

MB Fine Art

**ALL'S SWELL:** Leroy Grannis photographed Rory Russell from the water in the Pipeline off Oahu in 1972.

**GALLERY**

## Enough waves for everyone

**Photographer Leroy Grannis has made surfing and its culture his life's work.**

By JESSICA HUNDLEY  
Special to *The Times*

**S**EVENTY-FOUR years after he first picked up a surfboard, Leroy Grannis is still shooting the curl. No, he's not riding the waves anymore; he had to give that up four years ago, after hip replacement surgery. But at 87, he still hits the beach every morning, to chat and, sometimes, to take pictures.

What began as a hobby in 1959

has become a career that has taken him around the world, photographing not only surfers but surf culture as well — the vibrant, rebellious and nearly spiritual philosophy that accompanies life on the waves.

"It was the perfect hobby for me, because I knew surfing and I loved taking photos," Grannis says from his Carlsbad home, where he lives with Katie, his wife of 66 years. "If you surf, it becomes something you do all your life. The great thing about it is that it's pretty much the most fun way to get your exercise. Being by the ocean just relaxes you. It keeps you dreaming."

These days, surfing is not languishing in obscurity. In the last few years there have been two successful feature-length documentaries on the subject, as well as a major Hollywood movie starring nubile young women

frollicking in the Hawaiian waves.

In fact, it's safe to say surfing has been documented ad nauseam.

Yet "Birth of a Culture," a new show of Grannis' work at MB Fine Art in Beverly Hills, presents an invigorating depiction of the sport. Culled from work made during the '60s and '70s, the images are full of saturated color and living history. It's easy to see why his photos appeared in nearly every major surfing publication in the '60s, and why he is included in the International Surfing Hall of Fame and on the surfers' walks of fame in Huntington Beach and Hermosa Beach.

Leroy "Granny" Grannis has always been around water. He was born in his parents' home in 1917, a block away from the waves at Hermosa Beach. He began surfing at 14.

"It was 1931 when I first got on a board," he says. "There were probably only 200 or so surfers in California then, and everyone knew each other. It was family; there was none of this provincialism. There were more than enough waves for everyone."

Grannis continued to surf, heading to the beach in the mornings before going to his job as a day laborer for Standard Oil. In 1938, a courtship with Katie began with a tandem surf ride, and a year later they were married.

### Endless summer

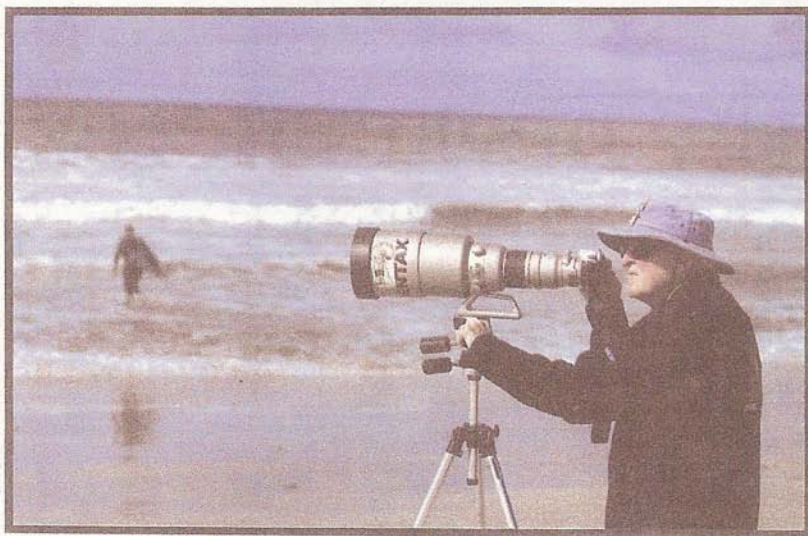
The eternal Southern California summer, however, was interrupted soon by war, and Grannis signed on to the Army Air Forces in 1943. Upon his return to civilian life a few years later, Grannis took a job in management at Pacific Bell Telephone and settled

down with Katie to start a family. The couple would eventually raise four children.

