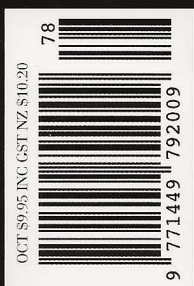
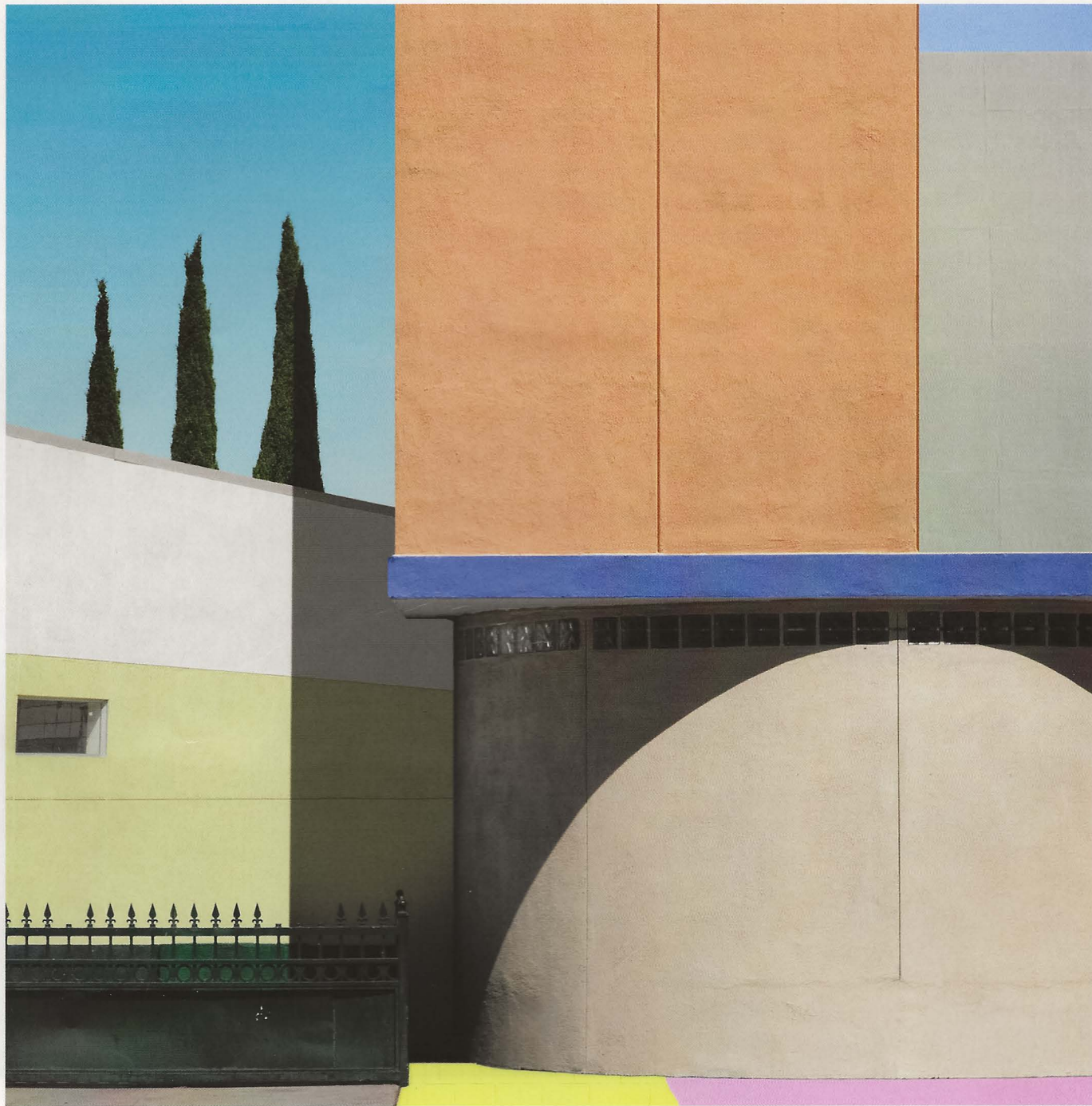


RUSSIA

This
Must
Be
*The
Place*

Kiki
in LOEWE



Opposite: *New Order*, Hollywood Boulevard.

STREETS OF YOUR TOWN

In L.A.'s pastel edges and concrete oases, George Byrne finds poetry in the incidental.

