

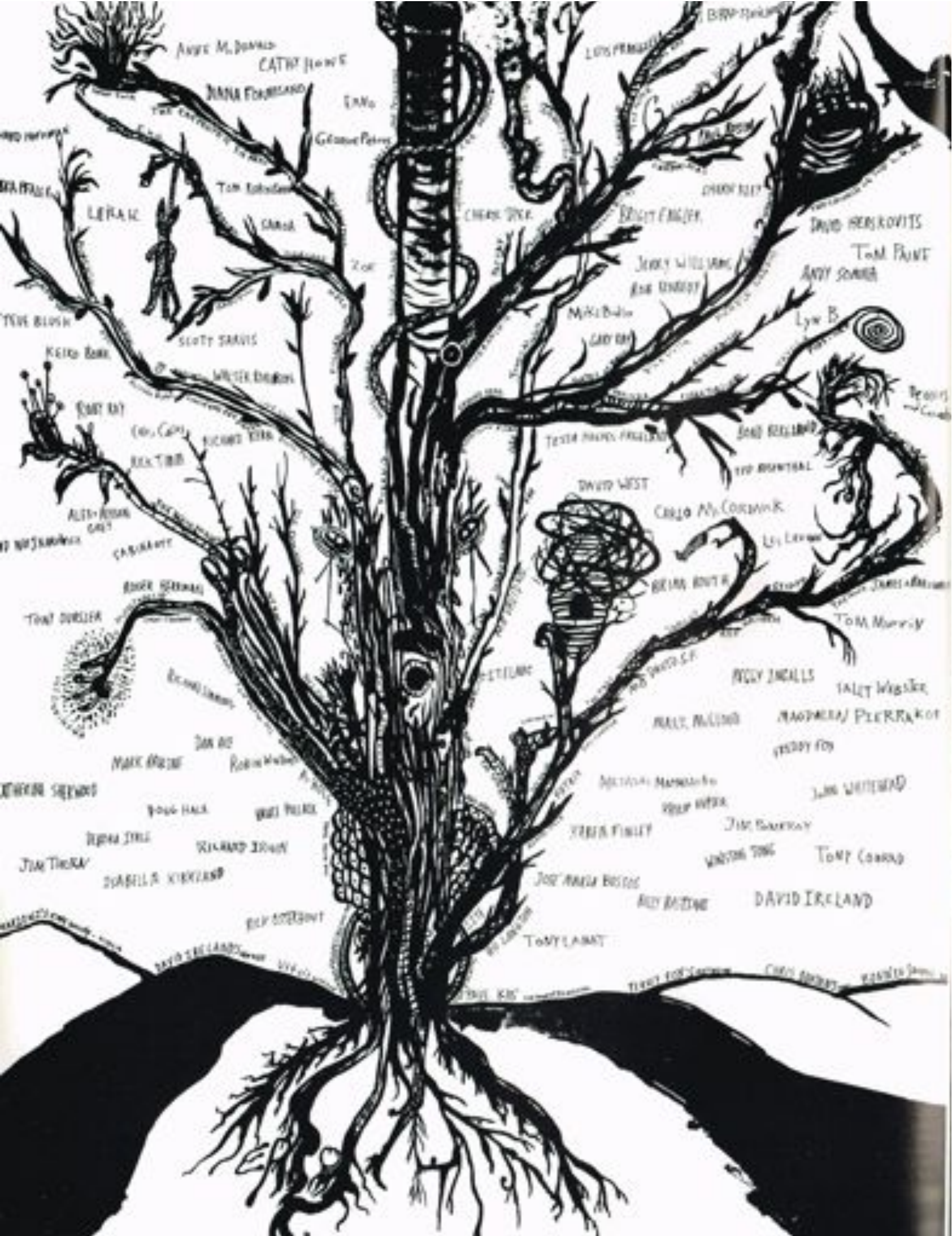
NEPOTISM

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This exhibition and book have been supported in part with funds from the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency.

I wish to thank Mike Osterhout and all the artists who are his friends for participating in this special project. Hallwalls is very happy to be presenting this new exhibition of their work. "Nepotism" is the latest exhibition made possible by Hallwalls' Visiting Curators Program.

