

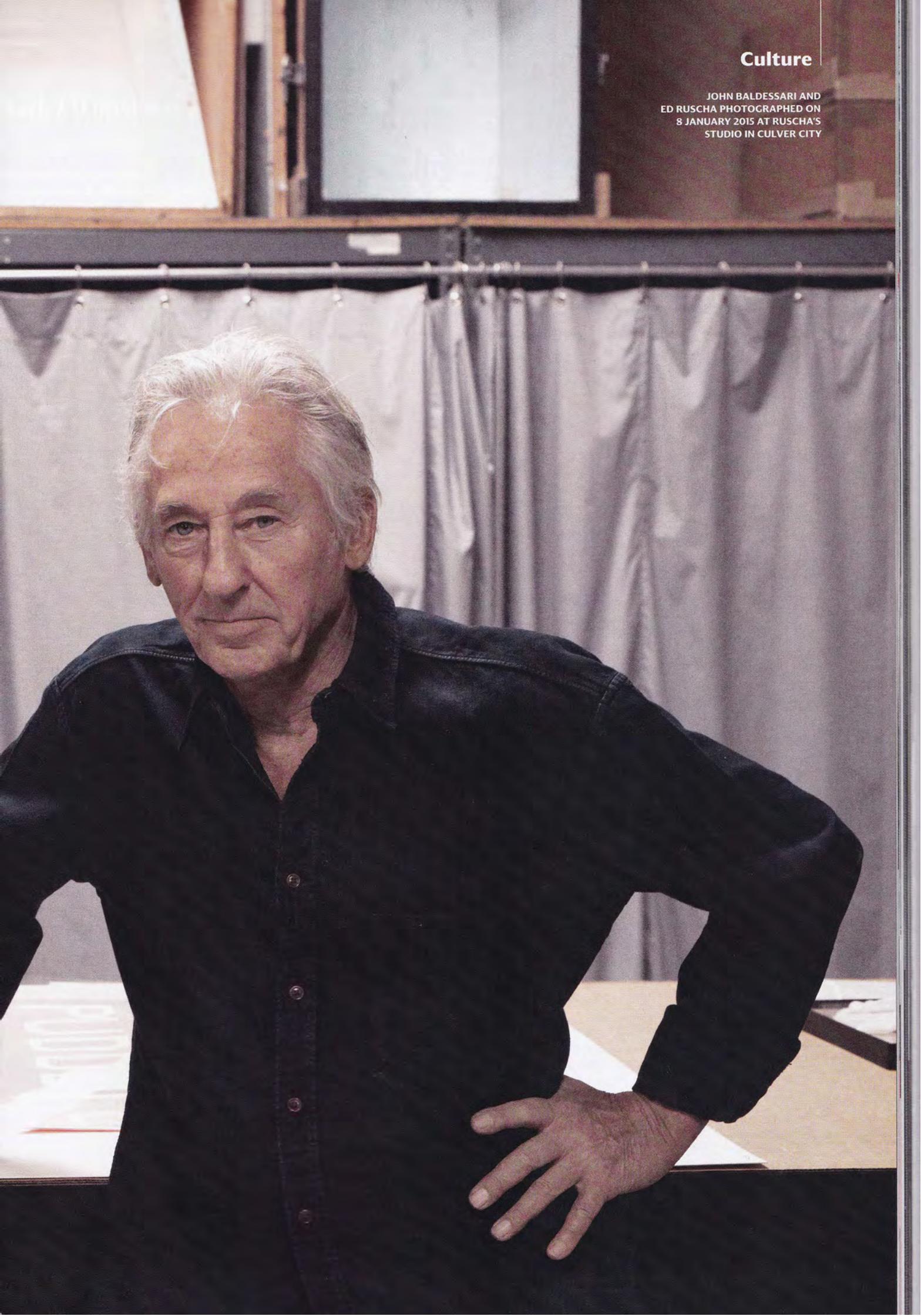
LA stories

Angelino art patriarchs John Baldessari and Ed Ruscha pick out their home city's truest voices and brightest new talent

