

SEARCHING FOR RUSSELL CROTTY
(WE FOUND HIM AND MET WARRIOR AND DREW ONA ONEA.)

THE EAST COAST
GOES OFF
-STICK AROUND- (PART 2) - JERRY BRANDELL.

surfer

DECEMBER 2010

...G-LANDIA...

TRASHY AND FUN - THE TONGUE - THE SURFER.
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DECEMBER 2010
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surfermagazine

December, 2010

(And the lost secrets of his California Homegrounds)

SEARCHING FOR RUSSELL CROTTY

— Kimball Taylor

California Homegrounds

Art begins with a voice - deep and resonant - a radio voice calling in from another time. "The mosaic eyeball," says Russell Crotty, and the phrase rumbled with possibility. "The mosaic eyeball."

The fifty-four-year old artist walked the streets of Fort Bragg, an old Northern Californian lumber town. He saw two places: the slowly gentrifying tourist hamlet it is now, and the decaying backwater it had been during his youth. He remembered days when this central street was lined with seedy bars and mill workers. Paychecks dispensed at the nearby docks rarely made it home. It was not a place, Crotty says, with a lot of options. In his artwork it is called "Fort Dragg." Crotty's childhood home lay in Mendocino, an even smaller town minutes down the coast. "Mendo" had been a minor mill town as well, and would likely have disappeared altogether if a group of San Francisco artists, Crotty's parents included, hadn't created the Mendocino Arts Center. The Center kept the town on life support while mashing lumbermen and beat generation artists in an uneasy truce. The kids of both Mendo and Fort Bragg surprised all sides by becoming surfers and hippies and heroin addicts.

North and south, the young Crotty combed a landscape of wooded hummocks, sea stacks, and creek mouths. He was a loner with a lot of freedom. His older brothers built a driftwood beach shack from giant drift logs. Crotty was specifically not allowed in or near the structure. So, one day, he torched it. Later he hung with the "rough and tumble" surfers of Fort Bragg, "a sort of intimidating bunch." And then on a summer night, the voice seized his creative mind—it floated in from a spindly radio tower based out of Tijuana, the melodic tones of disk jockey Buddy Lowe on the 1090 Soul Express. "There I am just a country bumpkin, laying out on the deck looking at the stars," says Crotty, "and here comes the voice of Buddy Lowe—so exotic and foreign. It lit my imagination."

As Crotty walked its streets again, Fort Bragg felt hurried in the midst of re-inventing itself. The Victorian downtown sported fresh paint. There were coffee shops and surf stores. And then, there in a tidy optometrist's office window, a 12" diameter eyeball rendered in mosaic tiles gazed blindly upon the street. Under the influence of the voice—the presence of which immediately delivers Crotty into a world of his own creation—this eyeball became infused with a meaning, the kernel of an idea that would later seep into his artwork like mercury finding a balance. The phrase in fact, would re-emerge as prose running through the contours of a jagged seascape, a telltale mark buried in cryptic directions to a secret sand bar: "Creek country," it reads. "North

of the former mill town and the mosaic eyeball. . . climb down the riff raff and go out, watch for the sneaker sets and the sharks.”

Today, Crotty is arguably the most successful artist ever to have built upon surfing as a theme. His work hangs in the Whitney and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, and the most prestigious contemporary museum in Europe, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, France. He earned an MFA from University of California Irvine in 1980, bounced between the art scenes of San Francisco and Los Angeles, and eventually toiled away on a bucolic Malibu hilltop. His reputation rose with the popularity of “mark making.” The genre includes everything from drawing to scratches on a cave wall. But as other “low brow” genres found galleries and acclaim among purveyors of modern art in the 1990s, Crotty’s waves, surfers, satellites and stars found a high-brow following. All the while, Crotty continued his coastal scouting and his stomping grounds grew to include much of the western coastline.