Catherine Howe
Exhibitions Curator
Hallwalls



Nepotism — The Company You Keep

At the invitation of Cathy Howe and Hallwalls I outlined an idea I had for a show called Nepotism. It would be curated solely on the basis of friendship and relation. Aesthetics and career issues would not figure in. A catalogue would be printed. The artists would be paid and the shipping would be covered. I would be able to realize this piece. I agreed. They agreed. A deal was struck.

In 1975 somewhere between the hippies and the punks, in a stagnant pool of time that bred disco and yuppies, I moved from Woodstock to Sausalito; from one cliché to another. Married at 22, I was about to get divorced, give away my dog, start seeing a shrink, and go back to school at The San Francisco Art Institute. Patty Hearst was still on the loose, Porsche's and BMW's crowded the Golden Gate, and the seeds for this show were planted in the fertile soil of the old mission.

Two communities figure prominently in Nepotism; New York and San Francisco. I spent from 1975 to 1983 in S.F. and from 1983 to the present in N.Y. The friends I have made in both of these places as well as a good part of the transplanted Chicago art-community comprise the artists selected for this show. They have also made me who I am. After all, that's what nepotism is about.

I am sure I could have fooled you into thinking a more happening, better looking, more successful group of people were my friends. But, that wouldn't be honest. That is not to say these are all the friends I have, but all who consider themselves artists. That is also not to say that I could trust all these people with my nieces and nephews, or with watching my apartment.

This group is my clan, my community, my congregation, my professional family. Stylistically we are all worlds apart. We are not a school or a look. We are not a powerful network. We all work with varying approaches and concerns politically, philosophically, and pragmatically. If there is a unifying structure, it is relation, and the responsibility which goes with the territory. We scratch each other's.

Some will always take exception with my use of other artists in my work, be they friend or foe. (no one knows you better than your enemies). Some will always feel exploited for the purpose of furthering my career. To them I have always admitted this exploitation, realizing the double edge of the sword. If you don't look good I don't look good. There's another homily that Vidal Sassoon didn't say, which contends that you can choose your friends but not your family. It would be my contention that you can't choose either. If I could choose, I'd pick healthier, richer, and better looking friends. For better or worse, these are the ones who picked me. I want to thank each and every one of them for participating in this show.

Nepotismia: The Family Curse

The word *nepotism*, as most readers undoubtedly know already, comes from the name of a serpentine region which at one time wound its way between the borders of five different central and south European countries. The first known reference to *Nepotismia* comes from the 15th century philosopher/cartographer *Fabricatus Maximus*, who placed it as a small territory situated between the larger empires of *Bohemia*, *St. Atusquo*, and *Santa Museuma*. By the mid 17th century *Nepotismia* would be flourishing as a major power in world trade as well as a corrupt image of declining social and moral values that inspired countless poets, novelists, and painters of the Cynicist School. Its capital city *Lincestica*, which was later razed by Pope *Puritous* in an effort to halt the spread of the *Venereal Plague* and its accompanying panic of 1791, was a corrupt, degenerate, and filthy urban sprawl of a dishonest and lazy merchant class whose advanced state of devolution, comparable to that of post-industrial times, has continued to baffle social historians. The legacy of *Nepotismia* is most often recalled in the tragic story of its final king, *Incest II*, a brilliant but wasted mind who rose from petty clerk to successfully pose as illegitimate heir to the impotent, senile, and sexually ambivalent monarch, *Osterhout VI* (no relation to *Mike Osterhout*), before finally losing his mind and being forced from the throne for trying to have his malignant goiter instated as a Cardinal.

Today, as the prevailing *modus operandi* of the Capital, nepotism exists as a discrete power structure, or structures, we'd more than likely prefer denying or any least framing in an alternative, more euphemistic set of terms. However, nepotism is nepotism, and by any other name would smell as malodorous. If we are forced to look at this striking feature manifest upon the face of modern times, we can deny neither its existence nor its intrinsicity to all aspects and within all systems of our contemporary discourse. So undeniably inherent is nepotism to the social-mechanical operations of our lives, I suspect we've come to view it figuratively and literally as a sort of family curse. If we must confess to this gutless manner of unfair favoritism and its false values established by, and as, status quo consent, let us at least attribute it to a genetic flaw incurable in an advanced yet primitive social animal such as us.