PHOTOGRAPHY: CEDRIC BUCHET WRITER: TIBBY ROTHMAN

Culture

JOHN BALDESSARI AND
ED RUSCHA PHOTOGRAPHED ON
8 JANUARY 2015 AT RUSCHA'S
STUDIO IN CULVER CITY



'Los Angeles is just a bunch of nerve endings,' begins Ed Ruscha. The artist is sitting at a rectangular table in his library, a generously sized warehouse room in his Culver City studio that houses his extensive collection of artist catalogues and monographs, and other books, fiction and non-fiction, that he's gathered over time: subjects include poetry, art criticism and history, literature, pop culture, film, fashion, politics and, of course, LA.

'A lot of these nerve endings happen to be artists, and they're the ones that I listen to. I keep myself open to that, so that's how I've met these people or know about them,' he says. 'All are completely different from one another and yet they all have the same kind of potency and drive that makes you wake up and smell the roses.'

Take, for instance, Ariel Pink, pioneer of lo-fi sound – 'he's way out there,' notes Ruscha. Ruscha caught an early-career Pink set at a nice dinner, a 'theatrical, disjointed performance,' that was so 'edgy and challenging,' Ruscha recalls that payment was temporarily withheld.

'All share the same kinds of quirkiness in the idea of living here,' he goes on. 'They're all pretty much doing their own thing.' Some are friends, a few he has encountered briefly, several he doesn't know directly but collects. (The studio walls proffer pieces by so many other artists, one is hard pressed to find a Ruscha.)

'I've never met him but have a couple of his works. He uses text in funny ways,' says Ruscha, picking up a Jon Pylypchuk collage in which stream-of-consciousness dialogue is scrawled primitively, attached to a smallish character costumed in a swatch of applied fabric. Near the Pylypchuk are two Dani Tull watercolours. Setting off one are variations of a loosely rendered line, refractions of a shape in the body. Ruscha also talks about novelist Mark Z Danielewski, who arranges his words into distinct shapes and form. Again, he isn't personally acquainted but reads him, if that is what you do with Danielewski.

Ruscha first met Daniel Joseph Martinez when Martinez was a teenage photographer and he was the assignment. In the decades since, he has tracked this particular nerve ending, whose conceptual, printed and performance work marches into 'artist-activist' territories. 'He's got something to say,' states Ruscha.

Ruscha, of course, has his own renditions of the city, including *Hollywood*, *Sunset*, *Santa Monica*, *Vine* (1998), *The Back of Hollywood* (1977), and *The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire* (1965–68). Ruscha does black and white and colour but now thinks of the city in monochrome. 'When I dream about this place, I picture it very much like a black and white movie,' he says. Not that he's disengaged. 'Thirteen thousand people

arrive daily to live here. The mayor came by and I told him that and he kind of changed the subject,' mentions Ruscha with an easygoing laugh. Even *Sunset Boulevard*, the subject of Ruscha's seminal 25ft *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), is to be deluged with 'recently approved skyscrapers.'

'They're on a real rush to develop this city out and maximise the density,' says Ruscha. 'It's getting to be claustrophobic.' His respite from the density is twofold – the solitude of his Mojave Desert home, and his warehouse studio. 'I've always had this love-hate relationship with LA. I've lived here for 60 years or so and I still find it inspiring but I can't say why.'

John Baldessari is another artist with an intense relationship with the city. So much so that when Michael Govan, director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, was struggling to find anyone that could deliver a new logo for the museum, he turned to Baldessari. Several days later, the artist invited Govan to his studio to see the imagery: an iPhone-photograph – palm tree, thumb, pencil – that replicated an image originally used by the artist in the 1960s. 'Palm trees are omnipresent in LA. The pencil and thumb are a device for drawing students to use to get perspective right,' Baldessari explains. It could be his logo too.

In the catalogue for the Hammer Museum's biennial 'Made in LA 2014' exhibition, which focuses on emerging and under-recognised LA artists, the museum's chief curator Connie Butler wrote: 'In New York, it was said, an artist knew she had made it when she could quit her teaching job; in California, an artist knew she had made it when she landed a teaching job.'