The funny thing is, other than a profile in the second-ever issue of *The Surfer’s Journal*, Crotty remained nearly unknown in the surf world. “Surf Drawing Blue,” an iconic piece among his early work stands 10’ X 20’, consumes a large gallery wall, and contains 40,000 thumb-sized sequenced cells of surfers pulling into and out of tubes. Pocket rides give way to floaters, bottom turns flow into Curren-esque arcs that lead, inevitably, back into the curl. Each image is minimal and kinetic. One wonders at the ability of chicken scratch to evoke such energy. A surfer can lose himself in the bend of this eternal wave, and yet, the piece speaks equally, and with more qualitative success, to a cold modernist read. There are loftier ideas in the repetition. From 20 feet away “Surf Drawing Blue” looks like script recovered from alien spacecraft—and for many in the art world, the subject matter might as well have been.

And so it is that Crotty’s intimate depictions of the California coast end up in odd places—venues where they might receive wonder at their unintelligible modernism just as the secrets of a lifelong coastal wanderer become lost in their own repetition. The main entrance to the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, China, for example, is dominated by three of Crotty’s giant globes—perfect fiberglass spheres surfaced in paper and covered in Crotty’s earth and sky. One invokes fields of mustard grass, another the rolling hills of Paso Robles, and a third, jagged sea stacks north of Fort Bragg. The mosaic eyeball. If one were able to hover high in the embassy’s palatial entry, and to read the text crawling through these California landscapes, they would discover Crotty’s voice.

Yet there is a body of work through which the voice runs deepest. Thirty years ago, Crotty came upon a stack of empty, hardbound, cloth-covered books at a failing stationary store. He bought them, took them home, and as he began to fill the pages, the artist discovered a project that would last the rest of his life: *California Homegrounds*. The volumes are satirical takes on commercial surf magazines—complete with travel features, endorsements, action sequences, spot descriptions and hero worship. The formula of surf-porn and marketing alchemy are rendered in simple stick-figure illustrations—and, something informative happens when surfers are stripped of their surf clothing. The content might be considered childlike if not for the furry and precision of the action or the artistic truth in fictional editor Perge Wilcox’ take on surf culture. “A Pain in the Groins,” reads one article, a piece centered on a crew of ne’er-do-wells and their hollow jetty wave: “From the draft table of some deluded engineer, the locals here praise the bastard . . .” A point break on the Lost Coast becomes the fodder for a tale of warning: “The Shack!—it’s a spooky place, but the waves are the ultimate day off. I’ve camped there a lot . . . but never by the shack. I think something happened there, something really BAD!”

The characters of *California Homegrounds* are archetypes of the people we know—like Bearded Hippy (“Bearded Hippy says, ‘Do the pure thing.’”), slick professionals Drake Edwards and Chard Fulsom, or Elwood, the driftwood artist, and Sonia, the girl-ripper by day,

ceramicist by night. Homegrounds surf spots ebb off the page as familiar haunts—Dead Cars, Creak Peak, and Astros. A well-regarded break in Los Angeles is thinly veiled as “Goon Lagoon.” Jetty rocks and retaining walls are peppered with broken bottle shards, bird shit and graffiti: No Un-Locals. The kooks are identified and forewarned: No Malibu Frankies, No Todds.

Amidst the humor and the piss-taking, however, is a deadpan geographic seriousness. Crotty’s body of astronomy-inspired work caused one critic to compare him to the gentlemen astronomers of the Victorian age—there is a humanism to his obsessive detail. Yet in California Homegrounds, Crotty also comes to us from a time in California’s 1970s when localized and secret surf spots developed very real cult followings, and Crotty’s boots-on-the-ground experience with the coasts of all three western states bleeds through in spot descriptions—White Cliffs: howling offshores and superfast sand bottom walls. When the banks are set . . . heart stopping drops into spinning pits that wall into oblivion—or even directions—Park under the palm tree, cross the railroad tracks . . .

Apart from chronicling the dying culture of the surfer as isolationist, California Homegrounds’ semi-precious volumes literally contain descriptions of, and directions to, the last hidden gems of an over-populated coastline. The kicker is, no one knows exactly how many Homegrounds volumes exist (Crotty randomly assigned volume and issue numbers), each edition fetches upwards \$12,000, and even at those prices, Crotty is still loathe to let any of them go. Looking over a book he’d given to a friend and forgotten, Crotty muttered, “This is a good one, I think I want it back.”

