The photographer Anthony Hernandez tends to measure his work almost exclusively in formal phases. It is not unusual for photographers to accentuate the application of their craft rather than to what it is applied, especially for those who came of age at a time when the artistic legitimacy of photography was still questioned. But in Hernandez's case, given the immediacy and importance of his pictures' content, the emphasis on form is surprising. Over five decades, in ways both oblique and pointed, Hernandez has documented the breakdown of the social safety net, the brutal follies of contemporary urban planning, and the adulteration of the natural environment. His career, which seems only more apposite today, has been dedicated to investigating a long arc of inequity. Or perhaps it is one measured more by the way he has investigated it. Or both.

Hernandez began taking pictures in 1966, when he was nineteen years old. A high school friend auspiciously introduced him to the medium with the gift of a photo manual he'd found left in a bathroom. Shortly thereafter came Hernandez's black-and-white-with-people stage: shooting in 35 millimeter, he traversed his native Los Angeles—mostly downtown and points east and south—as well as a handful other cities, regularly hitch-hiking to New York, using a small inheritance to travel to Europe, and, on a grant in 1972, returning to Saigon for the first time since serving as a medic in the Vietnam War. Along the way, he amassed a distinctive body of work in the classic vernacular of street photography. Composed quickly, in the midst of the action, these early photographs conjoin diverse groups of passersby in momentary constellations that hum with narrative possibility.

Like the hugely prolific and inventive photographer Garry Winogrand, with whom he eventually became close, Hernandez in this period shot idiosyncratic and fleeting street scenes that are frequently emblematic of a specific time in American life. But where Winogrand's pictures can be antic, warped, confrontational, and often powered by cruel
juxtapositions, Hernandez’s are more solemn and pensive. He has an eye for solitary, lonely looking figures, as well as for society’s historically marginal members: the poor, people of color, and the elderly, who appear somberly staring at their reflection in a shop window or making their way with caution down the sidewalk. Hernandez identifies the last photograph of this era as one he took of a middle-aged man on the street in New Orleans in 1976: he’s scowling, and his face is halved by deep shadow, as he stands apart from the crowd just beyond.

A few years later, a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts allowed Hernandez to buy a medium-format camera and tripod, which he sometimes rigged to the top of his VW bus. The subsequent photographs include figures, but they also feature stark urban landscapes, taxonomies of uninviting and/or degraded public spaces in Los Angeles such as bus stops, corporate plazas, and forlorn recreation areas where working-class people fish and sunbathe. Following this deeply incisive body of work, Hernandez switched to color transparency—a brief color-with-people stage—to capture what at first might seem to be an antithetical environment, a single moneymade street in Beverly Hills: Rodeo Drive. Striking for their restraint, the pictures are less occupied with spectacles of wealth and consumption than with exploring their stultifying, alienating effects. Shooting again on the fly, but this time with a medium-for-mat camera, Hernandez manages to catch beautiful shoppers looking as uncannily inanimate as mannequins. But the project seems to have been a hinge point. After it concluded in 1984, Hernandez dispensed with people altogether. For the last thirty-five years, he has remained entrenched in the color-without-people stage of his practice. He shoots both interior and exterior spaces, often in tight close-up, where the presence of humanity is only implicit: home-less encampments, thrift stores, public housing projects, the storm channel of the Los Angeles River, and abandoned tract houses in the far reaches of LA County. Many of the images have a minimalist cast, which makes them “as charged as tarot cards,” in critic Luc Sante’s words.1 Everything #7 (2002), a photograph of a cardboard square submerged in water and sheathed by iridescent orange algae, is sparing in context but rich with surface pattern and plays of light, including symmetrical polka dots of foam. Most recently, Hernandez has embarked on a new project in which he takes pictures from behind a 45-inch-square black screen that re-creates the moiré effect he once achieved shooting through a bus-stop enclosure. A door or a supermarket sign comes into focus from a few steps away but recedes up close, where the images morph into optically complex abstractions.

To Hernandez, all these varying stages are simply ways of employing “different palettes.”2 His earlier photographs can seem a world apart from his later works, with their spare, burnished presence, but access, in all senses of the word, supplies a connective tissue. As Hernandez told me when I visited him at his storefront studio in LA’s West Adams neighborhood this past March, he’s always tried to photograph ordinary things and he’s consciously turned his
attention to public places and the people using them; he sees his subject matter as existing in a commons that's accessible to anyone who's interested. It's not that his pictures don't convey intimacy. Indeed, the fulcrum of public and private, and the yielding of one sphere to the other is a consistent tension throughout Hernandez's work, where either type of space is always permeable and subject to economic circumstance.