WORDS Imogen Eveson
PHOTOGRAPHY George Byrne

"...California is a place in which a boom mentality and a sense of Chekhovian loss meet in uneasy suspension; in which the mind is troubled by some buried but ineradicable suspicion that things better work here, because here, beneath the immense bleached sky, is where we run out of continent."

— Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*

Los Angeles, in popular imagination, is a sprawling city of paved-over desert, overlaid with the desperation and aspiration of its four million inhabitants. It confronts and confounds but paradoxically inspires; creating space in the minds of those who are looking. In 240 years it has evolved from its roots as a small Spanish pueblo to become a culture capital of the world, mythologised by the writers and artists, from Joan Didion to David Hockney, who journeyed here mid-last century and wove themselves into its unique urban fibre.

When Sydney-born artist George Byrne arrived in L.A. in 2010, he was struck by a feeling that would galvanise the ideas and aesthetic he had already been cultivating. "I remember walking out of the airport and seeing the sky and the light and feeling really good," he says, "like I'd stumbled on the beginning of something."

To Byrne, L.A. presented a fascinating landscape that felt "dusty, flat, wild, rundown and huge", with a distinct cultural makeup. "[In] much of the city it feels like you could be in Mexico, and that was fantastic. I noticed that the streets were falling apart, no one seemed to observe speed

limits, there was no random breath-testing ... but the police were very intense and scary, cruising around like they had much bigger fish to fry. Culturally it felt like there was no obvious parochial sense of *we are this or we are that*. It felt like a complete choose-your-own-adventure, anything-is-possible place, with a really strong creative community and a scintillating sense of action and activity."

Seven years later, Byrne's name evokes an image of L.A. that is immediate and resonant. He trawls the city for its accidental beauty, capturing photographs with colour contrasts that hit like endorphins and shadows that fall with architectural precision. His airtight compositions are pieced together from sky, light and shade; kerbs and blank walls; bollards and lamp posts; signage and the odd unsuspecting passer-by. Poetry in the incidental. They are images that pop on small screens – Byrne's Instagram account has amassed close to 100,000 followers – but arrest when viewed large.

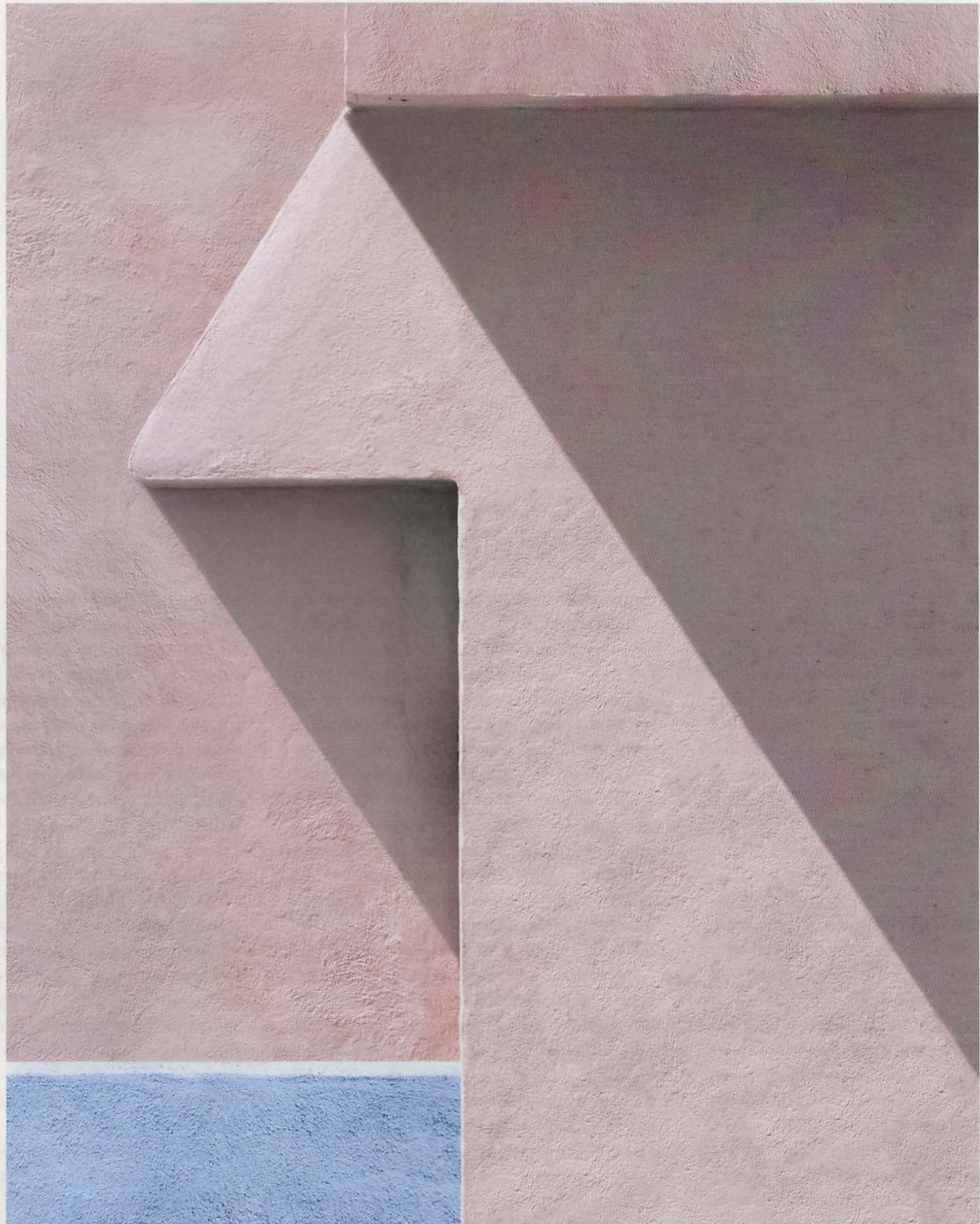
As communicated by the title of his current exhibition, *New Order*, Byrne's latest work marks a shift in creative approach for the artist; an investigation into image construction as opposed to solely image-taking. But the core ingredients remain the same, fixed squarely on the elements that make up the man-made environment. The punctuation of the odd pair of palm trees is one concession to the natural world, but even these represent a form of artificiality: this iconic symbol of L.A. is not native, with all but one palm species having been introduced to California for ornamental purposes.