Deep Time

“Laird’s a kook.” The note was scrawled across Latigo Canyon Road outside of Laird Hamilton’s Malibu house. While the advertising world was in love with Laird—the American Express endorsement, a National Geographic cover, a dive-watch by Chanel—Malibu’s groms were certainly not. Laird’s image had brought a new breed of surfer to Malibu (Malibu Frankies), an affront to the rebel mantra enshrined there. Oddly enough, the only surfers empowered enough to confront this commercially inspired invasion were children. And they let the giant Caucasian Hawaiian know it. “Laird’s a Fag,” read another missive.

Filmmaker Brian Taylor and I had come looking for this graffiti. I relished the odd juxtaposition of tiny humans battling the invading islander for influential supremacy at Malibu. Rumor held that the groms’ near constant verbal abuse had rattled the man. The entire dispute conjured images of the diminutive Lilliputians from “Gulliver’s Travels” warring with Gulliver at the edge of metropolitan Los Angeles.

Unknown to me, another Latigo surf figure would pull us from the vandals’ scribbling. For Brian, Russell Crotty cast a stronger resonance in these hills. Brian had been an art student at UCLA, and troubled over the difficulty in being taken seriously as a “surf artist.” The art scene in L.A. is competitive. Stereotypes of the surfer as vapid hedonists have very real consequences for the seriously minded, and Brian sensed this limiting quality from the start. He consulted distinguished professor and west-coast conceptual artist John Baldessari, who pointed him toward Crotty. Sometime after introductions, Crotty became an informal mentor, collaborator, and friend. Because surfing fit into this master and apprentice situation, Brian and Crotty’s relationship took on a rambling aspect. They road-tripped to catch swells, camped out under the settings of Crotty’s oeuvre. “There was always a weird board, a new spot, a new way to surf, eye-opening authors and artworks,” Brian remembered. “Russell instilled in me the confidence to reinvent myself.”

Unaware of this history, I didn’t realize Brian held another destination in mind as we continued on up Latigo Canyon until he veered onto a dirt road blocked by an iron cow-gate. He stopped

the car, opened the gate, and we trespassed further up the hill. The landscape became rural—tall grasses, chaparral, rock clusters, live oaks. Two deer stared blankly from the roadside. A final curve brought us to the crown, where we parked near a solitary chimney rising above the foundation of a burned down house. The view from here was as expansive as Malibu views come—ocean vistas, point surf, and unfolding California.

Crotty and his wife Laura Gruenther lived here as caretakers for 16 years, and Crotty credits the arrangement with his success. For one, it gave him time and space to work. But something else happened. The dome of night sky above this perch blossomed in his imagination. Crotty read astronomy texts and built a small observatory where he viewed and sketched stars, planets, and solar systems. These pieces grew into bigger works that included books and globes. His artistry grew, the work drew attention. He flees the Earth without space suit or blast off, he draws time. Yet, Gruenther had been doing much of the breadwinning, and she described an afternoon when, holding down one job, she was preparing for an interview to gain a second, when here comes salt-encrusted Brian and Crotty. They'd been surfing the beautiful day away. Empty barrels fade into sun parched memories . . . In her pants suit and holding her portfolio, Gruenther snapped, and verbally thrashing Crotty for his lax attitudes toward their finances and adult problems. "What's funny about that day that Russell got into trouble is that while he's in some ways a wise old sage, he's also an obsessively surf-stoked little kid," Brian remarked. "That's what got him into trouble, but that passion is also a big part of what makes him a compelling artist." It's not a unique story for creative people. Usually, the working spouse becomes fed up, the artist takes heed, doubles-down, and success is amassed through sweat equity. The irony for Crotty is, in a matter of days after the scolding a busload of moneyed art patrons trundled up the dirt road, and instead of yard-sale bargaining as they had in the past, they attempted to out-bid each other. They salivated over the artwork. They tried to pull unfinished scribbles from the shack that served as his studio. Crotty had arrived.

Brian and I rediscovered the smallish cement slab that had once supported Crotty's studio. Combing over it, Brian plucked up remnants of melted artwork. I tried to picture Crotty penning so many stars and landscapes at a desk over that slab, that it would give him tendonitis. I imagined the high-brow patrons swinging sharp elbows in the shack.

