

LYNELL GEORGE

## Walking East of West LA

*The Photography of Kevin McCollister*

It's the other point of entry, this eastern spine of downtown Los Angeles, along the Alameda corridor where Union Station thrums with passengers departing, arriving, connecting. And drifters, who hover somewhere in between coming and going. This is the juncture, the elusive middle space, that writer/photographer Kevin McCollister loses himself in. He has become eloquent in visually evoking the poetic hang-time of the destinationless.

Late on a Sunday afternoon, amid the flow of flip-flopped and sun-hatted weekend travelers, McCollister looks like he, too, could be coming or going. With quick, hard-to-read eyes and a taut, reserved energy, he blends into the ambience of anticipation, looking for something that's not a train or taxi or a "score"—but *something*. He has arranged himself at one of the concourse's small tables at the edge of the flow with an iced coffee and his two cameras, a Panasonic Lumix and his Canon D40, still zipped away in their soft black cases. His face relaxes in a greeting, not quite a smile, but welcoming and forthright.

He's already working, scanning possibilities: the resigned mother with the hysterical six-year-old; the bent woman on a walker fed up with panhandler sob stories; the timid security guard she's buttonholed who nods between his "yes ma'am"s. McCollister's eyes finally pause on a man with a dramatic flounce of dyed blue-black hair and a wool scarf flung not-so-nonchalantly about his neck despite the eighty-degree heat. He's holding court at a table with three other men—all of whom look like they've walked out of another era or circumstance. McCollister risks another surreptitious glance, but doesn't make a move for either camera. Something's missing, not quite right—the moment. "That one has a story," he says. "If I wait long enough I'll find him again."

What is a train station if not a point of departure? A gateway into stories. But you can't buy a ticket to the places McCollister takes you. His Los Angeles is not the high-gloss of turquoise pools, movie stars, and mile-high, listing palm trees. Rather, it's

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Brian, 2010

the city's broken seekers, its mix-and-match architecture, its abandoned asphalt roads—the beauty in its lonelier, hidden contours.

While he is certainly documenting LA, his images evoke something chambered and contemplative, startling in their quietude.

His book and the blog that inspired it, *East of West LA*, elicit a Los Angeles that feels personal, like memory and fantasy fused, a Los Angeles that is private but not at all exclusive. “Kevin is seeing what’s not seen about LA,” says Brooks Roddan, who found the images compelling enough to publish in book form. “He’s seeing, I think, the differences between the perceptions of LA and the realities. The story is: there’s more here than you imagined, and what you imagined is not here at all.”

The blog, which McCollister launched five years ago, has built a small but loyal following (well over 100,000

visitors, and a steady hundred views a day). It wasn’t conceived as one of those photo-a-day exercises. And he has some rules: “No Rolls Royce convertibles. No swimming pools. They seem to be covered adequately. But,” he elaborates, “I don’t want to get too lofty about what I understand or don’t understand about LA. It’s much more of a model or muse to me than an object I’ve studied to enlighten anyone. If you’re an artist and you’re able to sketch somebody’s thumb, that doesn’t mean you understand their childhood.”

That thumb, in McCollister’s work, is an apt metaphor, full of clues. The fine particulars—an empty *farmácia* bathed in aqua fluorescence, a Hollywood Boulevard James Brown impersonator, wig slightly askew, flashing a set of ruined teeth—sketch a far more complex LA story of struggle, blind faith, and persistence. By isolating an object—a single, soft-lit doorway, late-night street musicians serenading



Betty and Darla, 2008



Old Woman Stares into Sun, 2011

empty sidewalks, a transient's forlorn tent—McCollister “finds” LA by holding onto something we might gun past in a rage on the 110, or something we linger beside every day but see past. We observe Los Angeles through his prism, an LA edited down to an oblique gesture, to a wry, visual non sequitur. It's an LA only seen in stop-motion, an LA that uncharacteristically can only be navigated, McCollister knows, with patience and by foot.

A case in point: This stretch of the Alameda corridor just outside the station doors is a complex nexus. In the amber light, compositionally, it's loose, messy, and full of possibilities. Downtown's chessboard of skyscrapers gather to the west; the central jail looms northeast; and the old *Pueblo de los Angeles*, from whence this all sprang, is only a crosswalk away. This is one of those locations where the city's standard operating definitions, east of the world's imagination of Los Angeles, don't quite work. “From here,” McCollister says, “I can walk to Boyle Heights or Lincoln Heights. Or maybe I'll just walk up to Broadway, it just depends.”

When you step off into one of his images, you realize it isn't that Los Angeles is mysterious; it's been misread, its elegance and edginess elided from our imagination. The images, particularly those emptied out of humans, force a

new reading. He knows he's channeling ghosts—Fitzgerald, Chandler, even Bukowski—a certain sort of discontent which writers have for so long attempted to express.

He cordons off Saturdays and Sundays for shooting, mornings before 10 a.m., evenings after 4 p.m., the off time from his full-time job as an administrative coordinator at the Writer's Guild. “LA is tricky for photography because it's so much sunlight, so much glare,” he says. He rarely photographs late at night, yet his images of an emptied-out LA convey a sort of nighthawk quality. What makes McCollister pause is not just the image, but what's tethered to it: “Definitely a mood. Not adulterated too much. It's just whatever emotional content [is there].” He admits that what speaks to him is often “pretty melancholy, pretty singular.”

We reach Olvera Street, usually an explosion of tourist-gear sound and color. Today it's overrun by television vans, heavy cables, and sun canopies—all quite contrary to what he's after.

