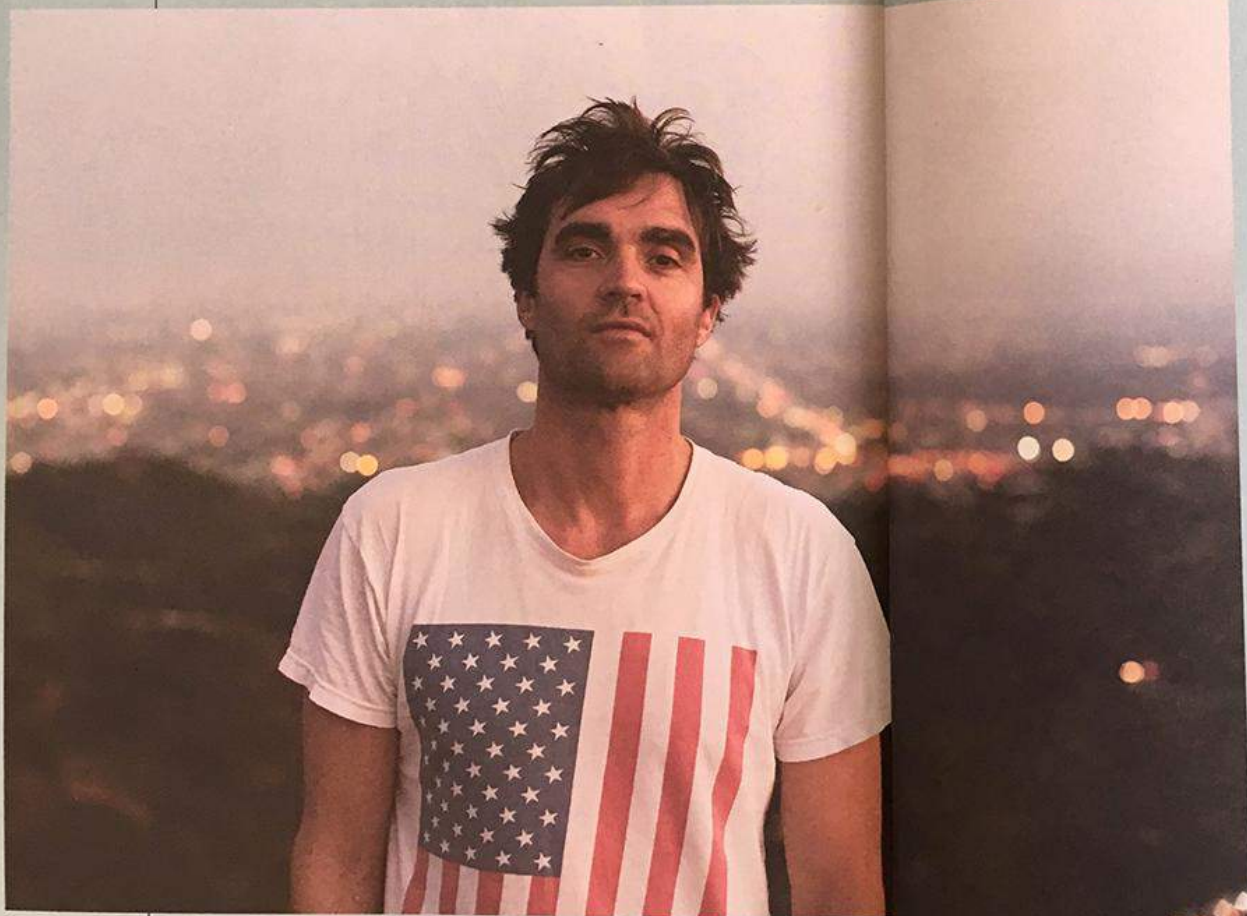


SEEING LA LA LAND

by Cameron Baird



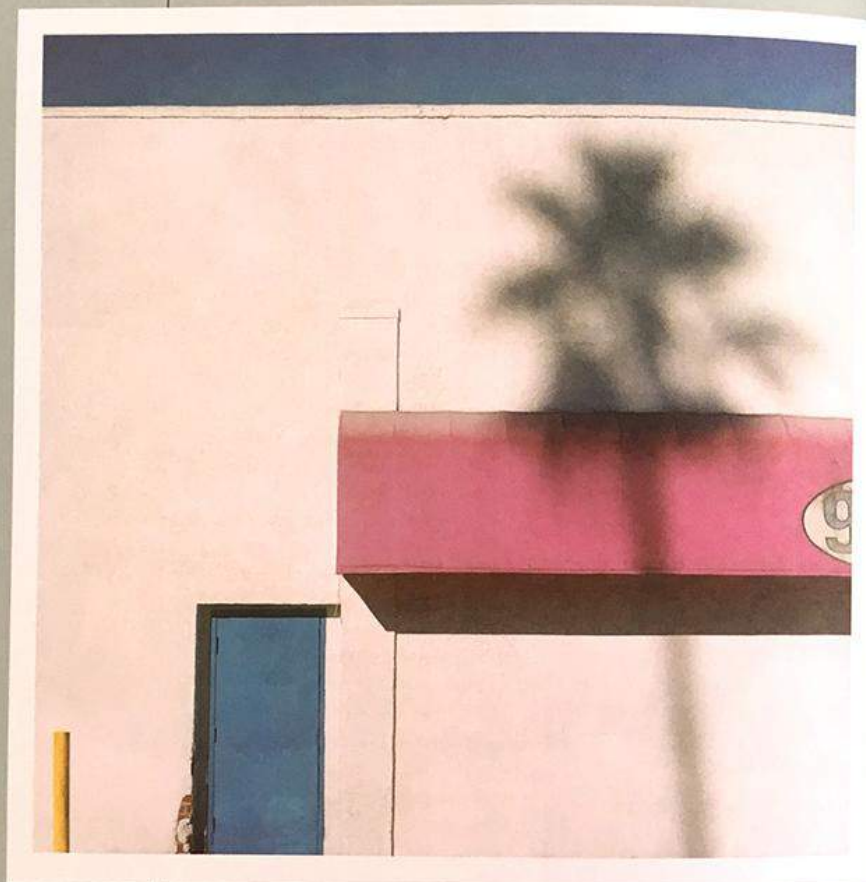
THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT THE urban landscape that has attracted photographers for decades — the light and shadow, the man-made structures that tower over the same men who made them.

It's the urban banal that poses another question all together, and that is: is there beauty within this hard, cold, often-dull construct? Is there a way of finding colour, the natural, the softness and mystery within this concrete jungle?

George Byrne's study of the urban banality of Los Angeles is one that draws instant appreciation. His ability to find rare beauty — the splash of colour, a spot of nature, the wink in a crowded room — is what makes his work so interesting. What others miss, Byrne isolates and focuses on, creating worlds of surreal simplicity and wonder in the everyday.

As a talented Australian, Byrne is an unlikely hero of the Los Angeles photography landscape, finding himself pursuing several artistic slants at the same time. He knows how to pour a good coffee, and as a musician and writer, knows a few things about creating a damn good tune. Most of his profile work is married with a beautiful piece of music, composed and performed by the man himself.

An
After Hours
interview
with George
Byrne.



In our *After Hours* interview, we sat down with George when he returned home over the new year, and picked the brain of a man who has taken social media success, gallery representation, and recent residencies all in his stride, without breaking a sweat. This is a bloke whose modus operandi is as casual and as cool as the crisp photographs he takes. And, typically Australian, he's keener to go for a beer and tell a story than talk too seriously about his work, or about himself.

CAMERON BAIRD: There is a common misconception that LA is a place limited to tourists, smog, traffic and posers, when in truth there are so many beautiful aspects to experience. Do you agree with this, and do you feel you need to convince people of this?

