

Spirit into the photographs of Edmund Teske Matter

Feature

FROM KENNETH ANGER TO JIM MORRISON, THE VARIED SPIRIT OF LOS ANGELES PERMEATES AND SHAPES THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF EDMUND TESKE

Born in Chicago, Edmund Teske (1911–1996) came of age as a photographer in Los Angeles, becoming part of the city's vibrant avant-garde art scene. His photographs captured the spirit of his surroundings, while being shaped by it, from the glamour of Hollywood to the city's colorful inhabitants and varied landscapes. His creative presence influenced two generations of artist-photographers active in the area.

Teske arrived in Los Angeles in 1943, drawn by romantic notions of sunshine and the silver screen, and the possibility of an energizing, creative lifestyle. He had spent his early years in Chicago focused on the social documentary tradition, giving the Depression a face and form in his works. In Los Angeles, Teske immersed himself in the city's small but tight-knit artistic community, where he found a reservoir of creative individuals and ideas that helped to refine his unique vision.

Artists, filmmakers, writers, and other talents would converge on the legendary Studio Residence B, where Teske lived. Located on the grounds of Olive Hill, a 36-acre site in Hollywood designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, the estate was envisioned as a center for the arts by its owner Aline Barnsdall. During his four years there, Teske's work took shape and flourished. The photographer Man Ray and his wife Juliet, writer Anaïs Nin, film directors Lewis Milestone and George Cukor, and architect John Lautner were among the luminaries Teske hosted.

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His friendship with writers Christopher Isherwood, Gerald Heard, and Aldous Huxley led to the study of Vedanta, a branch of Hinduism that would greatly influence Teske's work. He developed a regimen of meditation, prayer, and study at the Vedanta temple in the Hollywood Hills and soon began to apply its philosophy of oneness to his photographs by experimenting with composite printing. Teske would combine two or more negatives to produce a unique photograph, reconfiguring the different images into a new reality that dispelled fixed notions of time and space.

Los Angeles' entertainment industry offered Teske plenty of subjects to explore with his new technique. From the 1950s onward, he made portraits of actors to earn a livelihood, commonly making artful adaptations by combining them with other negatives from his archives. For a portrait of the actress Geraldine Page, Teske included a detail from a floral-patterned folding screen. In a photograph of the Doors, taken in a garage at the back of the photographer's Hollywood studio, Teske juxtaposed the band members against a negative of a parched and cracked vinyl seat cushion. This telling work was used as the back cover image for the Door's 1970 album *Thirteen*. Teske had met the band's lead singer Jim Morrison in the late 1960s and found his blend of feminine and masculine attributes irresistible. He also created several searching portraits of Morrison and his partner, Pamela Courson.

The complexity of Teske's multi-image work reflected the proximity and influence of the city's movie industry. Underground filmmaker Kenneth Anger admired Teske's work and suggested that he combine a photograph Teske made of Anger with a Gustave Doré engraving of a scene from John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*. The finished print is infused with a sense of ritual and magic, capturing the transgressive spirit of Anger and his films. Another filmmaker, Jim Whitney, collaborated with Teske on many projects. His film *Yantra*, made in the 1950s, was greatly influenced by Teske's photographs, with complex animation and continually flowing images set in a series of pulsating motions.

In 1953, Teske devised the technique of duotone solarization, in which he interrupts the photochemical process with light in the darkroom to produce a remarkable palette of spontaneous color and dramatic stains on the print. Working in

this way, he was able to evoke a motion picture-like drama in his stills. He used it to great effect in a photograph of Private Endore, a sadistic character from the film *War Hunt* played by Teske's friend, the actor John Saxon. Framed dramatically from below, Teske's photograph of Saxon brandishing a knife is enhanced by the streaking chemistry, which gives it a ghoulish appearance, accentuating the savagery of the actor's character in the film.

While Teske's work drew on Los Angeles' creative community, he also took cues from the varied landscapes of the region, from the bold forms of Topanga Canyon to the coastal lushness of Big Sur. Mono Lake in particular, with its stark volcanic tufa formations, came to be a universal representation of nature for Teske. He would introduce images of the area's natural sites into many of his composite prints. In addition, the photographer spent countless hours wandering the hills near his Studio Residence B home. His photographs of the shapely trees in the vicinity are highlighted with his skillful manipulation of photochemistry, creating a lively patchwork of depth and texture.

Teske also turned his lens on Wright's artistry in Hollyhock House on Olive Hill. The photographer felt a creative kinship with the architect, whom he met in 1936 while on a fellowship at Taliesin North, Wright's residence in Wisconsin. In one photograph of Hollyhock House, Teske offers a dramatic perspective, leaving to the imagination how the building supports itself. The surrounding groves of olive and eucalyptus trees are dwarfed by the building, which emerges over the hustle and bustle of Hollywood Boulevard. In Wright's Hollyhock House and Teske's work, the background of Los Angeles looms large.

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Note to editors: Images available on request.

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