

M+B

RUSSH

ARTISTS /
HUGH HOLLAND

WORDS ELLE GLASS
PHOTOS HUGH HOLLAND

Sometimes you do something just for you. You don't care who sees it. You don't care what they think of it. All you care about is the thrill, the rush, that moment – and what comes of it – gives you and you alone. There is something magical about not working to any agenda, not even your own. Of having no deadlines, of going wherever you are led. The boys (and girls) of Dogtown – in the brief window from 1975 – were this way inclined. They were a revolution of sorts, living in the moment, with no aspiration beyond the then-and-there; on a permanent summer vacation where Route 66 meets its end, “that last seaside slum” where the days were long and they spent them doing what most people thought was a waste of time. What they did – breaking into stranger's backyards to drain pools and find their way into ariels – was all they cared about. They skated like the greats surfed, they rode the boards low and pushed – hard – against what had been done before. “We didn't think there was any future in it . . . We were doing it because we loved doing it,” says one in the documentary *Dogtown and Z-Boys*. And, right there with them was Hugh Holland. The man with a “regular job barely making a living doing decorative painting” who spent endless rolls of film and hours on these boys. He was so much part of the scene that in *Lords of Dogtown* you find the more than the occasional nod to him, lying on his side at the edge of the emptied pool, propped up on this elbow, camera at the ready. He shot Stacey Peralta – who went on to write *Lords of Dogtown* and direct and write *Dogtown* – and Shogo Kubo, Wentzle Ruml, Jay Adams and all the others who would one day soon wear the blue shirt of the legendary Zephyr team.



Thirty-seven years later, Holland talks slowly, hovering over his words, choosing them carefully. He says he doesn't know which images we are using for the feature, but “can pretty much guess” even though they – those pictures – weren't really discovered until 2005. They sat “for years and years in “boxes, many boxes”. “No one saw them really,” he tells us, “not many people, not even me for a lot of the time.” They were just what he'd done; he didn't think of them as “you know, fine art prints, book material or anything really” until when exhibiting in a small gallery of his then-hometown San Francisco in 2004, by chance, one of these skate images were among those he exhibited. By circumstance, American Apparel's Dov Charney

came across the shot, and then again in somebody's apartment in New York City, and “that's how it got discovered really”. The summer of '05 saw Holland's shots in the windows of the LA label and picked up by the LA gallery M+B. “It was a really big deal,” says Holland, who (still) sounds slightly surprised. The ‘big deal’ wasn't so much the commercial recognition, but more the fact that he'd been the only one to capture what he had just assumed everybody else saw too. Almost all of the other pictures from that time have a harder edge, a harsher light closer to the pages of an extreme sports magazine. “Mine had a different kind of feeling to them.” These pictures are now the “of course” that Holland opens most of his sentences with; the “of course you want to interview me about those

M + B

pictures”. “It was three years – only three years – that I was shooting the skateboarders.” From those years though, he’s done two books and counting, exhibitions and campaigns and, still, there are plenty more left in those boxes. “We’ve got thousands and thousands of good pictures from that era. I was very prolific when I look back on it, I think wow, wow, how did I do so much?”

When asked why it all ended in ’78, he says, “Well, you go from one thing to another and I was ... I got busy with work or whatever.” The conversation strays to something else and, eventually, Holland steers it back to the question of giving it all up. “Maybe I stopped because it was not interesting any more. Because I was never into skateboarding. Not at all. And a lot of people that interview me or talk to me come on with the idea that I’m a skateboard photographer. Not at all. And a lot of people that interview me or talk to me come on with the idea that I’m a skateboard photographer. But I’m not. I don’t want to be a skateboard photographer, I’m not a skateboard photographer. BUT I’m happy to be the one that did all these pictures.” These pictures are of the soft afternoon light, of the shadows stretching for the last part of the day. Boys with their arms high and knees bent near sitting on the asphalt of the road. Fixed gazes and breath drawn, leaning into the board. Holland pins the “brief” years from 75 – when the pools marking the LA landscape were drained by its responsible water-conscious citizens – as the finest. That was when vertical and its “fantastic manoeuvres” was born of circumstance and suburban kids’ boredom and reckless disregard for the possibility of not getting it right.

