

Melrose Hustle

When we get a look at Eddie Dodson's face, it is twisted by panic and strain. Maybe he is just squinting in the afternoon sun. He stands alone, his back against the wall. *My Summer with Eddie: The Shortest Short Stories of 7552 Melrose Ave.* is a work of L.A. noir for the end of the disco era: a document and a daydream. Published in 2013 as a two-volume ebook, it contains black-and-white photographs taken in the summer of 1979 by photographer/cinematographer Stephen St. John. The photos are interspersed with dialogue, commentary, and poetic fragments, and it can be difficult to discern from what perspective the narrative is being told.

From 1973 to 1984, Eddie Dodson was the swaggering, druggy owner of a hip furniture boutique on Melrose Avenue that bore his name, Dodson's. It was also a popular meeting place for the local cocaine-and-Quaalude crowd, which often included actors such as Jack Nicholson and John Belushi.

Stephen St. John's studio was across the street from Dodson's, with a perfect view into Dodson's display window. From July 19th through August 30th, 1979—his camera positioned like that of a detective—St. John documented the comings and goings of Eddie Dodson, his stylish clientele, as well as random passers-by. His text reveals that St. John and Dodson knew one another to some extent. In Volume Two, St. John refers to Dodson as "my friend," though the terse interaction that followed makes it feel like a specious claim.

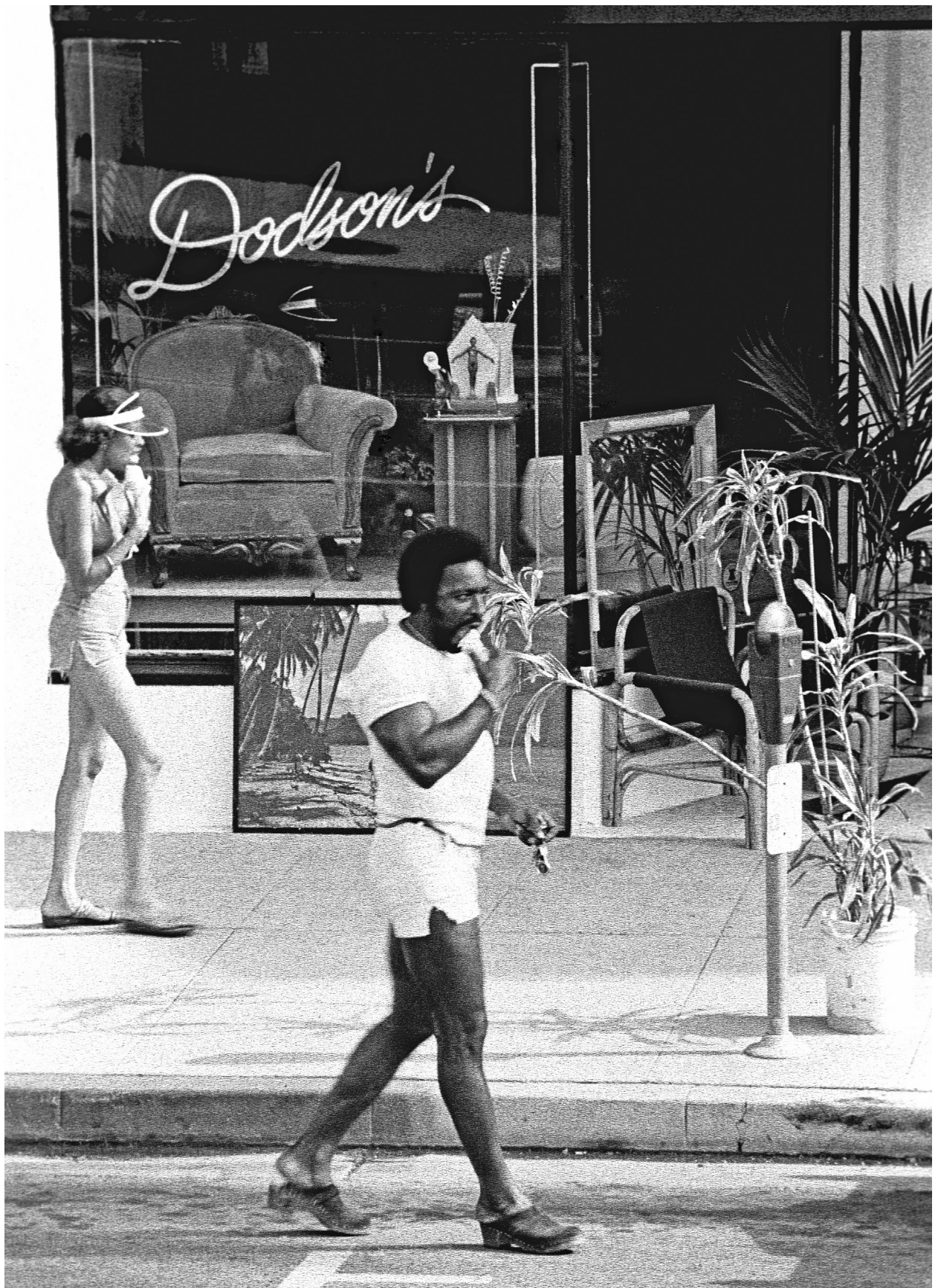
By 1983, Eddie was addicted to heroin. Displaying the peculiar work ethic of a man on the spike, he turned to bank robbery to support his habit. He robbed 64 banks in nine months, setting a world record. Before he died in 2003, he robbed eight more banks. Understandably, heroin attracts fewer users than other less demanding recreational drugs. In 1979, Quaaludes were an easy option. The pills were stamped, RORER 714. St. John writes at the beginning of *Volume One*, "Everybody was on the lookout for chair 714."