For all the faults within nepotism, I for one do not feel prepared to entirely dismiss its problematic claim of due (sub) cultural inheritance. And, I suspect, this illegitimate right is one which nearly all this exhibition's participants hold in some similar regard. Why? *Nepotism*, by exposing a vulgar hidden agenda within the rarified sphere of High Art, belongs to a derisively parodic series of curatorial efforts conceived by *Osterhout* as conceptual art works in and of themselves. *Nepotism* then, is like a companion piece to *Osterhout's* two year stint as East Village Gallery owner/director *Mo David*, and to his other fictitious art world personas — *Kristan Kohl*, a deceased German woman abstract artist and *Richard Mawry*, a comically naive maker of assemblage art and prolific writer of sincere crackpot letters to various publications and art critics, and belongs within the context of his larger body of degenerate, blurry, and challenging encapsulations of life as art. This would certainly have to include the periodic holiday services he organizes called the "Church of the Little Green Man." Involving dozens of different creative talents over the years, it has not only served as a viable humorous, provocative, and flexible format for a broad range of participants, but has continued to mix a caustic combination of satiric irreverence with genuine community participative involvement. *Nepotism* continues a line of shameless curatorial abuses *Osterhout* has produced as implicit parables, including his "Payola" show at *Mo David Gallery*, in which wall space was openly rented by the square foot to any eager artist willing to pay (and I was paid off to review it), and "Heteronymic," a group show of four different artists at *Hallwalls*, all of whom just happened to be the same person, a.k.a. *Mike Osterhout*. The reason for *Nepotism* cannot be merely attributed to a cultural critique — its cause has more to it than that. It is as well part of a fun-spirited, energetic, and spontaneous stream of uncanny absurdities that sprung collaboratively from this eccentric and irreverent group of friends.

This essay, and perhaps even this show, might have a bit more credibility for those of us mesmerized by the seductive gaze of false objectivity which institutional art criticism employs to hypnotize under the command of academic authority, if only I could feign some impersonal distance in my analysis and judgement. This, though, would be impossible, and more significantly it would be a self-defeating lie. It's precisely this culturally perpetrated deception that *Nepotism* both refuses to adopt and directly attempts to undermine by exposing it and holding it up to self-ridicule. The truth about this show is that we're all bound together as buddies, colleagues, lovers, and ever irritable siblings. Not a group of manifesto propagandists, we've spent most of our time and energy, to the contrary, as far from any such public platforms of careerist ambition. Always elusive as a definable form of ritual in its hybridized rock show/church service/performance art/exhibition/senseless debauch, the work has been persistently impolite, unpolished, intoxicated, excessive, and self-indulgent. Far from widely promoting these events, they've been kept like a guarded secret from the press and potential audience and are produced with an undisguised attitude of inaccessibility and contemptuous intolerance for the mainstream. As a group we've never done anything for anyone but ourselves, remaining busy enough following Osterhout's irrepressible lead as the slightly daft project motivator. While the dubious likes of those who are faithful enthusiasts for a number of these artists are well appreciated in return, and often equally respected as kindred members of the "larger" downtown N.Y. scene, we have always been our own best audience. Surely there's a Hallmark Card or Snoopy Calendar out there which says this all much better, but this bad word, "nepotism", is just another of Mike's typically antagonistic ways of presenting something that's essentially much more sensitive and positive by nature; something like camaraderie, creative, emotional and intellectual interaction, conspiratorial lunacy, mass hysteria or the emotional, career, social, and at times financial support that artists who aren't too busy scrambling for the top of the money mountain fame dung-heap, give to each other as a community.

