WONDERLAND: KICKSTARTER'S MOST-FUNDED PHOTOGRAPHY PROJECT

PRO PHOTOGRAPHE

INSPIRATION FOR IMAGING PROFESSIONA

GO BACKSTAGE WITH BRIAN FINKE

Exploring the hidden worlds of hip-hop video vixens, flight attendants & frat parties.

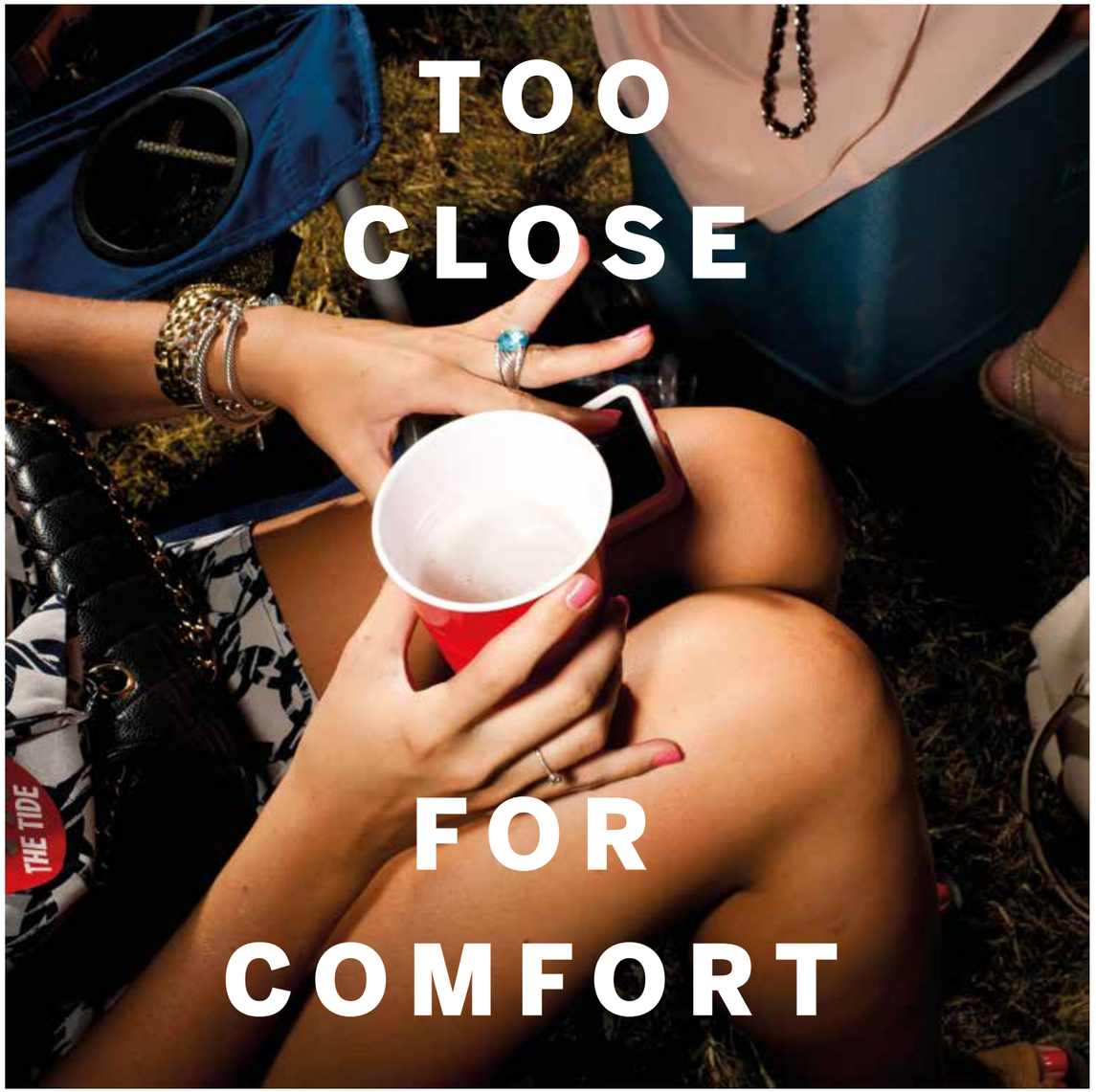
Photographing rocket launches
PG.30

The new frontier of storytelling
PG.46

NEW GEAR: NIKON D500 » PANASONIC LEICA 12MM F/1.4

$11.95

ISSUE 019 AUGUST/SEPTEMBER 2016



TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT

THE TIDE

From the über-preppy bacchanalia of fraternity and sorority life in America's deep south, to the fitness cults of