Chairs, real ones, are established as a motif in the photographs. Dodson's front window and (legitimate) inventory become the set dressing for an existential drawing-room play about wealth, fate, and perception. The furniture coming and going from Dodson's reveals the Deco and Nouveau revival of the 1970s. Secondhand classical Hollywood glamour is for sale on the street. It is a fashionable accident that aligns *My Summer with Eddie* with the noir fiction in the 1930s—films like *They Shoot Horses, Don't They* (1935) and *Day of the Locust* (1939)—that blended suspense and banality to depict Los Angeles as a place of ambition and despair.

St. John's photos document an upper-middle leisure class. Many of the subjects drive Porsches and Volkswagens and have time to kill in the middle of the day. The rare overweight, old, or Hasidic person moves past St. John's lens, while the young, stylish, and rich stop and make themselves at home. As they lounge, preen, and smoke, they also unwittingly pose for Stephen's pictures.

The graininess of the black-and-white film gives suggestion to both

Keith Vaughn is a freelance writer. He lives and works in Alameda, CA.







fashion shoot and criminal investigation. As in the former, where the point is to show off outfits, St. John's subjects are photographed head on, in full. One portrait in *Volume One* depicts a woman in sunglasses and heels standing in a casual *contrapposto* while lighting a cigarette, her shirt falling artfully off her shoulder. Her position in the frame is as perfect as if she'd been directed where to stand. The difference between St. John's portraits and fashion photography is mostly academic. However, the main distinction of these photographs is the story they tell. We are forced to wonder: who was this woman, and what was her connection to Eddie?

Windows, reflections, and lenses, all of which frame perception differently and with varying degrees of obscurity, are a salient theme in St. John's photographs. "Two steps later, these thoughts became his Karmann Ghia, shimmering in the storefront glass," writes St. John in *Volume One*. In one shot, Eddie is shown running to his car. Above his head in the composition, almost filling the display window, is a funhouse mirror that returns a wavy, distorted reflection. Perception is corrupt and contingent.

Later, Eddie is photographed reaching out to a person beyond the edge of the frame, grasping a tanned and dismembered arm while casually slumping his shoulders. There are no chairs on the sidewalk; the lights in the shop are decidedly off for the night. Is Eddie shaking hands or handing off? Our biographical knowledge directs our assumptions toward exhilarating lawlessness.

