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FADING BOOMTOWN

A CONVERSATION WITH PHOTOGRAPHER GEORGE BYRNE

BY HUDSON BROWN

Australian photographer George Byrne has developed a deep appreciation for Los Angeles since arriving in 2011. With its uncompromising heat, jarring streetscapes, and sense of seclusion, The City of Angels has become the primary focus of George's cameras, including his iPhone.





LUSHELL
GREEN & WHITE

PEAK OF WHITE
BANKRUPTCY

BANKRUPTCY

FAU



FITZROY POOL

It looks like a fading boomtown of the 70s and 80s - lots of the architecture looks like it's falling apart. Thanks to the relentless sun, every colour in the entire city eventually turns to pastel. It's quite a trip.'

Having first picked up a camera in his formative teenage years, George initially took up drawing and painting at Sydney College of the Arts (SCA). Later deciding that photography was where his passion lay, he graduated from SCA in 2002 majoring in fine arts and photography.

'Through the combination of learning about other artists and taking lots of pictures, I soon found that whether I was shooting a person or a house or a natural landscape, I was interested in photography as a deductive art, which is further enhanced when it can intersect with other aesthetic and social questions.'

Embarking on what George calls his 'American Odyssey' in 2010, he arrived in New York City where he stayed with his younger sister (and Hollywood actress) Rose, before 'he blew all his money' and was in desperate need of a change.

'I was getting crushed and needed to get out. When I arrived at LAX and saw that giant strip of blue - I could sense the space. I knew LA had won the toss.'

Becoming absorbed by the infinite contrasts to be found in the Los Angeles streets and neighbourhoods, George found intrigue and appeal in the faded colours, harsh slabs of concrete, and spasmodic spurts of greenery.

