

Jim McHugh's Portraits of Famous People and Familiar Places

Liz Ohanesian

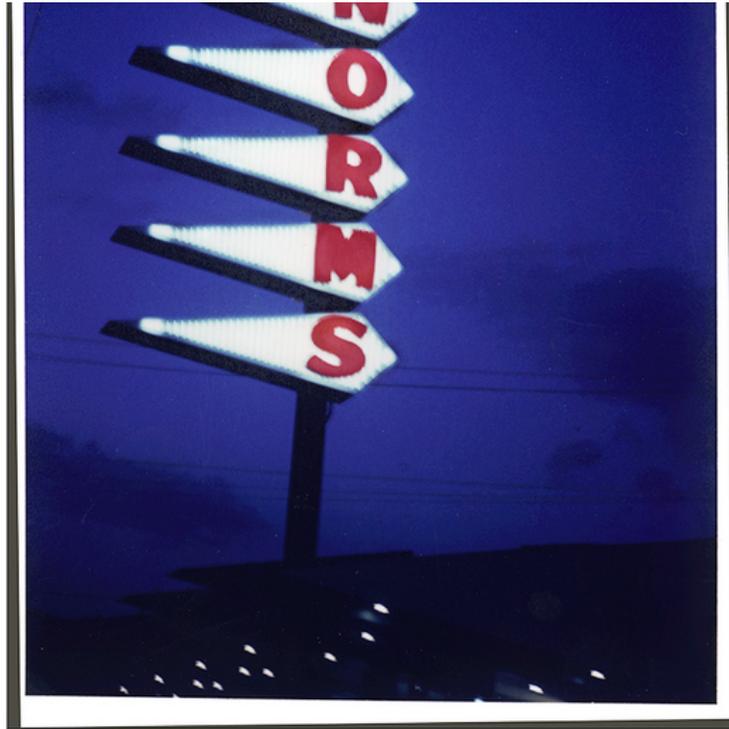


Jim McHugh talks a lot about Los Angeles as he sifts through the stacks and boxes of photos inside his East Hollywood studio. The photographer's hometown is ingrained in his work and, in the case of the photos he's currently perusing, it's the subject too. As he sorts through the boxes, he separates the L.A. photos from ones taken in Mallorca. There's one of the Cocoanut Grove that appears on the cover of his book "Let's Get Lost." A few of the photos in the pile stem from the book, which was named after a song written by McHugh's grandfather, Jimmy McHugh.

One photo is a glimpse of the Capitol Records building shrunk in the background as a small section of the Pantages Theatre swells in a foreground corner. McHugh points out that this was taken on the side of the Pantages near the parking lot. Despite that, the ornamentation on the facade is just as elaborate as one might expect of the street-side view of the building. "It's quite remarkable," he says, "this was what their idea for the parking lot was."

McHugh wonders about the Los Angeles that his mother saw when she arrived downtown from Minnesota during the 1940s, how different it must be from the city that his daughter knows. "L.A. is kind of rediscovering it now," he says of the city's past. He talks about the changes downtown and how public transportation has expanded. He points to a picture in the pile. It's Norm's Diner, which recently earned historic-cultural monument status. The photos, shot with Polaroid film, exist in moments that belong to neither the past nor the present. There is a bit of the ethereal to the photos, but, for the Angeleno, the familiarity of the architecture and signage immediately snaps the viewer back into reality.





Norms Restaurant, La Cienega Blvd. Los Angeles, 2001. T-79 4 x 5 Polaroid. | Photo: Jim McHugh.

"This is what I would call architectural photography," he says, " but it's not really, it's more of a portrait of the place."

Portraiture is a major part of McHugh's body of work. He spent 25 years working for People Magazine. He started working for the magazine in the 1970s, at a time when shooting celebrities often meant spending a substantial amount of time with the subject. "We spent three days with Gregory Peck," he recalls. His portfolio is filled with shots of household names, from Angelina Jolie to Manny Pacquiao. On the magazine front, his work has also appeared in outlets like Forbes, Fortune and Architectural Digest.

Years ago, when he was on assignment for Architectural Digest, McHugh photographed the artist Billy Al Bengston. The photos impressed Bengston, who suggested that McHugh use artists as his subjects more often. "I just got into it and started doing it," McHugh recalls. "At the time, you don't realize what you're doing."





David Hockney, next to a similar cubist painting of himself in his Hollywood Hills studio, 1984. Titled "David Hockney - Hollywood Hills studio," 1984. | Photo: Jim McHugh.

McHugh met many artists, including David Hockney, who he has photographed numerous times. Eventually, he landed a show at James Corcoran Gallery. He worked with Jan Butterfield on the book "The Art of Light and Space," and with Lyn Kienholz on a calendar featuring California artists. With every project, McHugh's circle of artists and subjects grew bigger. "Each time you do one of these projects, you pick up people," he says. "For me, the projects are great, but what's more great is that you pick up the opportunity to photograph more people for something."

Host of KCRW's "ArtTalk" Edward Goldman recently described McHugh as a "tour guide for us through the Los Angeles art scene." Goldman says he recently incorporated a hefty amount of McHugh's photographs into the "Touch" exhibition at El Segundo Museum of Art. The show juxtaposes portraits of artists with paintings and sculpture. There is both a McHugh photo of David Hockney and a painting from the British artist in the collection.