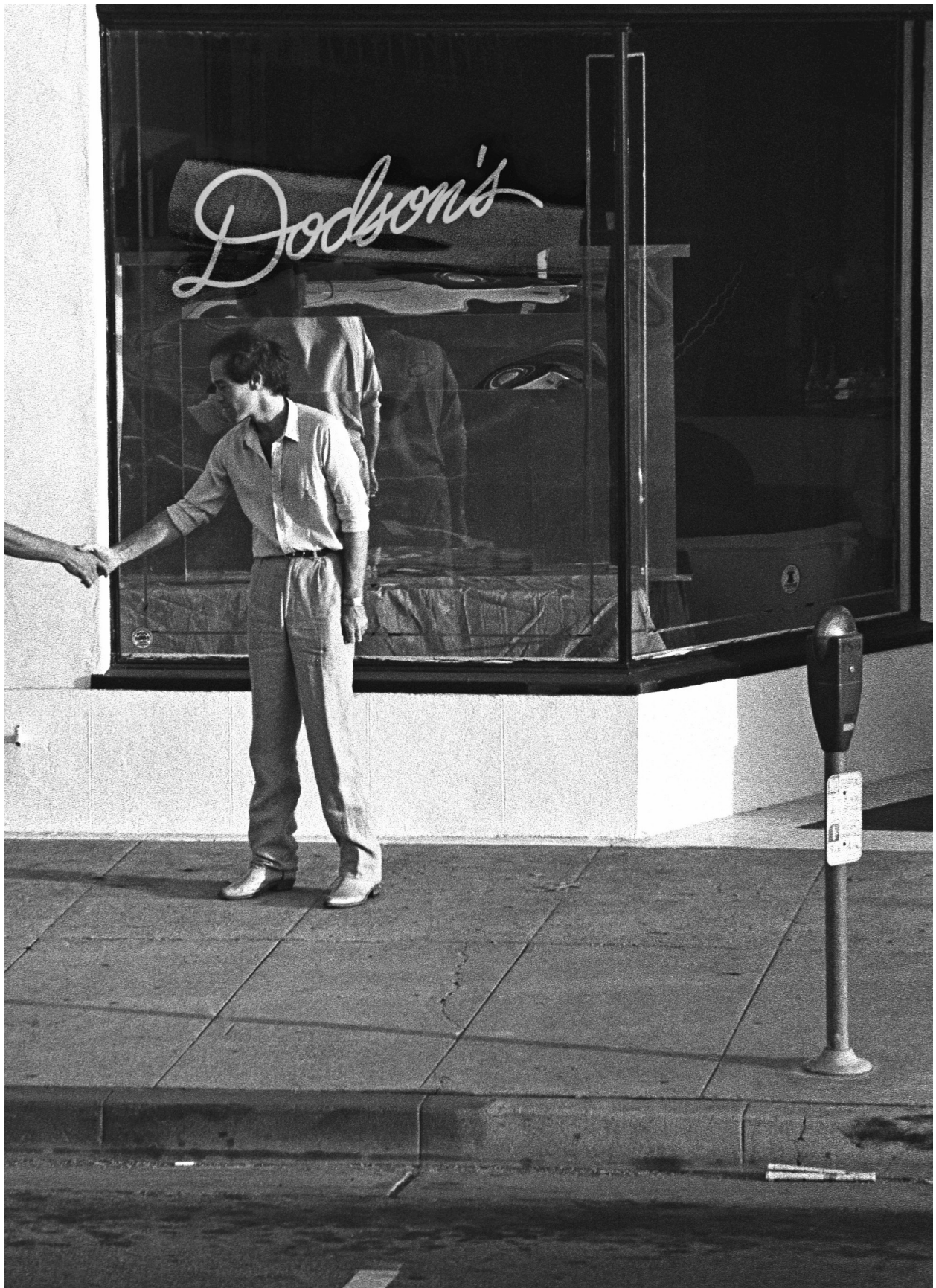
Moments of elegant synchronicity and integration among opposites also punctuate *My Summer with Eddie*. In *Volume Two*, a muscular African American man in short-shorts and mules walks up the street, while a thin