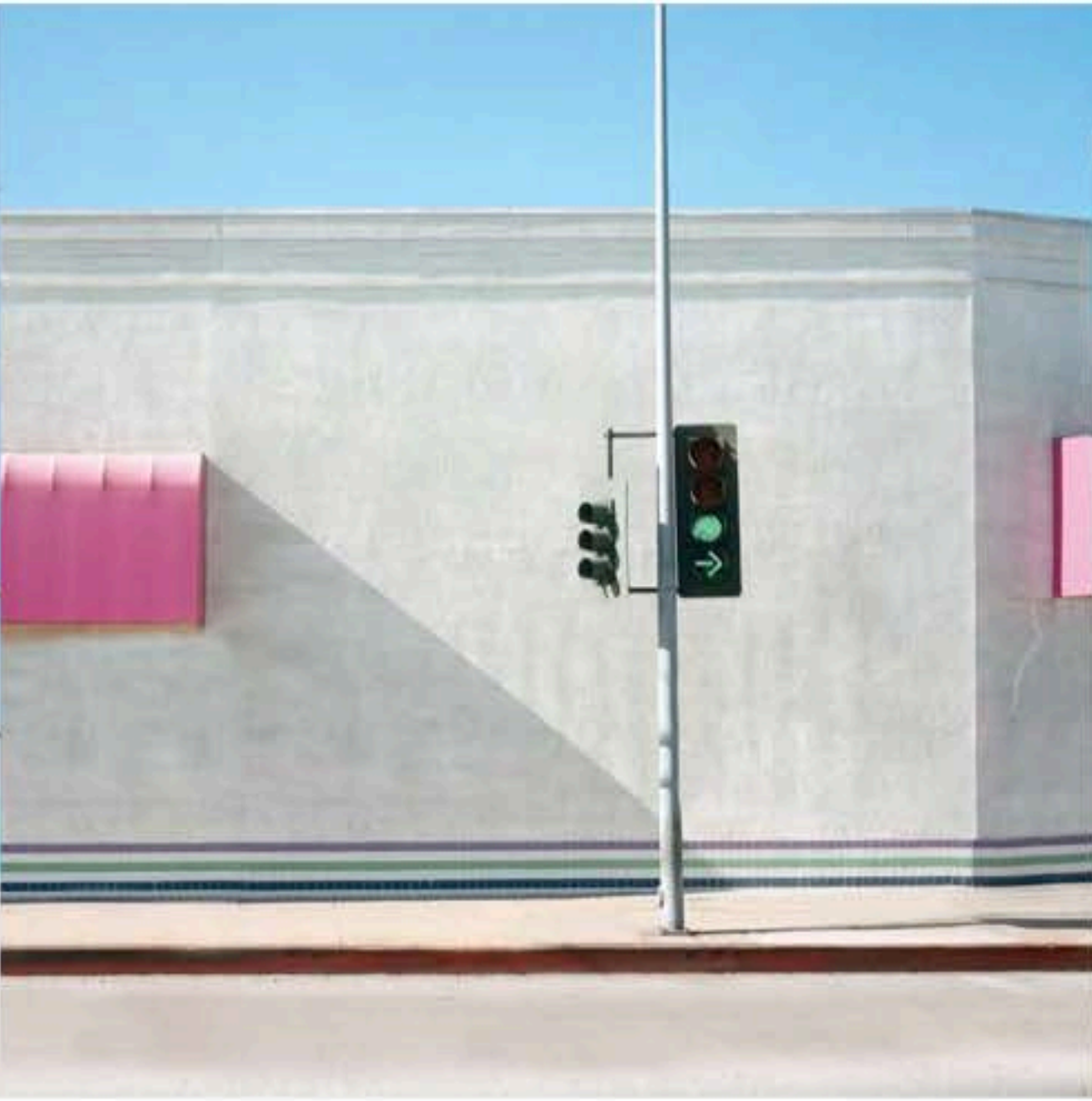
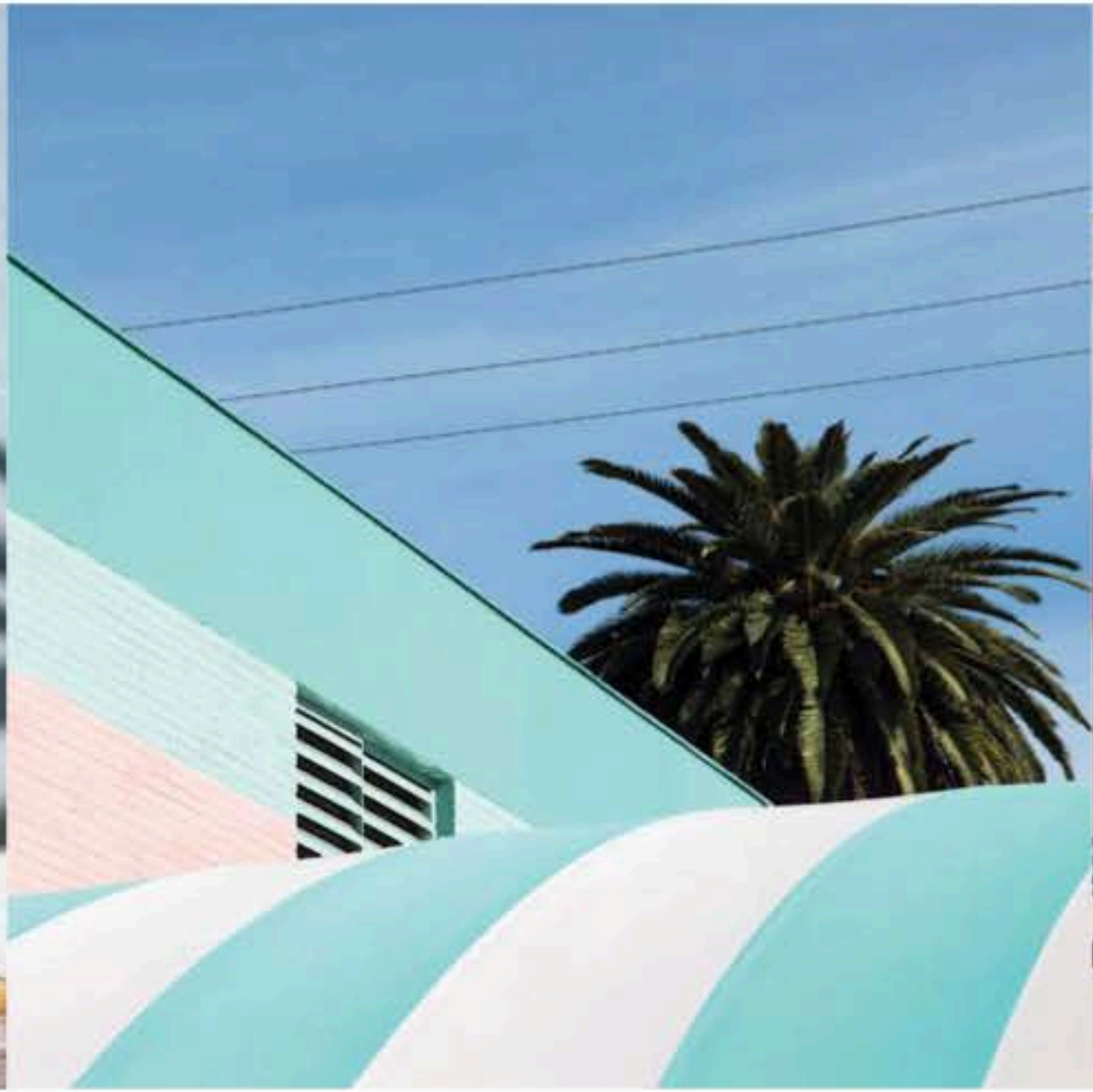
'I just love photographing the things I am immersed in every day. I want to explore the idea that the things we see most are often the things we most

