



DENNIS LETBETTER

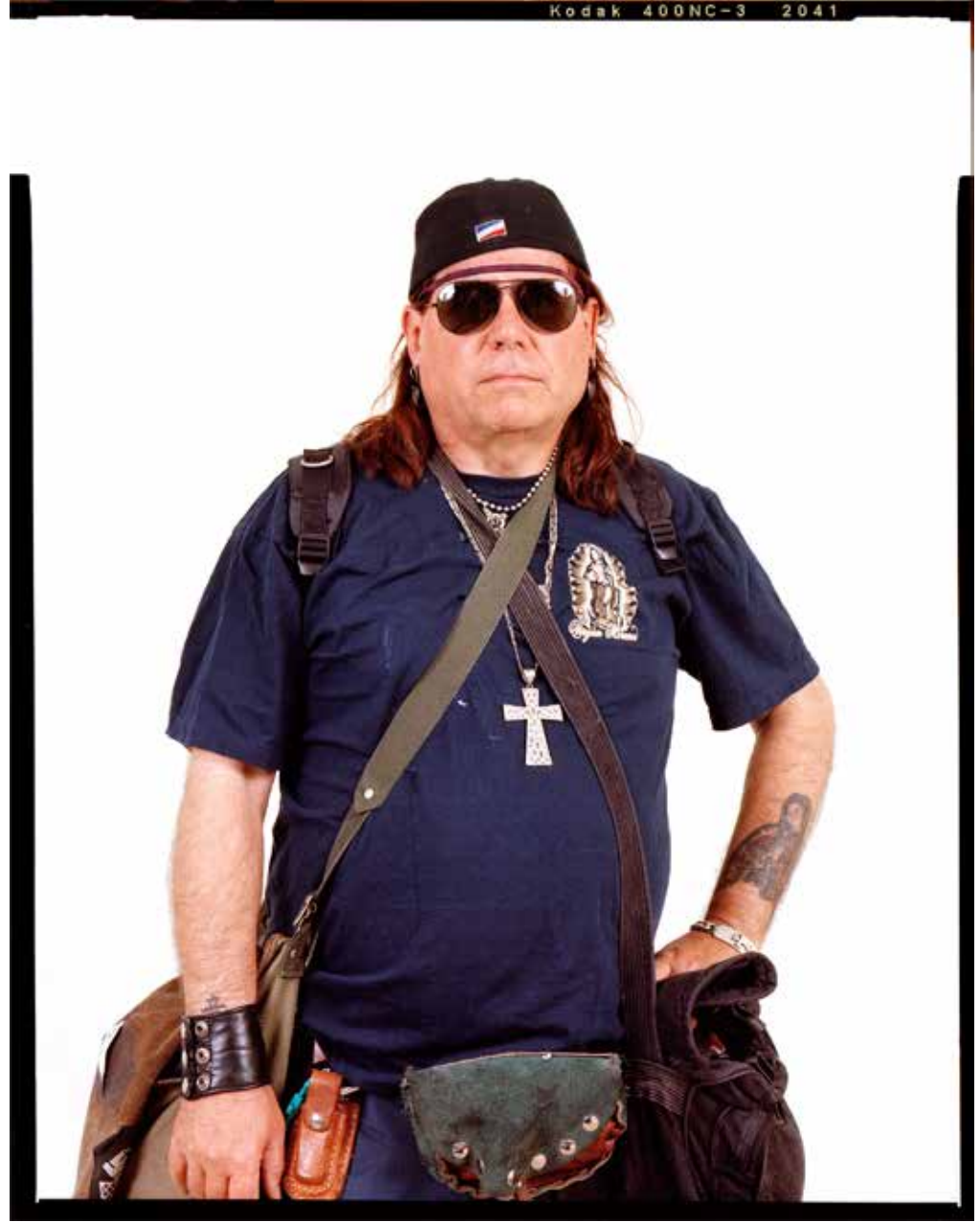
The Haight Street Project

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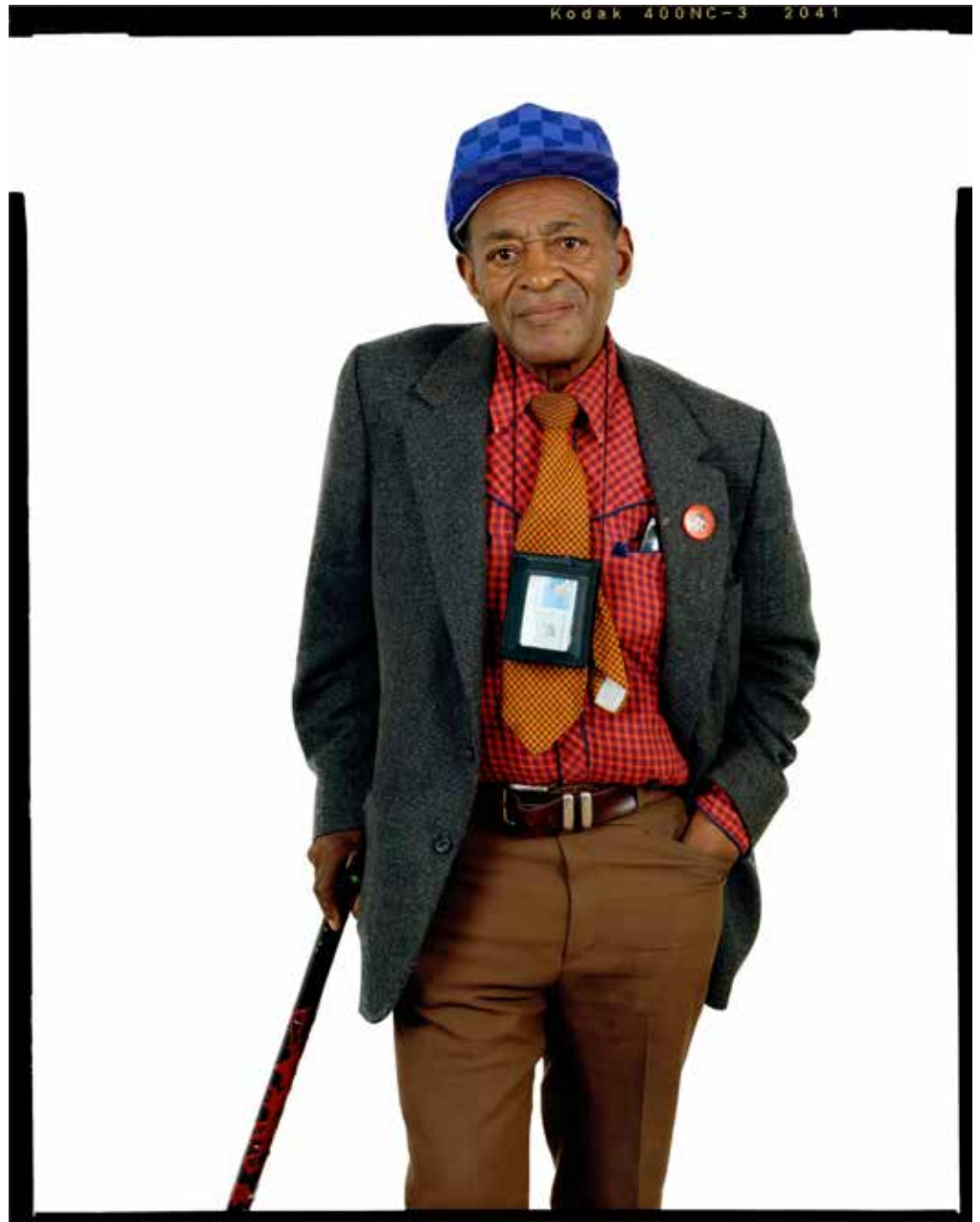
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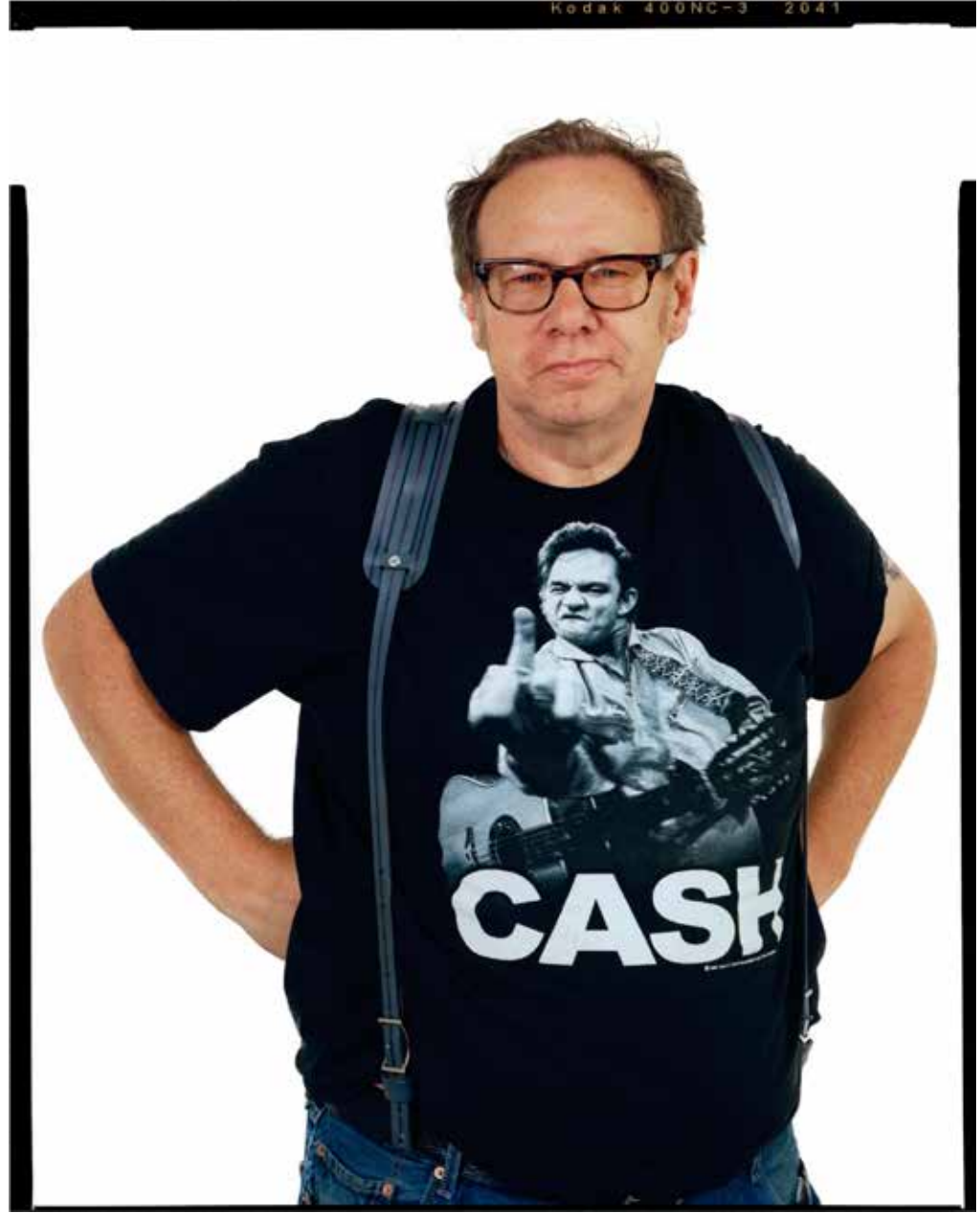