With an 18-year-run at CalArts, begun in 1970 and followed by nearly a dozen more at UCLA, Baldessari exemplifies the tradition. He remained a teacher even as international recognition grew. His laidback style and humour were a stark contrast to the viciousness of the typical art-school-crit. 'He didn't resist younger generations' work,' one former student remembers. 'He was unthreatened by it.' Instead, more than four decades' worth of students have been through classes that Baldessari taught, creating a sort of LA art world iteration of 'six degrees of Baldessari' in which everyone seems to connect back to John.

Mark Z Danielewski

Ergodic novelist

The book has me under house arrest,' laughs novelist Mark Z Danielewski. He's talking about the deadline for his upcoming, multi-volume novel *The Familiar*. In Danielewski's written worlds, narratives composed of characters' quotes, one poems, or even reader-contributed data, form swatches, symbols or line drawings. His West Hollywood home sports notebooks full of thick-line doodles akin to artists' studios. Patches and patterns in different orientations represent characters. 'I'm trying to get the energy, the movement of what character will look like'. When Danielewski shifts to computer, he writes using InDesign, stocked with a library of 24,000 typefaces. 'The font choice is a major thing,' he says, taking 'several years of experimentation'. Alterations to a character's voice require type adjustments, while alternative sample layouts deepen his understanding of the story. For *The Familiar*, he is adding photographs to the mix.

SELECTED WORKS

HOUSE OF LEAVES, 2000

IN HIS DEBUT NOVEL, THE WORD 'HOME' ALWAYS APPEARED IN PANTONE 287 U. 'BLUE. WITHOUT IT, IT'S MISPELT,' SAYS THE AUTHOR.

ONLY REVOLUTIONS, 2006

THIS ROAD-TRIP STORY, ABOUT TWO AGELESS TEENAGERS, RUNS IN STRIPS, UPSIDE-DOWN AND BACK TO FRONT.

PHOTOGRAPHED ON THE ROOFTOP GARDEN OF RESTORATION HARDWARE, WEST HOLLYWOOD, CALIF., JAN 2015



Molly Berman

Photographer



As a teenager, Molly Berman, daughter of *Star Trek* producer Rick Berman, attended a private school in Los Angeles but felt a distance from her peers. LA seemed vapid, misunderstood by those attracted to it, a glamorous surface with little beneath. Returning from Bard College, a small New York State liberal arts institution, 'I realised how wrong I was. When you get out of a place, you can start to see new parts of it,' says the 24-year-old photographer.

On a road trip across America, taken just after graduating, Berman became transfixed by decrepit buildings in decaying towns or on stretches of withering roads between them. She took photographs of them and, in doing so, wondered, 'Is it elitist to find beauty in them?' Her current series of images of comfortable Angelenos, living in highly sought-after zip codes, considers that same question. Posed with a set of their belongings, the images have the tinge of a luxury advertisement. 'But I try and add a little bit of emptiness to them,' she says.

SELECTED WORKS

'ORDINARY COMBUSTIBLES'
'I TAKE PHOTOGRAPHS AS A JUSTIFICATION FOR MY TENDENCY TO STARE. MY SHOW'S TITLE DERIVES FROM THE FACT THAT I PHOTOGRAPH

EVERYDAY OBJECTS WITH THE HOPES OF BRINGING NEW LIFE TO THEM AND ALTERING THE WAY THEY ARE VIEWED'
PHOTOGRAPHED AT HOME IN MIRACLE MILE, 9 JANUARY 2015

Greg Wilken >

Artist and field explorer

'Art is a great excuse to be curious about the world and, while doing so, live a pretty interesting life,' says Greg Wilken, a graduate of LA's Otis College of Art and Design, who now lives on a sailboat he restored in Marina del Rey. His large-format photographs and self-published books are in-the-field explorations of extraordinary history and geography. Wilken's most recent excursion is his most far-flung: ten months in the Republic of Kiribati, a remote nation of tiny atolls in the equatorial Pacific that's at risk of disappearing because of sea level rise. The trip, funded by a Fulbright grant, also took him to a new creative place - working with moving image and sound. In this case, he collected footage for an installation that uses the impact of global warming on land to explore 'the mental space that opens when viewers are confronted by the friction between different ideas, or scales, of time'. He says, 'The concept that during one lifetime an entire nation could disappear is akin to someone telling me the sun won't rise tomorrow.'