ignore. They become invisible due to repeated exposure and perceived lack of value. We are trained to marvel at waterfalls, not bollards. Like the Australian painter Jeffrey Smart, my challenge is to find objective beauty and mystery within the seemingly banal aesthetic confines of everyday urban landscapes. I find these spaces highly charged and deeply interesting, and photographing them helps me work out why.

LA has a very distinct look and feel. It's all about the sun - it rarely rains so you have a constant blue backdrop to everything and an endless perfect flat yellow light all throughout the day. The human-built environment in LA is very different to that of Australia; most of the buildings are one or two stories tall. LA is also quite a young city so you have no old stone buildings.'

Jack Kerouac once described Los Angeles as the 'loneliest and most brutal of American cities', an oft-repeated sentiment that George has frequently illustrated through his photographs.

'I think the point of interest is the juxtaposition itself, especially in LA. There is a certain comical quality to the whole LA set-up that makes that clash particularly entertaining. There is something very arresting about solitary figures too, they give any landscape a context and a story. Another possibility is that these people are all me, making the images, in part, an exploration of my own place in the city as the outsider.'



*LOS FELIZ
GREEN & WHITE*

*PINK & WHITE
BANKRUPTCY*

Describing his career as a 'slow, gradual process', over the last several years George has found success through Instagram, where he uploads the photos he captures on his iPhone as he criss-crosses the sparse, sundrenched streets of LA.

'I think first and foremost this stuff led me to have a daily practice. When you have a daily practice with anything, you evolve. I'd never enjoyed lugging cameras around day to day, so to suddenly have such a good quality digital camera in my pocket was a coup. It got me taking more pictures of everything and thinking more about what I was doing. This energy and focus then spilled into the work I was doing with all the other cameras I was using - mainly medium format film, 35mm, Polaroid and a Canon 5D - and it's rolled on from there.

I realised early on that iPhones are good at a very specific thing - very flat plate style images with maximum light. I also thought that the pictures that works best on Instagram are usually paired down, the less complicated the better - kind of like a visual tweet.

So in that sense I do approach an Instagram image with a particular aesthetic in mind. Sometimes I'll take an image with my iPhone - work on it - then realise it's good enough to shoot on film and I'll go back the next day and get it. Other times I'll take

an image with a film camera that I think will look great printed four-by-six feet but be ineffective on Instagram. Some images look good on both. It's all a very inexact science, but different scenes do require different cameras.'

Having now acquired a large online following, George sees social networking as a game changer in how photographers display work, and engage with their audience.

'It's completely changed the game; I used to interact with my audience once every few years, now its every day. It's a great way to keep people across what you're doing and provide a real time window into the creative process.

The other thing that's important about Instagram for me is that it's made being an artist more social and interactive. One of the problems I had pre-internet with being a full time fine art photographer was that I sometimes found it to be lonely and isolating and ultimately not as fun. It's a strange trade - you slink around in the shadows and watch the world go by and have a show every two years. This new online format has made it more engaging, sexy, current, and fun. I'm totally into it.'



GREY ON GREY