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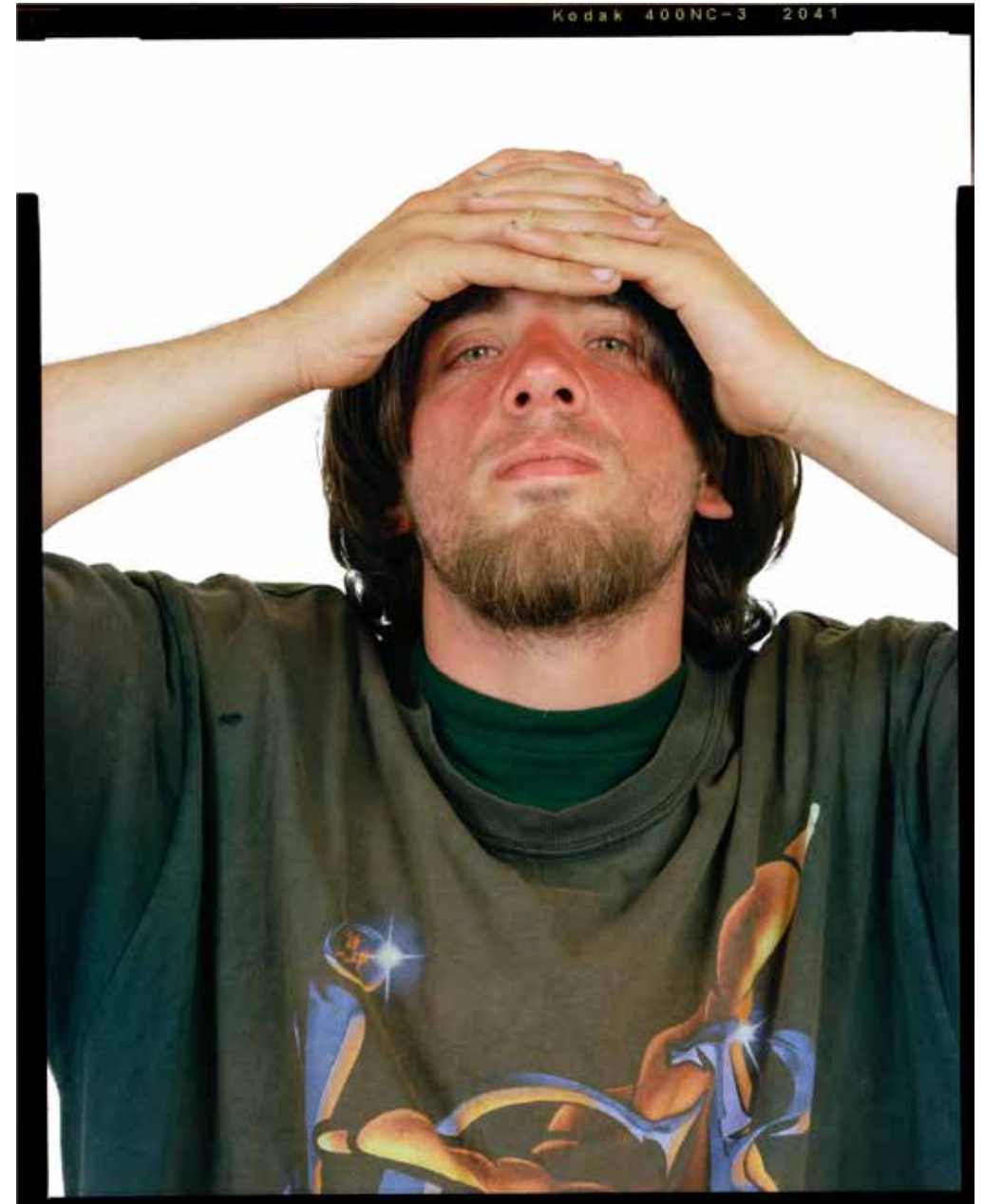


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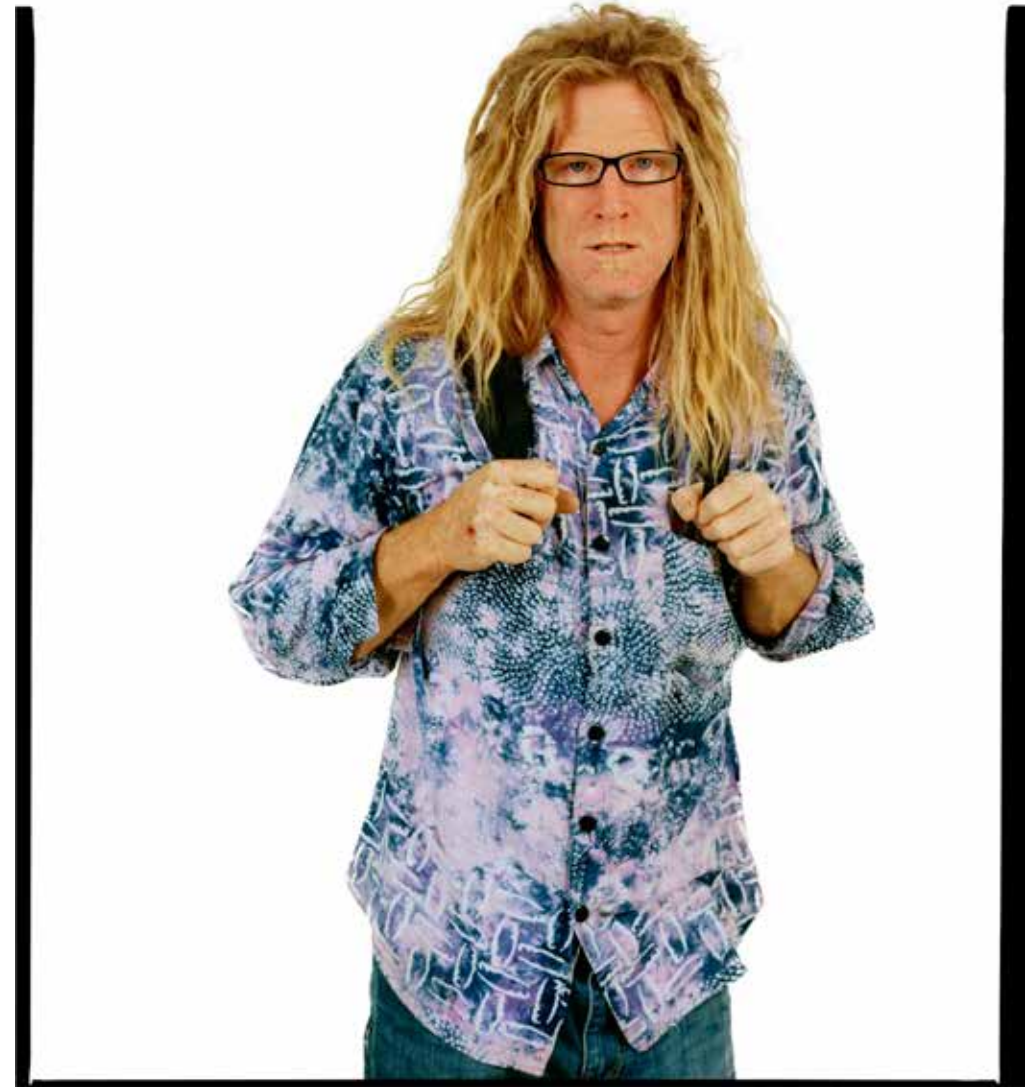
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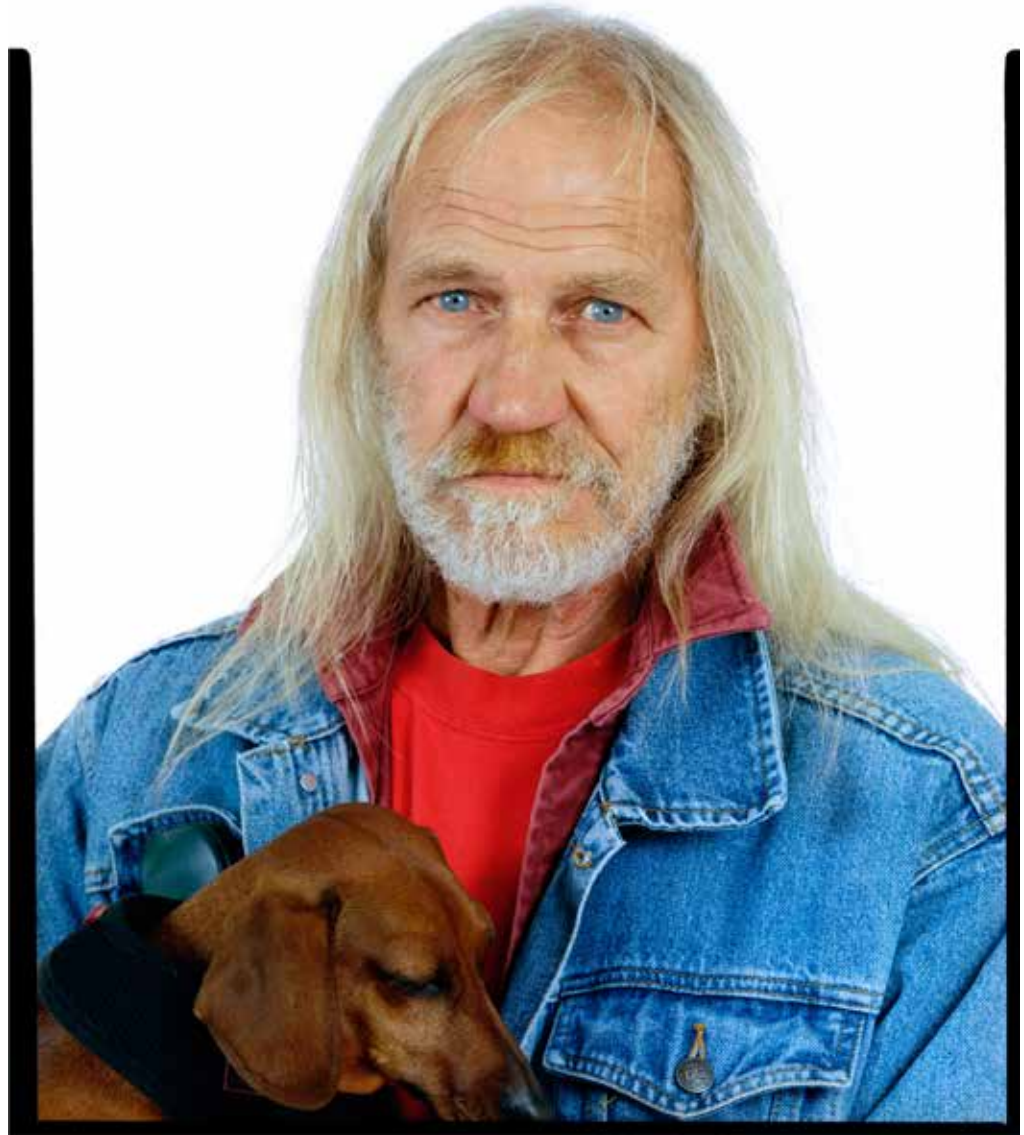