While Byrne enjoys shooting the natural landscape – as powerful images of Yosemite National Park and the Australian coastline attest – he circles back to the built

environment when it comes to assembling exhibitions: a sensibility set in place from an early age. Byrne grew up in the Sydney suburb of Balmain with three creative sisters: Rose, the actress, Lucy, who works for the Australia Council, and Alice, also an artist. Here, during the once blue-collar peninsula's post-industrial but pre-gentrified years, Byrne encountered the aesthetics of industry and urban spaces. With a Canon camera and, later, an old Hasselblad in hand (its square format, prevalent mid-last century, the blueprint for Instagram) he foreshadowed his L.A. years. "It's hard to imagine now but back in the 80s and early 90s Balmain was quite a rundown place, it was littered with abandoned industrial spaces and old factories. It meant as a kid there was a lot of freedom to explore. When I started taking pictures (at school and art college) I'd wander around these spaces and practise taking photos. Part of what I loved about [them] was the peace and quiet; you could look for pictures without the hustle and bustle of people. I also enjoyed the room to explore pure composition, just textures and elements."

Moving to L.A. helped Byrne to refine this type of "minimal urban aesthetic" he'd been practising on and off since his early teens, and brought with it an epiphany in terms of colour photography: "It suddenly all made sense to me," he says. But in addition: "What also made L.A. a deeply inspiring place to do this type of work was that I was aware I was plugging into a rich history of art that has come out of L.A. and Southern California. Some of my favourite artists had built their oeuvres on the landscape here."

Byrne cites Stephen Shore, Ed Ruscha,



Peach Wall With Purple.

“It felt like a complete choose-your-own-adventure, anything-is-possible place, with a really strong creative community and a scintillating sense of action and activity.”

David Hockney and Richard Diebenkorn as examples: 20th century modernists who created a West Coast lineage to which Byrne’s work now contributes. In the 60s and 70s, Shore and Ruscha were instrumental in establishing a new visual language that, half a century later, Byrne’s images channel. When Shore began shooting in colour and finding beauty in urban banality – dusty freeways, car parks, street corners and gas stations – it was not lauded as a radical new perspective on the American landscape, as it has been since; and not least because colour photography was seen to be the domain of the amateur holidaymaker, not the fine artist. (When, in 1976, New York’s Museum of Modern Art presented an exhibition of work by William Eggleston, the photographer now largely credited with legitimising colour photography as an art form, it was panned: “Eggleston’s photographs strongly resemble the color slides made by the man next door; and his show at the Modern was the most hated show of the year,” wrote Gene Thornton for *The New York Times*.)