During the period when McHugh was going through his archives for this event, he photographed the street artists involved in ESMoA's "**Scratch**" exhibition. That opened up McHugh's artist circle even more. "I was on the graffiti trail," he says. "These aren't quick, the shots with big view cameras," he says. "I spent a lot of time with people." Ultimately, he made a 17-foot print that incorporates numerous photos of the artists and their work. It was released at the L.A. Art Show in 2015.





Jim McHugh photographing "Scratch" exhibit at ESMoA. | Photo: Edward Goldman.

Photographing artists presented McHugh with creative opportunities that weren't always possible when he worked in the magazine world. "Working for People Magazine or Architectural Digest, it has to happen, right?" he says. "You develop skill sets to make that happen rain or shine."

When he's working on his own, McHugh doesn't have the pressure of the magazine deadline and that gives him the opportunity to experiment.

He tried out a new instant film from Impossible Project while shooting Thomas Demand, Tacita Dean and a number of other artists. "You might go to shoot a celebrity with something like that," he says, "but you would really want to know what you were doing before."

Whether he's photographing structures or people, he's taking a camera to subjects that he enjoys shooting. "It's a real privilege to be in an artist's studio and see how they work," he says. "I really like it. That's really it."

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Alison Saar in her studio - Los Angeles - July, 2015

© Jim McHugh

Allison Saar in her Los Angeles studio, 2015. | Photo: Jim McHugh.





Big Sleeps at the Container Yard, Los Angeles, 2014. Diptych. | Photo: Jim McHugh.



David Hockney painting "The Photographer and His Daughter," a painting of photographer Jim McHugh and his 15-year-old daughter, Chloe McHugh. Painting made in 2005. | Photo: Jim McHugh.





Ed Ruscha, Electric Ave. Venice, CA. 2008. | Photo: Jim McHugh.

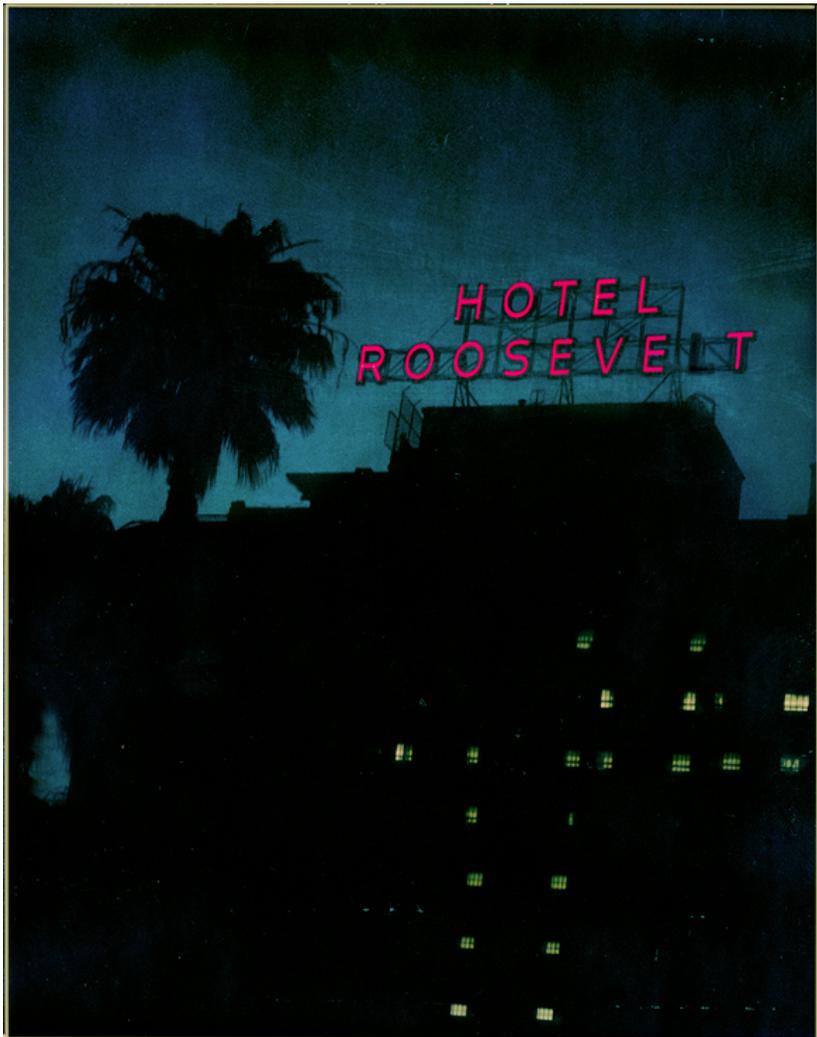


Las Palmas Hotel, Hollywood, 1998. T-59 4 x 5 Polaroid. | Photo: Jim McHugh.

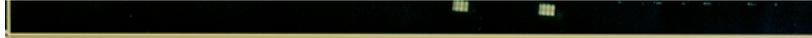




The Bryson Apartments, MacArthur Park, Los Angeles, 1998. T-55 4 x 5 Polaroid. | Photo: Jim McHugh.



Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel, 2002. T-79 4 x 5 Polaroid. | Photo: Jim McHugh.



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Top image: Patssi Valdez, East Los Angeles, 2001. | Photo: Jim McHugh.