GEORGE BYRNE: Yes. I think broadly speaking, LA is not a very well understood city, and with good reason. It is so

vast and lacks a simple visual icon that ties it all together such as the Eiffel Tower, or the Opera House. Gavin Lambert put it well when he wrote 'Los Angeles is not a city but a bunch of suburban approaches to a city that never materializes...'. This makes LA more a collection of smaller cities that don't necessarily have anything to do with each other, stitched together by giant freeways and — almost for convenience — labelled as Los Angeles. There is certainly 'smog, traffic and posers' but there is also stunning wilderness, rich Mexican history, a melting pot of cultures like no other city I've ever been in, and a massive art and music scene (and every other obscure subculture you can think of), all thriving and butted up against each other. It's a 'choose your own adventure' town. In my experience, the only really negative assumptions about LA come from people who hate driving (fair call), actors who feel claustrophobic living in the centre of the acting universe, and displaced, proud New Yorkers that don't get it. Other than that, most people I come across are very curious and positive about this strange place.

How did your Instagram success come about and how did it change the way you took photographs?

My Instagram following actually came about very unexpectedly. I had resisted getting an iPhone for years (I was worried it would take over my life), but as a photographer I was curious about the whole thing. Once I got a phone and started posting pictures, I found that more and more people were reacting to them. I'd been shooting with square format film cameras since my university days so I was immediately comfortable with that. I just began to have a really

good time with it and it didn't cost me a cent so it was win/win! The whole thing actually helped me in that it enabled me to take tons of photographs and get better at what I was doing, at seeing this new city I was living in. In terms of how it's changed the way I take photos, I think it just helped me refine and explore a type of minimal urban aesthetic I'd been practising on and off since the very first time I started using cameras — but this time in colour.

Knowing that you studied Fine Art in Sydney in the early 2000's (at Sydney College of the Arts), is it frustrating being thought of as someone purely from an online medium — or does it even matter?

I don't think it matters too much. To be honest it's still a real thrill to have people recognise my work at all, whether they think I'm an Instagram photographer or not. People who come to my exhibitions or purchase work tend to learn a bit more about my CV anyway. I also think that as I increasingly use Instagram to promote my broader art practice (not just post images), people will get a more all-encompassing sense of what I do.

How do you feel about the current breed of online photographer, one who may not have studied, or 'done the hard yards' learning the craft?

I think it's cool and it serves its own purpose. Stephen Shore talks a lot about this, how photography in the smartphone age has become a language in itself. We wade through so many images every day that we're incapable of retaining or processing in any deep or meaningful way. I say if someone takes a good picture they take a good picture,

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it really doesn't matter to me which camera they use. Cameras are just a means to an end and it's great that with phones, so many more people are engaged with images and art than ever before. Having said that, there's obviously a giant technical and conceptual leap between taking a great photo for your 'feed' and going down the path of being a visual artist and trying to make a living out of it. For the latter you need to learn how to make physical prints, then think in terms of a cohesive series that has some degree of conceptual grounding. Then you have framing, presentation and galleries which is a whole other beast. What I've learned is that just like with any other trade, you only get good and make interesting and original creative breakthroughs when you immerse yourself in it completely, whether you use an iPhone, a 8x10 film camera or a paint brush.

What was it about the streets and people of Los Angeles that first grabbed your attention and made you look at it so differently?

