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"For 20 Years, This Photographer Has Captured Mohawks in the Wild"

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Visual Culture

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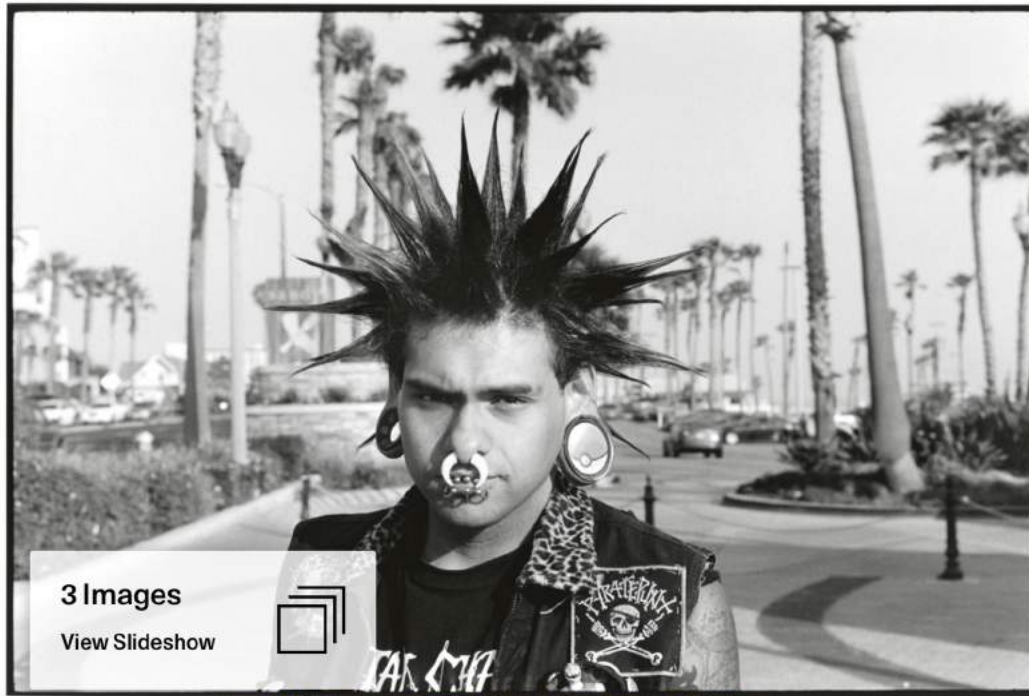
By Scott Indrisek



Ed Templeton, *Punk Tempere, Finland*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects.

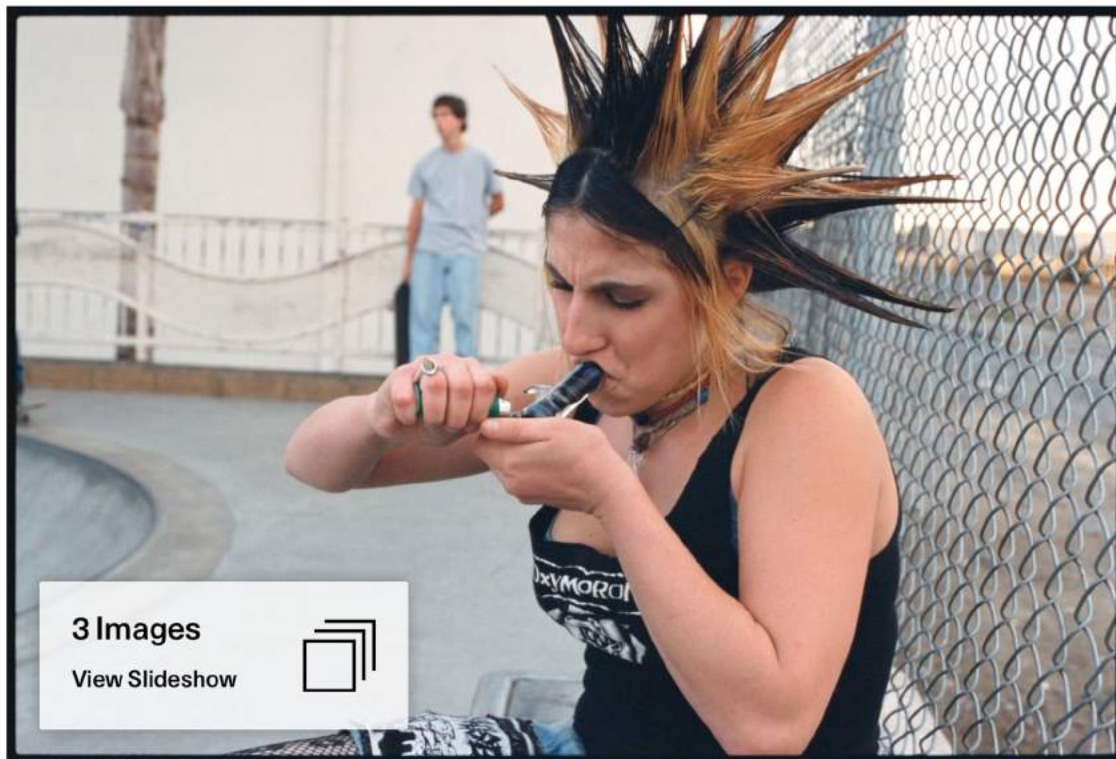
"I'm coming at it through a stance of awe," says the photographer Ed Templeton, discussing his portraits of mohawk-wearers around the world. "I like dressing super plain, not revealing anything about myself. But these people go: *'I'm a punk, and I'm going to spike my hair up and walk around on the street and be that guy every day.'* I'm in awe of that, as an anthropological thing."