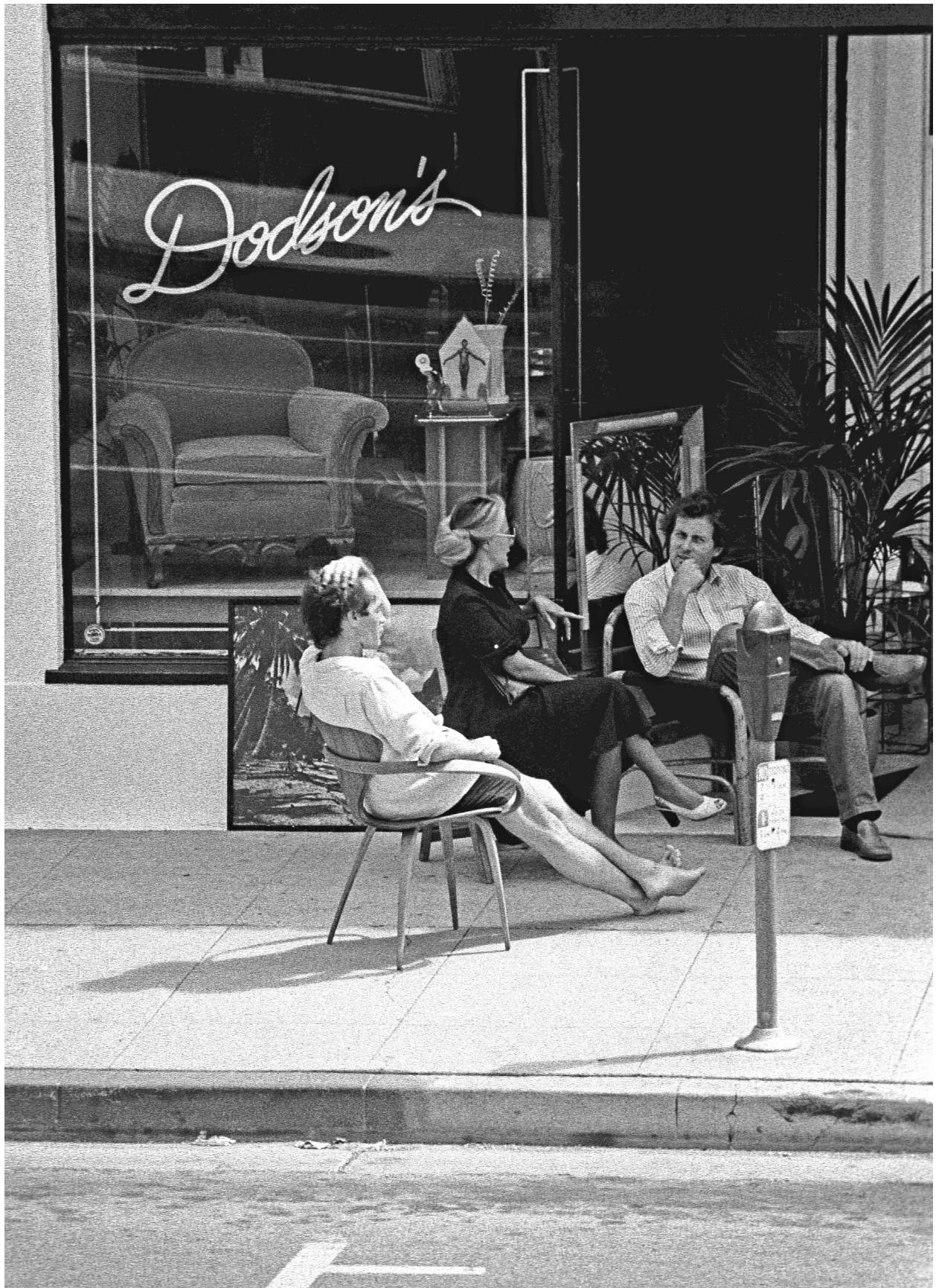
light-skinned woman in cut-offs and slides walks the same direction on the sidewalk, slightly behind him in the frame. They give no indication of being together, yet they walk in step, and both eat ice cream. The photo captures them both mid-lick. Their summer scene plays out before a backdrop that exhibits St. John's interest in frames and reflections. A plush antique chair sits safely in Dodson's display window, while a bamboo camp chair rests on the sidewalk. A potted palm is reflected in a mirror and echoed in a framed print of a tropical landscape propped against the storefront.