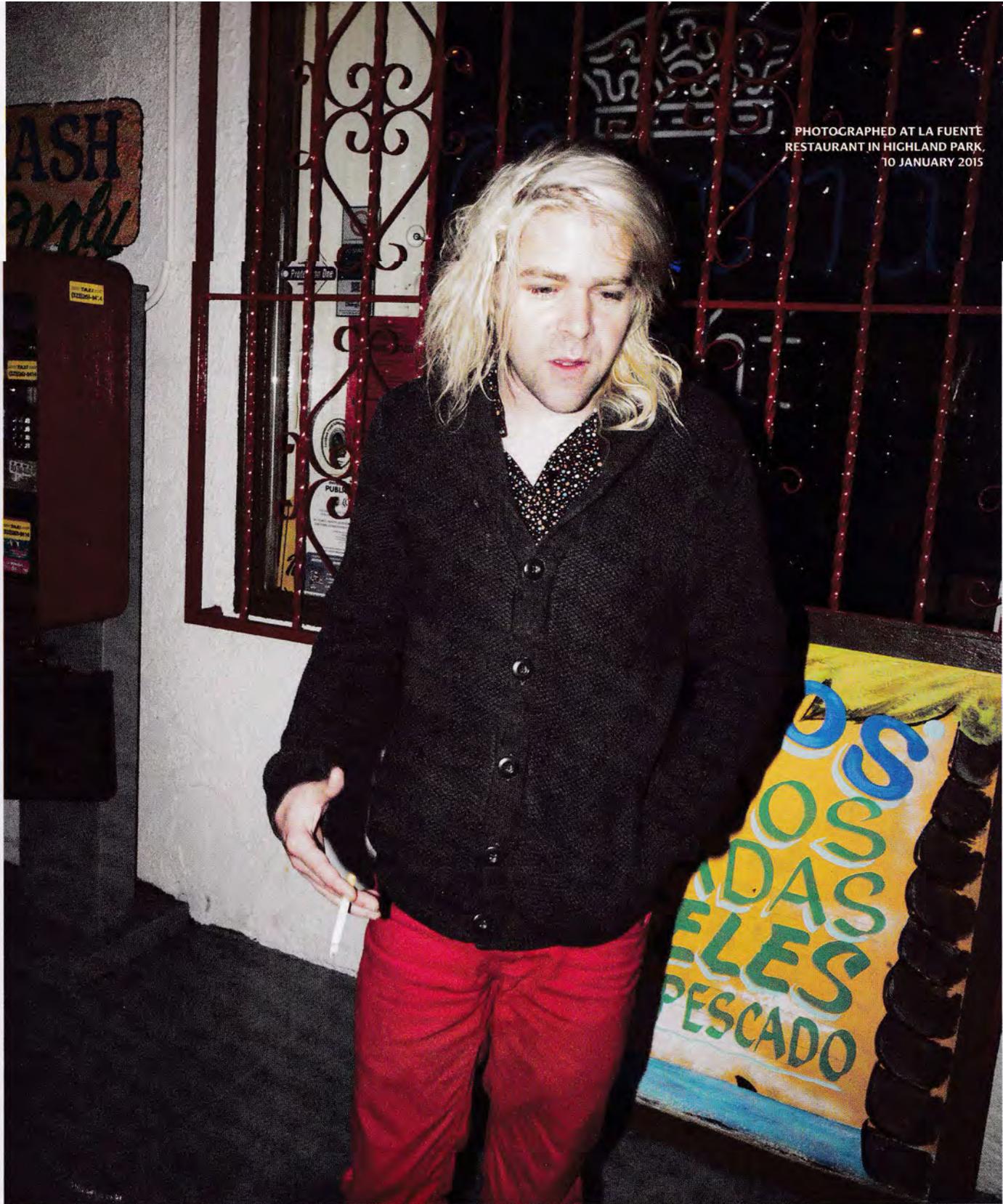
SELECTED WORKS

'ON THE ROAD OF A THOUSAND WONDERS', 2011
WILKEN TRACES WALKING TRAILS IN CALIFORNIA, INCLUDING THE CAMINO REAL, THAT BECAME RAIL LINES, THEN ROADS - 'PALIMPSESTS OFFERING TRACES OF MAN'S MOVEMENT ACROSS THE LAND.'

'ON THE NATURAL HISTORY OF JUAN FERNANDEZ', 2006
THIS TOOK WILKEN TO AN ISLAND OFF CHILE WHERE A SCOTTISH SAILOR LANGUISHED FOR FOUR POST-SHIPWRECK YEARS IN THE 1700S. HE WOULD LATER BECOME THE INSPIRATION FOR DANIEL DEFOE'S *ROBINSON CRUSOE*.
PHOTOGRAPHED ON HIS SAILBOAT IN MARINA DEL REY, 8 JANUARY 2015



PHOTOGRAPHED AT LA FUENTE RESTAURANT IN HIGHLAND PARK, 10 JANUARY 2015



Ariel Pink

The godfather of lo-fi

In 2010, Ariel Pink outdid Kanye West to claim Pitchfork's top song gong for *Round and Round*, and he has just released his tenth album *Pom Pom*. The album's unique, crowded-room-sound is exuberant, but some of the videos produced for the album, collaborations with director Grant Singer, strike a more misanthropic note. 'Very *Midnight Cowboy*,' notes the musician of *Put Your Number in My Phone*'s emotional dystopia. Meanwhile, *Picture Me Gone*'s desolate characters, in contorted masks cast from Pink's face, are less upbeat MTV vid,

more conceptual CalArts. But then Pink studied fine arts at the college. And the methodologies for his early albums so paralleled an artist's process, his first review came from Dennis Cooper in *Art Forum*. Covers were hand drawn or collage, sometimes incorporating Pink's image pasted on another band's graphic. He produced every sound, often rudimentarily, and played every instrument on the lo-fi home recordings with mixes that still had hiss. 'It was so uncommercial, it could only be seen as art,' observes the musician.