Zumba and Spartan Race, to the off-camera lives of hip-hop video models, photographer Brian Finke has made a career of bringing American subcultures into sharp and often disturbingly close focus.

WRITTEN BY ELLIOTT WOODS

ON

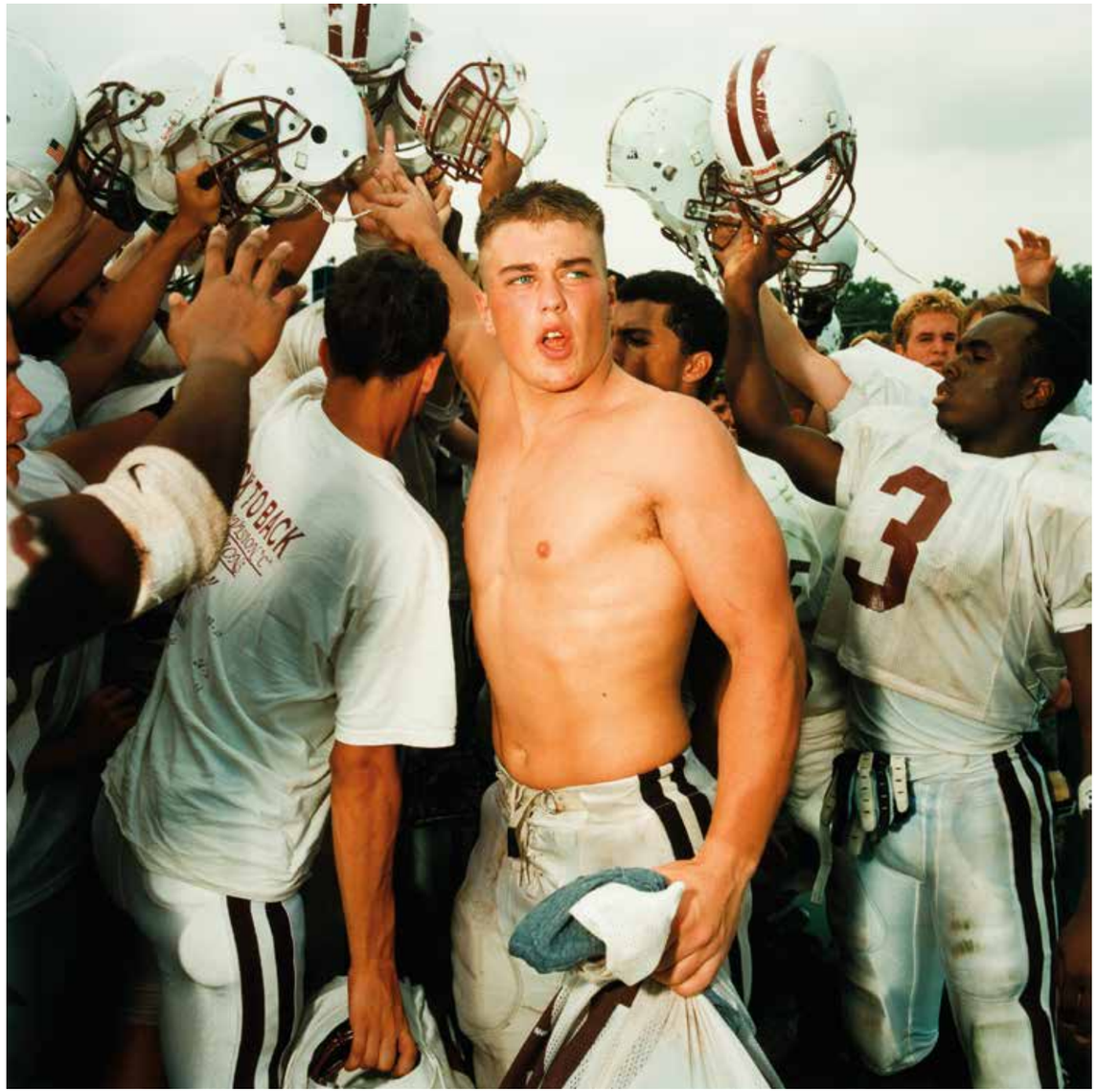
FRIDAY NIGHTS IN Spring, Texas, Brian Finke stood on the sidelines with a 35mm camera slung around his neck. He had a hunch that that he was standing in front of a gold mine: straw-haired boys with braces in colourful uniforms, posing like the pros they lionise; girls with big hair, stage makeup, and fake tans, armed with pompoms and blazing white smiles.

