

PROFILE

STREET ART

GEORGE BYRNE FOUND HIS STYLE IN THE URBAN JUNGLE, SO A RESIDENCY IN A NORTHERN NSW COASTAL TOWN WAS THE LAST THING HE EXPECTED.

WORDS MILANDA ROUT



George Byrne picked up a film camera at age 14. It was his sister Alice's and he just wanted to muck around a bit with it. He took photographs of a couple of mates, his girlfriend's hair and an old wall covered in bougainvillea. He had been dabbling in painting and drawing at school but he knew straight away it was so much more than just recording a moment; he had found his thing.

"It was the first time I had used an old film camera, had them developed and got them back by myself. I was just blown away," Byrne tells WISH

from his Los Angeles home. “I immediately had a sense that I could make not just photographs but I could create interesting pictures.”

Now Byrne may have subconsciously known that photography would be his main game (he even kept that roll of film) but it took a few decades for him to figure it out. As a teenager in Sydney, he was more interested in playing guitar. At university, he studied all different forms of art. In his 20s, he travelled around the world. It wasn't until he landed in Los Angeles in his 30s that he developed the aesthetic he has become renowned for: painting-like photographs of LA streetscapes.

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And even this was all almost by accident. Byrne originally went to New York and stay with his younger sister, actress Rose Byrne. He ended up in the US because he wanted to live overseas but had “used all of his Europe visas up” in his 20s so he sought a touring musician visa. Byrne had said he was planning to go on tour playing guitar for three years and at 65 tiny venues. “I did the first three gigs and that was it,” he says of his creative but successful application. He did not do as well in New York -- the only job he got was playing Santa at the Hallmark Christmas party.

Next stop was LA. He got a job at cafe and was soon exploring the sprawling city. “You are forced to drive a lot in LA and so you see a lot of the place. You just don't live in the bubble from your work to your home,” he says. “I was enjoying that and I started to carry my camera with me and shoot away.” A couple of years later Instagram arrived on the scene and Byrne started taking pictures with his iPhone. “I had real-time feedback on the work as it was developing,” he says. “It was a really interesting experience for me, having taken photos for 20 years, to have a real-time audience.”



Halcyon House and the Mount Warning mural in NSW; Virgil, LA

His works of stark streetscapes look like real-life Jeffrey Smart paintings. Thousands of people every day walk past very ordinary – in some cases rather edgy locales -- but Byrne turns them into art. It started to become a viable option as a full-time gig in 2014. “It was really a matter of a bunch of different forces coming together at the same time and getting fired from my café job that led me to surviving off selling prints,” he says. Byrne funded his first art show around Australia – he bought the plane ticket on a newly acquired credit card and travelled with 200 prints in his suitcase. He returned after successful exhibitions in Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane, with money in his pocket and a much lighter suitcase. A meeting with Tim Olsen led to his first solo exhibition called Local Division in Sydney and LA early last year. Then he got a phone call inviting him to be an artist in residence at Halcyon House on the NSW north coast over summer: an appealing offer but a daunting one given the hotel is set in a coastal hamlet when Byrne is known for his gritty urban landscapes of downtown LA.

“I had been to Cabarita beach 20 years ago on a road trip with friends after high school,” he says. “But I wasn’t sure what to expect as I hadn’t really done anything like this before and I wanted them to know that the

bulk of what I am doing is very much based in Los Angeles and they said no pressure, just see what happens. And it was absolute heaven. I took 20 rolls of medium format film and shot all the film in the towns around Cabarita Beach.”

Byrne’s work will be displayed at Halcyon House during May and it will be launched as part of a special weekend event with men’s luxury online shopping site Mr Porter on May 19. Byrne, who has been declared a member of Mr Porter’s style counsel and will be back at Halcyon House for the exhibition opening, says he would love to do more artist-in-residence programs.

“I was a bit nervous about how it would go but I think it has been one of the best things I have done in the last couple of years,” he says. “I want to do more projects where I travel somewhere for a chunk of time to make some work. That is something that is going to be on the horizon for sure.”

Accommodation packages are available to attend the George Byrne/Mr Porter exhibition event on May 19. Go to halcyonhouse.com.au for details.