SELECTED WORKS

THE DOLDRUMS, 2004
ONE PITCHFORK REVIEWER DESCRIBED PINK'S THIRD ALBUM AS 'THINK AUTISTIC KIDS COVERING BRIAN WILSON OR TOM WAITS SINGING A NURSERY RHYME'.

BEFORE TODAY, 2010
INCLUDES THE GUITARRIFIC TRACK *BUTT-HOUSE BLONDIES*.



Dani Tull [^]

Third generation artist and musician

Dani Tull possesses serious LA cultural pedigree. His grandfather, Sam Cherry, photographed Charles Bukowski, while his parents – both artists – founded pioneering vintage clothing store Aardvark's on Melrose Avenue. Early-career solo outings, such as a show at Blum & Poe, had a PoMo bent, while more recently, he's been known for pieces that tap into the mystical and subconscious. His latest show, at LAM Gallery, features hand-built sculptures that reflect

Tull's new interest in 'the analogue'. Web tendrils are etched into the incandescent wax surface of irregularly shaped tripodal forms, then inlaid with paint. 'I could easily get these fabricated or 3D printed but I want my hand involved,' he says. 'The work I am making, and a lot of other work that I see being made right now, is a response to social media and the way technology is so deeply integrated into our lives. There is a natural response for us to seek out things that are handmade.'

SELECTED WORKS <

'GAWDHEAD AND THE CAVE MIND', 2009

POST-PSYCHEDELIA, TAKING IN CAVE MEN, CREATION, PSYCHOACTIVE DRUGS AND ANCIENT TOTEMS.