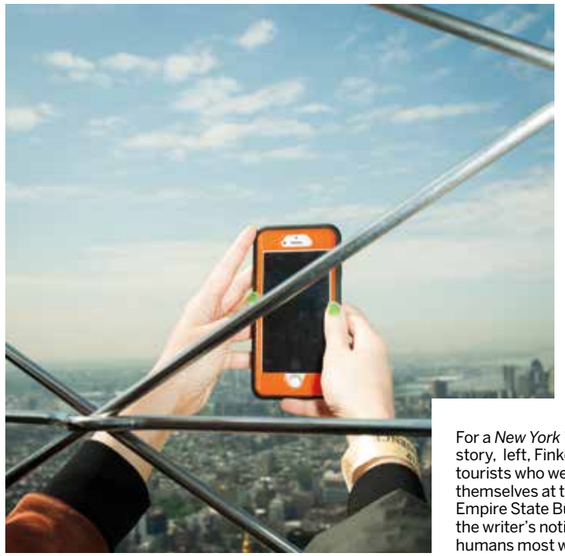
Brian Finke started photographing cheerleaders at his former high school in a project that began as a drug-use investigation and ended as a long-term fascination with high school and college sports. In the early 2000s, Finke photographed cheerleaders and football players in suburban America, stylised with his now-distinctive use of strobes. The project was published in 2003 as a monograph titled *2-4-6-8*. On the previous spread, Finke turned his attention from the action within the stadium to the action outside it, documenting 'tailgating': the parties that take place outside football stadiums in the parking lot, before the game begins.

Finke, 40, now lives in Brooklyn, New York, with his two young sons, but he grew up a long way from that epicentre of global media, in a suburb of Houston, Texas. As a high school freshman, Finke signed on with the school newspaper as a photographer and delved into darkroom classes. It was there that he discovered the social documentary work of W. Eugene Smith, and that his lifelong obsession with documenting America's football and cheerleading cultures began.