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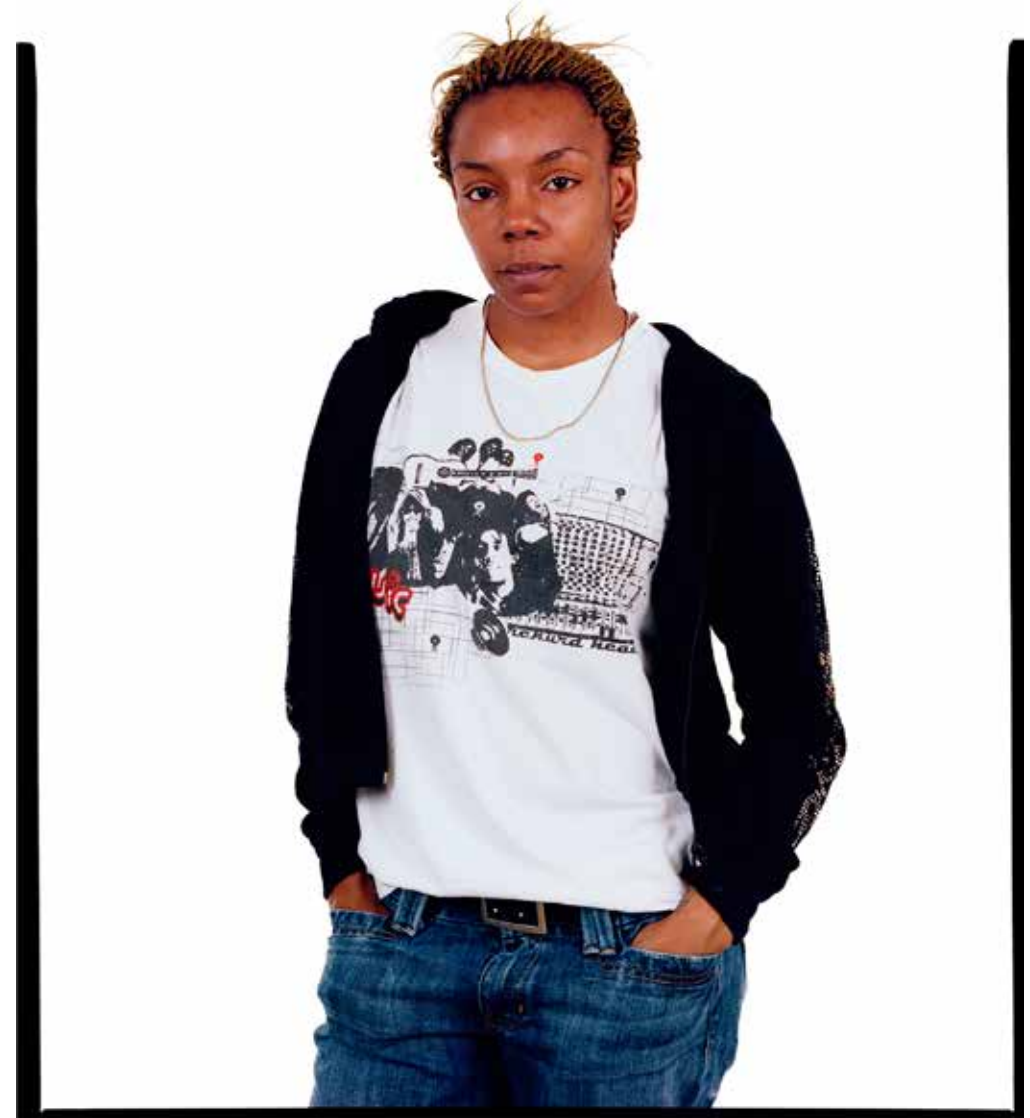