'ODD ARK', 2006

LINE DRAWINGS OF HEAVY-LIDDED CARTOON STONERS AND MOCK-UPS FOR A MAGAZINE TITLED *MY FLUORESCENT BEATITUDE*.

PHOTOGRAPHED AT HIS STUDIO IN HIGHLAND PARK, 10 JANUARY 2015

SELECTED WORKS >

MAPS TO THE STARS

WAGNER'S SCREENPLAY FOR THE FILM, DIRECTED BY DAVID CRONENBERG, SECURED A GOLDEN GLOBE NOMINATION FOR JULIANNE MOORE.

WILD PALMS

FIVE-HOUR ORWELLIAN MINISERIES, SCREENED IN 1993 AND BASED ON WAGNER'S COMIC STRIP OF THE SAME NAME, FIRST PUBLISHED IN *DETAILS* MAGAZINE.

PHOTOGRAPHED AT A PRIVATE RESIDENCE NEAR SUNSET BOULEVARD, 9 JANUARY 2015



Bruce Wagner

Acerbic wordsmith

For decades, Bruce Wagner's articles, screenplays and, most personally, novels, have skewered LA's narcissism with text that glimmers and pops like 4th of July fireworks off the Malibu coast, matched with truth-telling as incisive as a prison yard shiv. 'My work is about anguish and human struggle and failure and hopefully transcendence. But I'm not contemptuous of Hollywood. It's my hometown,' he adds, sitting comfortably in a room at the LA outpost of Soho House, where he informally offices. (The staff, he demurs, are 'faultlessly kind'.) Wagner famously dropped out of the nearby Beverly Hills High School to concentrate on the slick and the seedy, first as an ambulance driver, then as a hotel limo driver, ferrying the likes of Orson Welles and Andy Warhol. The terrain of the city is so familiar to him, he thinks of it as a home. 'The beach is the bedroom. East Los Angeles is the living or a dining room.'



Delia Brown ^

Artist of leisure

A few years ago, the painter Delia Brown returned from a spell in New York to a single-family home neighbourhood a few blocks north of Venice. The buzz of her *'Sex in the City'* phase was over, replaced by open water swims in the Pacific. Brown first earned critical attention, not all of it friendly, for her 'Guerilla Lounging' series, paintings of her girlfriends in the homes of wealthy collectors, arranged in decadent tableaux to create Monet-tinged portraits, drenched

in fine wine, lipstick and luxuries. Televisual glamour remained a concern, and the artist's current obsession is *The Real Housewives* series. Brown's original idea was to get cast as a 'housewife that painted' but she has scaled that back to pastoral portraits. In the first to be completed, *Countess LuAnn*, of *The Real Housewives of New York City*, gazes from a private dock, languid in an open bathrobe, as she enjoys her morning coffee. It is the first of a series that could run and run.

PHOTOGRAPHED AT HER HOME IN SANTA MONICA, 9 JANUARY 2015

SELECTED WORKS

'LAST EXIT: PUNTA JUNTA', 2012

A GLAMOROUS FEMALE MILITIA PARTY ON ST BARTHS.

'WHAT, ARE YOU JEALOUS?', 2000

BIKINI-CLAD WOMEN LOUNGE AROUND BEVERLY HILLS SWIMMING POOLS.

Daniel Joseph Martinez >

Art activist

Daniel Joseph Martinez's output distills terabytes worth of complex ideas into deceptively simple pieces that confront economic, political and social disparities. He introduced himself at the 1993 Whitney Biennial by slicing open the sentence 'I Can't Ever Imagine Wanting to Be White' and imprinting its disembodied words on museum admission badges. His show at Roberts & Tilton last year, 'The report of my death is an exaggeration; Memoirs; Of Becoming Narrenschiff', was considerably darker. A rumination on LA's dehumanisation of the mad and impoverished, it was based on Sebastian Brant's satirical 1494 work *Das Narrenschiff* (The Ship of Fools). For three years, Martinez rode buses across LA, from morning to night, listening and recording, and working through Michel Foucault's interpretation of *Das Narrenschiff*.