Anthony Hernandez, New Orleans #2, 1976

His series “Discarded” (2012–15), for instance, shot in the aftermath of the 2008 financial collapse, shows homes and the sites of former housing developments in Southern California abandoned and falling into ruin. The pictures mark the dissolution of once-private property into sculptural-looking remains, a perverse type of public art that only occasionally bears signs of the development’s initial design or the families who once lived there. In Hernandez’s photos of homeless encampments (a subject that he has documented since 1988), on the other hand, boundaries of ownership are marked in dirt with flimsy materials such as cardboard boxes, felt blankets that hang from brush, and spare mattresses. Rather than scrutinizing the homeless themselves, the photographs focus on the conditions in which they live. The 2007–12 series “Forever” (as in forever homeless), for example, shows the views they might have looking out from encampments. Such worlds are largely invisible to most people, but Hernandez confronts them with clarity of detail and almost hallucinatory vividness, capturing a soiled jacket on a tree enveloped by a swarm of golden pollen in one photo, or an assemblage of sleeping bags, underwear, and porno magazines stashed in leaves in another. These pictures may represent a different kind of ruin, but here the street has been cultivated into a rough domestic space that is so palpably personal, we sense Hernandez’s intrusion in it.

Such reversals and ambiguities, particularly as they are applied to depicting Los Angeles, make Hernandez’s work compelling. In an essay on the impossibility of social documentary photography in LA, the late artist Allan Sekula proposes a list of explanations for why the city has eluded more critical visual documentation. Sekula argues that in LA “geographical mobility” is misunderstood as “class mobility”; that “sunlight and misery are imagined to be incompatible”; that race in the notoriously segregated metropolis is understood culturally and geographically rather than as an “economic category”; and that the cataclysmic events that LA is known for—the fires, riots, earthquakes, and floods—are looked on as the “exception to the idyllic rule.” Indeed, the extreme poles of representing Los Angeles as either utopian or dystopic, as a palm tree-lined Eden or smog-choked inferno, obscure the consistent problems of inequality that in Sekula’s view demand steady and thorough investigation.

Going down this list, Hernandez’s work breaks with every convention Sekula lays out. Searching for a project after he decided to transition away from street photography in the mid-1970s (he gave up this mode of working largely because he couldn’t afford the travel it necessitated), Hernandez started thinking about the centrality of cars to Los Angeles. Notably, his series “Automotive Landscapes” (1978–80) is not about motion but stasis. If the automobile usually signals an engine of mobility in LA, whether actual or figurative, Hernandez’s photographs reveal both possibilities as precarious. Instead, we’re offered automotive hospitals—body shops and tire stores where delayed drivers wait anxiously and sweat-soaked men labor under open hoods—as well as graveyards for junked cars. One deeply detailed, supremely anti-pastoral photograph, Automotive Landscapes #35 (1978), features a vast circular pit of dead, eroding...
cars surrounded by tire piles edged in soft grass, with the concrete-lined trickle of the Los Angeles River visible in the distance. As a whole, the series displays the material toll of the automobile on the physical landscape of the city, where the freeway system was constructed directly through low-income neighborhoods.

Another concurrent group of pictures, “Public Transit Areas” (1979–80), though, suggests the lack of a viable alternative. Hernandez’s photographs of people waiting for the bus are among the most accurate depictions of the lived environment of LA I’ve ever encountered. A diagrammatic approach to place on a par with Ed Ruscha’s artist book Every Building on the Sunset Strip (1966), the bus stop pictures also engage repetition and seriality. They’re shot from a uniform vantage; in each picture Hernandez approaches the waiting passengers (again, they are mostly the elderly and people of color) head-on, and includes both sides of the street in the frame. Cars zoom by out of focus, but on the bus stop side, every piece of trash or splotch of dirt on the sidewalk is clearly delineated in stillness. The unrelenting sunshine in these photos does not appear pleasant; we can almost feel it bearing down on the would-be riders, who wait together, sequestered on small, unprotected islands in the midst of seemingly endless boulevards that Hernandez’s camera captures with a deep depth of field. In a photograph like Public Transit Areas #6, the scale of the street—its rows of anonymous-looking facades looming into infinity—in relation to the waiting people is almost humorously incongruous and absurd. But the riders’ patience and pliancy also casts them as depressingly stranded in a broader system that has little concern for their comfort.

In these photographs and the two other series he made around the same time, “Public Use Areas” (1980–81) and “Public Fishing Areas” (1979–82), Hernandez achieves a subtle disjunction by showing people absorbed in an experience of space while also capturing the landscape they’re in—often from a slight elevation—at a scope they are likely unable to see. The viewer is presented with two visions simultaneously: subjects enmeshed in their daily lives, and a larger almost cinematic rendering of the harsh arena in which those lives take place. Fellow artist Jeff Wall, who organized a 2009 exhibition of Hernandez’s work that included these pictures, writes: “Those without some sort of private access, some kind of in, without a private entrance to somewhere better, are those who are left to have this experience of the public domain.”

