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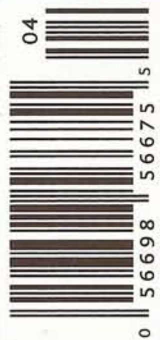
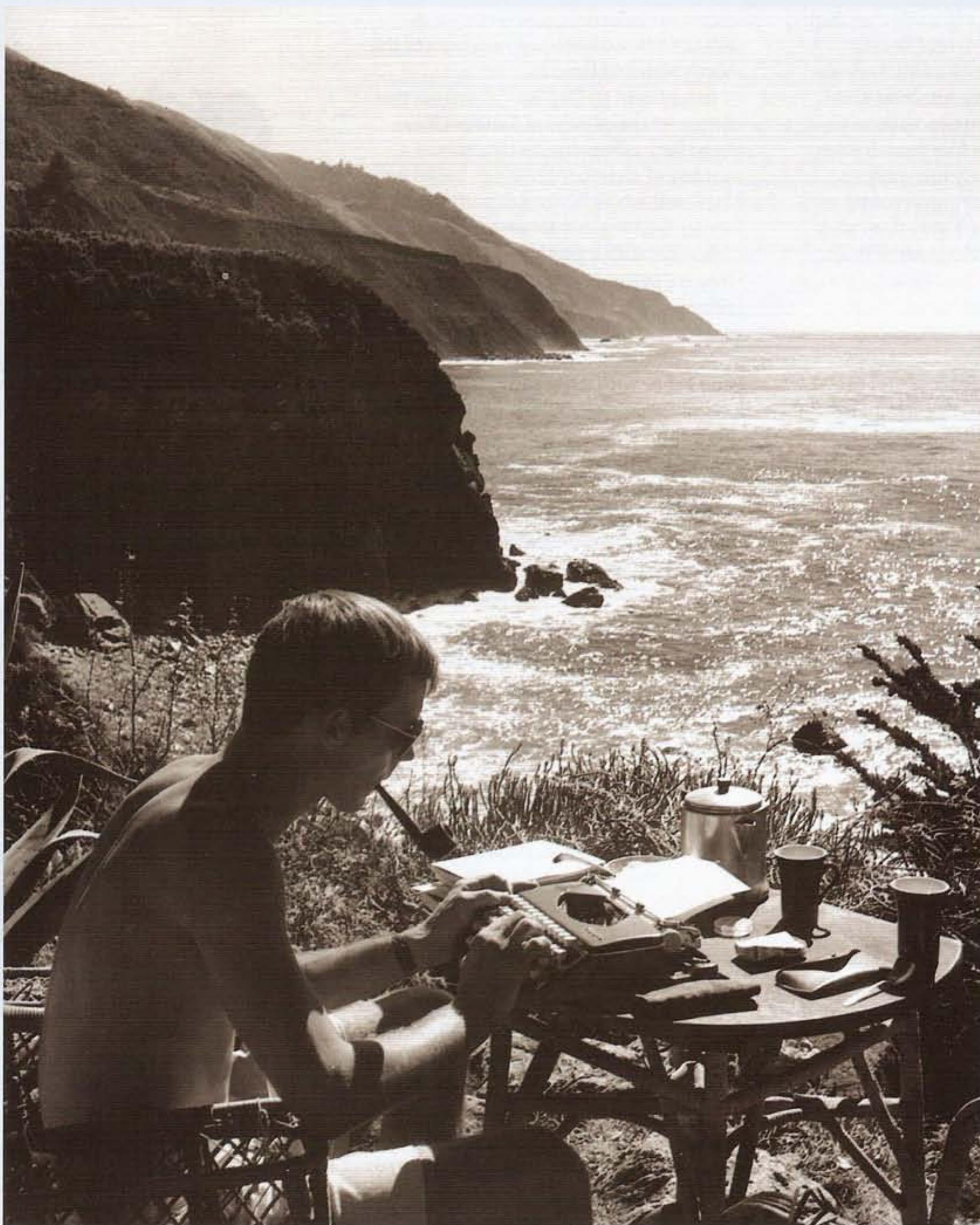