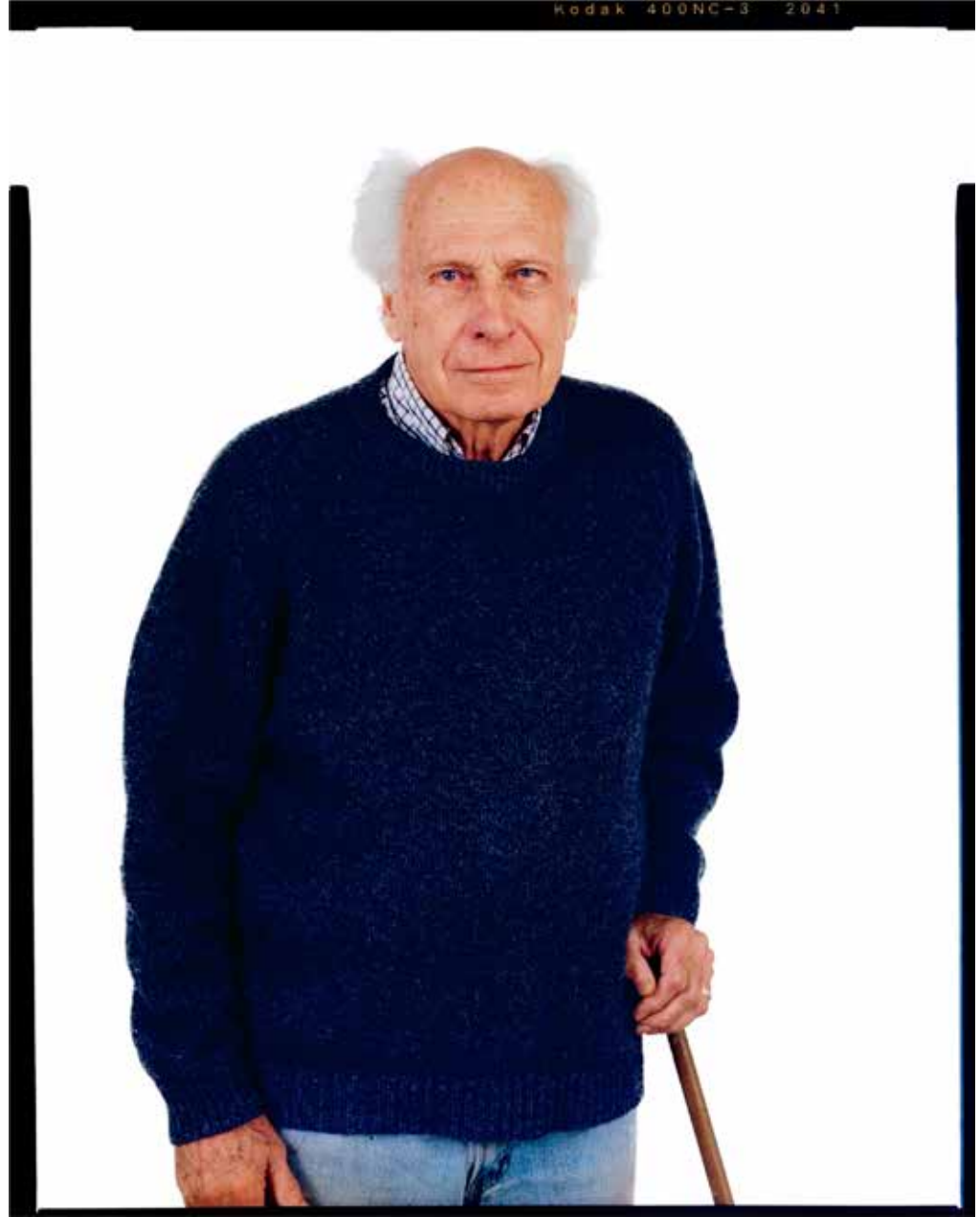
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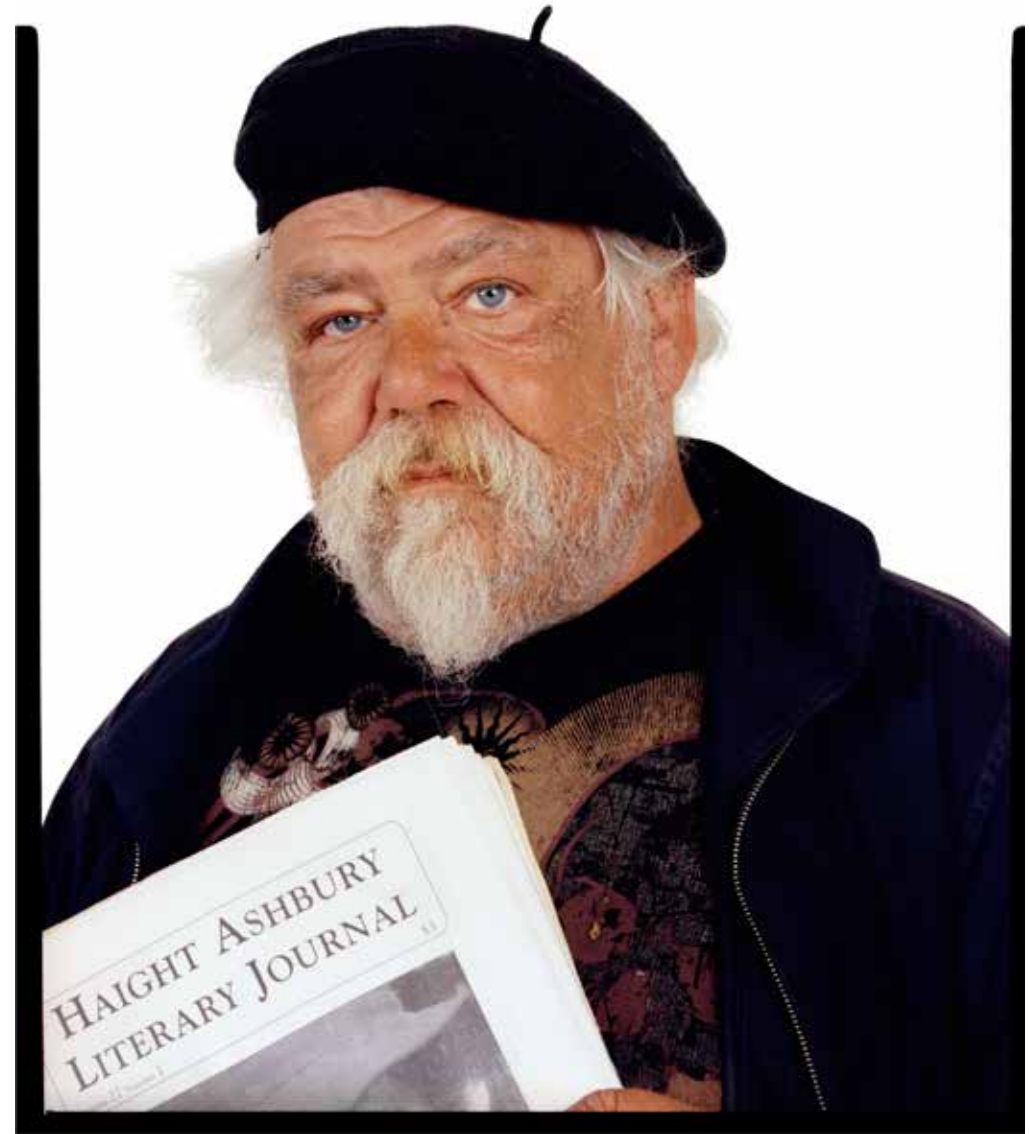
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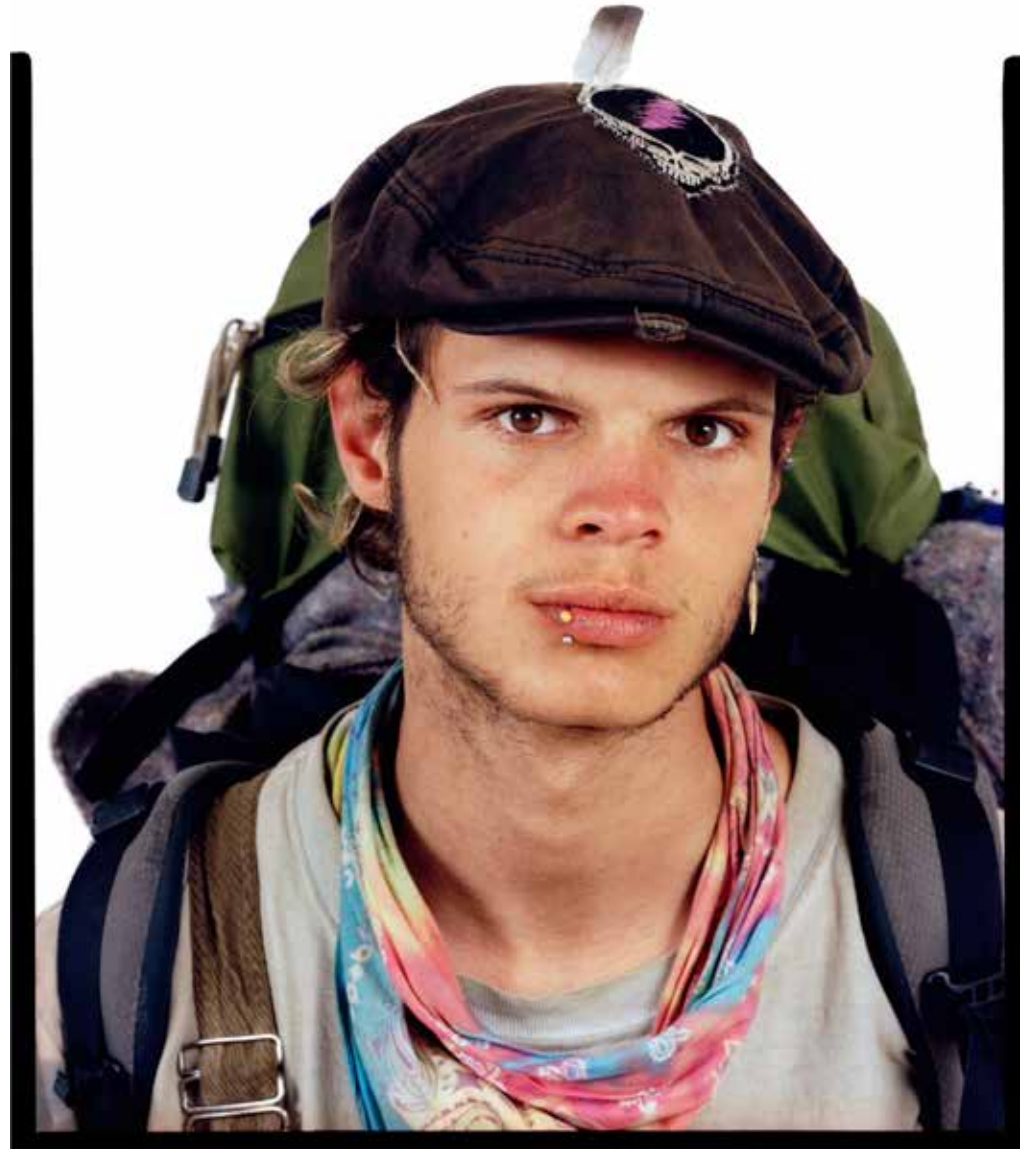
