



# The Clyde Fitch Report.

Arts. Politics. Rage.

## Drive! George Tate's Muscular, Mid-Century Photography

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*The CFR is honored to partner with POBA.org on profiles of its affiliated artists. In this post, we focus on photographer George Tate (1920-92), [whose images of mid-century Southern California are iconic and indelible](#). He is recalled by his son, [California architect Greg Tate](#).*

[POBA is a unique site dedicated to showcasing, promoting and preserving the creative work of exceptional artists](#) — in all forms of artistic expression — who have died without recognition of the full measure of their talents or creative legacies. [POBA](#) is designed to be a great place to see exceptional art that might otherwise not be seen by the public and to be a full-spectrum resource for those responsible for artistic legacies of talented, deceased artists. POBA's mission is simple: POBA aims to keep their creative works alive, and through them to inspire, provoke, intrigue, entertain, and enliven us. POBA is Where The Arts Live!

Who was George Tate? [From his POBA biography:](#)

*George Tate (1920-1992) displayed his uncanny ability to capture the giddiness and hope of a place and time through mesmerizing images of mid-century Southern California. Tate learned the technical aspects as a photographer in the U.S. Army during World War II. Following the war he worked at several photography studios in the Fort Worth, TX area, eventually teaching at the Fort Worth School of Photography. In February 1951 he headed west after receiving a scholarship to the Art Center School of Photography in Los Angeles, where he honed his compositional and aesthetic ideas. After completing his studies in 1953 he worked as a staff photographer for Firestone Tire and Rubber Co. in their Guided Missile Section until 1958. In June of that year he struck out on his own as a freelance photojournalist until he retired in the 1970s.*

*His 1950s work delves into the health and fitness life style of Muscle Beach in Santa Monica, CA and shows the sands teeming with contestants, athletes and adoring crowds. His unique look at people that made up the scene captures a range of emotions and moments silhouetted against an always-brilliant sky. Toward the late 1950s, he explored candid street photography showing the hustle and bustle of the city with endless sidewalks, coffee shops and storefronts as backdrops. Some of his most moving work captures the loneliness at the heart of the city, "lonesomer than the desert even."*

*His Venice Surfestival Beauty Pageant series from the 1960's takes the best from his candid street photography and brings that back to the beach. Editorial in spirit, the images show what's behind the smiles of pageant hopefuls as they fret and worry before taking the stage. Concurrently he also photographed many models, hopeful starlets and took a variety of classic cheesecake images.*

*"People look, but they don't see" was one his favorite quotes.*

### **What's the most perceptive question anyone could have asked George about his work?**

The most perceptive question I think he was ever asked was "Did your wife play any role in your success as a photographer?" It was perceptive because she was so fundamental to his success and to the great pleasure he had being a photographer. Robbye Tate (Mom to me) supported George's creative freedom and [bohemian approach to life](#) throughout their 50-year marriage. It would be fair to say that without her support, he could not have had the time or the means to become the photographer he became. Theirs was a symbiotic relationship: he'd see Robbye off to work and [then go out all day taking photos!](#) She loved his work, and they loved their life and each other. Together, they made the time and space for him to become a great photographer. He brought the talent, the eye, and the passion to the mix.



"Muscle Beach Adagio": Courtesy Santa Monica Historical Museum.

### **What's the most idiotic question anyone could have asked George about his work?**

People often asked him "Why are you [standing in the street taking photos of carwashes?](#)" I remember many summers helping Dad carry his camera equipment around L.A. He'd plant his camera where he thought he would get the best shots and get under his black cloth to take his photos. People would drive by honking and yelling at him for being in the road. Because I was a kid, I just stood there, mortified. George was unflappable, though. He'd remain undeterred and wouldn't say a word until he got the shot the way he wanted it!

### **What's the weirdest question anyone could have asked George about his work?**

I think he would have been weirded out by questions about fame and recognition. It just wasn't on his radar. I don't think he could have imagined his photography would be seen and loved by

thousands of people in dozens of countries some 50 years after they were taken. And with the advent of social media, the [reach of the Internet](#) would have floored him.

**George’s [Muscle Beach photos](#) glamorize and almost idolize health, beauty and fitness as the 1950s defined it. But what about it personally fascinated George so much? What do you think he was he trying to say, capture or interpret? Was he himself a fit man?**

Coming from a part of Texas that was both weather-challenged and provincial, he was taken by Southern California’s perpetually sunny days, the beautiful bodies and the freewheeling attitudes of the men and women there. He and my mother were also part of the World War II generation that really wanted to make life over, start fresh, live life to the fullest. I also think he was working out compositional ideas after recently graduating from the Art Center School of Photography. He was documenting the health and fitness movement taking hold on the West Coast, which by the 1950s was becoming a [modern-day Babylon](#). He was very fit. I remember him doing exercises in the living room, and goofing around that he’d learned his basic fitness techniques in the Army. When he was in his 60’s he took up bike riding. He loved to be outdoors, moving around!

**The images of car washes and gas stations from the 1960s and ’70s are as stunning as the Muscle Beach photos, except these images are not of live people but structures. In the end, which one was George more interested in? Do you have an opinion regarding which type of photography—street or commercial—he excelled in more? What do you think of contemporary architecture in southern California?**

He was very interested in [real people and real life](#), and used to say “People are the most interesting things to look at!” He’d chide me when my photos didn’t have any people in them. It took me a while to understand what my father knew and felt all along: that people not only add scale but lend warmth to pictures of modern buildings. As an architect, this was really helpful to me in illustrating my work.



“Legs.” Courtesy POBA.



George Tate. Courtesy POBA.

George excelled in street photography — he could get right in the middle of a crowd and go virtually unnoticed. His talent for invisibility let him shoot documentary-style images all day long. On the other hand, he loved architecture, the shape, form, color and shadows of buildings. The carwashes and gas stations chronicle the ubiquitous “car life” that was emerging. But they also capture the Southern California lifestyle — the new, Babylon kind of life you saw everywhere — in the very specific form and style of buildings that were taking shape in California. He was also very proud of his commercial work and shot hundreds of buildings for Best Steel.

As an architect myself, I love the architecture of SoCal! This is one of the centers of the world for architecture with a capital “A.” The iconic Frank Gehry,

the idiosyncratic Thom Mayne and the rising-star Patrick Tighe are just a few examples of the architects who have made and kept this a mecca for contemporary architecture. Love it, always have and always will.

**Reflecting on George's whole portfolio and accomplishments as a photographer, which three images showcase his "eye" most perfectly? Are those three your personal favorites or are they other images? Which ones?**

I love the **people and carwashes** the most! I think George loved these as well.