As eclectic and idiosyncratically individual as these are, they don't constitute a movement in the stylistic or ideological sense that has been emphasized in Art History's reading of Modernism. What this art shares comes from its abrasive contact sport of manic group wrestling on some sprawling, hallucinogenic, put your nose to your ass "Twister" game board. The work here connects in that germinal space too often overlooked in aesthetic understanding — the personal realm of social setting. On one level, it's a private joke you wouldn't understand and we probably already forgot, but on the other, this is art, and quite good art at that. It speaks in tongues, yet in skewered unison, its sub-text is an inexplicit, non-specific sensibility consistent within its various components. An intertwining of dissimilar but compatible forces, its deepest attachment is to that place and time when it came together between all of us in a fertile flowering upon a manure-rich cross pollinated garden of unearthly delight. How this came to be is but another of the fortunate ironies of troublesome indigestion from New York's gnashing jaws of greedy cultural consumption that occasionally lodges some malevolent gastric pressure which stews in the belly of the beast for years until it eventually unleashes itself with noxious urgency upon an unsuspecting and horrified public. Aberrant aesthetic transgressions such as these occur in generational gaps, or assimilation lags, between the set blocks of co-opted revolt. The media hype running amok as it plucks unripe off the vine whatever meager vitality that miraculously grows here, crates everything up in hyperbole and ships its bruised content around the nation and world as the latest new imperial taste sensation for pop-cultural gourmards to gorge upon till the brink of nausea and excluded dinner guests to spit at as sour grapes. These choreographed leaps in supply and demand fashion shifts have a way of producing unseemly pockets of neglected, disenfranchised, anti-establishment excess which may, when its imaginations are duly intense and wicked, condense into a system-savvy, mutant underground that's increasingly less predictable, acquiescent, and easy to dress up as it grows up untended. The only thing more assinine than all the misrepresentation and overexposure of the East Village Art Scene was how the group energy and feeling of limitless possibility still projected through its perverted media image to draw straggling lots of wild, mongrel psycho-visionaries to an overdeveloped tourist trap of mock-bohemia as if it were still a mecca of freedom, opportunity, and reward. Long after the East Village Art scene had peaked, it was attracting artists from San Francisco (Mike Osterhout, Bond Bergland,

Ruby Ray, Katherine Sherwood, Sally Webster, John Whitehead, Isabella Kirkland, Tony Labat, Magdaline Pierrakos and Sheri Kley) and Chicago (Karen Finley, Andy Soma and David West). Really, this private scene which formed then, benefited as much from the temporary collapse of sub-cultural vigor in S.F. and Chicago (temporary, because many of these artists have recently relocated in San Francisco) as much as from the allure of New York.

What all these misguided later-comers arrived at was a situation as despicably crass as it was ultimately hopeless. New York in the Eighties is a place where artists come to pawn all comforts, and oft-times their souls, to vie for success in the market standard. What of course has happened is that a lot of those who once thought they wanted the big brass ring real bad, have discovered how sickening, corrupt, and meaningless the competition, the prize, the competitors, the judges, and the spectators are. You might think otherwise, but in all honesty I believe that none of us wants anything to do with this game — except maybe to sabotage it. Hitting New York as they did, at a time when the East Village scene was splintering from within as those once close divided up between those who chose to enter the art world versus those who rejected it entirely, these recent arrivals would discover not only their own alienation and anger, but a number of marginalized artists who had gone through the best and worst of East Village hysteria and arrived at the same kind of present dissatisfaction mixed with a desire to make things happen again as they knew was possible for them outside the parameters of status quo attention. It happened all right, and knowing these mischievous collaborators as I do now, I can promise you that they're already reloading their guns before their barrels have even stopped smoking. We all came here looking for something few of us ever found before discarding. Whatever it was that we were once looking for doesn't so much matter anymore. What does, is what we all found here instead — each other.

Carlo McCormick, New York, 1989.

Nepotism: good for man, or just another ism?

Nepotism — n. patronage bestowed or favoritism shown on the basis of family relationship, as in business or politics.

Nepotism is by no small means a large measure of what it sometimes takes to get to wherever it is one thinks one is going. In so stating, one assumes the broadest definition of family as it is used today in its anti-nuclear, postmodernist stance. Nepotism extends beyond the family tree linked by branches and leaves to include the living network of friends and lovers. This is inevitable as the once strong ties of family and home are more and more tedious yet only a phone call away. So when the propitious time comes and one is in a position to help another, one opts for a home boy or home girl, someone spiritually if not physically from the same sphere of aesthetic appreciation and political comprehension as the benevolent benefactor of the bestowed kindness.

On the other hand, the down side, the bad news, the negative, the bummer, is that families also promote rivalry and jealousy, complicated networks of neurosis that can only be programmed through years and years of careful application and deprogrammed by a cancerous computer virus that multiplies into infinity. There is the pull of tradition, the trend towards conservative financial planning and aggressive careerism that keeps one close to the comforts of home and old habits, where little boys are always little boys and little girls are well, you know.

