

Anthony Hernandez

Glen Helfand

There are truthful stereotypes embodied in Los Angeles. Two are particularly instructive for looking at Anthony Hernandez's recent photographs: The first is how your social position in this vast metropolis is defined by mobility, through your movement through the sprawl. The second is that this is truly a city driven by images.

Back in the late 1970s, Hernandez, a native Angeleno, created a series called *Public Transit Areas* (1979–80) in which he photographed bus stops with varying numbers of passengers waiting for the RTD (Rapid Transit District). The black-and-white images, very much a Southern California version of street photography, capture the barren expanses of four-lane boulevards, desolate sidewalks in front of appliance dealerships, litter-strewn embankments, stained concrete, and billboards advertising brands of bargain booze. It's a romantically drab vision of a city where nobody walks.

Except that people do: old people, poor people, people of color. They wait for the bus, braving the unrelenting UV rays, the gray filter of smog, and the uncaring whoosh of vehicles, steered by oblivious air-conditioned drivers listening to pop songs on the radio. These are pictures of social vulnerability and unloved urban landscapes, which Hernandez photographed with a five-by-seven camera, sometimes strapped to the top of his Volkswagen van.

This was a period before Hernandez moved on exclusively to color, before he started to capture well-heeled, teased-haired, 1980s shoppers on Rodeo Drive, before he began to photograph spaces with a formal quietude that would betray their contested use and reveal the surprising chromatics of a homeless encampment or abandoned real estate. He has taken pictures in all corners of his hometown. "LA is my big studio," Hernandez says. "One day I'm in one corner, the next in the middle. It's always interesting."

Indeed. Los Angeles is also a city in constant flux, full of teardowns and makeovers. For decades, the transit system has been in steady overhaul. Now there's even a workable subway, with stations augmented with brightly colored public art, and bus stops that shade from the sun even if they have design tricks to discourage long-term lingering. Hernandez's recent series *Screened Pictures* (2017–18) finds him revisiting places he's been before, picturing public transit areas from a contemporary standpoint. What was once a seeming wasteland is full of pixelated color and lush abstraction. Street life, it seems, is currently kaleidoscopic, though still uncomfortably complicated.

Hernandez took these pictures through the metal mesh that forms the permeable walls of these outdoor waiting rooms, capturing the landscape from the position of expectant passengers. The perspective offers a startling contrast to his earlier pictures—arid breezes pass through the perforations, which give the images a digital appearance (despite the fact that they were shot on film, using a Hasselblad with 120mm, 150mm, 180mm, and 500mm lenses, and are not digitally manipulated photographs). "It's like having a filter to see LA in a new way," he says.

Some of the images, including the earlier bus stop pictures, are wildly colorful: they reveal a playground across the street, a verdant corner park, the blue stripe of branding on gas station architecture, palm tree silhouettes, stylish outdoor furniture, and art-directed advertisements for luxury watches.

It wouldn't be LA if there weren't abundant ironies butting up against it all. The visual filters cannot obscure the continued presence of people who could never afford a Tag Heuer, much less rent. Through the metal screen you can still make out a slumping pup tent and bracing, unmistakable evidence of disenfranchisement.

Hernandez is quick to point out that the images break up into abstraction the closer you get to them. It's an optical illusion. But it's real. Just like LA.

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