By 1959, however, the stress of work and family had taken its toll. Grannis developed an ulcer, a condition that forced him to find a relaxing hobby. Encouraged by his friend and dentist John "Doc" Ball, who was one of the first men to document the sport, Grannis bought a cheap East German camera and built himself a darkroom.

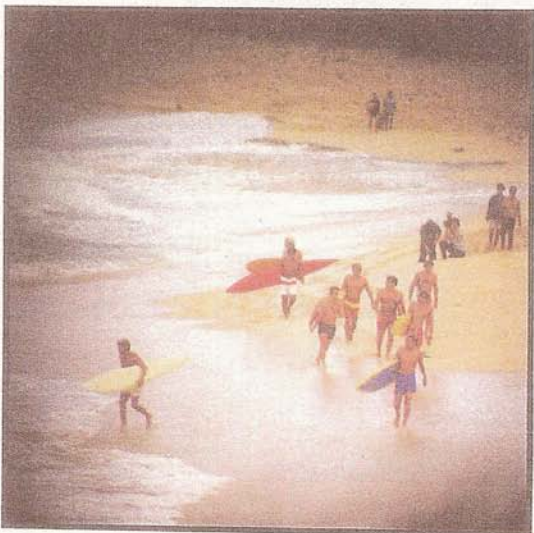
"I started chasing good surf," Grannis says, "and what was a hobby became a lot more."

While working at Pacific Bell, Grannis continued to shoot on weekends and vacations, bringing Katie and the kids along to surf contests all around the world. After his retirement from the company in 1977, Grannis devoted himself to photography full time.



GLENN KOENIG Los Angeles Times

**A FIXTURE:** At 87, Leroy Grannis still hits the beach every morning. He began photographing surfers as a hobby in 1959, and it developed into a career that has taken him all over the world.



MB Fine Art

**BOYS OF SUMMER:** Finalists in the Duke Kahanamoku Invitational at Sunset Beach in Oahu in 1968, shot by Grannis.

Grannis' MB show captures the first 10 years of his photo career, images of surfing at perhaps its most colorful and innocent. Lean young men sweep across enormous waves. Shaggy-haired blond boys and bikini-clad girls dig their toes into the sand and gaze happily into Grannis' lens.

"Surfing was becoming immensely popular," Grannis says of those years. "It was changing quickly. The boards were going from heavy wooden planks to lighter fibers, and the 'Gidget' movie had struck a chord. Suddenly everyone wanted to surf, or at least look like surfers."

Grannis chuckles. "All at once, there were a lot of

these guys with the right boards and the right ears and the right clothes, but they were just impersonating surfers. You never actually saw them in the water."

Grannis' photos show a culture's growing obsession, beaches filled with bodies, waves covered by boards. Armed with a long lens, he snapped images of some of the best surfers of the era from the sand.

But in 1963 he purchased a Calypso, an underwater camera invented by oceanographer Jacques Cousteau, and stepped into the water. A year later he outfitted his own surfboard with a wooden camera box suction-cupped to the tip. Paddling out

### 'Birth of a Culture'

Where: MB Fine Art, 612 N. Almont Drive, West Hollywood

When: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays

Ends: March 30

Info: (310) 550-0050; mbfala.com

to where the action was, Grannis was able to capture his subjects with a new intimacy. His photos became more nuanced and personal, and he tried to catch the subtleties, the play of light off water, the individual body language of each rider.

A feeling of elation alternating with calm underlies Grannis' work. You don't need to have been on a wave to be thrilled by his images.

In "Bobby Cloutier and Greg Noll, Waimea Bay, Oahu," taken in 1966, surfing legends Cloutier and Noll slip down an impossibly huge curve of blue, the break hanging like an enormous white cloud above their heads. In "Club Surfing Contest, 1963," the waves at San Onofre Beach are captured cluttered with bobbing boards, a huge crowd watching from the shore.

And in one of the most moving photos of the show, "Midget Farelly Surfing Shore Break, Makaha, 1968," the surfing great is shown atop his board, moving fast down a beautiful stretch of ocean. He's nearly in silhouette, the colors rich and dark, and his head is bowed low, as if in reverence.

"It wasn't my intention," Grannis says of his work's emotional pull, "but it was there, and I shot it."

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