

# Our Great Photographers

We turned the lens around for a look at some of the most cherished, talented and creative minds behind the camera today

## JIM MCHUGH

Jim McHugh has a profound connection with both Los Angeles and art. A native of the City of Angels and the product of a show business family (his grandfather, Jimmy McHugh, penned the Tin Pan Alley standards “On the Sunny Side of the Street” and “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love, Baby”), McHugh grew up in Europe, returning home to attend the UCLA Film School.

He ultimately found his medium in still images, however. He has worked for *Women’s Wear Daily*, *Newsweek*, and *People*, shooting celebrity portraits. His images of stars like John Travolta and Clint Eastwood have been recently exhibited at the Arclight Theatres in a show called *Just One More...* and at Germany’s Photokina photography trade fair. “I was the official photographer of the Grammys for a lot of years,” McHugh recalls. Additionally, he has shot a number of celebrities for the cover of *Architectural Digest*, including John McCain, Tina Turner, Candice Bergen, and Claudia Schiffer.

He has a deep affinity for creative people, whether they are musicians, actors or artists. He shot the cover portrait for David Hockney’s book, *That’s The Way I See It*, and has created two books of his own on art and artists: *California Painters: New Work*, written by Henry Hopkins, and *The Art of Light and Space*, written by Jan Butterfield. He shoots painters and sculptors in their studios, effortlessly capturing their humor and humanity.

“For a long time, I photographed painters,” McHugh reminisces. “It’s one of my favorite things to do. I have hundreds of portraits of artists, both male and female, in their studios, surrounded by their work. I’m most comfortable around painters. I did a show at the Corcoran Gallery in the mid-80s: portraits of Ed Moses, Billy Al Bengston, Ed Ruscha—all the people who were living and working and making art in LA at that time.”

McHugh’s recent works have revolved around locales rather than people. His large format photographs are moody, elegiac studies of urban landscapes and architectural detail, exploring the themes of loss and urban entropy. “I’m doing a series I call *Vanishing Los Angeles*,” Jim explains.



“It’s not just about the buildings that are being torn down, but also the attitudes and atmosphere that is vanishing. When I was growing up, when you looked towards downtown, all you could see was City Hall; the Art Deco tower dominated the skyline. Now, it’s trivialized, dwarfed by the huge skyscrapers that block it from view.”

Working with an antiquated Speed Graphic camera—the kind used by legendary 1930s photojournalist Weegee—McHugh prowls Los Angeles, chronicling and memorializing its ever-changing cityscape and architecture, shooting in the late afternoon or early evening to take advantage of the moody light and lengthening shadows. He shoots in both

(Above): Jim McHugh. Photo by Alfredo Falva.  
(Opposite): Jim McHugh, *Cocoanut Grove*. Images courtesy of the artist.



color and black and white, using Polaroid film, which has now been declared extinct. The decaying, unstable film stock heightens the shadowy, *chiaroscuro* effect. He does his own printing to assure the nostalgic, noir-tinted results.

"I shot the Coconut Grove and Lou Ehlers Cadillac," says McHugh. "They're both gone now. I did a piece in partnership with the LA Conservancy called *The Miracle Mile*: I photographed almost all of Wilshire Boulevard, from the beach to One Wilshire downtown."

childhood," he reveals. "I'm very taken with Roman architecture. One of the things I love about Rome is the *incredible* sense of history. Everything around you is so very, very *old*. Everywhere you look, the landscape is dominated by buildings and temples that are 2,000 years old."

Rome provides a stark contrast to Los Angeles, a city notorious for cannibalizing its own history. "It's unfortunate that we are so quick to tear things down here," says McHugh sadly. "Or we just ignore the



Jim McHugh has a deep appreciation for the inexplicable darkness that haunts this famously sunny, palm-shaded city and has inspired classic writers like Raymond Chandler and contemporary writers like Michael Connelly, Walter Mosley, and McHugh's personal friend, James Ellroy. He frequently shoots the very locations that appear in their novels, the darkest literature of Los Angeles.

Not all of McHugh's work explores the mean streets of Los Angeles, though. Some of his photography celebrates the places where the sidewalks end. "I've been shooting a lot in Beachwood Canyon recently and in the Hollywood Hills," he says. "I'm very taken with the fact that there is a mountain range running through the center of Los Angeles—that there are places in the city so remote and so rural you can see deer and coyotes, but they're just a few minutes from Hollywood and Vine."

The vanishing Europe of his expatriate childhood intrigues and inspires him as well. "I did a project called *Stone Portraits*, a series of black-and-white photos of Rome and Paris as I remembered them from my

treasures that remain. I took a picture of the fountain at the intersection of Wilshire and Santa Monica Boulevards in Beverly Hills—the one with the changing lights—and when people saw it, they thought it was in Europe somewhere, even though they probably drove past it every day without really looking at it! There's an Art Deco statue called *The Muse of Music* that stands at the entrance to the Hollywood Bowl. People look at my photograph of it and ask, 'Is that in Paris?' They've passed it and paid it no attention."

McHugh, however, pays thoughtful, meticulous attention. "I want to create a history," he says. "A record of what's been lost—what's gone before."

—Lynn Morgan

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*McHugh's photography is featured in this issue's "LA's Iconic Artists," "A Painterly Style," "Laddie John Dill" and "Art Books." His work will be featured in New York - California: Camera Works by Jim McHugh at The Farmani Gallery in Brooklyn, New York from June 1 through 30.*

(Above): Jim McHugh, *Self-Portrait*. Courtesy of the artist.