

'SEE THE THINGS I DREAM'

ESCAPE THE FAMILIAR

Rising photographer Sam Gehrke finds the color in black and white | BY SYDNEY ZUELKE

When Sam Gehrke peers through a camera lens, he's taken to a new realm where anxieties dwindle and Eugene's same tired vistas turn into hidden treasures.

"I'm not the most social person," Gehrke says, his kind eyes hiding behind thick, black frames. His time spent shooting skaters at WJ Skatepark, he says, helped him feel comfortable capturing human subjects — now his forte.

"It was a good way to be a part of something and have human interaction with the camera," he says. "It's easier for me to enter into a social situation if I have a kind of buffer between me and another person."

Gehrke's appetite for photography stems from many things, but most prominent in his attraction to the form was his introduction to cinema as a kid, from Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) to Chris Marker's French New Wave film *La Jetée* (1962).

"One of the most influentially aesthetic movies was one my mom showed me, *The Night of the Hunter* [1955]," he says. "It's an American movie but it draws a lot from German Expressionism — a lot of shadows, dark undertones and black and white."

These films just so happen to harbor the very characteristics that make Gehrke's work so stunning: a hint of nostalgia paired with the clarity of contemporary photography, grunginess and a certain self-preservation

— a style that struck interest in big-time media outlet *VICE* and regional pubs such as Portland's *Vortex Music Magazine*, who both discovered Gehrke via Instagram and Tumblr.

"Being around other photographers, I've always heard that black and white is a cop out, but growing up and watching so much film noir, I grew up really loving it," he says. His style of work parallels that of well-known photographer, and Gehrke's idol, Estevan Oriol, who primarily photographs Mexican gangs and hip-hop stars in L.A., always in black and white.

"I like seeing every detail in a person's face, and I enjoy shooting people with more flaws," Gehrke says. "I don't want to do photography that is something that you're going to see on a billboard or are bombarded with everyday."

This stems, perhaps, from his own self-image, for which photography has again become an outlet to express. "I'm not a depressed person but, you know, I get sad sometimes," he offers. "I feel a little bit deeper than most people that I know, and I think that photography allows me to have an outlet for that sadness sometimes."

"My self-portraits have helped me a lot in dealing with self image and body image," he continues. "It sounds narcissistic, but self-portraits were something I did all the time, either [of] dreams I had or interpreting ways I saw myself in the mirror; loneliness associated with my social



JOEY BADA\$\$ AT WOW HALL, 2015



anxieties, really singular pictures."

Even when photographing musicians, Gehrke makes a photo taken in a sea of people look intimate. Primarily recruited for shooting hip-hop artists such as Brother Ali, Wu-Tang Clan, Joey Bada\$\$ and Run the Jewels (which makes up much of his freelance work for *VICE*), he recognizes that his own love for hip-hop music and culture is miles away from what he grew up in — "the suburban, white Eugene bubble."

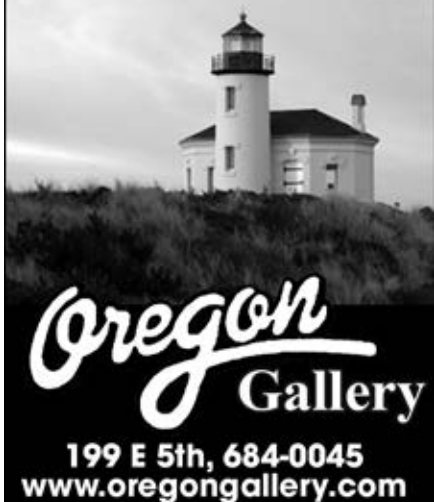
But it somehow makes perfect sense when you realize his craving for an escape from reality in all the different art forms he cherishes. "The comfort is what scares me the most," he says. "Because I don't want to be stuck here for the rest of my life."

As much as he loves being surrounded by his idols — musicians and other creative minds — Gehrke says his talent for analyzing images and finding meaning or beauty in something unpleasant or dark may be put to good use outside the city limits.

"Seeing images of what was happening in places like Congo and Iraq and Afghanistan in a book called *War* by James Nachtwey made me look at the power of images in a different way," he says. "Ultimately I'd like to be a war/conflict photographer." ■

See the photography of Sam Gehrke in the solo show "Glass Fronts Over Bare Teeth" opening for First Friday ArtWalk Oct. 2 at The Wayward Lamb, 150 W. Broadway. For more info, visit samgehrkephotography.com or follow him on Instagram @pogsandtamagotchis.

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