The mohawk, like many cultural appropriations, has a fraught and twisty-turny history. Despite its Native American roots, it has—in its more extravagant, spiked, dyed forms—become associated in the popular imagination with the (predominantly white and male) punk rockers who adopted the haircut as an impossible-to-miss middle finger to the mainstream. The mohawk itself bifurcates into a dazzling array of subcategories, from the Chelsea hawk to the lazy hawk, and the dreadhawk to the rat-hawk.



Templeton's attraction to the hairstyle as a cultural marker makes sense: He first picked up photography in the early '90s to document the culture of skateboarding (he turned pro in 1990) and has long been a documentarian of youth. In his time, Templeton has seen reactions to the hairstyle change significantly. What was once an incendiary gesture can now seem like the trappings of a costume. "The mainstreaming of the mohawk is a real bummer for the authentic punks who have been living that lifestyle forever," he admits. "Even the kids I see who are legit punks, there's an element of dress-up."

Partly, Templeton says, it's the internet that has made once-rebellious or niche subcultures accessible to anyone. What was once a labor of love—diving into a genre's intricacies, paying one's dues—has become effortless. "You could be a nerd one second, with no musical taste, and then find goth music, downloading everything, ordering every piece of goth clothing on Amazon. You can go from zero to full-on goth in one week if you wanted to."



The broader acceptance of the mohawk, however, has made Templeton's job as a photographer easier. "Now, having a mohawk in public isn't a sign of *'leave me alone.'* It's a sign of *'come talk to me.'* Every single person I've gone up to has been delighted that I want to take their photo."

Templeton's mohawk-centric photo series is currently on view at [Roberts Projects](#) in Los Angeles. (The show, "Hairdos of Defiance," borrows its title from a phrase coined by *Thrasher* magazine's skate photographer Mark Burnett.) While many might think of today's mohawk as an affectation of white teens in the suburbs, there's a surprising diversity captured in these images, from a young African-American punk in Detroit (sporting a rare tri-frohawk) to a young girl in Long Beach with almost shockingly high mohawk plumage.



Ed Templeton, *Sunbathe Hawk, HB*, 2016, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects.

In other instances, a gentle pathos abounds: A portrait taken in 2015 depicts an older punk with a “balding hawk” that starts “in the middle of his head.” Another image catches a high-mohawked man sprawled on the sands of Huntington Beach, reading.

Other photographs capture the labor-intensive upkeep that a mohawk can require, with friends helping each other gel and sculpt tall liberty spikes—the hair carefully twisted into a row of knife-like points. Templeton acknowledges that there’s an unexpected fussiness involved in maintaining such a dramatic hairstyle. “For me, punk was an attitude where you just didn’t care,” he says. “Spending an hour fixing your hair—for my sensibilities, that’s not punk.”

I asked Templeton if he’s encountered many avid skateboarders who also rock mohawks. He can’t think of any; indeed, the sport would seem to beg for a more aerodynamic haircut. But the artist is already conjuring the possibilities. “I was imagining a guy skating down a bike path,” he muses, “using his hawk as a sail...” ●



Scott Indrisek is Artsy’s Deputy Editor.