ACADEMIC COMMUNICATION AS WITCHCRAFT by Albert Kümmel-Schnur

Hunter S. Thompson by Erik Bluhm

M+B Gallery, Los Angeles CA December 2, 2006 · January 20, 2007



Hunter S. Thompson, (above) Self-Portrait in Big Sur, ca. 1960-63. (opposite top) Hells Angels (Walking), ca. 1965-66. (bottom) Sandy Walking Agar, Big Sur, ca. 1960-63. *© 2006 The Estate of Hunter S. Thompson/The Gonzo Trust. Courtesy ammobooks.com & M+B Gallery, Los Angeles.*

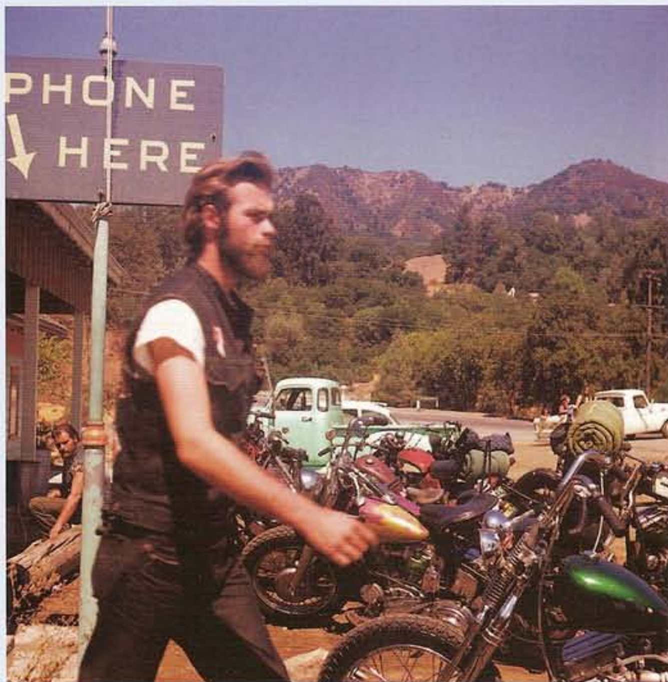
The most memorable images among the period photographs of Hunter S. Thompson's "Gonzo" show at M+B are anchored either in natural beauty or in the rebelliousness and violence of vivid action. While Thompson's subject matter spans from Tijuana street scenes to staged still lifes, the heart of this assemblage—six of the 26 large prints—document the Hells Angels, presumably taken while researching his 1966 book on the motorcycle club. Back then, a few years before Altamont and their rise to notoriety, the Angels were just one of many mobile brotherhoods, with names like Gypsy Jokers and Satan's Slaves, trolling the byways of California.

We are so familiar today with their infamous destiny that our perception of these be-denimed jockeys is colored toward how and why they got where they were going. Of course, Thompson could not foresee the future. He merely halted its progress here, momentarily, from behind both his portable typewriter and his camera. We get to see what Thompson transposed to paper, the source in a snapshot.

In *Hells Angels (Walking)* (1965-66), a bearded young biker strides confidently out of a roadside establishment wearing black jeans, a white T-shirt, and black vest. His hair, long and unkempt by the day's standards, is swept back into a messy pompadour. The parking lot is crammed with bikes, some stacked high with bedrolls. The locale is clearly California—brush-covered hills, oak scrub, eucalyptus trees, steely blue sky with haze. The details are magnetic, focused: the two-tone paint on the ovoid gas tanks; the scruffy rider with a crumpled paper bag sitting on a log bench amongst the weeds; a beat-up white Ford pickup truck pulling out onto the highway, with three figures in leather vests in the bed looking back, their gazes levied at the action in front of the store.

The photograph—a transcript of the actuality of the moment—has through time garnered its own legendry, thanks to "the role of our expectations and anticipations in perception" (E.H. Gombrich). It's difficult not to project forward, to the raised pool cues and stabbing knives in the concert crowd. Not that we know much about the Hells Angels (surely few of us have ever dealt with them firsthand), but the next thing on the timeline comes from "Gimme Shelter" with a dead concertgoer and a dazed Mick Jagger cooing, "Something funny always happens when we start that number...."

