

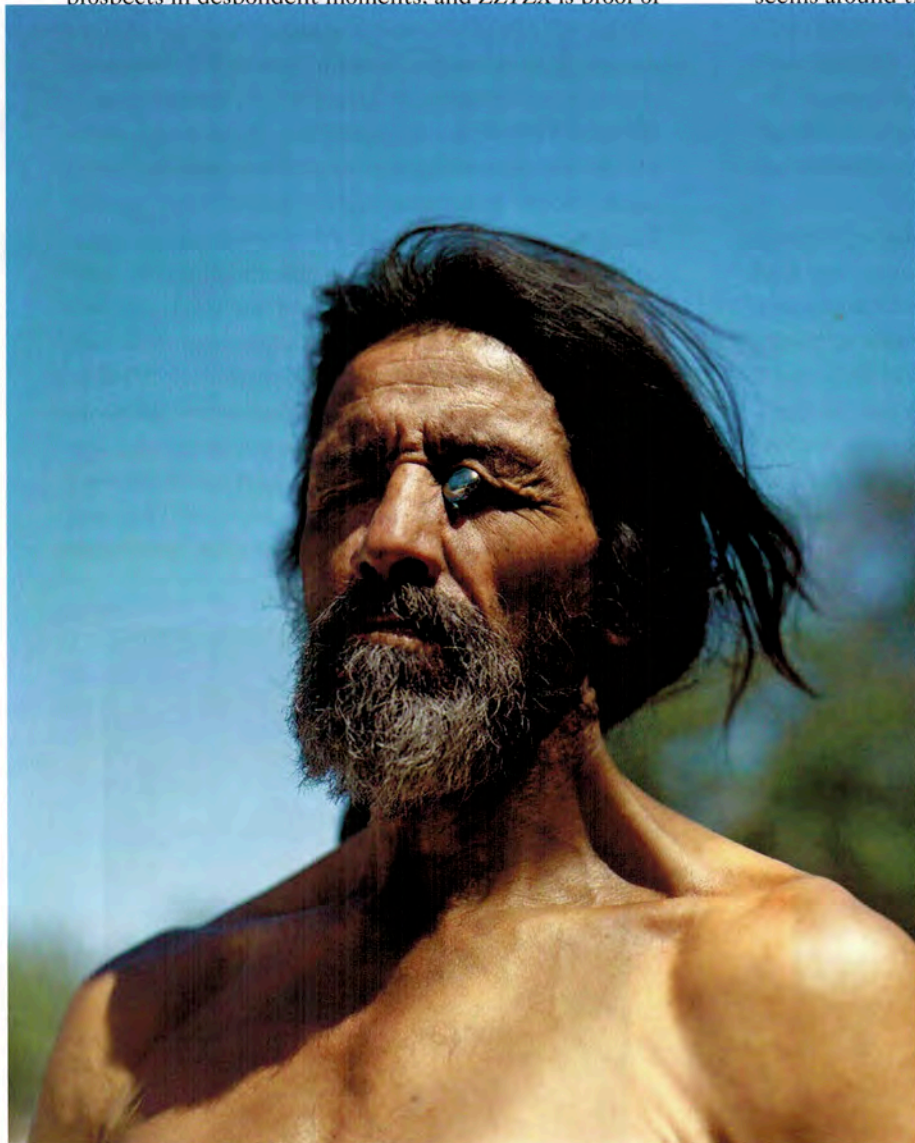
“The glamour of Hollywood is a wealthy and beautiful subsection of the city, but it is a tiny fraction of what comprises the rest of LA, and I find it uninteresting,” photographer Gregory Halpern reflects on *ZZYZX*, his latest book set in Los Angeles. Following a grid pattern that splays into hills and valleys, Los Angeles is a lot more than Hollywood. It is a place composed of more than 80 distinct neighborhoods and districts. The city has so many names – the City of Angels, Tinseltown, La La Land, the Valley of Smoke – that it harbors a sense of dissociative identity. It adapts to the needs of those who call upon it. The former Guggenheim fellow’s most recent publication, comprised of 77 photographs, takes us from the dusty regions east of Los Angeles to the breeze of its western limits.

Our peripatetic nature is what pushes us toward better prospects in despondent moments, and *ZZYZX* is proof of

such a promise. Picture yourself in the desert. The sand burns your soles. You are blinded. The gusts from rocky hills play a riff on scorching hot air. Rays of light bend into taunting mirages while you recalculate the remaining odds for change that grow smaller and smaller in your mind. This is the town of *Zzyzx* – the last word in the English language – a dead end in the Mojave Desert. Many Angelenos often debate about where Los Angeles ends, and it seems that this boiling interzone serves as the spiritual limit of Halpern’s LA. Oddly, none of the pictures in *ZZYZX* seem to be taken in the former pseudo-wellness community. Rather, the town is a specter looming over a sunny city that consistently feels like it is on the brink of a natural disaster. “The end always does feel closer in Southern California,” Halpern says, “Between the smog, the drought, the threat of earthquake – it may well be why Californians seem to have more fun, because death always seems around the corner.”

ZZYZX highlights the brilliance of the worn-out fantasies that often glare at us in LA. Halpern’s is a troubling kind of beauty – the ultra-American. The silhouette of a Joshua tree jolts through a piercing blue sky. A wildfire leaves behind prickly thorns in the stark landscape. Then, finally, a highway – a River Styx carrying angels through the sprawl. As Halpern moves us further west into the city, deeper into its crevices, a star-spangled palm catches sunrays and merges with a head rainbowed with dye. A cracked smile juxtaposes with a broken windshield. Dreamlike, tired faces greet us, and many turn their backs. Halpern exposes the impossibility of recognizing a person through a portrait, sensing the viewer’s impression as being a combination of the photographer’s subjectivity and their own assumptions. This fantasy is decisively unmasked by a piece of blue tarp, adorned with cut-out holes forming a giant smiley face. *ZZYZX*’s final pages bring us to the Pacific coast, the end of the road. Many are flung into the maelstrom of LA’s promise of limitlessness. A few lucky ones bask in its light, while others turn into mist.

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Photographs: Gregory Halpern

