

# Anthony Hernandez

## *Eye on Rodeo Drive*

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“Street photography” has been a focal preoccupation for photographers since the late nineteenth century, most probably because the street is our most common form of public space and, at the same time, street photography is at the heart of what makes photography unique.

Anthony Hernandez, who started taking photographs in 1969, concentrated on people and their behavior in public throughout the 1970s and 1980s. His goal was to photographically immortalize a rapidly changing society. Doing so, he investigated with subtlety the social, cultural, and racial differences of the urban milieu, focussing very much on the streets of his native Los Angeles. Until 1984, he had been taking black-and-white photographs of people who mainly belonged to the working class neighborhood of downtown Los Angeles.

In 1984, Hernandez identified a new trial subject: people who strolled the sidewalks of Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills. His research target came about at the suggestion of an art director at *Los Angeles* magazine who commissioned him to do editorial jobs. Given to his passion working as a street photographer, Rodeo Drive was perfectly fitting since “it summed up the bright, sun-lit optimism and heady consumption of 1980s California.”<sup>1</sup> The glamorous street had flourished since its creation in the late 1970s, having attracted most desirable fashion brands like Armani and Gucci, and was then both a place for the rich and famous to use as their catwalk, as well as a popular tourist destination, adorned with a touch of Hollywood glamor.

After shooting his first pictures in color, Hernandez was so excited by the results of his Rodeo Drive subjects that he kept on working in color during the next decades and decided to not do editorial jobs any longer.<sup>2</sup>

The series *Rodeo Drive*, 1984, consists of forty-one color pictures of shoppers on Beverly Hills’ luxury shopping street. There are no more than four sets of this portfolio in existence which are only available for museums or cultural institutions.

Hernandez used a 35mm camera with the same zone focus technique he had used in his earliest streetwork whereby the camera is pre-focused for a set distance, allowing for quick shots.<sup>3</sup> This technique allowed him to take pictures fast while walking, barely stopping for more than a few seconds at a time. “I was trying to be invisible,” he says. “I didn’t want the confrontations that come with taking more considered photographs.”<sup>4</sup> The well-coiffed and fashionable pedestrians were a sharp contrast to his earlier studies of working class neighborhoods in gritty corners of downtown L.A. or at desolate bus stops.

In order to highlight the sense of place in Rodeo Drive, Hernandez chose to shoot on transparencies instead of negative film and then printed on Cibachrome with its typical high-gloss finish, rich colors, and metallic feel. Carefully considered, he went on over-exposing his Ektachrome film, which led to a less saturated color palette but had the effect of emphasizing the typical Californian sunlight and the heat of Los Angeles.<sup>5</sup>

The *Rodeo Drive* photographs capture the parade of passers-by in their trendy fashions with the era’s obligatory shoulder pads, big hair, cinched waists and outsized glasses, as



well as the extravagant interiors of the luxury boutiques. These conjure up scenes from two popular TV shows, namely “Denver Clan” and “Dallas”— glossy soaps which highlighted “power-dressing” to the masses and established big money as a must.

Hernandez’s pictures feature well-dressed pedestrians with stylish hair-dos and make-up who feel unguarded, resulting in authentic portraits of people who were not aware that they were being photographed (*Rodeo Drive #20*, *Rodeo Drive #72*); others instead pose consciously in front of the camera (*Rodeo Drive #8*, *Rodeo Drive #34*). But Hernandez does not only capture the affluent members of society, he also shows store clerks and local office workers during their lunch breaks (*Rodeo Drive #26*), as well as a colored man with a slouched gait (*Rodeo Drive #64*).

In many pictures the subjects reveal a complacency and self-consciousness; at the same time they have the allure of being bored, stressed, unrelaxed, grim, or quizzical (*Rodeo Drive #1*, *Rodeo Drive #74*). In some of Hernandez’s compositions the observer is confronted with shimmering storefronts which act as mirrors with, for example, a young woman applying her eye-shadow looking into a polished golden plate (*Rodeo Drive #3*) or with a store window that serves as a frame. These images brilliantly “investigate incidents and ambiguities of self-presentation”<sup>6</sup> in an environment of luxury trade. Beyond the surface of the pictures they can be read as a commentary on the social landscape, however with no moral pointing finger. People from different socio-economic backgrounds gather to enjoy the catwalk and show themselves off, of course in the proper attire. In Hernandez’s compositions they are depicted in candid, powerful, and off-guard moments, disclosing expressions, gestures, and often lifeless demeanors resulting in the revelation of real feelings, character traits, and states of mind (*Rodeo Drive #7*, *Rodeo Drive #11*). These portraits appear to be more intimate than his earlier street portraits. They are brilliant emanations of consumerism, time capsules, and great manifestations of the fashion of the time caught in candid moments, sincerely documenting and at the same time breathing the zeitgeist and style of the 1980s.

The works by Hernandez are hidden treasures, little known outside the art world. His remarkable oeuvre spans more than forty-five years and his dedication to his craft is uncomparable and quite unique, as is his will to take risks and constantly push himself.<sup>7</sup> His work is about to reach a broader audience since the San Francisco Museum of Art last year hosted a major retrospective accompanied by an important monograph. Museum curators as well as renowned artist colleagues like Lewis Baltz, Robert Adams, and Jeff Wall appreciate his work to a great extent and have written about it. Hernandez is a true master in reconciling photo-journalism and street photography, while capturing physical and mental sensations as well as the social interaction and alienation of people on the street.

- 1 [www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2012/nov/30/big-picture-rodeo-drive-photography](http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2012/nov/30/big-picture-rodeo-drive-photography), retrieved July 15, 2017
- 2 Erin O’Toole, “A very hard look” in: *Anthony Hernandez*, SFMOMA, 2016
- 3 Charles Hagen, “Anthony Hernandez: Burden Gallery” in: *Artforum*. 34 (2): 124, October 1985
- 4 [www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2012/nov/30/big-picture-rodeo-drive-photography](http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2012/nov/30/big-picture-rodeo-drive-photography), retrieved July 15, 2017
- 5 Ralph Rugoff, “Rodeo Drive, 1984” in: *Anthony Hernandez, Rodeo Drive*, 1984, Mack Publishers, 2012, n.p
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 [www.lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/08/23/an-unvarnished-look-at-los-angeles/](http://www.lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2016/08/23/an-unvarnished-look-at-los-angeles/), retrieved July 15, 2017







#10



#11



#12



#13



#14



#16



#17



#18



#19



#20



#21



#22



#23

Rodeo Drive, Beverly Hills, 1984  
A set of 41 Cibachrome prints