Z-Boys opens with an excerpt from Craig Stecyk’s *Dogtown Articles*: “Two-hundred years of American technology had unwittingly created a massive cement playground of unlimited potential. But it was the minds of 11-year-olds that could see that potential.” And Adams: “Once pool riding came in, y’know, that’s like all we wanted to do.”



“The style was incredible,” says Holland. “That’s what brought me to it in the first place. I always say it’s like a ballet on concrete. I came into (it) being totally fascinated with capturing the point where the action reaches its peak.”

He also caught the in-between times, the static of those suburban days, “boys standing around not doing anything, just waiting”. “But at the end, the reason I stopped was because I didn’t like photographing the company logos, you know.” He says this almost out of nowhere. “Because they started wearing helmets and knee pads and elbow pads with logos written on their shirts and all that stuff and it was just ... it was not the same.” “It was the last year of the free spirit,” he says of ’77. After that, skate parks were built “as fast as they could” and money was made. After that, the boys in Holland’s pictures – for him – stayed just that. The Peter Pans of Venice Beach and beyond, held almost forever in boxes. One of Holland’s favourite shots – *Down On The Corner* – was taken on the way back from a contest at Balboa Beach when he stopped off for another little small contest. “I shot some pictures of the contest but that wasn’t what was good. It was the kids in the street, outside the contest – the kids in the street just hot-dogging. Years later, someone was telling me, ‘do you know who that is?’ and I said ‘nope’ and they said, ‘that’s Danny Kwock’.

Anyway, he became a famous surfer later in the 80s and there in Newport Beach he was a legend.” Then, though, and always in Holland’s lens, he is “just a kid on the street but WHAT STYLE. Beautiful style.” When asked of the others, he says: “I don’t know what happened to them, a lot of them became pro – they got logos and they designed boards and stuff – but anyway, that’s neither here nor there.” It was the summer of ’75, those early days, when Holland drove up Laurel Canyon and first “saw these bodies flying out of this ditch” from the corner of his eye. “I wasn’t paying attention really, but it just caught me. I got my camera and went over there and IMMEDIATELY they said, ‘Take a picture! Take my picture!’ they said ‘Get this! Take a picture of this!’ so, that started it all.” Holland

M + B

used the Eastman film that was doing the rounds at the time, end lots from movies, for its “soft and warm tone”. He shot against the sun and cared only for composition. He reminds us that “back in the days of film, though, you couldn’t see what you were doing right away, you had to learn by trial and error and lots of film”. It was instant, a first-chance-only affair “because they were moving so fast”. “So I would set the camera at a high-enough shutter speed so I wouldn’t shake too much ...” he runs through the technical considerations he should have taken into account “... A lot of times I didn’t really care. Never mind the lighting. That will take care of itself.” He laughs. “Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t.” He admits this is half the reason the prints and the slides stayed in the box for as many years as they did – because he simply didn’t think they were any good – the kids didn’t want them if you couldn’t clearly see their faces. “In the book for instance – there’s a lot of dark ones – and ones that I never thought of back then but now they’re my favourites.” *In Your Face* is among these. “The long shadows in the later afternoon sun made for a lot of drama. And I didn’t use flash. Rarely, if ever, I used flash. So a lot of pictures look underexposed, are underexposed.” In *In Your Face* you can barely make out the boy’s feature. “One reason I didn’t think of them back then because I gave the kids a lot of prints. I spent tons of money on processing and prints and stuff. Every day I would go out and bring them prints – that’s what really got me in good with everybody. And I knew that they wouldn’t really appreciate the dark ones or the ones that were artistic. So, 30 years later we discover the ones that are artistic and wonderful and that I really love.”

When asked what gives him the post satisfaction, Holland is silent. For a long time, even for the relaxed pace of our conversation. “I don’t know ...” he pauses, stops. “... Just getting a striking picture. Just getting an image that is beautiful, that’s all. It doesn’t matter what it is, it’s just getting something that makes people think and wonder.” Of the movies that try so hard to capture the time he hid for so long in boxes, Holland’s “embarrassed to say that I haven’t seen the whole thing”.