

“I had these urges to be a storyteller, to be a writer, and I knew that I had this secret life in Tulsa that no one had photographed...” – Larry Clark

Between 1963 and 1971, the photographer Larry Clark photographed and filmed his close group of friends, drug addicts in Tulsa, Oklahoma. When the images were published as the photo book *Tulsa* (1971), the pictures seared the wholesome image of the American heartland with graphic depictions of sex, drugs, and violence. Clark’s exposé was regarded alternately as a wretched narrative of the decline of American youth, accomplished at the expense of the bodies it represented, and welcomed as an artistic watershed of participant observer-oriented personal documentary valued for the photographer’s privileged access to hidden subcultures. *Unruly Bodies: Dismantling Larry Clark’s Tulsa* seeks to remix Clark’s original story into a critical exhibition that moves beyond sensationalism toward examining the implications of such a photographic project for contemporary life.

Dismantling Clark’s original sequence exposes a number of hidden sub-narratives that complicate the project’s original reception. For example, in the book, sequence and photographic form are made to draw forth involuntary, affective responses from the viewer. *Tulsa*’s emphasis on narrative, in turn, betrays the photographer’s initial intention of making a film about his inner circle, a project that would only reach fruition in 2010—decades after the footage was shot. The series’ relationship with photojournalism, as well, surfaces on close examination: the early photographs show the influence of *LIFE* magazine photographer W. Eugene Smith in both theme and style. Comparison with Danny Lyon’s *Bikeriders* (1968), another precursor to *Tulsa*, draws out evidence of the gendered constructions of the body-conscious 60s, a complex mix of deviant masculinities on the margins of society that contrasts markedly with the minor roles played by the few women in *Tulsa*. Finally, while the underlying theme of this exhibition addresses the biopolitics of *Tulsa*’s rebellious bodies, which engage in illicit and self-destructive behaviors that challenge the regulatory—and life sustaining—control of the dominant culture, it is important to call attention as well to Clark’s own role in constructing *Tulsa*, and to reconsider power from the photographer’s position as the surveillant eye over unruly bodies.

Sequence and Affect

Tulsa continues to elicit strong responses from viewers despite having been published over forty years ago. The involuntary, affective reactions the viewer experiences when faced with the most shocking of the images derives in part from Clark’s ability to construct a narrative that allows for an empathetic relationship with the work. But his most effective strategy is the juxtaposition of distressing scenes and tame ones, which builds suspense through the anticipation of pain, followed by palpable realizations of agony. The underlying theme of death becomes a potent source for this affective response as it clings to the individual photographs and becomes the universal connector, implicating us all.

These affective responses are bolstered through photographic form. Blur, ambiguity, and graininess give the most shocking images a tactile or haptic quality that evokes physical contact. These qualities allow the viewer to rub against the photograph, as it were, as though it were another body. It is this physical interaction, over and above the subject matter, that becomes the site of meaning and value.



Power Over Unruly Bodies

The drug-addicted subjects of *Tulsa* uncover unruly bodies that resist life-sustaining regulations and norms by manipulating their bodies in ways that render them less compliant, less productive, and less normalized than mainstream society. In this way their actions could be cast as a critical form of rebellion against the neo-liberal compulsion to work. But *Tulsa* complicates this biopolitical schema, for as the need to fulfill the craving for drugs consumes these figures, their bodies become increasingly beholden to the drugs themselves: lethargy, listlessness, defeat, anger, hopelessness, violence, and a relentless sexual appetite dominate the confining spaces of the photographs. *Tulsa* suggests that the path of suicide-by-drug abuse is one that divests bodies of agency rather than endowing them with it. This raises the question: Is not Clark, the photographer, the ultimate source of regulatory power here, crafting images—and subjects—for our sensationalist consumption?

Photojournalism

While Clark adamantly rejects the label “photojournalist,” he was a great admirer of W. Eugene Smith. Both Clark and Smith operated from an insider perspective, lending their images a certain aura of authenticity, a strategy validated by *LIFE* magazine, which sought to establish the camera as objective witness. Both photographers explored the crevices of American society, exposing aspects that tarnished America’s image as a pure and wholesome place. Both of them used introspection as a means of humanizing their subjects; both made a point of drawing in ordinary context to create empathy; both manipulated deep shadow

expressively. Finally, both men skated close to betrayal and exploitation for personal gain—an ethical problem that, historically, photojournalism has struggled to contain.

The Women of *Tulsa*

Grouping the photographs of *Tulsa*’s women exposes the subordinate role that women play in the narrative of destruction. These women clearly do not control the guns and syringes that symbolize power in this drug subculture. Rather, they occupy the full range of feminine stereotypes: argumentative shrew and sweet Madonna; selfish destroyer of life and sad witness to death; victim of violence and compliant object, helpless even to shoot up without the aid of a man. As the 1960s passed into the 70s, the Women’s Liberation movement was on the rise, but in this subculture patriarchy remained sovereign.

Tulsa as Film

Larry Clark initially intended to tell the story of Tulsa through film, only abandoning this idea in favor of the photo book once he realized he only had twenty minutes of usable material. Yet even in book form, *Tulsa* possesses many cinematic qualities, as evidenced by its meticulous sequencing, which purposively creates the feeling of a dramatic movie plot. The story builds slowly from the introduction of the principal characters to scenes of blood, violence, and needles, finally climaxing with a death. A few pages of contact prints of the film footage follow, and then the plot is repeated in the latter half of the book. The reader is left with the impression of a never-ending, inescapable cycle with mortal consequences.