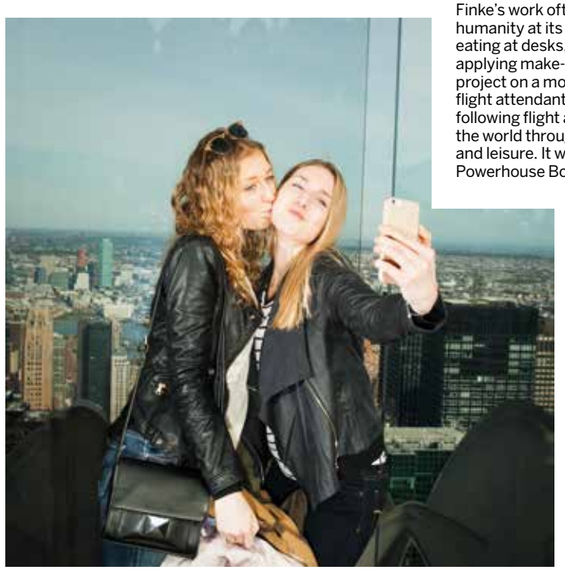
By the time he crossed the country in 1994 to pursue a fine arts degree at the School of Visual Arts in New York City, he was an accomplished darkroom technician and photographer, but he was still treading close to the paths beaten by his idols—Gene Smith, Gilles Peress, Robert Frank—trying hard to emulate the black-and-white realist aesthetic of an earlier generation of documentary photographers. He photographed heroin users in the South Bronx, traveled to India on a grant from the Alexia Foundation for World Peace, and was selected to participate in a project called Child Labor and the Global Village.

"I was trying to photograph in a very similar style, and similar subject matter," he told me over the phone from his Brooklyn apartment, "and when I came back from India I really felt the need to find something that felt more like my own, stylistically, and in terms of subject matter." »





For a *New York Times Magazine* story, left, Finke documented tourists who were photographing themselves at the top of the Empire State Building, illustrating the writer's notion that what humans most want to see from an observation deck is themselves. Finke's work often portrays humanity at its most awkward: eating at desks, posing for selfies, applying make-up. A multi-year project on a modern icon, the flight attendant, involved Finke following flight attendants around the world through training, work and leisure. It was published by Powerhouse Books in 2008.



Around that time, he saw the movie *Bring It On*, about competitive high school cheerleading, and something clicked. Finke's two sisters had been cheerleaders back in Texas, and he knew high-school sports was a world that he could access. He began travelling the country to photograph football players and cheerleaders, and the resulting work became his first book, *2-4-6-8: American Cheerleaders and Football Players*, published by Umbrage Editions in 2003.

The book reflected years of experimentation with colour film and medium format, using flash to manipulate colour and mood. In the darkroom, working with black-and-white film, Finke had enjoyed the range of expression he could achieve with adjustments in the printing process. Working with colour and artificial light challenged him to learn how to make those adjustments in the camera itself, opening up a new world of artistic possibilities.

He started picking up assignments with the *Village Voice*, New York's alternative newspaper, and making the rounds with editors at major newspapers and magazines, returning every few months to show them new work. He caught a break when one of his editors at the *Village Voice* moved on to *New York Magazine* and eventually assigned him a feature, after some front-of-the-book work. Making the jump to editorial work, Finke had the flexibility to explore new creative territory. Rather than approaching stories in the standard *Life* magazine format—with a storytelling set of wides, mediums, details, action shots, and portraits—Finke developed a penchant for up-close shots that force you to inhabit the personal space of the subject in a way that is occasionally disorienting and often uncomfortable. Though he has kept his passion for social documentary work alive, he has strayed far from the raw aesthetic of his old-school heroes.

"I don't consider myself a journalist," he told me. "I have a very simple approach to work. I love being out in the world and experiencing all of it."

Finke was on a short break between assignments when we spoke, and the week ahead was typical of his schedule. In the following days, he would be photographing tourists taking selfies on top of the Empire State Building for the *New York Times*, flying to Washington, DC to photograph a Republican politician for *Businessweek*, and then driving six hours to Virginia to attend a backyard mixed-martial arts fight. "I'm along for the ride," he said. "I love the randomness of it."