Is nepotism good for the economy? The bottom line on nepotism has to be efficiency. Can the nepotistic system keep us competitive with the management systems developed by the superindustrious, super-race that has come from no other planet than our very own Earth to overtake our American ass? Or, is it more important to protect the backs of our posse in the life and death war of life? Perhaps we are looking at this the wrong way.

Is nepotism good for the soul? What's left after you've used up the good offices of friends and family? Well, brothers and sisters, still looking to get wherever it is you're going? Don't give up or despair! There's hope yet. Have you ever considered self-promotion or prostitution?

David Hershkovits
1989

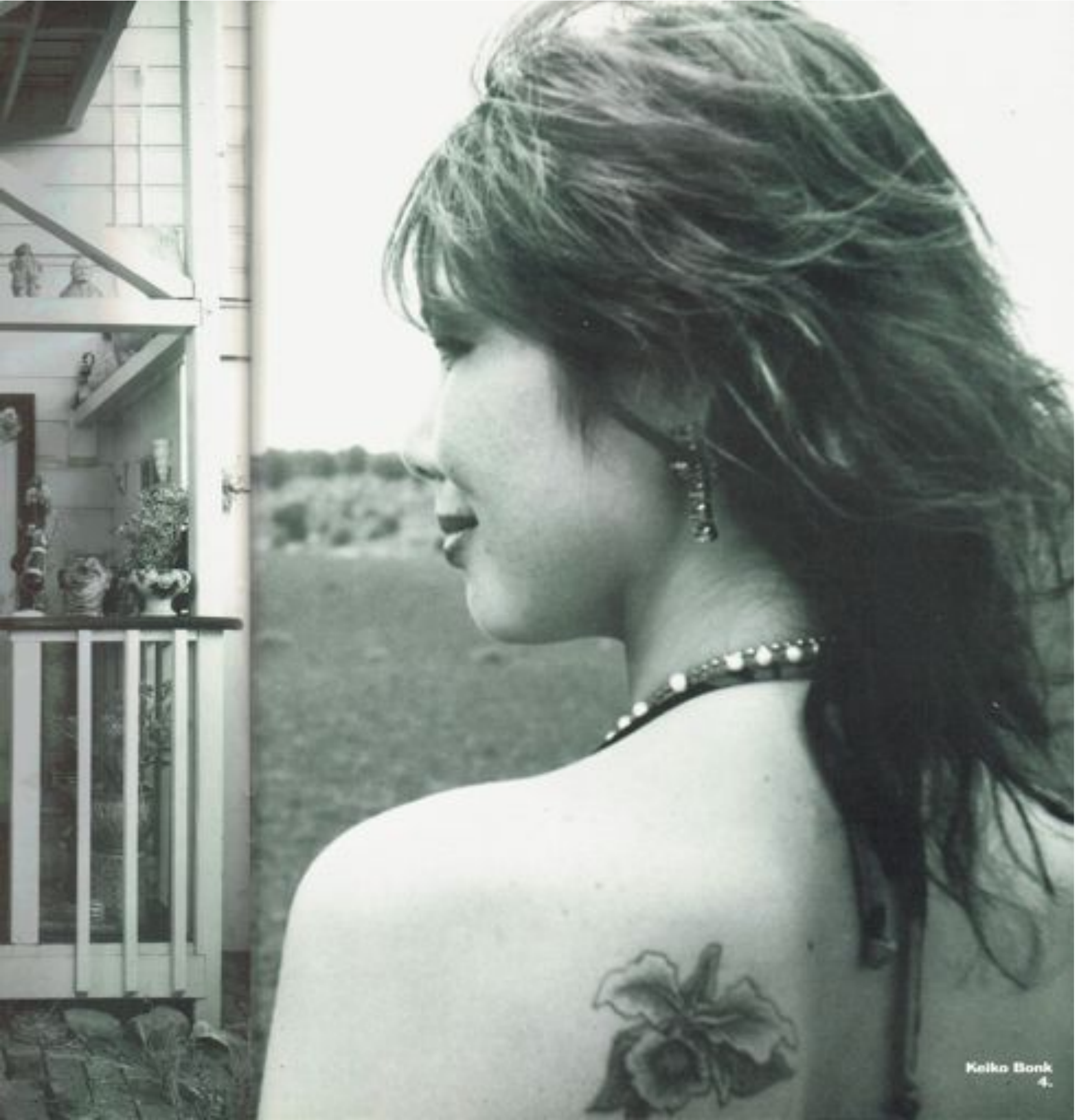


Alex Grey
1.



