In her 1973 essay ‘Freak Show’, Susan Sontag observed that she had gleaned from Walt Whitman’s poetry collection, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), that ‘nobody would fret about beauty and ugliness’ if they embraced ‘the real, […] the inclusiveness and vitality of actual American experience’. Documenting the real, particularly the real along the ride, is not a uniquely American trait, of course, but the country’s roads have long seduced the photographer’s eye. They’ve given us everything from Robert Frank’s *The Americans* (1958) to Danish-born photographer Joakim Eskildsen’s book *American Realities* (2016) – originally a commission from *Time* magazine – that scorched the country’s national pride in its mythical ability to deliver abundance and comfort by chronicling those citizens currently living below the poverty line. Photographer Anthony Hernandez catalogues the narratives of surface streets, the avenues and intersections that truly make Los Angeles a city, and not only a web of connection points between the area’s freeways and suburban sprawl.

When Hernandez – who spent his formative years in the Boyle Heights neighbourhood of East Los Angeles during the 1950s – picked up a camera, he was less interested in optimizing the horizon than in engaging with the stark realities he encountered in his home town. In 1969, having recently returned from the horrors of the Vietnam War, he used a handheld 35mm Nikon to develop a style influenced by street photographers like Garry Winogrand, but with a unique sense of alienation and disequilibrium. With the notable exception of his series ‘Rodeo Drive’ (1984), Hernandez focused his lens on the poor and working-class pedestrians that fill the vastness of LA, its grand driving boulevards and marquee promenades. Working parallel to, but independently of, the Chicano art collective Asco – whose political performance work of the 1970s and ’80s called attention to the absence of Latinx people in art
and film – Hernandez’s images subtly underscored the fact that the city’s minority-majority Latinx population, as well as lower-income communities more broadly, were still marginalized.

Hernandez’s most recent series, ‘Screened Pictures’ (2017–18), captures familiar landmarks: pickup points for the LADOT Transit buses that serve, woefully inadequately, an urban population of around 13 million people. The works closely echo the artist’s early, visual-language-defining ‘Public Transit Areas’ (1979–80) – a series of portraits taken at bus stops with a 13 × 18 cm large-format camera that captured a high level of detail. For ‘Screened Pictures’, Hernandez instead shot through the black, powder-coated, perforated-aluminium panels that flank LA’s redesigned bus stops, lending these images the Ben-Day dots appearance of Roy Lichtenstein’s work. Yet, while Hernandez may have borrowed from the pop artist’s aspirational commercial motifs for his gallery-goers in Screened Pictures #23, the gold-rimmed watch face in #37 or the towering new-build complex in #17, the once-vibrant colours of the small, mundane shop facades depicted in #7, #22, #16 and #32, disclosing their well-worn years, shun pop art’s gloss.

Considering ‘Public Transit Areas’ alongside the series ‘Automotive Landscapes’ (1978–79) could give the impression that Hernandez’s key focus is modes of transportation – a not unreasonable assumption for an artist

Anthony Hernandez, *Screened Pictures #32*, 2017–18, inkjet print, 1.1 × 1.1 m. Courtesy: the artist and Kayne Griffin Corcoran, Los Angeles

raised in a city infatuated with driving and the autonomy it affords. The artist’s true subject during his 50-year career, however, is evidenced most clearly in series such as ‘Rodeo Drive’, ‘Public Transit Areas’ and ‘Public Use Areas’ (1980), which depict how alienated people can be from their surroundings despite being part of a crowd. Hernandez exposes this modern condition of mass disengagement, of how individuals become isolated together in the city. ‘Screened Pictures’ illustrates the bus passenger and pedestrian’s commute – one tracing urban anonymity and, within the streets’ textures, generally only seen at full speed and framed by the LA car’s familiar windshield.

- Jennifer Piejko