

ERIK HAGEN
BEHIND THE WHEEL

Kat Kiernan







Afternoon
2010

In the typical Hollywood story, a young artist with a dream moves to a new city. Without any prospects or money, the artist “pays their dues” in a few low-level jobs before landing their big break. At least, that’s how it plays out in the movies. And what better place to pursue this movie-scripted road to success than Los Angeles, the city where films—and dreams—are made. In the movie of Erik Hagen’s life, he is seated behind the wheel of a taxicab with his camera in hand. New to Los Angeles, the young photographer takes a job as a cab driver to pay the bills. Between rides, he photographs his new surroundings from the driver’s seat, exploring the city both on wheels and on film. If his life were a movie, this is where Hagen, having driven

a cab for a few short months, leaves his keys behind and becomes a famous photographer.

Instead, Hagen spent the next five-and-a-half years photographing his series *Los Angeles* from behind a steering wheel. Hagen’s art-making had been on hiatus in the years after he received his photography degree from the Rhode Island School of Design. To keep his eye sharp in this new city, Hagen shot a few rolls of film during the monotonous working hours. He realized when the film came back from the lab that what had started as a simple artistic exercise had the potential to be an exciting new project. With his camera riding shotgun, Hagen explored the city the way that most Angelenos do—by car—stop-



Parrots
2014

ping to make pictures whenever a scene caught his attention. Sometimes photographing out of the taxi's windows and sometimes returning to a location after dropping off a passenger, Hagen drove 60 hours each week, trading off day and night shifts, making photographs all the while.

Visitors often think of LA as a glamorous place where people with big dreams, big personalities, and big money live fabulous lives. Hagen's photographs show a less glitzy and more somber side to the city. The black-and-white images contain the usual suspects—palm trees, billboards, and bright lights cutting through the night sky—but his decidedly un-slick aesthetic exchanges sparkle for grain, and blue skies for grey horizons. The crisp, high-contrast

images lack the expected motion blur that comes from shooting from low vantage points while driving. There is no chronology or narrative, and eventually the perfect weather becomes tiresome, the bright lights less striking, the landscape less impressive. "In Los Angeles I saw neither beauty nor glamour, but rather an endless sprawl of concrete and an unending battle with nature. Life there seemed lonely, desperate, a struggle. I was in purgatory behind the wheel."

Driving a taxi created a physical and psychological distance between Hagen and the rest of the city's population. That distance is accentuated in his photographs by the visual barriers he includes in many of his compositions. In one image, a half



Downtown
2011

open window creates an atmospheric dome over the city skyline, segregating its residents from outsiders while alluding to its artificiality. The photographs made outside the confines of the car also have that distant feeling, though the visuals are subtler. In these, Hagen employs dramatic shadows and avoids defining characteristics such as faces or landmarks. Looking only at anonymous stretches of highway, or the backs of heads, we are never close enough to the subject to make a connection.

Slivers of the photographer are present throughout the series—his hand on the steering wheel, his face obscured in the rearview mirror—but we cannot defini-

tively conclude anything about him. Hagen offers his audience just enough information to let us know that we are looking through his eyes, while retaining a kind of anonymity. In “Afternoon,” Hagen looks at his shadow against a brick wall, the top of the car’s passenger side window further obscuring his silhouette. It’s a strange self-portrait; he becomes an unknown—the cab driver you might have hired once but would never remember. Looking with the photographer, rather than at him, his view of alienation and isolation becomes our own.

While clearly photographs about LA, the immediacy of Hagen’s viewpoint and glimpses of the photographer indicate



Billboard
2014

that *Los Angeles* is also about his relationship to the city. Despite the inescapable car culture associated with the LA, other vehicles rarely make an appearance in Hagen's photographs. Though he is likely often sitting in four lanes of traffic, his audience is presented with views of a nearly empty road. "When you drive a taxi, at least in Los Angeles, there is a great deal of down time spent alone with your own thoughts," says Hagen. The photographs reflect these feelings of isolation, visually skewing the sprawling city to reflect his personal feelings. If sent home as postcards, these un-idealized depictions of the long stretches of highway, signs for strip clubs, and lonely sidewalks in the wee hours of the morning could state "Wish

you were here" in an ironic manner suggesting that Hagen wishes he wasn't.

In the movie of Erik Hagen's life, his move west and the years that followed serve as an impetus for revitalizing his art-making. With Los Angeles in his rearview mirror, Hagen has returned to the East Coast, photographing his new surroundings with a closer relationship to his subjects. While he is not nostalgic for the City of Angels, he views his time as cabbie there as a great learning experience, leaving him with a less glamorous and more honest point of view. 📷

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