Allyson Grey
2









Gary Ray
6.



Dan Ake
7.



Peggy Ingalls
II.











Katherine Sherwood
13.





David Hershkovits
16









Work Dogs [Scott Jarvis, l, Bob Kennedy, r]
19.







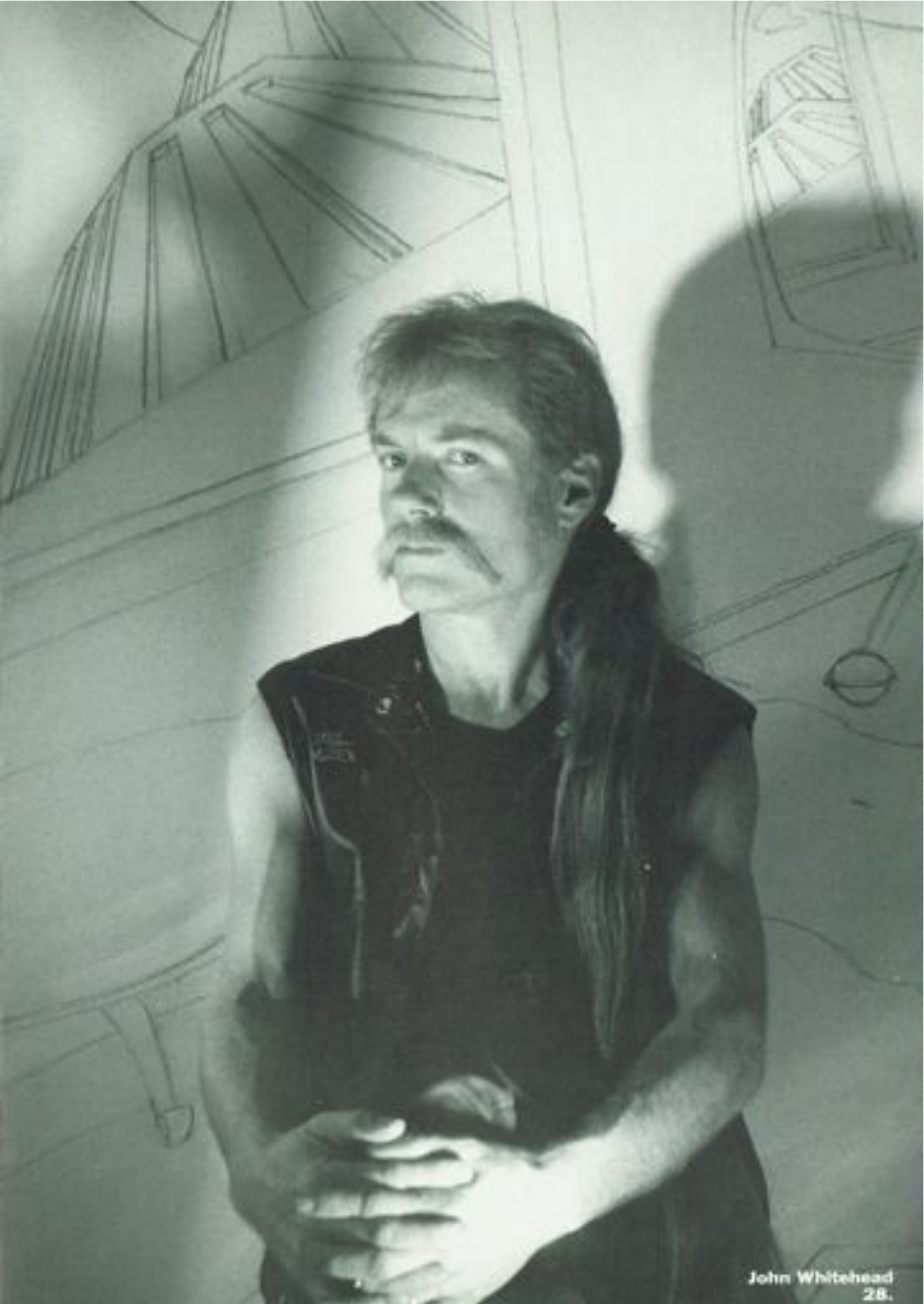
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23.