SELECTED WORKS

'I AM A VERB', 2012

HUNCHBACK POPES,
FALLEN STATUES OF LIBERTY,
AND NEON SIGNS.

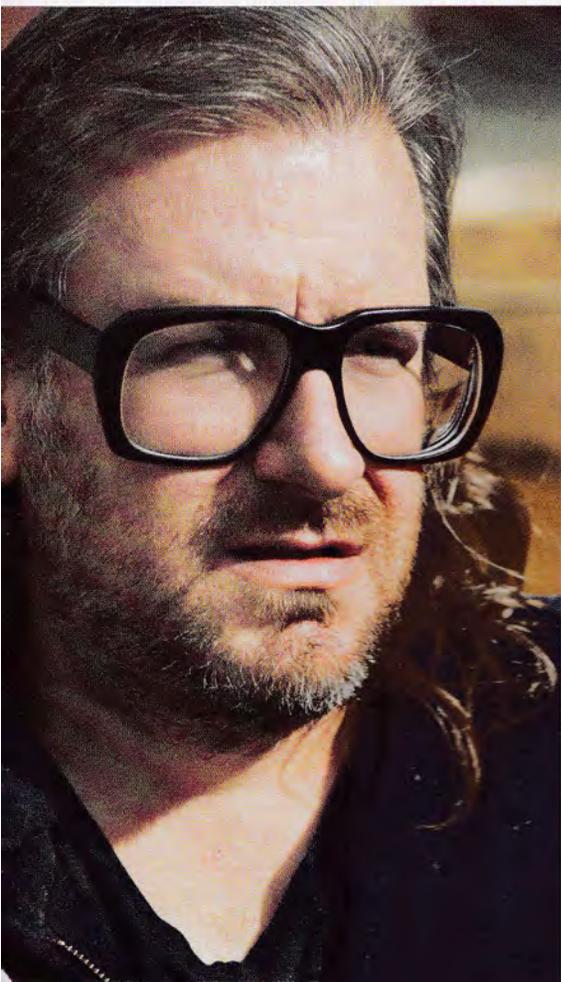
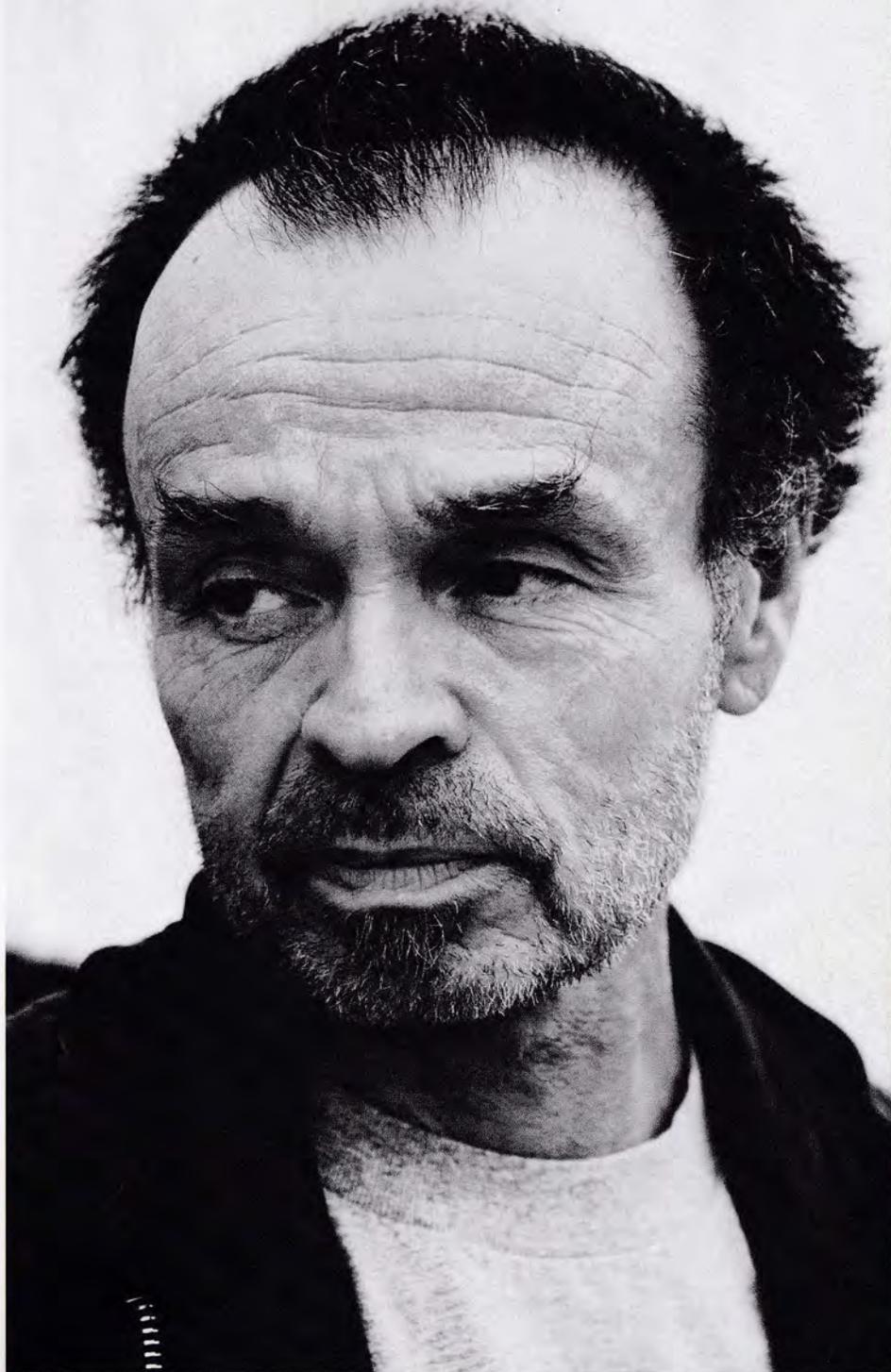
'THE HOUSE AMERICA BUILT', 2004

