



THIS SIDE OF PARADISE

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PHOTOGRAPHER DOTAN SAGUY CAPTURES VENICE BEACH ON THE CUSP OF CHANGE

By Christina Campodonico



Dotan Saguy's image of a snake-sitting street performer showcases the larger-than-life and mythic quality of the Venice Beach Boardwalk

Like a drop of seawater containing countless microorganisms living side by side, the communities that make up the Venice Boardwalk are like coexisting worlds within worlds.

“That’s really what I love about Venice,” says photographer Dotan Saguy, who was born on a kibbutz and grew up outside Paris, of the neighborhood he visits frequently and its storied boardwalk.

“All those little worlds are right next to each other and they’re completely different and the people who participate in them are also completely different. ... You have the skate park people and the paint wall people and the Muscle Beach people and the basketball people and the handball people and the racquetball people. It’s just infinite. It goes on and on.”

Saguy captures those microcosms and more in a series of black-and-white photographs collected in a recently published book and part of a new exhibition at Venice Arts opening this Saturday.

Titled “Venice Beach: The Last Days of a Bohemian Paradise,” his photos shot between 2015 and 2017 document a tumultuous period in the boardwalk’s history. Concurrent with the eviction of the Venice Beach Freakshow and protests against Venice’s favorite love-to-hate tech company Snapchat, the dirty circus.”

Saguy tries to not only

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With a Leica Monochrom, Saguy captured quiet moments within the boardwalk's bustling world

showcase both, but dig deeper into their respective beauties, something for which he's gained notice. National Geographic spotlighted six of Saguy's photos of the boardwalk in 2016. And one — a striking black-and-white photo of a Muscle Beach weightlifter about to lift some serious iron as another man thrusts himself into a handstand — even earned him an honorable mention from the magazine's travel section for Travel Photographer of the

Year.

"That was surreal," says Saguy of the nod. "Especially since this was the only black-and-white [photo] they chose in the whole selection of 11 pictures. ... The travel side of National Geographic, they are always in color. They never do anything in black-and-white. So the fact that they chose that picture in ...

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It also helped to put the tech entrepreneur turned pro photographer — who transitioned into photography by taking classes at Santa Monica College and shooting photos for its student newspaper "The Corsair" — double down on his mission to visually document Venice at a critical moment.

"In a way, I was turning a page with that contest," he says. "The yield of pictures really accelerated. ... I want to say the last summer that I shot it, which was last summer, I probably got maybe a third of the pictures in the book."

Some of the stunners on view at Venice Arts include the image of a bikini-clad snake-sitter named Jenna staring down her massive python ward as it stretches itself across two exercise poles, and a tender photo of a zany-hatted animal rights activist named Jingles offering a carnation to a shy, young pregnant woman.

In another, Jenna reclines in the sand (she's almost unrecognizable in the background) while her charge sits coiled around a low exercise bar — her son looking up at it — and another python slithers toward her. It's a surreal juxtaposition of beachside leisure and an exotic, looming threat.






"There's a peace to that photo, but there's a tension," says Saguy. "To me that photo reminds me — especially in hindsight, now that I know that [Jenna and her son] received an eviction notice and they're fighting the eviction and everything — that scene now really in my mind is the Garden of Eden scene."

You could say the photo captures a charmed moment before a reality check that pushed out Venetians and those on the cusp of displacement know all too well — which is why Saguy chose to capture this moment and so many others in Venice in black-and-white.

"I think those scenes are not going to be as frequent," he says. "I wanted to kind of freeze it in time."

Dotan Saguy's "Venice Beach: The Last Days of a Bohemian Paradise" opens from 5 to 8 p.m. Saturday (Aug. 11) and remains on view through Sept. 21 at Venice Arts, 13445 Beach Ave. Free. Visit venicearts.org for gallery hours.



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