Yet, especially in his photographs of white-collar work-ers in downtown LA, which comprise much of “Public Use Areas,” Hernandez balances some of this bleakness with levity. The images were taken at the site of a massive urban renewal project that, beginning in the late 1950s, razed the affordable rooming houses that once lined the incline of Bunker Hill, and cut off the pedestrian-friendly corridors that linked the area to the rest of the city. At the expense of taxpayers, the businesses once headquartered in the financial district a few blocks to the south (on the bustling streets Hernandez started photographing in the 1960s) eventually moved in, erecting corporate fortresses. The architecture, as author Mike Davis writes in his 1990 classic City of Quartz, expressly “reproduced spatial apartheid.”6 “Public Use Areas” seems a distinctly sardonic title for these pictures, given the paucity of people in them and the apparent inutility of the space. Here, office workers unwind in desolate plazas and skyscraper-ringed walkways, contorting their bodies to conform to awkwardly shaped Brutalist-style benches. Still, Hernandez presents what appear to be genuinely calm instances of repose—private moments in a public space or public moments in a private one, depending on your
perspective. In the lovely Public Use Areas #25 (1980), a young woman reading in front of the dull abscess of a Bank of America office has fully reclined onto an embankment of thick grass, absorbed by her book.

As Hernandez moved away from photographing people toward the end of the 1980s, he didn't give up the social critique lodged in series like these. But he did reconfigure it. As someone taking photographs on the street, he had always aimed to be invisible. "You're right there, but it's as if you weren't there," he said. "That's the kind of photographic moment—it's a tradition actually—but it's a challenge."7 One of his favorite pictures is by the photojournalist W. Eugene Smith. It's a 1950 portrait of three generations of coal miners, whose faces are black with soot, standing against the vista of their mining town in Wales. Hernandez told me that Smith had obviously vanished for the men as he took the photo. Despite his proximity to them, their eyes look off in the distance, not toward the camera.

The photographer's invisibility defines much of Hernandez's later work as well, though the pictures typically lack subjects from whom to disappear. The close framing of many of the photographs destabilizes a sense of where Hernandez is in relation to what he's shooting, and the images often appear constructed rather than "seen." "Pictures for Rome" (1998–99), a group of photos of abandoned or unfinished buildings that Hernandez made as a Rome Prize fellow, portrays vacant structures in a way that's more aligned with the installations of Light and Space artists such as James Turrell or Robert Irwin, and the paintings of Cy Twombly, than with the work of typical disaster documentarians. Instead of highlighting the obvious neglect of these buildings, Hernandez, as curator Ralph Rugoff notes, exalts in their aesthetic possibility.8 Here, as elsewhere in Hernandez's work, formalism becomes a means of applying pressure to the underlying subject: a way to forge images that are indelible and indefinable as opposed to illustrative or morally docile.

This seeming encryption of subject matter is relevant given the way representations of decaying buildings and other places are often used as license for their destruction. Hernandez's pictures, of course, resist this application. Take a series he shot at Aliso Village, the public housing project in Boyle Heights, where he was born to Mexican immigrants in 1947. The development has an intricate history: its own construction was predicated on the demolition of the Flats, a self-contained "slum" established at the turn of the twentieth century, where a large community of immigrants lived. To bolster its argument for the demolition, the Housing Authority relied on photographs, many of them showing weathered homes in the neighborhood without people, so as to make them look condemned. Decades later, the Authority again featured images of a deteriorating Aliso Village on its website leading up to the housing project's demise in 2001.9 (Ultimately it was replaced with mixed-income town houses.) Sneaking into the buildings beforehand,
Hernandez conjures the lives of past residents through elements that under a different gaze could be considered blight, but that here are treated with respectful deliberateness and attention. One photograph, Aliso Village #16 (2000), presents a papyrus-colored surface replete with tagged and carved names (Norma, Polo, Flaco, Danny Boy), many crossed out or added over time. In another picture, a small skeleton figurine left by an occupant hangs in space from a cracked ceiling, the fissures gently echoing the slender voids between the doll’s bones.

What are pictures like these advocating for—or are they advocating at all? Certainly they seem more than just beautifully composed renditions of misbegotten spaces. While Hernandez doesn’t stress the politics of photographing this way, or draw explicit lines like poverty or inequality with which to connect his work, it doesn’t mean that the work itself isn’t embedded with a forceful political outlook that Hernandez has returned to again and again. And perhaps because of this, or his willingness to follow his instinct and change course throughout his career whatever the cost (Wino-grand told him when he gave up street photography, “You don’t know how great you could have been”), commercial viability and even institutional recognition long eluded him. His first monograph, Landscapes for the Homeless, came out in 1995, nearly thirty years after he began working; his first retrospective was in 2016, as he neared seventy; and it’s only in the last ten or so years that he has consistently sold his prints. This year, however, he will have his first Los Angeles solo show in a decade at the gallery Kayne Griffin Corcoran, as well as an exhibition at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City. He also appears in the Venice Biennale. He and his wife, the novelist Judith Freeman, split their time between LA and a house in Idaho where they’ve lived on and off since 1992. Hernandez has more plans to photograph the terrain between the two places, using the perforated screen as a frame in which to view the minimal landscape of Nevada and document its deserted housing developments. Meanwhile, his unsentimental eye for LA remains intact. “Everything is fenced,” he told me when I asked what had changed most for him about the city. “You look around, there’s so much more fencing than there ever was. All the garages are fenced. You go to all these poor areas, it’s all fenced. That’s something I noticed a lot happening over the years.”

- Kate Wolf