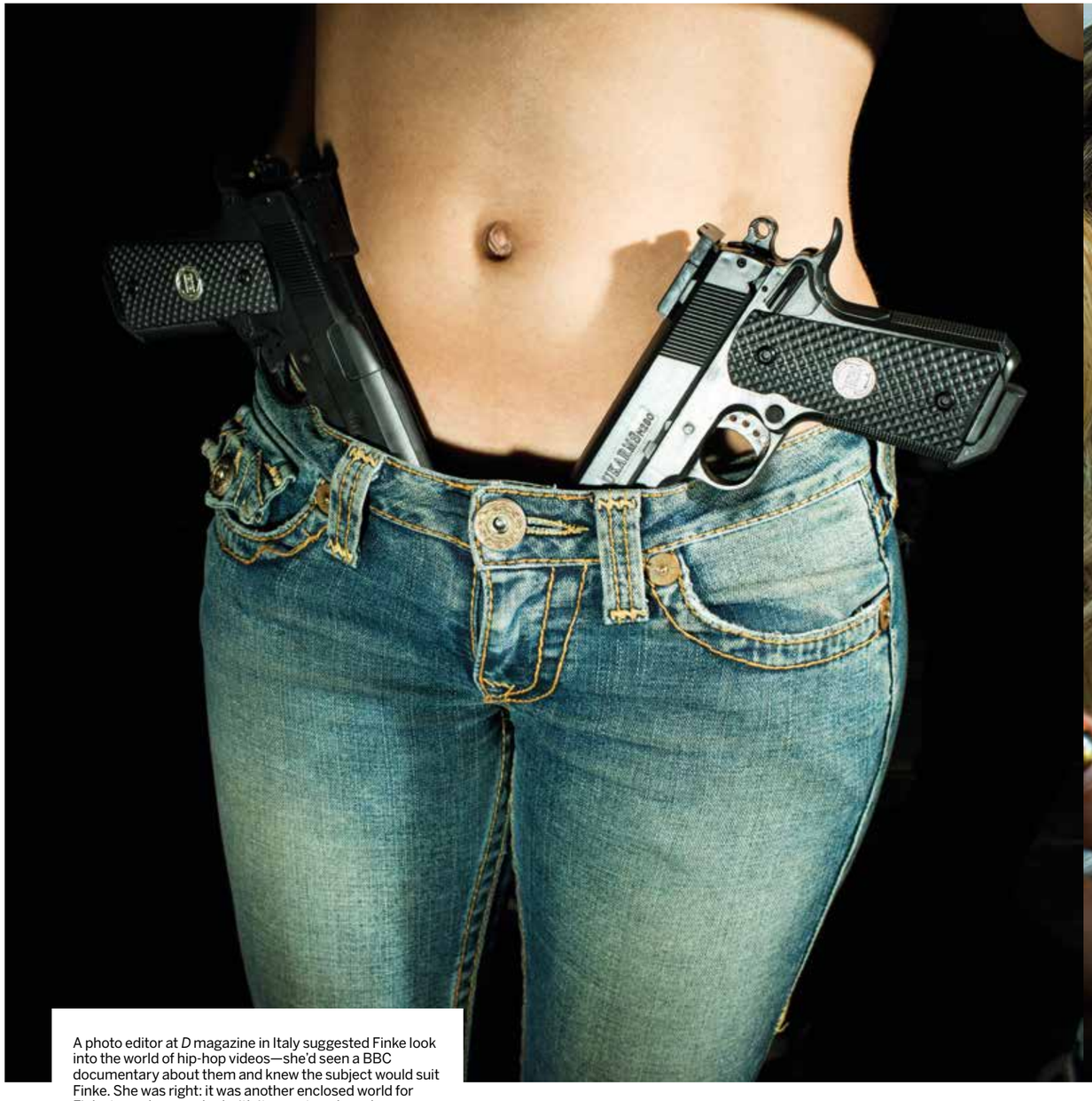
Note number five in the painter Richard Diebenkorn's memo, 'Ten Notes on Beginning a Painting', describes Finke's approach well: "Don't discover a subject of any kind." In other words, one should start painting first and see what emerges, rather than pre-conceive an artwork. While at first glance, Finke's collections seem tightly contained by their subject matter—perhaps even overdetermined—spending some time with his photographs reveals an eye that carefully chooses images for their expressive potential, for the way that vivid colours and evocative facial expressions combine to force a visceral reaction, and for their ability to capture the bizarreness and grotesqueness of the mundane.