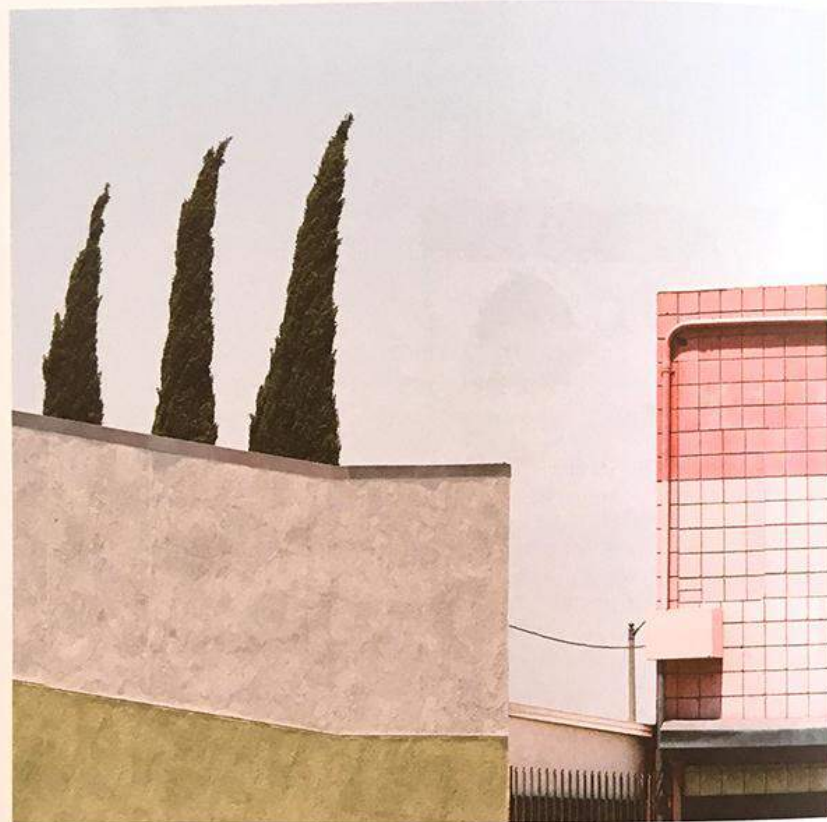
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Your work has been associated with 'New Topographics' photography. Do you feel your work fits this kind of categorisation, or any other?

Yeah I do. My work is definitely influenced by the New Topographics crew. They were spawned in part by the groundbreaking images of Walker Evans, Dorothy Lange and the other photographers of the Farm Administration Act era (1940's). To a large degree the New Topographics steered photography away from its conventional use at the time, and set the stage for

Byrne in his
LA-based
studio.





photography to be appreciated as an art form that didn't necessarily have to document a story or event. It didn't need to be a portrait of someone or capture a traditionally beautiful landscape. Their pictures were more nuanced, painterly and abstract in their intention — all elements I like to employ — so I was keen on them from the outset. In terms of other influences and categories, when I started out taking pictures I was actually more interested in getting into painting. I was obsessed with Eu-

ropean Modernism and the American Abstract Expressionists and spent a lot of time imitating them. Later down the track I also discovered the Color Field painters of the 60's and 70's. I think my work borrows from all these genres in different ways.

As one who is always looking at the everyday instance as a possible image (and travelling so much to find that ideal shot), how does your work affect your personal life?

Yeah it can be hard to switch off at times but it's not too bad. Years ago I experimented in shooting more Robert Frank-inspired street photography and I found that much harder. The pressure that came with looking for that 'decisive moment' (i.e. where the dog walks past and the kid falls off his skateboard while the couple kiss on the sidewalk all at once), ended up making me feel like I was unable to properly experience my own life. It started to feel less creative and more like the art of trying to be in the right place at the right time and banging out tons of photos. As much as I love and respect that genre of photography and the people that do it well, it just stressed me out. What I'm doing now better suits me; I still get a little manic when I'm in the zone but — aside from the sun — my subject matter stays still and it's up to me to make it work.

What is your usual creative day like? Do you have a structure to how you work, or is there no strict time to when you move creatively?

My day-to-day life is pretty varied and depends mainly on what's due and whether I have an exhibition I'm working towards.