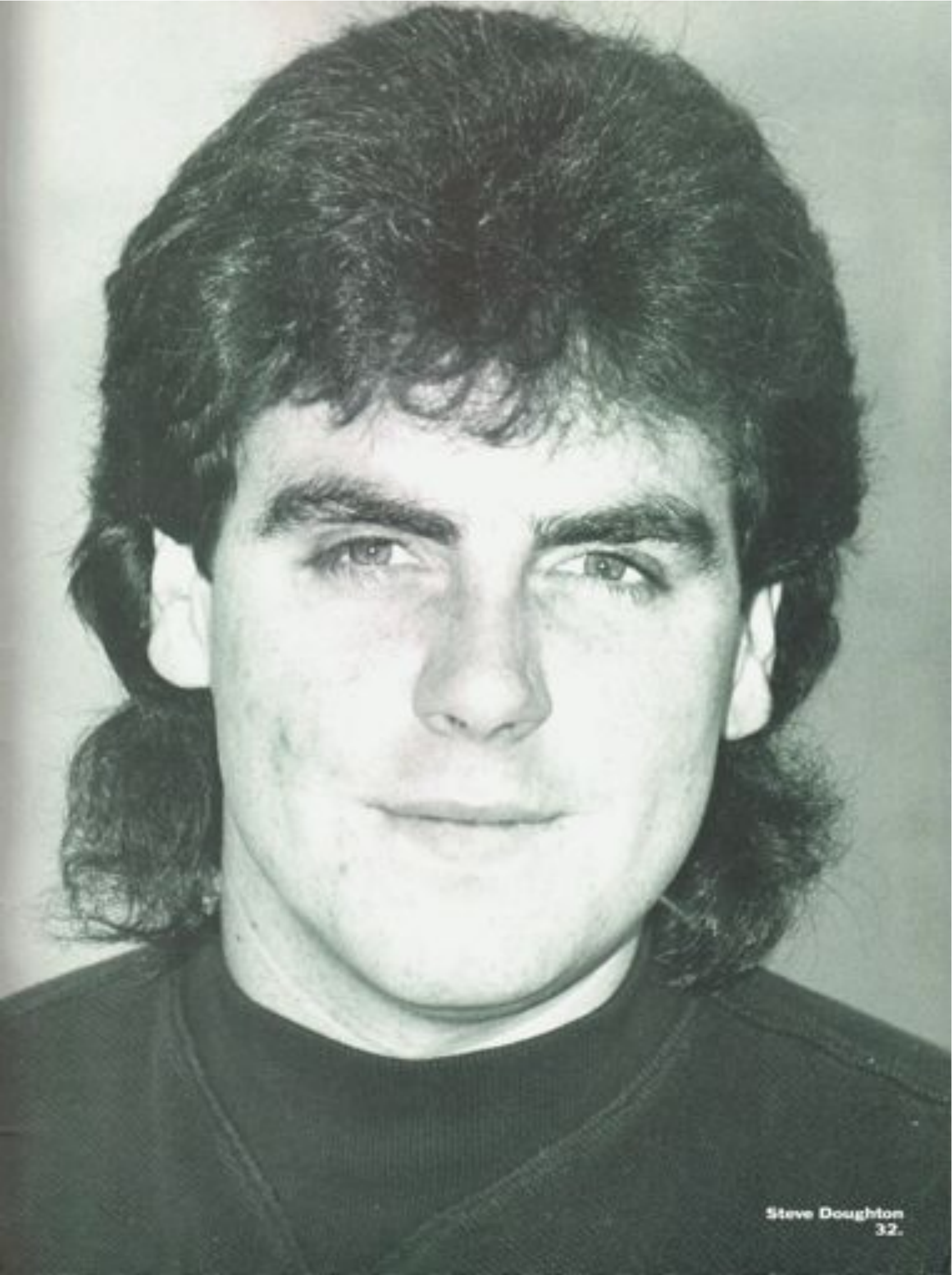


Karen Finley
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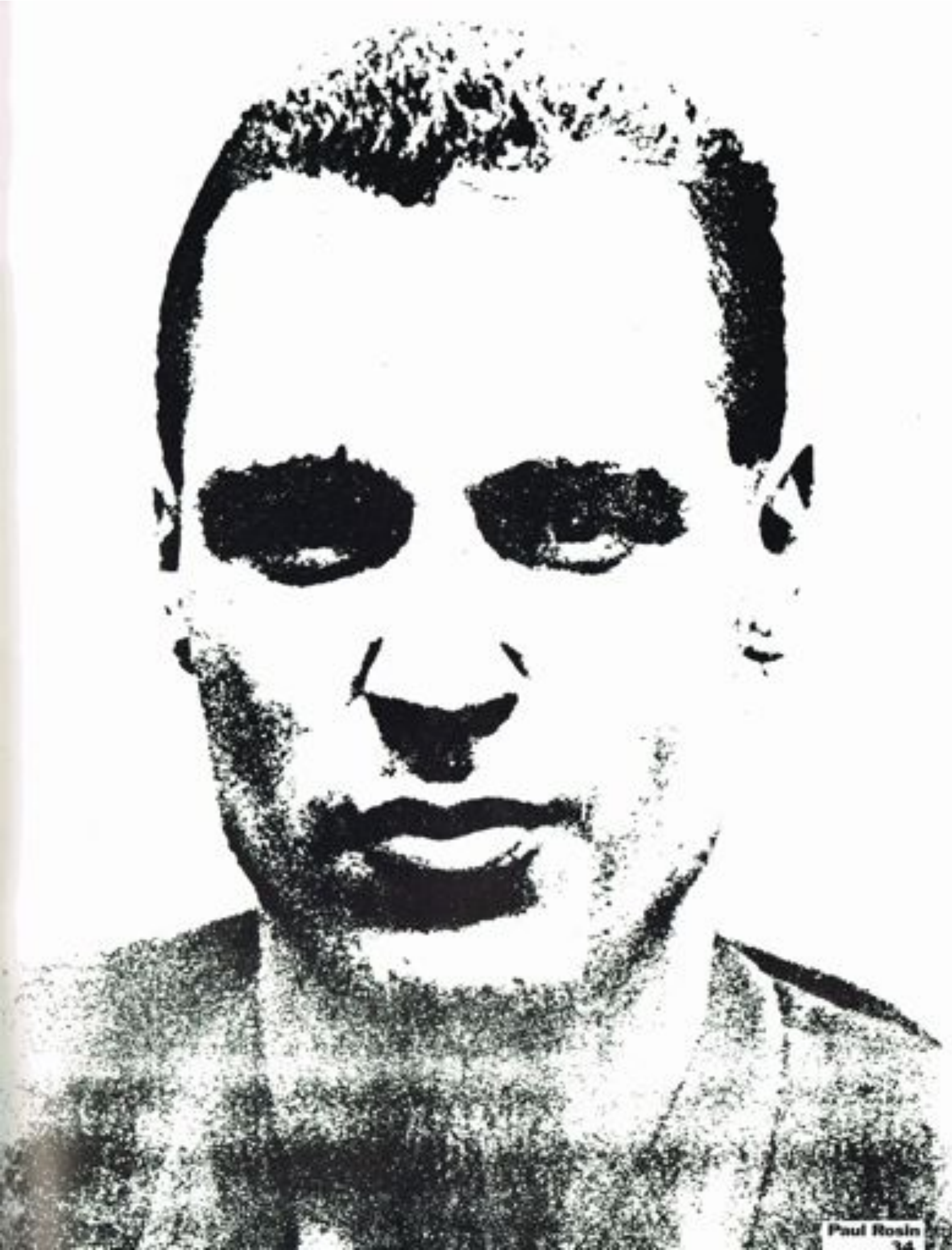
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Steve Doughton
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Magdalen Pierrakos
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Carolyn Carpenter
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Cheryl Dawn Dyer
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Robin Winters
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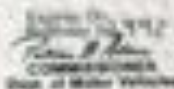


Tony Oursler
39.





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