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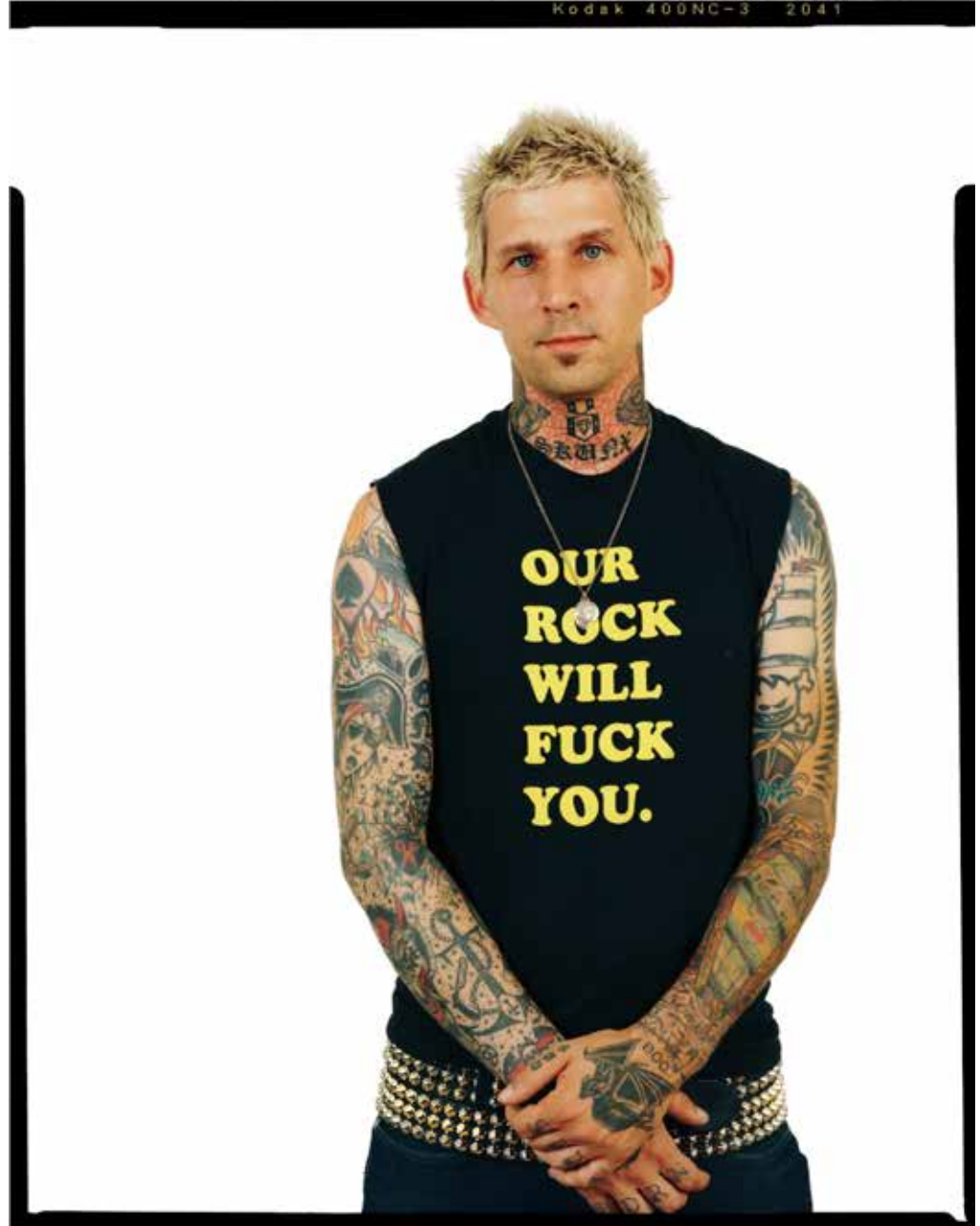
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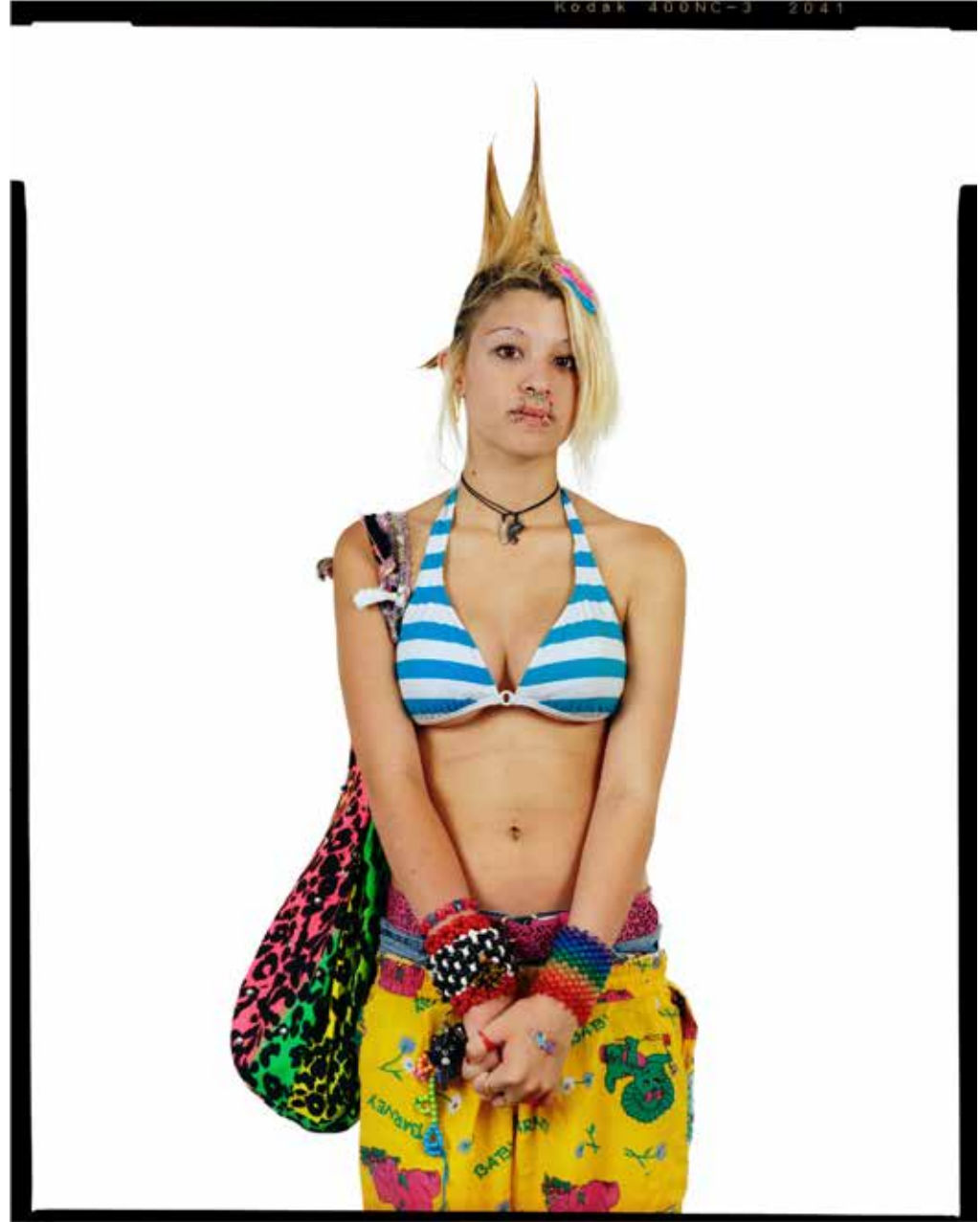
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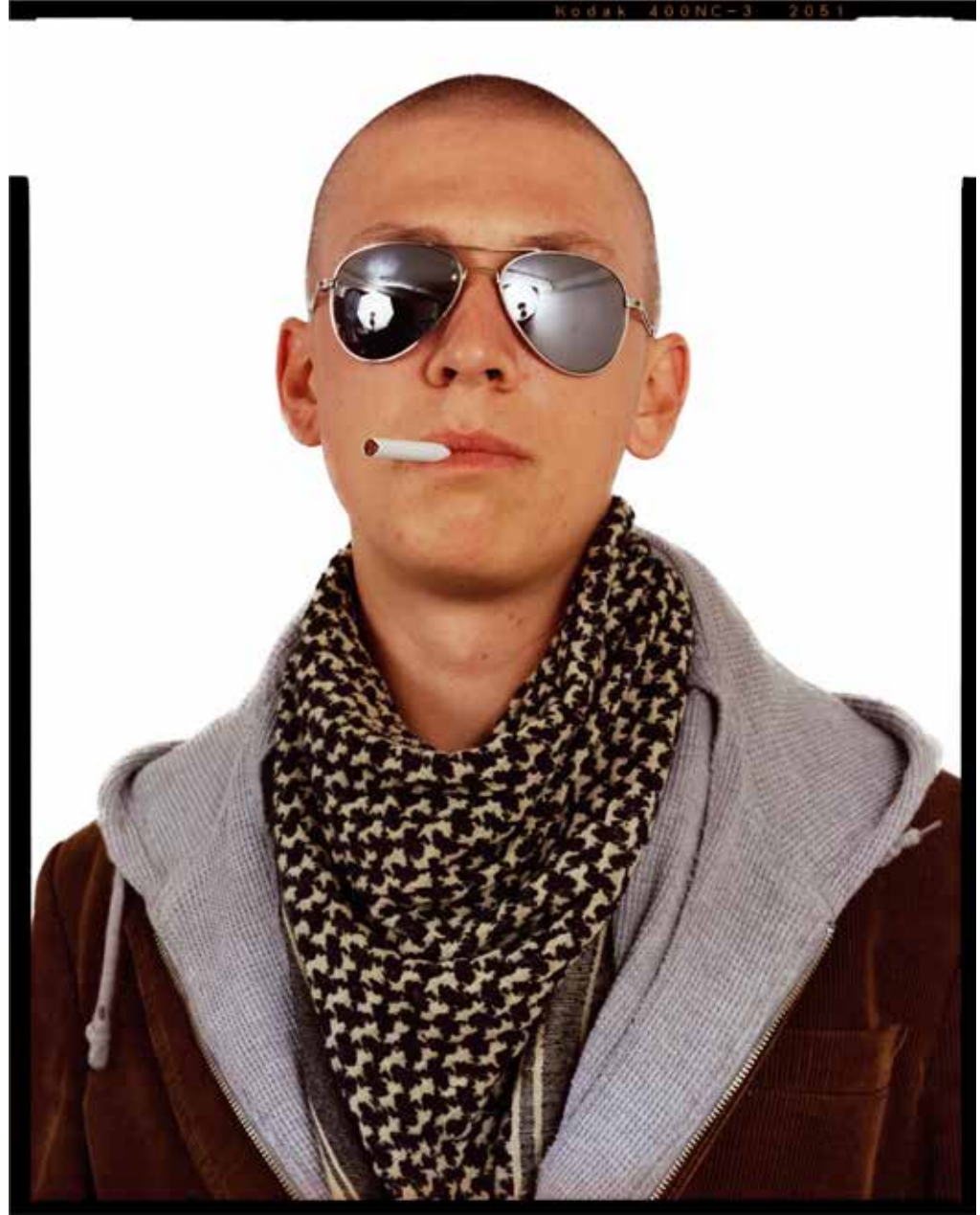


