, trimmed in blue and containing a few inches of the signature brown sludge found in so many of the images. The cinder-block wall surrounding it has been reinforced with chain-link fencing and two strands of barbed wire, reminding us that these things are safety hazards and an insurer's nightmare. But beyond all this is a sandbar and what looks like a perfectly pleasant bit of shoreline.



Victorville by J. Bennett Fitts (2005; C-print, edition of six, 40 by 50 inches)

What can owners do with these pools other than fence them off? The folks at Inland Empire have come up with a creative solution. They filled theirs in, sodded it and now keep it trimmed like a lawn. No insurance risk here.

Mr. Fitts does give us one view of a functioning pool in *Grand Junction*. There is a golf course in the background. The grounds are well-maintained, and the evening sky casts the glow known as the "magic hour" in filmmaking. The pool has only a single user, a chubby adolescent girl who sits on the edge with one foot dangling in the water. If she doesn't seem to be having much fun, it could be because on the fence surrounding the pool are 10 – count them 10 – signs that issue warnings or prohibit specific behaviors.

Mr. Fitts clearly has an eye for the more forlorn aspects of the American dream and the technical skills to realize his vision in these very accomplished prints. "No Lifeguard on Duty" could be described as depressing, but as a body of work it has an undeniable elegiac quality.

He is working in the tradition of Western landscape artists that includes painters from the 19th century and later photographers such as Robert Adams, Richard Misrach and Stephen Shore. These sites are among the minor ruins of a nation. They embody the Ozymandias effect of Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem: "Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair."

**Plan your life**

**"No Lifeguard on Duty," by J. Bennett Fitts, continues through Aug. 18 at Holly Johnson Gallery, 1411 Dragon St. Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. Free. 214-369-0169, [www.hollyjohnsongallery.com](http://www.hollyjohnsongallery.com).**