One of the more illusion-heavy photographs depicts a torso (Eddie's) blockaded from view by a round mirror that reflects a smiley face a sky-writer has drawn overhead. The disembodied torso furtively speaks with a woman who leans forward with intrigue, her face obstructed by her long hair. The photograph speaks of the secrecy, seediness, and pursuit of illicit kicks the store came to be known for, all while maintaining an elegant formal cohesiveness: the mirror sits centrally in composition, while its ocular shape is repeated in a car's whitewall tire in the bottom right corner of the frame.

With a light touch—reminiscent of Andy Warhol's minimal video work of the 1960s in which hip people do simple things, like *Eat* (1963) and *Sleep* (1963)—St. John works within strict technical parameters to record a single subject as a marker of time. His direct, deadpan involvement with the urban character of Los Angeles recalls the photo-books of Ed Ruscha, like *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965) and *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966).

In the summer of 1979, St. John's night-job was shooting additional footage for John Carpenter's film,





The Fog (1980). The young filmmakers of the time, like Carpenter, Brian De Palma, and Tobe Hooper, were reinventing genre films by personalizing their conventions. In genre films like Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) and De Palma's *Dressed to Kill* (1980), representation is cut loose from its moorings. Images and narratives—especially those with claims to historical veracity—are regarded as artificial, flexible constructions. At the time, post-punk, new-wave, no-wave, and neo-geo were emergent, loosely defined styles. Pictures Generation artists, like Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince, were using photography to deconstruct the nature of representation and identity. From the academy to the punk club to the matinee, visual history was understood to be mutable and adaptable to individual expression. Everyone saw the world as a stage, perhaps especially in Los Angeles.

After his summer with Eddie, Stephen St. John went on to be the Steadicam and camera operator on films including *The Karate Kid* (1984), *Out of Africa* (1985), *Raising Arizona* (1987), *Unforgiven* (1992), *Men in Black* (1997), and *Man on Fire* (2004), to name only a few. In 2014, he was nominated for an Emmy for Outstanding Cinematography for *Killing Kennedy* (2013) and most recently he was the cinematographer on *Mercy Street* (2016). His ascension on one side of Melrose was the inverse of Dodson's decline on the other. *My Summer with Eddie* is a chronicle of the rising tide, before the world records and summer blockbusters.

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Stephen St. John, *Untitled* from *Angel on Safari* (1979). Published in *My Summer with Eddie, Volume Two* (2013), ebook. Image courtesy of the artist.

2

Stephen St. John, *Untitled* from *Reader's Imagination* (1979). Published in *My Summer with Eddie, Volume One* (2013), ebook. Image courtesy of the artist.

3

Stephen St. John, *Untitled* from *Sky's the Limit* (1979). Published in *My Summer with Eddie, Volume Two* (2013), ebook. Image courtesy of the artist.

4

Stephen St. John, *Untitled* from *Angel on a Business Trip* (1979). Published in *My Summer with Eddie, Volume One* (2013), ebook. Image courtesy of the artist.

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Stephen St. John, *Untitled*, from *Synaptic Pruning* (1979). Published in *My Summer with Eddie, Volume Two* (2013), ebook. Image courtesy of the artist.