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IN THE STUDIO

Edward Colver's art remains punk

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Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times

STILL WORKING: Artist Edward Colver stands next to his iconic photograph of a punker flying over a crowd at a D.O.A., Adolescents and Stiff Little Fingers show, circa 1980.**The punk scene he chronicled is gone, but the ideals live in Edward Colver's creations.**By Lynell George, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
August 17, 2008

IT WAS fast, it was furious and it was over in a blink. But photographer Edward Colver's shutter blinked a fraction faster. If not for his poking in and out of hot, dank punk clubs across the Southland, a whole bigchunk of L.A.'s early hardcore scene of the '70s and early '80s would have hurtled -- visually -- out of memory.

If you were there, you remember him. He was everywhere -- Hong Kong Cafe, the Cuckoo's Nest, Perkins Palace -- impossible to miss: The tall guy smack in the middle of the churning mosh pit, towering over the melee ("When they push it, I tell 'em I'm 5-17."); the one with the thrashed Pentax with the strobe duct-taped to the hot shoe, the one you might have seen later rolling off into the night in a powder-blue hearse.

Most likely, it's the name you've seen, in tiny Courier font, crawling along the edge of a "you kinda had to be there" sort of print, or an album cover for the Circle Jerks, X, Wasted Youth, Fear, Red Hot Chili Peppers. Colver's images added the visual contact-rush to fanzines like Flipside and NO MAG, live photos that seemed to capture the implausible -- bodies flying, eyes blazing, mouths agape. They verified that a "still" could be anything but. "While other photographers also documented the L.A. punk scene," writes Larry Reid, of Fantagraphics Books, in his introduction to "Blight at the End of the Funnel," a retrospective of Colver's work published in 2006, "from the outset Colver aspired to art."

But when that first wave bowed off, so did he. Or so people seemed to think.

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He and his subject slipped out of the frame. The images, however, continued to swirl round and round, many without Colver's knowledge. Just as Colver had once been, *they* were now ubiquitous. Not just on punk rock websites or lending a visual foundation for documentaries like "[American Hardcore](#)," but on T-shirts and other paradoxically ready-

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made anarchy gear lining the walls of mall stores. If that weren't unsettling enough, Colver and his wife, Lani, a make-up artist, recently discovered that one of his most famous shots, the photo from the *Circle Jerks*' "Group Sex" album, had ended up on a line of Vans sports shoes. "It's kind of turned into this detrimental thing because everybody remembers my photos, but they forgot I took 'em. . . . And it's kinda weird," Colver says with a "whatever" shrug.

Colver isn't hiding out, though it might appear that way when you come to call. His 1911 California Craftsman is almost entirely obscured behind a wild, twisting hedge of fragrant star jasmine. Colver too has been in full bloom. He's been right here, somewhat under the radar, but working. And while he still makes pictures, he's remade himself as a sculptor. Much of the work is political, confrontational, profane, droll, exhilarating -- like the music that slashed through those early punk clubs.

Within the last few years, he's moved his entire cyclone of a studio space at the Brewery downtown to this house in Highland Park, with an art room and some "studio-like" space out back. That's qualified, only because the word "studio" would make the work and his process seem more formal than they are.

At first blush, Colver is not the most loquacious subject. His face at rest is skeptical, equivocal. Why use four words when you can say it in two? Like his photographs, his comments are frank and to the point. How did he shoot those **landmark photos?** "It's just being cognizant of what was falling into the camera."

But behind the hedge, the remote exterior, is an outpost of the unexpected. The verdant front yard sprouts art pieces, such as the hindquarters of a metal dog that's sniffing at something, or, out back, the brocade of a tomb marker as garden trim, that make it feel like a mash-up of Charles Addams and "The Secret Garden." Just inside are a precisely appointed living room and dining room full of Mission style and Arts and Craft furniture. "Wanna see my Frank Lloyd Wright candlesticks?" Colver, a 13th-generation Californian, has been circulating through flea markets and garage and estate sales since he was a teen. His arrangements of dried ginkgo leaves and poppy pods are positioned throughout; nearby rest his collection of California pottery and lamps by **Gustav Stickley** and **Dirk van Erp**.