I try to get up and at it by 9am. I recently got myself a little studio at werkartz.com, which is a fantastic multi-use art and photo studio space right near Chinatown (right near Downtown LA). This has changed my life considerably as I'm now able to split my professional life from my home life (massive coup), and possibly be more productive.

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Do you believe in the After Hours, whether it is a time or place? And if so, how do you enjoy it?

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You had a pretty packed year in 2016 with shows in Sydney and LA. What is coming up this year, and what projects and partnerships can we look forward to seeing?

It's shaping up to be pretty busy in 2017. I have a pop-up exhibition (19-21 May) at Halcyon House, a beautiful little boutique hotel on Cabarita Beach, half an hour north of Byron Bay. I did a residency there over Christmas last year so I'll be showing some of the work I shot in the area alongside some LA work. This show will then travel and hang in the Olsen Annex Gallery in Woollahra, Sydney, for two weeks following that. I'll also be having my first major exhibition in NYC! Tim Olsen (of Olsen gallery) recently partnered with Gruin to open a space in Soho NYC called OLSEN GRUIN. My show there — NEW ORDER — will open late June and run for a few weeks; all the details will be posted up on my website soon. **END**

There is a common misconception about LA, that it is a place limited to tourists, smog, traffic and posers, when in truth there are so many beautiful aspects to experience. Do you agree with this, and/or do you feel you need to convince people of this?

Yes. I think broadly speaking, LA is not a very well understood city and with good reason. It is so vast and it lacks a simple visual theme / icon that's ties it all together such as the Eiffel Tower, or the Opera House in Sydney. Gavin Lambert put it well when he wrote "*Los Angeles is not a city but a bunch of suburban approaches to a city that never materializes..*". This makes LA more a collection of smaller cities that don't necessarily have anything to do with each other, stitched together by giant freeways and – almost for convenience – labeled as Los Angeles. There is certainly '*smog, traffic & posers*' but there is also stunning wilderness, rich Mexican history, a melting pot of cultures like no other city I've ever been, a massive art & music scene and every other obscure subculture you can think of, all thriving and all butted up against each other. It's a 'choose your own adventure' town. In my experience the only really negative assumptions about LA come from people who hate driving (fair call), actors who feel claustrophobic living in the center of the acting universe, and displaced, proud New Yorkers that don't get it, other than that most people I come across are very curious and positive about this strange place.

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Knowing that you studied Fine Art in Sydney in the early 2000's (Sydney College of the Arts), is it frustrating being recognised as someone of an online digital/social medium, or does it really matter? In particular as you shoot daily on all types of cameras, not merely an iPhone.

I don't think it matters too much. To be honest it's still a real thrill to have people recognize my work at all, whether they think I'm an Instagram photographer or not. Also, people who come to my exhibitions or purchase work tend to learn a bit more about my CV. I also think that as I increasingly use Instagram to promote my broader art practice (not just post images), people will get a more all-encompassing sense of what I do.

How do you feel about the current breed of online photographer, one who may not have studied, or 'done the hard yards' learning the (hate to say it) craft?

You can say it! I think it's cool and it serves its own purpose. Stephen Shore talks a lot about this, how photography in the smartphone age has become a language in of itself. We wade through so many images every day that we're incapable of retaining or processing them all in any deep or meaningful way. I say if someone takes a good picture they take good picture, it really doesn't matter to me which camera they use, cameras are just a means to an end and it's great that with phones, so many more people are engaged with images and art than ever before in history. Having said that, there's obviously a giant technical & conceptual leap between taking a great photo for your 'feed' and going down the path of being a visual artist and trying to make a living out of it. For the latter you need to learn how to make physical prints, then think in terms of a cohesive series that has some degree of conceptual grounding, then you have framing, presentation and galleries which is a whole other beast. What I've learned is that just like with any other trade, you only get good and make interesting & original creative breakthroughs when you immerse yourself in the thing completely, whether you use an iPhone, a 8x10 film camera or a paint brush.

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