In 1975, Shore was one of eight young American photographers, alongside German couple Bernd and Hilla Becher, whose work was presented in an exhibition, *New Topographics – Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, at George Eastman House in Rochester, New York. The show, in turn, paid homage to Ed Ruscha, who in the decade before had published a series of photo books with such self-explanatory titles as *Thirtyfour parking lots in Los Angeles* and *Every building on the Sunset Strip*.

Byrne flags the New Topographics movement that sprang from this exhibition as a key reference in his work, largely because of how its proponents were responsible for reimagining the purpose of photography in a fine art context. “They steered the medium away from its conventional use at the time,” he says, “and set the stage for photography to be appreciated as an art form that didn’t necessarily have to document a story or event. It didn’t need to be a portrait of someone or capture a traditionally beautiful landscape. Their pictures were more nuanced, painterly and abstract in their intention – all elements I like to employ, so I was keen on them from the outset.”

Having studied fine art history alongside photography, and practised as a painter in the past, Byrne’s appreciation of modernist painting informs his work. In *A Bigger Splash*, Hockney’s most iconic L.A. image (the artist first moved there from Britain in 1964), you can recognise elements inherent in Byrne’s work: the clean linearity of building, pool and palms, for example,



Hollywood Toyota.

and a saturated sky met with pastel tones. The image is representational, but its use of colour fields edges it towards the abstract; an approach even more apparent in the paintings of Diebenkorn. Between 1967 and 1985 the American artist created his seminal *Ocean Park* series, which captured – in compositions of colour – the light and topography of the Santa Monica neighbourhood as seen from his studio window. Today, these 145 canvasses are fine examples of Colour Field painting. The movement, most famously associated with Mark Rothko, lends its name to another photographic series by Byrne, and possesses a type of reductive abstraction that clearly resonates with the artist. When asked of his ability to form extraordinary compositions out of otherwise overlooked elements of

the everyday, he considers: “... if you are approaching making a photograph in an abstract way, you have as many decisions to make as an abstract painter. You may have great source material sitting in front of you, but your options in how to realise it are infinite; from where you stand to take the picture to how you print it and so on.”

His latest exhibition, *New Order*, nods – as the Colour Field painters did – to Matisse, the ultimate colourist of the 20th century. “I decided to take this idea of reclassifying ordinary urban spaces and push it further by focusing more on the forms and surfaces themselves while also being open to more abstraction,” he says. “While I was working on this series I noticed if I stopped utilising depth, I was basically left with flat shapes: colour, contour and texture – a little like a



Bob Marley.



Echo Park.

Matisse cut-out. So in consciously employing this approach I found I had more freedom with composition and the whole *New Order* idea started to bubble away in my head.”

Most of the photography that forms *New Order* was shot in East Hollywood and Downtown L.A.; a few were taken in nearby Palm Springs, where Byrne ventured to see how his aesthetic would translate to a place that felt different but still relatable (here, he encountered a distinct colour palette, “more desert tones, less pastel”). These images appear more like abstract paintings – or collages – than ever before; with walls, signage, railings and concrete steps forming a confluence of geometric shapes. They’re rendered in trademark colour combinations that cast a hint of otherworldliness; creating uncanny dreamscapes that invite you to dive right in.

“I love the idea that these invisible, ignored, base, urban elements that we wade through on a daily basis can be the source material for a divine moment of bliss.”

For Byrne, that brief moment of losing yourself is the best reaction anyone can have to an artwork. As for his own work: “There may be a part of me that gets off on the idea that people accept the content of the images as beautiful,” he says. “Because really they are looking at bollards and awnings, 99c stores and car parks. I love the idea that these invisible, ignored, base, urban elements that we wade through on a daily basis can be the source material for a divine moment of bliss. That’s awesome, and for me a reminder that there is beauty everywhere and in everything, you just have to keep your eyes open.”

George Byrne – *New Order* runs at Olsen Gruin, New York, until October 9. See more at olsengruin.com.



Corner Composition Palm Springs.