A DISSECTED SCALE MODEL
OF THE CABIN USED BY
THEODORE KACZYNSKI, AKA
THE UNABOMBER, PAINTED
IN COLOURS FROM MARTHA
STEWART'S PAINT LINE.

PHOTOGRAPHED IN
HUNTINGTON PARK,
10 JANUARY 2015



Meet more of Baldessari
and Ruscha's creative LA
crowd at Wallpaper.com



Jon Pylypchuk <

Anthropomorphic sculptor

The titles are as important as the pieces for the Winnipeg-born Jon Pylypchuk, whose current show is at LA's China Art Objects Galleries. Titles – such as *I wish my parents were still alive* and *I have thought deep through this trouble* – create a dialogue with his anthropomorphic creations. 'They might not be something I would say in "normal life", but I could articulate it through little characters,' says Pylypchuk. Initially the titles came to him through the music he played in the studio, lyrics lodged somewhere but slowly becoming something else. 'It gets adjusted in your mind to become something that makes sense to you.' Today, he keeps useful phrases in a mental 'repository'. He now refers to his adopted home town as *The Greatest City that Ever Existed!*, a visceral appreciation of its artistic freedom.

SELECTED WORKS

'IN THE ABSENCE OF
HUMAN BASTARDS', 2011
MORDANT HUMOUR AND
TERRIBLE PATHOS AS FLUFFY
BUG-EYED HORSE TOSSES
OFF FLAT DOORMAT RIDER.

'HOPEFULLY, I WILL LIVE
THROUGH THIS WITH A
LITTLE BIT OF DIGNITY', 2005
RAGDOLL RAT ARMY DIES IN
MYSTERIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES.

PHOTOGRAPHED AT HIS
STUDIO IN HUNTINGTON PARK,
10 JANUARY 2015