As for nature, Thompson had the good fortune to be somewhere majestic before it was tainted by the masses as a "destination." Big Sur and the central coast had long been a haven for internal ex-patriots, be they "misunderstood" writers, sculptors, or Trotskyites. A narrow, seasonably impassable road threaded its way down from Carmel, hampering pursuit by normalcy. Aside from the well-known Henry Miller, the tall trees and fog sheltered such obscure luminaries as Kenneth Rexroth, Harry Partch, and Norman Mini. Employed as a picket at a



rundown hot springs resort in the area, the struggling young writer Thompson spent his days tapping keys, chatting with neighbors Joan Baez and her sister Mimi, and at night did his best to police the rowdy baths. Of course the resort cleaned up its act to became the Esalen Institute, home of "the American awakening" and birthplace of the "human potential" movement where the attractions of Zen manifested themselves in Rolfing, meditation, and encounter groups. By then, Thompson was on to his next adventure—Puerto Rico, Florida, South America, Las Vegas—but he left part of his shadow in Big Sur, a skinny silhouette behind a camera aimed at the hills and the sea.

Carlos Alfonzo BY PETER FRANK

The Freedom Tower, Miami FL December 7, 2006 · January 31, 2007

The late Carlos Alfonzo stands as an almost iconic exemplar of the more salutary spirit of the 1980s. A powerful neo-expressionist painter, he was also a gifted draughtsman and later an accomplished sculptor. A gay man ultimately felled by HIV/AIDS, he expressed his sexuality in abstracted but unadulterated symbols. Displaced by politics and resulting social stresses, he straddled at least two cultures. Committed to visual expression, he derived inspiration from other arts such as poetry and dance. The breadth of Alfonzo's vision encompasses a worldview, not just a self-reflection, and does so with wit, obsession, and virtuosity. His long involvement with both *santéria* and the Catholic Church, and the vicissitudes of his life under Castro and then as a Miami refugee, reflect his evident intellectual and spiritual hunger, a ready impressionability that makes his art so absorptive despite its consistency of form.

Alfonzo's work feels like that of so many other artists yet looks not quite like any of them, but all of them together, all melted down and reconstituted in glowering colors, rough but never tentative brushstrokes, and a welter of looping, slightly cartoonish, strongly cartographic lines, all of which are swept up in constant, swirling, erotic motion. Figure and ground intermingle. Image, diagram, and pure shape segue freely into one another. Spontaneity and composure coincide. At his most ambitious, working on mural scale, Alfonzo could achieve breathtaking results; at his most intimate, existential dread shows both its sad and grotesque sides. The large painted-steel sculptures he realized in the late 1980s display the ferocity of metaphysical insight, but, given their basis in ballet and folk dance, do not belie his kineticism or obsession with human presence.

CARLOS ALFONZO, UNTITLED 19, CA. 1986, ACRYLIC ON PAPER, 24 X 18 IN. COURTESY THE FREEDOM TOWER, MIAMI.

Celebrated in his native land and then in his adopted city, Alfonzo was included in many Latin American surveys before and after his death in 1991, and the retrospective the Miami Art Museum organized a decade ago was also well received at the Hirshhorn in Washington, DC. This latest survey, smaller and yet still thorough, did not leave Miami, and its placement in the appropriately spacious galleries of the downtown Freedom Tower—a 1925 structure that once housed the Cuban Refugee Center—emphasized the show's sentimental resonance for the city's Cuban community. But it could not have been an accident that "Carlos Alfonzo: Extreme Expressions, 1980-1991" opened during the "art week" built around the Basel Miami fair. The show's organizers clearly hoped to attract the international art world, putting before the convened multitudes the impressive accomplishment of a quintessential Miami artist. The competition for the attention of the distracted, over-stimulated hordes was fierce, of course, but one could hope that some German or Korean dealer, Brazilian curator, or critic from Madrid, London or Los Angeles might have managed to find their way downtown. This immense, short-lived talent deserves far wider recognition.