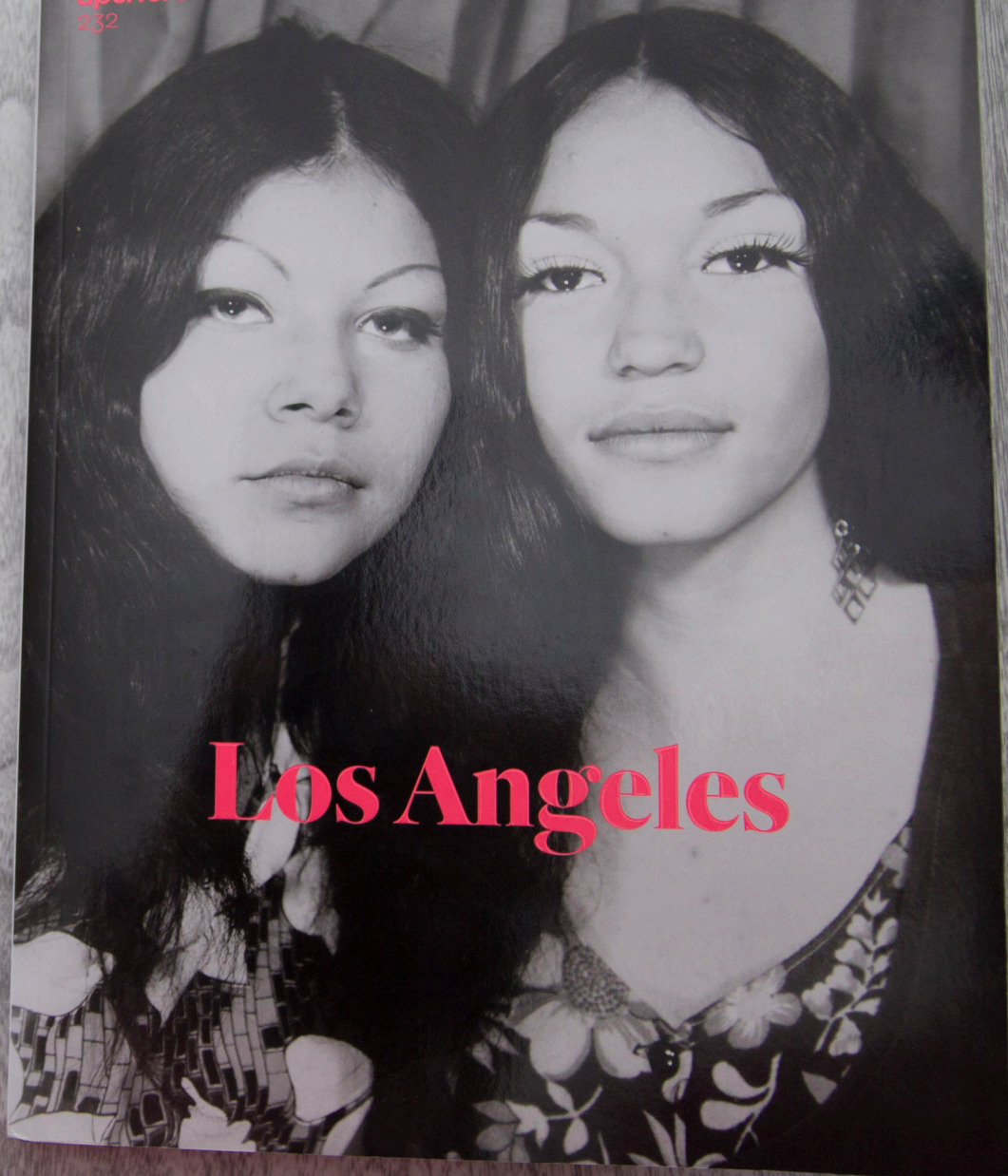


aperture
252



Los Angeles

Kate Palmer Albers

Barak Zemer

Kate Palmer Albers is a professor of art history at Whittier College, Los Angeles.

How do human beings—and human bodies—experience a culture that is structured around separation? How many ways can we be outside, looking in? And what are the consequences, conversely, of occupying inner spaces? Bodies in states of transition, and subjected to degrees of impermeability, are at the heart of Barak Zemer's photographic interests. The title of his recent body of work, *Aquarium* (2012–16), sets the tone for a range of disorienting states of looking, states of containment, and, often, states of incongruity. Those dark and luminous spaces of immersion and separation act as metaphors both for his experience in Los Angeles and, more broadly, for a heavily structured and mediated experience of daily life in the twenty-first century. As he puts it, "The aquarium is how we live, encapsulated."

Zemer was born in Israel, in 1979, and relocated to LA for graduate school, in 2011, where he found the flux of his encounter as a foreigner echoed and mirrored in the basic structure of this most decentralized city. The rich sensory porosity that had characterized Zemer's daily life in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv infrastructure and pervasive car culture. The contrast was initially—and to some degree remains—a shock. Of his experience in LA, Zemer says, "I'm trying to deal with it. We're closed in a car, we're all bubbled from each other. It's as though someone planned it for us to be unable to look at or experience somebody else. And the camera fights that. It recognizes the closed thing."

As a result, Zemer photographs prolifically, finding his subjects in the course of daily life, on his travels around the United States and internationally, and at tourist sites like zoos and aquariums that he habitually seeks out wherever he goes. For *Transit*, his 2018 exhibition at LA's Night Gallery, Zemer culled a tightly conceived edit from some fifteen thousand images he's made in the past few years alone. In those photographs, one feels again and again the sense of something just out of reach, a consciousness in which disorientation has become routine. In *Passenger* (2015), an older man's face is partially lit by the blue glow of flight—an inverse of the aquarium. In *Ramp* (2014), the white industrial haze of a Los Angeles morning fails to fully mask the slight oddities of street life. *Aquarium* (2015) depicts a seated woman with her cellphone, appearing comfortably, if incongruously, submerged. Is she taking a photograph, looking out? Or is it a selfie? In *Lotus* (2014), lacquered and bejeweled fingernails offer a closed bloom from the darkness, and in *Head* (2016), a statue seems to have shed a lifetime of tears. The organic and the artificial repeat and replay, in ever-shifting configurations.

In both the vast archive of his images and the radically reduced selection that has become *Aquarium*, the current U.S. political environment is never pictured directly. However, as Zemer comments about the series as a whole, "If it succeeds in being about the human experience, then it's always about politics." In Zemer's work, that feeling finds its way into moments of disconnect, of uncertainty, and of absurdity.

Opposite:
Aquarium, 2015
Overleaf:
Passenger, 2015;
Ramp, 2014
Pages 66–67:
Lotus, 2014; *Red Hair*, 2015
All photographs courtesy
the artist







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