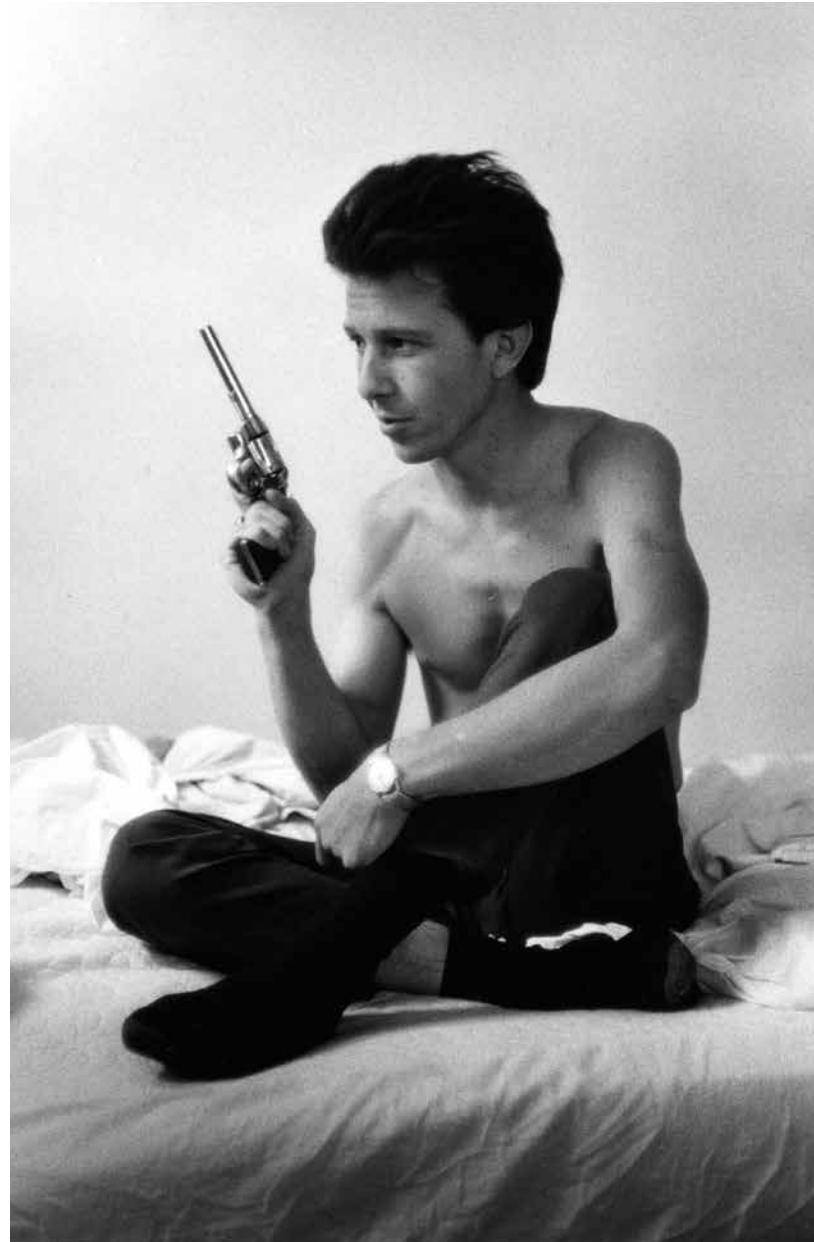


Image credits

Cover: Larry Clark, *Untitled*, 1963, Collection of the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock, 1983.0064.0023 © Larry Clark, Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

Interior: Installation view, *Unruly Bodies: Dismantling Larry Clark's Tulsa*, California Museum of Photography, Riverside, 2016-17 (photo by Nikolay Maslov); Larry Clark, *Untitled*, 1971, collection of the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock, 1984.0036.0013 © Larry Clark, Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

Below: Larry Clark, *Dead 1970*, 1968, Collection of the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock, 1984.0036.0004 © Larry Clark, Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York



Unruly Bodies

Dismantling Larry Clark's Tulsa



Unruly Bodies: Dismantling Larry Clark's Tulsa is organized by the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock and is guest curated by graduate students from the Department of the History of Art and the Public History Program: Pamona Alexander, Marissa Friedman, Robin Hextrum, Rocio Medina, Daisy Ocampo, Karlyn Olvido, Meranda Roberts, and Sara Rowe, as advised by Susan Laxton, Assistant Professor of Art History at UCR. The exhibition is coordinated by Joanna Szupinska-Myers, CMP Curator of Exhibitions, with support from Jamison Pollock, CMP Curatorial Intern. Special thanks to Tyler Stallings, interim Executive Director of ARTSblock; Leigh Gleason, CMP Curator of Collections; Zaid Yousef, ARTSblock Exhibition Designer; and Kathryn Poindexter, CMP Curatorial Assistant. The exhibition is made possible with the support of UCR's College of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (CHASS), and the City of Riverside.

Selections from the Permanent Collection of the California Museum of Photography

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