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MEET OUR ART THROBS

George Byrne & Paul Davies





LA STORY

Blue skies and bold colour evoke the brighter side of L.A in the latest body of work by photographer George Byrne, who proves his gift for capturing beauty in the banal. *By Sophie Tedmanson.*



PHOTOGRAPH BY MONIQUE SANTOS. STYLING BY DUNCAN KILICK. GROOMING: MOLLY WARKENTIN. ARTWORK COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND OLSEN IRWIN GALLERY. ALL PRICES APPROXIMATE. DETAILS LAST PAGES.

Opposite:
Temple (2015) by George Byrne.
This page: the artist during a recent visit to Sydney, wearing a Bassike T-shirt, \$90, and jeans, \$295.



*Ace Hotel, 5th
Broadway (2015).*

George Byrne can't stop looking at a palm tree. There are thousands of people relaxing on picnic rugs in the middle of Sydney's Centennial Park, eyes trained on a big screen where the Tropfest short film festival is in full flight. But to the left, a giant lone tree looms large, stretching skywards away from the crowd and catching the light so that it stands out remarkably in the night sky, cutting a picturesque yet quiescent image over the oblivious crowd below.

"Check out that tree, it's so beautiful!" the photographer says as he crooks his neck skywards and motions up to the darkened sky.

Byrne's eye is just so that he notices such things. Daydreamer, perhaps, or just curious? "I do think I'm an inquisitive person. I notice a lot of weird stuff," he says. "I have no idea why: maybe it's because I don't feel like I understand things properly unless I break them down into pieces, visually and conceptually."

"Some of my mates hate telling stories around me because I'll usually end up cross-examining them on the finer details, picking holes. It's probably due to watching too much *Seinfeld* as a teenager – Jerry was all about the details."

A lone palm has become something of a signature for the affable LA-based Australian photographer – whose Instagram handle amusingly reads: "breaking it down, one palm tree at a time" – but they are usually captured against a bright blue Californian sky.

It was in LA, where Byrne moved in 2010, that he found his photographic niche (he is also a singer/songwriter). He now spends hours cruising around the city in his car – a former police car and beast of a vehicle known as "the shark" – looking for inspiration. "I think being a foreigner was a big part of my initial interest in taking photos of LA, but looking at my older pictures, I also think that I've always had the inclination to shoot this kind of work."

His striking images – a pink inflatable ring idling in an empty pool, a vertigo-inducing view from a hotel balcony, intersections



*Blue on blue
#2 (2015).*

of wall meeting pavement, angles of shadows that form perfect symmetry, a string of colourful balloons, a lone cowboy – are mesmerising in their simplicity, with a calmness arising from their pastel colours and tranquillity. He intentionally shoots in full sunlight, giving his images a painterly, two-dimensional cut-out effect. They look so flat they resemble a modernist painting not unlike a Jeffrey Smart. He cites Stephen Shore, a member of the New Topographic movement of American landscape artists, and abstract artist Richard Diebenkorn among his artistic influences.

One of his personal favourites from his LA series captures a yellow pole, blue door, pink awning and a shadow of a palm tree that perfectly sums up his aesthetic.

Dusky pink, pale blues, mint greens – they are hues not normally associated with the grit of LA but ones that have helped earned Byrne a cult following, firstly though Instagram (where he has more than 62,000 followers), and now the wider art world.

His LA images featured in his successful *Local Division* exhibition at Sydney's Olsen Irwin gallery in February, his first solo show back home.

Gallery owner Tim Olsen said Byrne's ability to find the beauty in the mundane nature of suburbia is what makes his images so evocative; their psychology of colour and geometry speaking a silent language to the viewer.

"He has a sensibility for harsh light, maybe from being an Australian," Olsen says. "He has a very innate sense of intellectual geometry in the same vein as Jeffrey Smart ... where you feel as though you are taken on a subconscious journey with your eye around the image. It can be a very urban, uninteresting landscape but maybe because of George's eye he's able to make it interesting and pleasurable. There's something about their minimalism, there's a paradox – in their emptiness (yet) there is a fullness."

Walking through Sydney streets Byrne spots a pink building, and mid-conversation, takes out his iPhone and frames it. ▶

ARTWORKS COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
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99c Silverlake (2015).



Miami #1 (2015).



China Town (2015).



Green and white #2 (2015).

I ask why it is that he sees beauty where the rest of us see banality, and he recalls a quote from the 19th-century Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro: "Blessed are they who see beautiful things in humble places where other people see nothing."

"As someone who makes a living taking pictures of bollards and parking lots, this quote resonates big time," he says.

Byrne grew up in Balmain in the late 1970s and 80s, surrounded by three artistic sisters: Lucy, who works for the Australia Council, Alice, a painter, and Rose, the actress.

The local factories doubled as a playground for Byrne and his sisters, and instilled an early interest in industrial architecture in young George. He caught the photographic bug from his sister Alice, who used to leave an old Canon camera lying around the family home.

"I actually recall the first roll of film I ever put through it," Byrne reminisces. "I remember five or six of the pictures: my girlfriend sitting on the grass, a fence post, clouds etc. I just thought the whole process was completely magic. I still do."

His recent *Local Division* exhibition hailed a triumphant visit home for Byrne and marked a turning point in his career.

Olsen says Byrne's images resonate because they give people more than just a photograph. "I think people now look for more spirituality in art – it's actually not what is in George's work, it's what's in you, what you get out of it. The view that George presents allows you to come in and ask yourself what it is you find in the work ... you enter your own soul."

Byrne, who is also working on a new album, plans to expand his *Local Division* series to Miami later this year and possibly Texas. He also hopes to turn a series of Polaroids he took at Joshua Tree, a much darker approach than his previous works, into a book.

He is humble about his recent success. "I think any success I've had recently just feels like another step in the thousands of steps it took me to get proficient at what I'm doing," Byrne says. "I've been doing this stuff for many years and worked really, really hard on it. The main takeaway right now is that I'm inspired to keep going and I'm looking forward to the next project." ■

ARTWORKS COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND OLSEN IRWIN GALLERY



Hotel pool #1 (2015).