KODAK SAFETY FILM



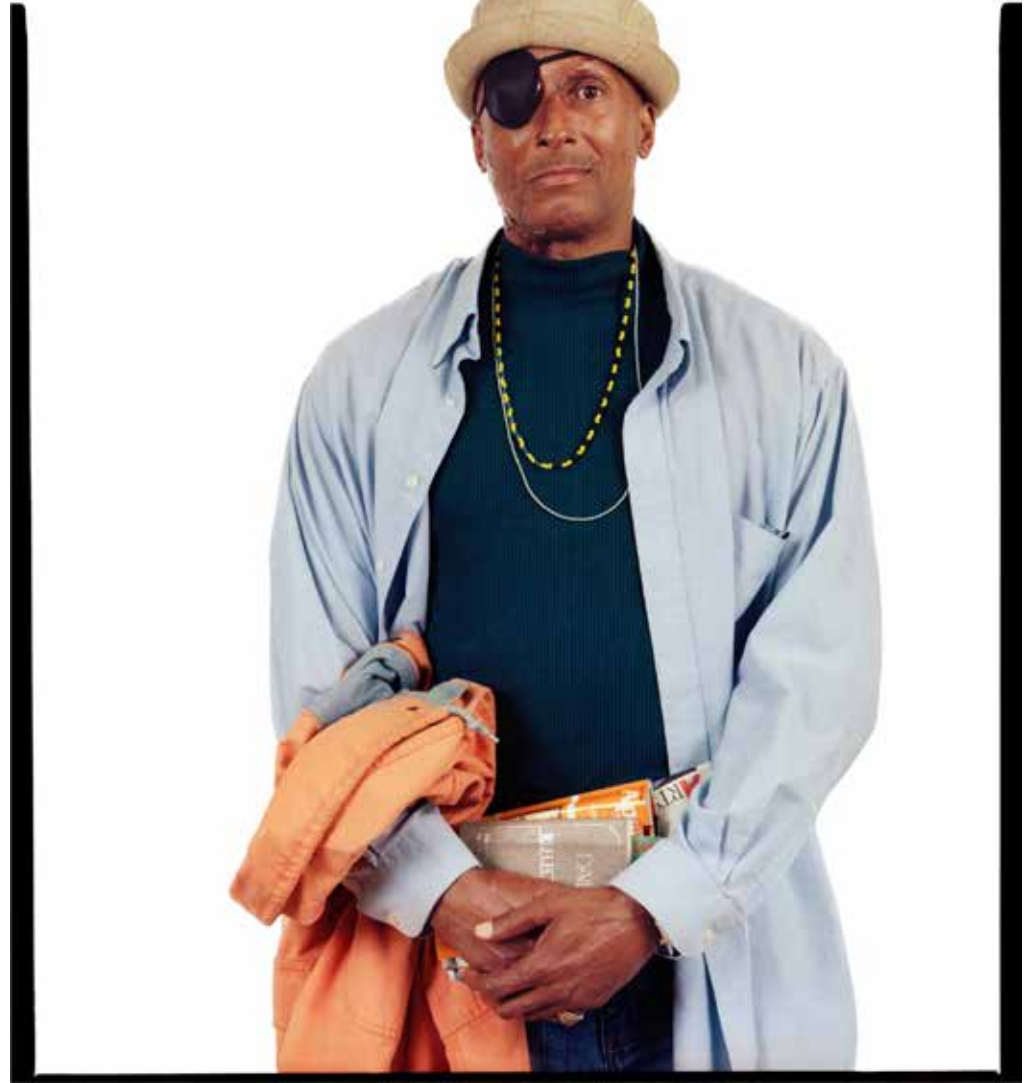
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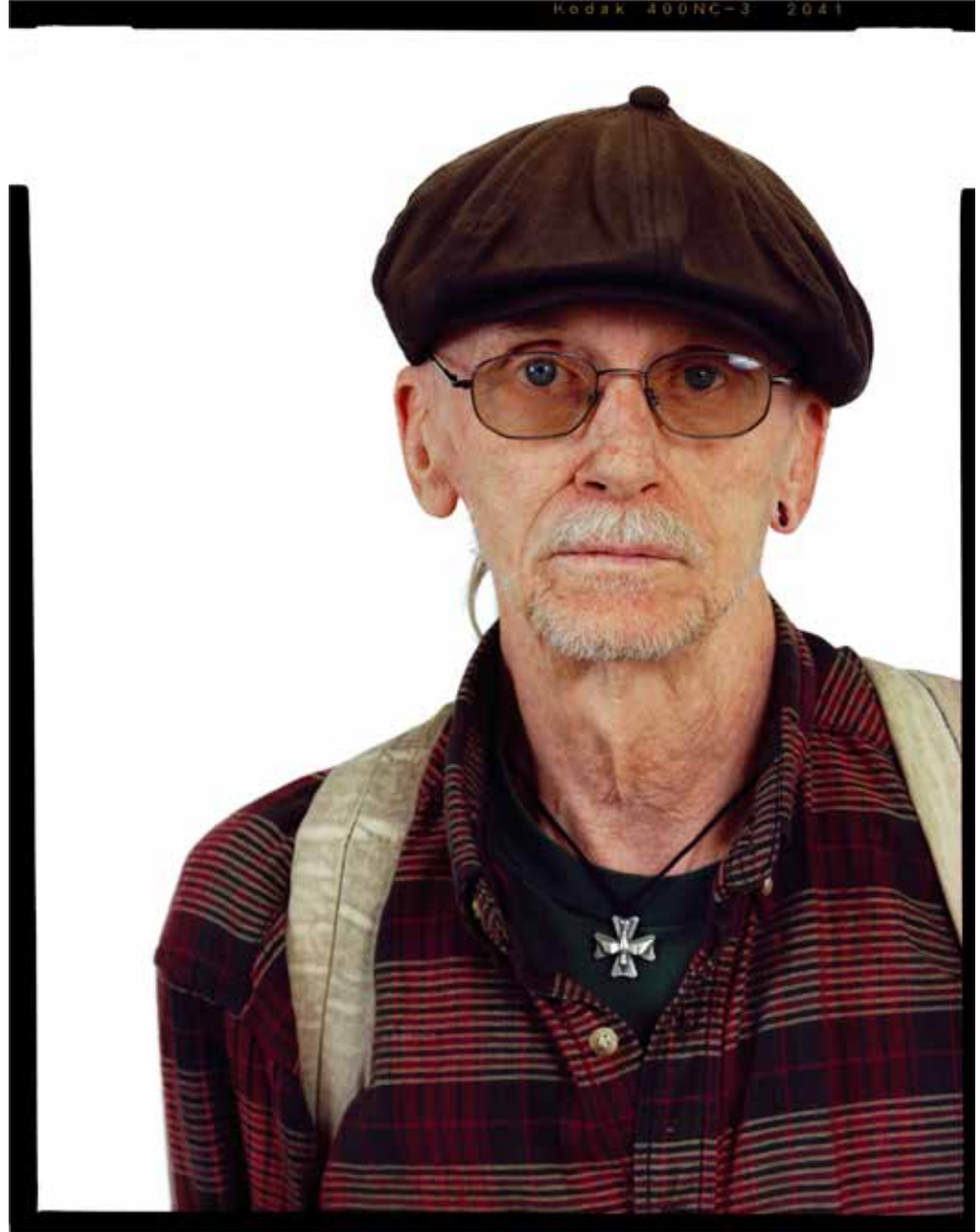
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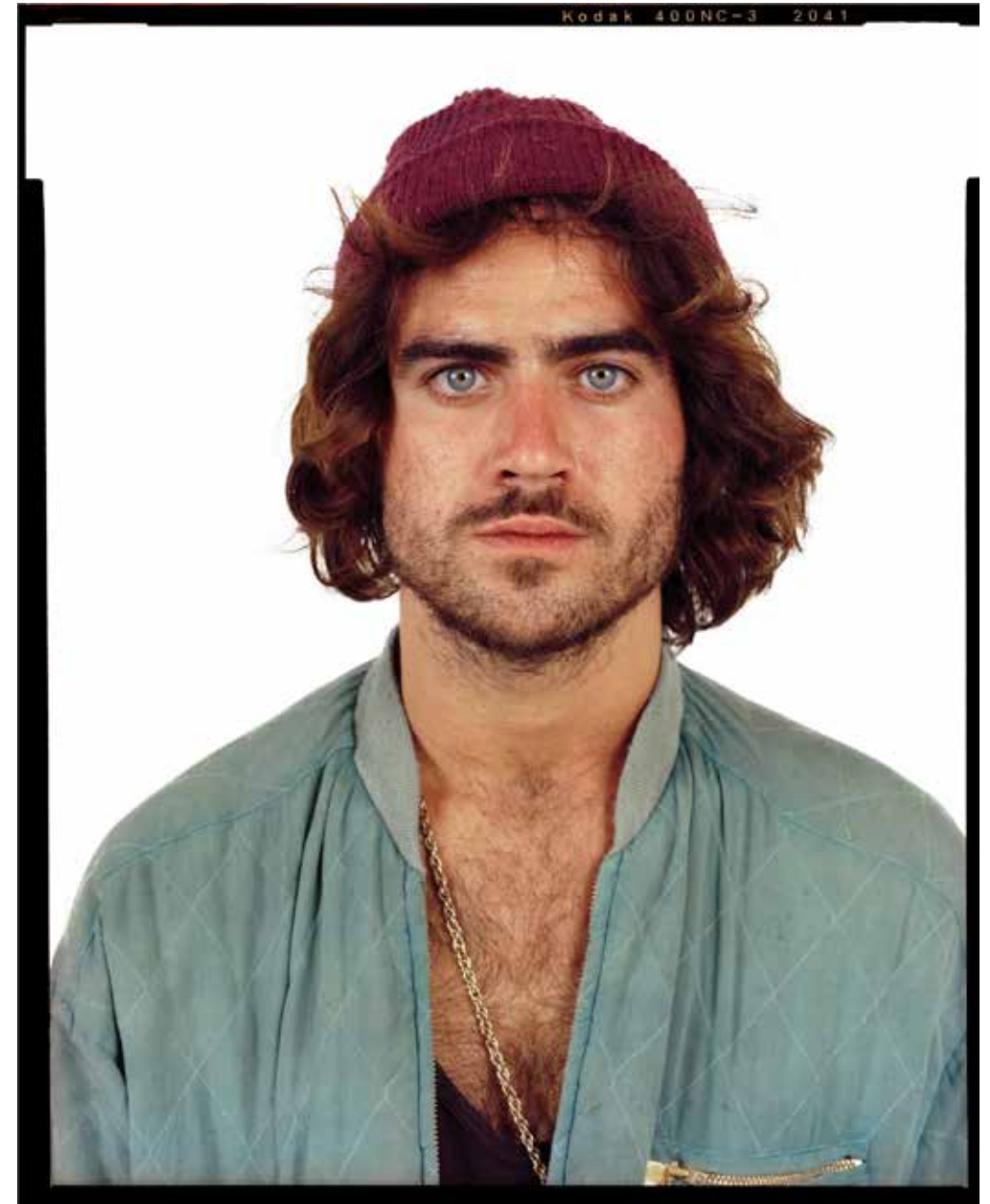
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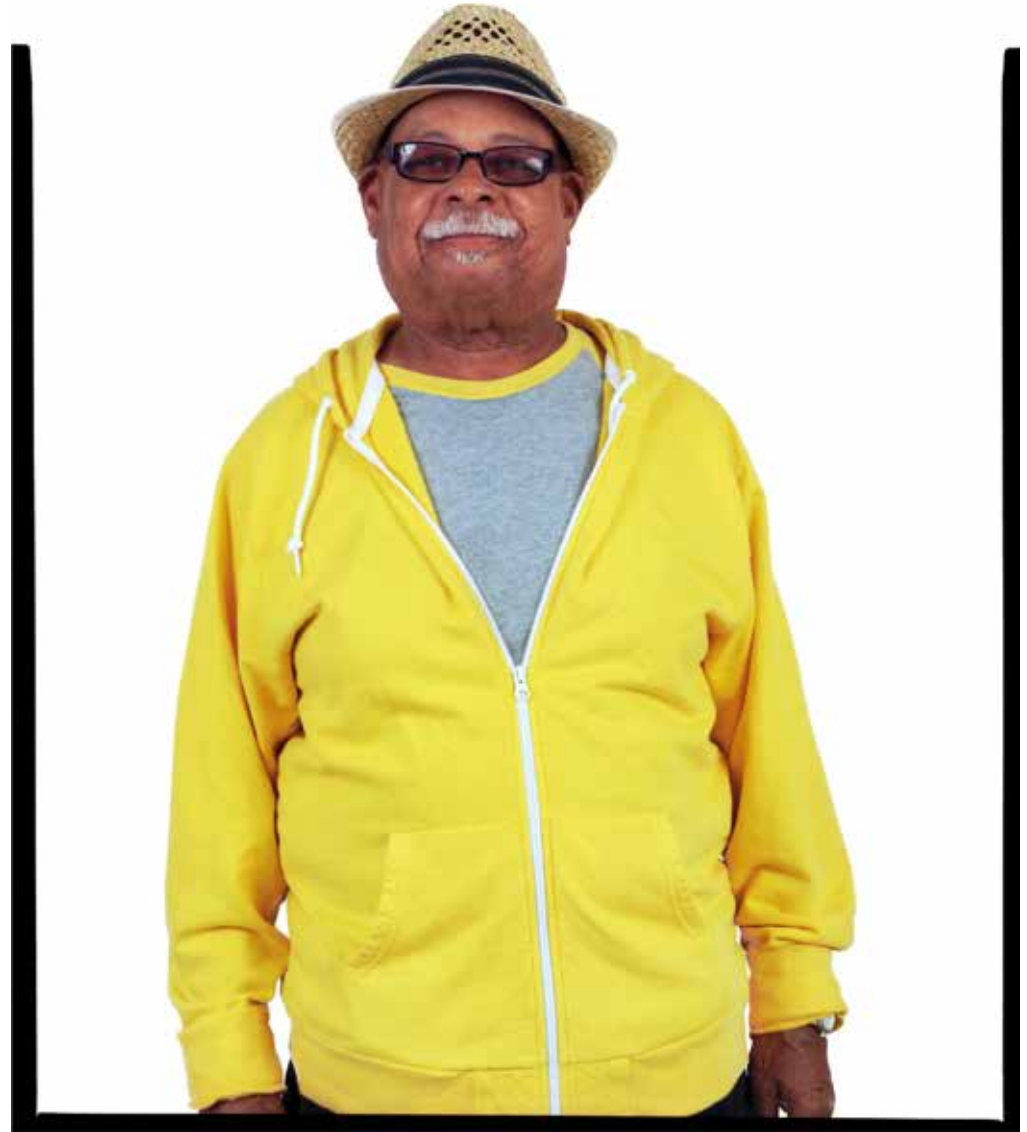