"You can imagine what happens when people come by to pick up photographs," says Lani, "Like, this is Edward Colver's place, right?"

A most unusual collage

IT MIGHT seem a little incongruous. But not for long. The mutterings and screams you hear aren't a convalescing relative, Lani assures, but a roomful of exotic birds. The loudest this afternoon is Zeus, a **yellow-headed Amazon**, who is in full-tilt rant, channeling a neighbor lady. One door down is Colver's "art room" where a store of his finished work lives: the pieces, mostly assemblages, that are the outgrowth of his obsession for collecting -- punning greeting cards from the '50s, rusting street signs, antique children's shoes, a red-satin funeral backdrop. He turns these pieces of toss-away into go-for-the-jugular pieces that take on hypocrisy, probe racism, take jabs at corporate greed. An old **movie theater sign advertises** "Now Appearing" with an American flag and "Coming Soon," with a swastika behind bars. "I like just playing around with the objects and make them say something."

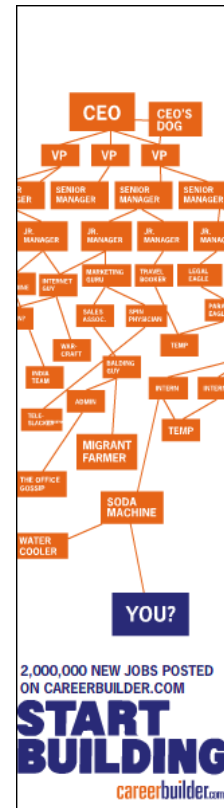
Step out back, and it's a wild untamed frontier. Pass the chicken coop, make a left at the crowing rooster, and one their ducks, Flipper (named for a favorite band), tilts his head at Colver's approach, appropriating the mien of club bouncer guarding his still-in-progress studio's threshold.

Right now, the space is a collision of inspirations. A scarlet pool table anchors the room, and around it are stray keepsakes, front-yard giveaways, old art pieces in various degrees of disassembly. It's life as an installation, but he admits, "I've always created environments. When I was a kid I had an orange tree in my room."

There are vitrines, stacks of yellowed newspaper clippings. Rusting signs: "Not Responsible Children After School Hours." Baby doll heads and a collection of wooden mannequins posed in compromising positions. Crates of sheet music, hundreds of 78s -- gospel, spirituals, jazz -- and even more LPs -- John Coltrane, 13th Floor Elevators, **Captain Beefheart**: "Oh, this over here is my Armageddon section." He kneels before a dusty crate. "This is one of my favorite albums. It's got an exorcism on it. 'I ain't comin' out!' . . . It's hilarious."

Same game, new toys

IT'S ALL fodder. "I just tinker around and get inspired." The more you see, the more the bridge built between these worlds becomes visible. It's not that he left it behind. He's revisiting his themes now in a different medium. The fury of the music inhabits the fury of the politics of the new work. "I'm still stuck in that era in a lot of ways. It influenced my politics," he says, "I came through the hippie era and all of that anti-war stuff. My father was a forest ranger, which gave me an ecological consciousness, and people like **Jello Biafra**, from the Dead Kennedys, helped crystallize it." But, says Colver, "It



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always kinda cracked me up. There were a few punk rockers who went out there and were more anarchistic, but really, there was a lot more stuff going on in the hippie scene that they looked down on."

Colver wants no part of old punks and new punk revivals.

"There are people who think punk is still going," says Colver, "but I think it's something different." For him it ended in '83. "There were just a lot of these little thrash bands. Spoutin' all this stuff. Just loud and noisy. Copycat stuff."

Beyond a hired job, he doesn't "create photography" now. "I used to carry my camera around for years. It was always banging against my side. But I just never saw anything I wanted to take a picture of anymore."

Nowadays, his work is mostly about the sculpting. And trying to wrestle the rights back on his work -- he's got a lawyer, Eric Bjorgum, on the job for that. Clothing is a nascent sideline too, now that any gear that bears his images have to carry his authorized "California Casualty" label. None of this is about nostalgia. "Someone just told me, 'Hey, John Doe and Exene are playing. Are you going to take pictures?' . . . I took pictures of them when they were kids. I don't want to make no old foguey pictures. No offense to them. But, you know what I mean."

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