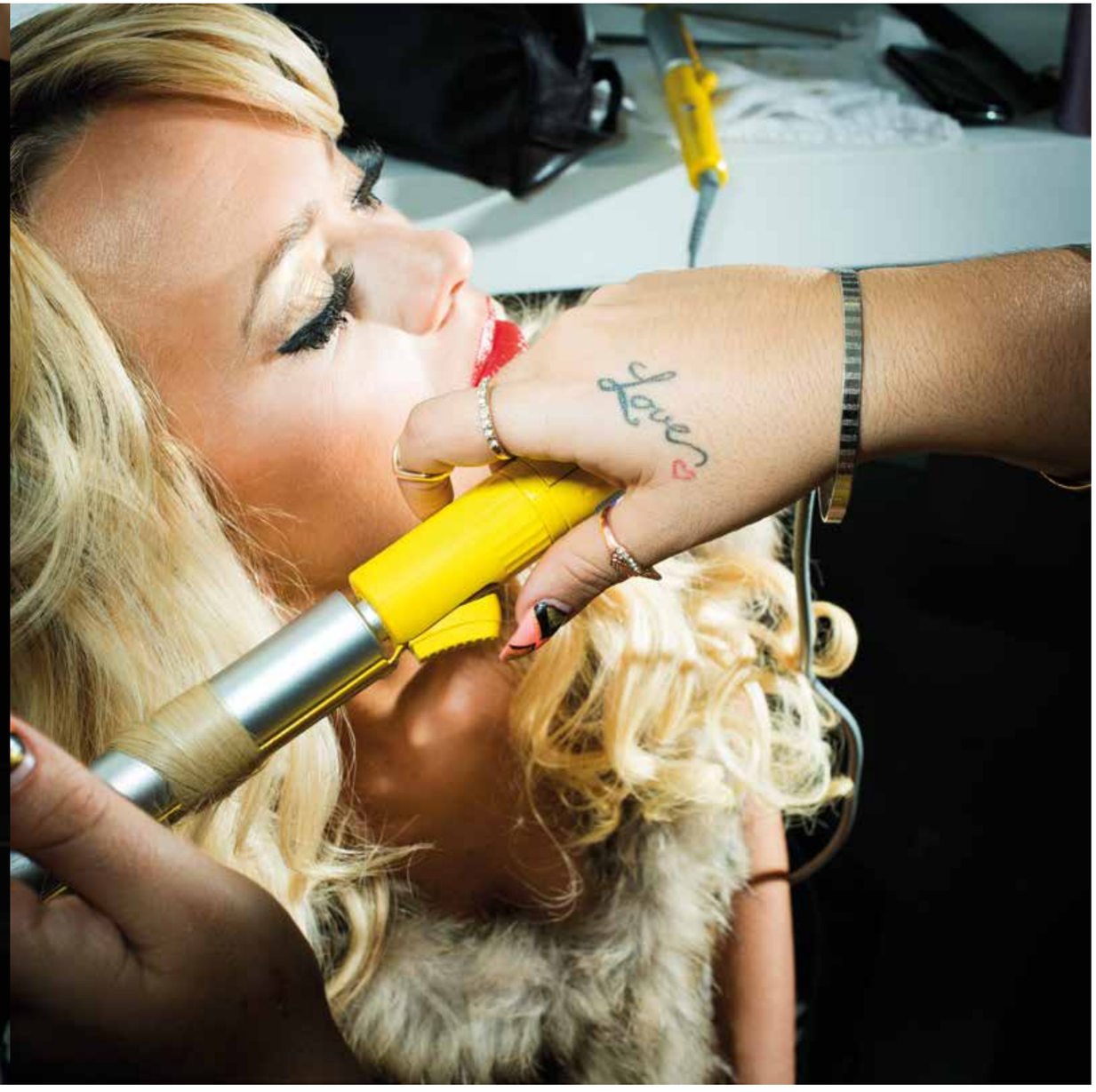
As part of a project for *ESPN Magazine*, Finke attended university football games to document the pre-game parking lot mayhem known as 'tailgating'. Amid the jubilation of the teen and 20-something fans, who are dressed in the pastels and paisleys of the white south, we are confronted with the horror of conformity. An initial reaction—*That looks fun*—swiftly morphs into—*What the hell is wrong with these people?* In a picture from a tailgating party at the University of Mississippi, known as Ole Miss, we see what appears to be an expensive white leather purse stuffed with two large bottles of whiskey sitting on a patch of grass, ringed by three pairs of well-manicured feet in strappy sandals. The painted toenails, the tanned legs, the sandals—all stamps of inclusion that are further enumerated throughout the set.