The quiet, unembellished city he seeks doesn't always make itself known. “I may come back with nothing,” he warns me. “I can spend hours and hours and *think* I have something . . .” he says, letting the thought trail off. He





Woman Ordering Food, 2008

makes a quick survey and the camera comes out, the small Lumix, bumping against his chest, ready.

He crosses another narrow street and into the busy courtyard at the old church—Nuestra Señora de Reina de Los Angeles—*la Placita*. People trade pleasantries with him, the regulars he's come to know: men and women

selling bottled water, wooden bracelets decorated with religious figures, simple rosaries. Still others, crouched on the sidewalk, ask for change. He pauses near a fountain at an altar crowded with votive candles, scattered prayers, and mementoes—a child's shoe, a hazy sonogram, silver *milagros*. A woman, her black hair slated with gray, stands near



L.A. River, 2007

the fountain. He sees a possibility, something in her face, the incline of her head. He raises the camera, then stops. “There’s this feeling,” he explains later, “that photographing someone praying might be just a little too distracting or intrusive.”

He presses on.

If you’d asked him twenty years ago, McCollister would have defined himself as a writer—a poet, primarily. He had come from elsewhere, winding from Cleveland to New Orleans, where he worked on a river boat, *Delta Queen*, then Boston, where he studied film and screenwriting at Harvard Extension. Photography hadn’t been on his radar. Neither was Los Angeles, which upon an early visit in the ’80s he had dismissed as crowded and unlivable.

Just six years ago, when he set out on this endeavor, this little side project (“call it creative practicality”) was pure hobby, not vocation. His brother had married a woman from Taiwan and relocated. “She had a blog and I didn’t know what a blog was,” McCollister recalls. “I just wanted to have a dialogue with her and perhaps a half-dozen

other people—just pictures of LA.” It was a simple plan. “I thought it was going to be [a] ‘This American Life’ thing where I would . . . talk with people, but it’s not that way at all. It just sort of mushroomed.”

He bought himself a hundred-dollar camera and set up his blog, christening it, with a wink, *The Jimson Weed Gazette*. He started posting, sometimes just text—lists, observations; or a combination of image and reflection. Over time, as he learned more about his camera and its potential, McCollister says, “[It] took on a life of its own without me even making a conscious decision.” He was writing less and less, he says. “The photos were just doing all the work.”

The poetry is still evident. The power of a single object, the oblique framing, the ratio of dark to light, and the elliptical situations in his photographs reveal his emotional awareness. Los Angeles isn’t just sunshine and excess. He has put his stamp on the place. The name-shift—*East of West LA*—was part of the project’s evolution, as was the blog’s initial brazen claim, now its tagline: *I’m photographing LA—All of it.*

That vow caught Brooks Roddan's eye. Roddan was already familiar with McCollister's writing through a mutual friend, the poet Micahel Lally, and had asked for some poems for a possible book. "The poems I'd responded to, the best poems, were all walking poems; a man walking through neighborhoods as if he was seeing LA for the first time," Roddan says, "seeing things only a poet both aware and innocent could see."

Time passed, and Roddan learned that McCollister had stopped writing poems and had refocused his energies. He began visiting the blog, stowing away the images in his head. Once they reconnected, Roddan had a different plan. "Kevin, I said, 'I think your poems are now photographs and your photographs are now poems. Let's do a book of your photographs.'"

Precisely what Roddan saw in the poems filtered directly

into the images: an open-ended seeking. McCollister says, "I don't usually have a plan, I just walk with the traffic lights—whichever one is green." We wind over the hard, hot concrete through Mei Ling Way, past crowded souvenir shops, restaurants smelling of hot oil and scallions, gentrified art galleries side by side with retro furniture stores, and finally onto an empty courtyard on Chung King Road, canopied by hanging cherry-red paper lanterns.

The only business open at this in-between hour is a shop with a pulsing red neon sign announcing FONG'S ORIENTAL WORK OF ART. But what has enraptured McCollister isn't the retro neon, or the curiously tangled name, or the gathered men playing cards near its front doors, or anything at all telegraphing Chinatown. Instead, he has installed himself before the shuttered doors of what looks to be a recently vacated business. Its cloudy window



Bryson, 2008





Old Man, Abandoned Building, 2008

reveals nothing but scattered newspaper, trampled cardboard flats, and a chair and table shoved against a blank wall. The sight stops him cold.

He raises the Lumix, snaps once and then again. He keeps going. Finally, he shows me the image on the camera's screen, and I see what he sees: not simply an abandoned table and chair, but something painterly, something out of the realm of Edward Hopper or Andrew Wyeth—a silvery hint of sunlight, a ghost trailing on the wall. There's sadness there. The frame is full of questions. What do all these remnants mean? Was this the end of someone's story?

It *feels* like something in that frame, and he's relieved. "There are some nights where the sky is the limit, where I've taken four hundred or as little as ten. But of those four hundred there can be zero," he says. In other words, he

knows to be cautiously optimistic. It's the waiting that's nerve-racking—that drive home hovering between anticipation and result—the hope that he has captured what was conveyed. There's a piece of mood that has to go with the image, some essence of LA escaping.

What the work seems to most skillfully convey about LA is that it can't be both destination *and* dream—though we all struggle to make it so. These images, procured through patience, through slowing the city down, reveal that conundrum.

"LA has this real end-of-the-road feel to it," McCollister reflects. "It's such an undeniable destination point for so many types of people—rich, poor, talented, untalented. You come because you need something. And sometimes you have to wait a very long time. And sometimes the waiting can drive you crazy." **B**