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LOVE AND HAIGHT *ON GLASS PLATES*

These unflinching portraits of the people of Haight Street, by Dennis Letbetter, who has long lived in the neighborhood, are messages from both survivors and victors. Some of them make music or art, some of them are biding their time to make music or art, some of them are giving unconditional love to their dogs and receiving it for the first time, some of them celebrate Timothy Leary or Jerry Garcia or the Hindu gods they found in the thickets of nearby Golden Gate Park. Some of them have learned to be content just passing through their time on earth.

They are voyagers who have landed in an island nation of Bohemia, eager explorers of hope, determined shedders of despair, refugees from what was expected of them back elsewhere, open to the new ad hoc families they discover in the maxifamily universe of Haight Street, world headquarters of the Haight-Ashbury district.

Fifty years after the Summer of (Ambiguous) Love, the gaze of Dennis Letbetter through the glass plates of his camera is unblinking, unjudging, and most extraordinarily, loving. History can't be stopped, but the history of Haight in the Sixties is memorialized in these faces and postures.

* * *

Winkum, enrolled in the activist profession, arrived on Haight Street in 1965 as a scout and emissary during the first dawn glimmers of the Age of Aquarius, bringing the good news of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement to a citizenry and a youth demography in urgent need of the revelation that the Viet Nam war was wrong and it was okay to say fuck when a person's heart is pure.

He was not a Berkeley dropout; he had never been a student. "I ain't putting down the FSM and Viet Nam," he declared, "they brought us together to drop acid, man."

Thus perfectly credentialed, he patrolled Haight from Masonic to Stanyan, offering medical advice ("Don't drill holes in your head to let the air in, don't smoke banana skins to get high"), vocabulary instruction ("The opposite of 'up tight' is 'groovy,' man") and eking out non-taxable earnings by selling what he called "pharma-cuticles."

I haven't seen him in years. He may have gone to the great commune in the sky. But this early colonist would still feel at home in the neighborhood.

The Summer of Love was succeeded by several more summers of love, and then Haight devolved into the first American teenage ghetto, afflicted with muggings, overdoses, and tee-shirt shops; and then it struggled to rise like the Phoenix. And so it has. Unlike other great bohemian outposts, Greenwich Village or St.-Germain-des-Prés, gentrification has kept itself to courteous limits.

These portraits of the people from the street nearly a half century after the arrival of Winkum, the summers of love, and the teenage slum years, reveal the manifold layers of passion, abandon, seeking, and stoical acceptance of contemporary Haight. Look into their eyes, as Dennis Letbetter does with his camera, and you see that this onetime capital island in the Bohemian archipelago still breathes both life and death. It's not always groovy; sometimes uptight.

Once, walking down Haight to the Red Vic, a group-owned movie house, I noticed a young man lying curled on the sidewalk, eyes closed but his radio between his legs, blowing rap music into the late afternoon air. His slice of pizza was abandoned near his face. A girl with a shaven head said, "That Todd, I think his name is, good friend of mine, he's like that sometimes. Maybe his name is like Bruce. One of my best pals."

His breathing seemed suspiciously shallow. I called 911 and gave the address of the pizza shop, but the ambulance was delayed because psychedelic pranksters had changed the numbers on the shop with those of another a block away. The medics arrived, took one look at the kid, and jabbed a needle into his chest. He came awake, flailing and cursing, "Assholes, you ruined my high!" and took off running.