FINKE DEVELOPED A PENCHANT FOR UP-CLOSE SHOTS THAT FORCE YOU TO INHABIT THE PERSONAL SPACE OF THE SUBJECT IN A WAY THAT IS OCCASIONALLY DISORIENTING AND OFTEN UNCOMFORTABLE.

The boys have floppy haircuts with long fringes swept across their brows, Polo-brand button-down shirts, stickers from fraternities and sororities. They wear Ray-Ban sunglasses and clutch ubiquitous red Dixie Cups. Above all the other symbols of the tribe, it is the passion for collective intoxication that seems to create the deepest bonds—at least in Finke's world. If these were photos of heroin users in the South Bronx, how would our reactions differ? What is it about wealthy white people dressed in expensive clothing that makes drinking to excess come off like a cherished pastime instead of a social disease?

In one photo—a close-up of two blondes in sun dresses laughing at someone or something off-screen—we see a foreshadowing of the near future. A young man, his shirt unbuttoned and his tie loosened, grimaces as he swallows a gulp of his beverage. He grips a tent pole with one hand—is it a casual gesture or to prevent him falling over? We know where he's headed. We know where the guy slumped next to a keg of beer in the back of a pickup truck at the Louisiana State University tailgate is headed, too, and we can guess what the night holds for the woman in cowboy boots held aloft by two men as she chugs booze from a Gatorade cooler, for the »





A photo editor at *D* magazine in Italy suggested Finke look into the world of hip-hop videos—she'd seen a BBC documentary about them and knew the subject would suit Finke. She was right: it was another enclosed world for Finke to explore, packed with its own trends and conventions. He started shooting behind-the-scenes on video sets of famous artists and B-list stars alike, for a series that became 'Hip Hop Honeys', an ongoing project about the women who provide background decoration in music videos.

woman in the purple dress slugging Maker's Mark bourbon from the bottle, and for the four people preparing to pound beer from neon-green tubes attached like octopus tentacles to a funnel named 'Bongzilla'. While other sports photographers focused on expressions of fandom and the action on the sidelines, Finke trained his eye on subtle markers of identity—a method that results in fascinating portraits of subcultures wherever Finke finds them.

In 'Hip Hop Honeys', Finke's long-running personal project about the off-camera lives of hip-hop video models, the markers of inclusion change, but the pressure to conform remains. Replace sundresses with black fishnet stockings, strappy sandals with gold-studded high heels, Ralph Lauren Polo button-downs with tracksuits. The women Finke shows us are often posing in highly sexualised stances, their asses to the camera. They wear heavy makeup and revealing outfits that draw attention to their breasts, hips, legs, butts—not terribly different from the makeup and outfits that Finke's high school and college cheerleaders wear, but in a venue that dispenses with any notions of innocence. When men are present in the photographs, they are usually ogling a woman at the centre of the frame, accentuating her identity as object of sexual desire and luxury possession.