I asked the medics if I'd done the right thing by calling them. One said, "I'm not sure I want to decide that for you." The other said, "But he'd have been dead in eight-ten minutes." Later I saw the young man buying his new fix from the dealer in a black hoodie topped with a red beret (for a winsome soupçon of elegance) in front of his usual station at a mural on the wall of a bank.

* * *

For a time, a group of acolytes gathered at an altar which was a former traffic stanchion transformed and blessed by the Hindu priest, Baba Kali Das. The city of San Francisco moved the holy stanchion into Golden Gate Park at the baba's request, which was more like a demand, because the city administration suspected that some of the worshippers might eventually become voters.

Baba Kali Das was formerly Michael Bowen, a talented artist, a genius hustler, co-founder of the Oracle on Haight Street, one of the first underground newspapers, and also a co-founder of the Human Be-In in Golden Gate Park, starring Allen Ginsberg, Timothy Leary, a contingent of Hell's Angels to keep the peace, and a parachutist descending into the crowd from the sky as the magical afternoon ended. This event took place on January 14, 1967, which is often given as the official start of the Summer of Love. (The date may be approximate because I was there, so how could I be expected to remember precisely?)

Folks generally knew the location of Michael Bowen-Baba Kali Das because the scent of patchouli announced his presence with the penetration of a trumpet fanfare. He believed from the dawn of the Age of Aquarius that the fabled Gathering of the Tribes should come unto him. Some of them did.

Irked by a paragraph I had written about him, he once threatened to kill me, loudly, publicly, with impressive sincerity, so that my guest at lunch reached into her purse and handed me her tear gas pistol; but then, upon deeper thought, he relented and invited me to a holy all-vegetable with added tofu feast, prepared by a male acolyte who had been promoted to unpaid personal servant. "Shanteh, Shanteh," he chanted, ratifying the peace between us. Besides, if he killed me, I probably wouldn't be able to write about him.

In his role as Hindu priest, plus guru and prophet, he accepted honey, yogurt, and cash offerings, and also the love of a pretty visiting Italian tourist. He married her, moved to Italy, moved to Hawaii, had a child or two, returned to exhibit his paintings and an autobiography written in books made of birch bark, frightened the lady I invited to his gallery opening. Moved to Stockholm.... if charisma had not already been invented, he would have been its discoverer.

Michael, I do believe, honest I do! And Michael, wherever you are now, look down or look up at the tribes gathered in the Letbetter portfolio.

* * *

Later, the legend persists.

In this fabled outpost of the Sixties, after nearly half a century with a few modifications, nostalgia for herpes-and-AIDS-free sex may be the new Transcendental Meditation. A few of those camped on Haight Street amid the invisible ruins of the Haight-Straight Theater, the Red Vic movie house, the Oracle, the shop of the friendly brothers who dealt in the best cactus this side of Don Juan, the Magnolia Thunderpussy munchies station, were actually born in communes and are conforming, continuing, honoring their rebel, anti-“boojwah” parents or grandparents. I know a young woman, Tirza, no last name, please, who is a third-generation hippie. Her boyfriend (also no last name, baby) calls himself Paradox because he’s a gluten-free gay man who prefers sex with women. Although he wasn’t christened Paradox, he forgives his parents’ error – how could they have known who he would turn out to be?

As a veteran of the scene – truth be told, a veteran in general – I remind myself that these are not ghostly revenants, wandering out of the mists, but flesh and blood contemporary human beings with the usual human needs. Their desires also deserve respect and are given it by Dennis Letbetter. His eye registers the surface and reveals the depths.

The twenty-first century Haight Street people whom Letbetter explores have found ways to scavenge and even thrive in a new economy. Some are flâneurs, as the French say.... digging the scene, as the French don’t say. But in the great tradition, others are still intent on seeking a better family than the ones they left behind in Cleveland or Tuscaloosa, and some find it in the extended maxi-family of the Haight-Ashbury district. If a person sets out into the San Francisco universe wearing a tattoo, a nose ring, or a dog, soon he or she makes friends with other dog, tattoo, or metal wearers. Food stamps can be shared. That’s a start right there.

Some of the most moving of these portraits are of the men and women who have made themselves special with makeup, clothing, thrift shop personal décor, or merely with the mask folks put on when the camera

is pointed toward them. Choice of décor or mask is a declaration: I am here, I am different, I am important, I am me and only me. Frank expression of that yearning is the principle of power selected by the people of Haight – and in fact, by you and me, too – and shows who we are, who we have chosen to be, who we deserve to be, by God. Despite what anybody else might think.

Herbert Gold 2014



Honoré de Balzac *Louis-Auguste Bisson 1842*

Honoré de Balzac made an extended series of novels and stories of characters in France entitled *La Comédie humaine*. The personages spiral in and out of the narratives – at some times in detailed consideration, at others simply seen in passing in an adjacent box at the opera. The portraits shown here are characters in a visual narrative of a special neighborhood in San Francisco. This is a novel of personages inevitably interconnected and intertwining (one cannot help but imagine) in the Haight.

Photography is evidence but it is not truth. These portraits present a certain aspect of those depicted, but it is a miniscule slice of who they are. Does it give us insight to their education, intelligence, history, possibilities, family or security? In the Haight, the lingering spirit of happenings in the sixties and seventies encourages knowing self-presentations in dressing simply for a weekend shopping visit. What then can sartorial attention reveal?

The definition of a portrait has been disrupted by new technologies, and the fact that virtually everyone is a photographer these days. Portraiture should not be a casual thing, yet we are witnessing its devaluation through casualness. Once the province of the elite, with their painted portraits, then formal photographic portrait studios, the portrait has transmogrified into a stultifying barrage of cell phone pix, Instagram and Facebook postings, and corporate head shots. The staged, studio and formal portrait gives way to the candid, the informal, the snapshot and the seeming preference for self-portraiture in the form of the hand-held selfie. The contemporary societal addiction to the selfie has largely trumped any interest in considered, studied portrait making. Has formal portraiture of any kind lost its social utility? Will we see again such thoughtful works as those of Nadar, Cameron, Avedon, Deakin, Disfarrner, Dater, Penn, and Horsfield?

In the summer 2010, I turned my garage – just one block away from Haight Street – into a portrait studio. I worked with Swiss designer

Jean-Benoît Lévy, who went out to invite the interesting, the interested and the willing to have their portraits made. I used 4 x 5 film and strobe lighting. Now that Amazon has been awarded a patent for photographing against white backdrops (U.S. Patent No. 8,676,045) perhaps I shouldn't admit that I used one, however obvious that I did so. Offering more encouragement than direction, I simply asked the subjects to stand and present themselves as they wished. I knew none of them. Are portraits more revealing if the photographer knows the subject or does it not matter? Photography's relative instantaneousness, by comparison with painting or sculpting, offers even the formal photographer little time to establish a relationship with the sitter.

The images here are just a selection of the 600 negatives I exposed in this project. The expense of analogue-based photography naturally forces selectivity, but such jettisoning can be a very painful process, not least because it is easy to be married to intention instead of result in one's valuations. Alfred Stieglitz courageously destroyed the greater part of his work, leaving us with his select few photographs rather than keeping a cabinet full of near misses, and thereby lending his oeuvre clarity of vision and profundity.

It can be a painful and courageous gesture simply to be a portrait photographer. Very few people can accept their appearance. There are seeds of unhappiness laced into those images that make them only look their best. Somewhat inevitably the bearer of bad news when the proofs are first viewed, the photographer may begin to find forgiveness after about 10 years, when people prefer their younger selves, but often too late to salvage the photographer/subject relationship. And yet I persist. We still want to see one another. The portrait allows for an unmitigated examination of others; we can observe without being observed, staring as we wish, without offense.

Dennis Letbetter

Subjects in order of appearance:

Brian Sonntag, Jennifer Glee, Fr. River Damien Sims, Ronald J. Wheeler, Samuel Smith, Rainbow M.C. Lenehan, William H. Holic, Amy Bloch, Stannous Flouride, Charles Neadom, Devil, Emil Sempf, Maryssa Curtis (Raven), James Jackson, Ricky Swiney, Genell Martin, Lauren Saltzman, Tom Flournoy, Larry Miles, William Kirkpatrick, Toni M. Brookins, Aaron Perkins, John Powell, Maurice Bassan, Candice M. Holland, Ashley Lewis, Howard Shirley, Carla Koopal, Greg Doxey, William Birdwood, Joseph Valentine, Maya Denton, Greg De Hoot, Ashley Elizabeth, Patti Navarro, Garth Elson, Bozo, Hashim Davis, Miles Hapgood, R. Mike Kelley, Melody Popovich, William Savage, Shadow, Peter J. Golbetz, Mira McClain, Roan Michaels, Kella Svetich, Skylar Ford, Reedy Williams, Megan Shino, Michael E. Young, Jon Exworthy, Zena MacCarthy, Ryan Geul and Lindsey Haley, Hadley Johns, Adam Ibarra, John Paul Marcelo, Patrisha Vestey, Sean-Michel Normand, Murphy, Mike Montesciaros, Khadeejah Evans and Robert Bell.

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A photograph of a wall with peeling wallpaper and a poster of a white dog. The wall is made of vertical wooden planks. The wallpaper is a light brown color and is peeling away from the wall in several places, revealing a darker, textured surface underneath. On the right side of the wall, there is a poster of a white dog, possibly a Bull Terrier, with a black and white pattern on its face. The dog's head is the main focus of the poster. The background of the poster is white with some black and grey patterns. The overall scene is somewhat cluttered and shows signs of wear and tear.

"I am composed of a multitude of spectra which inter-
perse my body in a great number of layers. Your plates
will never be able to catch these spectra which form my
essential self, but can only record some pose of my body."

Honoré de Balzac