Mostly, the women are alone, photographed either in hotel rooms or in the unfinished concrete backrooms of video sets where they're waiting to perform. Finke uses a blend of harsh flash and dark backgrounds to accentuate the artificiality of the women's outfits, makeup, and seductive posturing. It would not be appropriate to call the portraits intimate, even though they are revealing of something beyond the superficiality that the video girls are involved in creating. Rather, they make it explicitly clear that the hyper-sexualised representation of women in hip hop videos, as in many other realms, is the opposite of intimacy.

HE IS, ESSENTIALLY, A COLLECTOR OF CULTURAL ARTEFACTS, WHICH HE PRESENTS TO US IN SUCH A WAY THAT WE ARE COMPELLED TO DRAW LINES AND BOXES BETWEEN AND AROUND THEM.

There is no judgment implicit in Finke's photography, and he denies that he has any goals or ideas motivating the way that he depicts hip-hop video girls, drunk football fans, or any other subculture. When we spoke, he refused to identify any common threads joining his body of work together, and said that his work has not led him to any general conclusions about American culture. He is, essentially, a collector of cultural artefacts, which he presents to us in such a way that we are compelled to draw lines and boxes between and around them. It is up to us to search for meaning in what Finke insists is nothing more than scrupulously assembled miscellany.

With a few subtle tweaks, many of Finke's photographs would be perfectly at home in a Prada or Nike marketing campaign—which isn't surprising when you consider that Finke makes part of his income shooting for major luxury brands and advertising agencies. Singles from a Nike shoot featured on his portfolio site would fit well in his photo essay about a special Caribbean cruise for devotees of Spartan Race—a pay-to-play obstacle course race series popular among Crossfit types. The images of elaborately painted fake fingernails he produced for the liquor brand Southern Comfort would blend in seamlessly with 'Hip Hop Honeys'. In fact, the only true demarcation between the sets of photographs on Finke's website is that they are organised according to which assignment or personal project they were produced for. But if you were to shuffle them all together and select 50, you'd still have a cohesive and compelling collection, maybe even a book.

The America that Finke reveals to us is a constant party, a collage of saturated colours, affectations of fashion and expression, and people who seem to be self-conscious and conspicuously alone—even when they are surrounded by other people. It is a world where the less glamorous sides of mass culture and the modern workplace reveal themselves in images of tourists taking photos of themselves atop skyscrapers with the aid of aluminum selfie sticks, overworked employees eating lunch at their desks alone, flight attendants applying eyeshadow and blush in tiny handheld mirrors to conform to a dress code, and middle-aged swingers canoodling with strangers at a resort in Jamaica. If you're taking photos of yourself, who do you intend to show them to? What is the nature of intimacy experienced with someone who does not know you or care about you? Why are all of us—regardless of skin colour, age, or geography—so drunk all the time?

It's hard not to take Finke's collective output as evidence of a culture made up of individuals who are so desperate for a sense of identity that they are willing to sacrifice authenticity. The thing about makeup, stage lighting, and tight clothing is that it only makes people look more beautiful at a distance and from a particular angle—up close and bathed in bright light, the mask is conspicuous, disturbing, and even a little sad. ✪

brianfinke.com

After the state of Colorado legalised marijuana, a 2014 MSNBC documentary investigated the new industry's biggest players. Finke shot stills for the project, including the 'Flowering Room' at supplier Starbuds' warehouse, right, and one of its customers, Billy Rogers, smoking a joint after work in his Denver apartment, left. Below, Finke's first story for *National Geographic* focused on the meat industry. Director of photography Sarah Leen commissioned Finke after seeing his many Instagrams of his own backyard BBQ, which he documents in loving detail.