Living on 135 acres of brush, Crotty said, "Whenever the Santa Anas blew, we slept lightly, to say the least." On Friday the 23rd of 2007, Crotty and Gruenther threw what would be their last dinner party in Malibu, and went to bed without a notion of fire. At four in the morning on the 24th, Crotty woke to the smell of smoke, outside the wind howled. A quick telephone chain with neighbors confirmed that fire was advancing on them with the strength of the wind. Crotty and Gruenther began packing the essentials—paper work, some art pieces, new surfboards, computers. In his haste, Crotty filled a duffel only with socks. "When we left," said Crotty, "it was by the hair of our chinny-chin-chins." It was 5:45 a.m., less that two hours after Crotty first woke with the smell of burning brush.

Their closest neighbors, the Moores, made the decision to stay and fight the flames, something they'd done eight times before. Tommy Moore, a videographer, had the presence of mind to film the event. And once the Moores' house was secure, more a last minute reprieve of the winds than a human victory, Tommy drove to Crotty and Gruenther's home, again set his camera on a tripod and began to rescue artwork from the studio, even as a side of it burned. In the video a wall of fire advances from the east and sporadic flames ignite all about. Tommy entered the studio, hefted a six-foot diameter globe from the burning space, set it outside, and he re-entered. Normally it takes two men to lift a globe of that size. Soon after, the wind shifted, and started the globe rolling down the mountain toward the Pacific Coast Highway.

On the afternoon of our visit to Latigo Canyon, Brian and I traveled to an upscale art district in Santa Monica where the Shoshana Wayne Gallery was showing a twenty-year retrospective of

Crotty's surf imagery. The wildfire that ended Crotty's run in Malibu effectively plucked the artist's imagination down from the stars. His observatory gone, he once again found himself at sea level, and he picked up the thread of surfing and the seascapes that first inspired him. The retrospective included "Surf Drawing Blue," and even some volumes of California Homegrounds. For Brian, I suspect, the show felt something like being reunited with old friends in a formal setting—there's Bearded Hippy, Sonia and Elwood—and enmeshed with it all, Crotty himself. Driftwood on gallery tables existed there because Crotty spotted it on a beach, maybe one of the beaches in the work, maybe a secret cove holding Scary Reef. The art came alive in that way, the world of regular surfers—mill workers, metal heads, and Mickey Dora retreads—elevated to high art. Toward the end of our visit, curator Kerry O'Bryan unlocked the door to a storage room where a large globe hung. It was dominated by sky but trees and land covering its bottom third were consumed with red, and the language of wildfire (a language without translation), of evacuation and doubt and loss and renewal running through the land.

Micro-brew

As we descended through a redwood forest Crotty refers to as Sasquach Country, bars of light slipped intermittently through the canopy to alight on an otherwise deeply shadowed road. At speed, the light pools condensed to create a flickering, cinematic quality in the windshield. Maybe it was this light show that caused Crotty's expansive mood. We'd joined Crotty at his vacation house in Upper Lake, an inland retreat carved from a walnut orchard, but it was more fitting that our search for waves would take us by his childhood home on a little surf filled bay in Mendo—a town that time forgot—and to the beaches of his first explorations. Inspired by that visit to the ashes of his Malibu hilltop, over a period of nearly a year Brian and I met up and surfed with Crotty along the Gaviota Coast, and at the very bottom of California at Imperial Beach, and now we were headed to Mendo and points north—a good chunk of the cagey old barrel-hunter's range.

Meeting a favorite author or musician or artist can often be a deflating experience. As fans we expect fireworks or instant camaraderie or a glimpse of the creative mind. But in most cases, the artist has already given the most intimate part of themselves in the work itself—to ask for something more is a fool's errand. And yet, I wasn't aiming for some piece of Crotty, but maybe answers to something of Brian's line of enquiry: how to be an original surfer and thinker in this crowded, commodified world. Alternatives to the mainstream grind. I thought there were secrets in California Homegrounds, and by meeting Crotty at some of the real locations of his made-up world, I hoped some bits of wisdom would seep through, some enlightenment. For the most part however, I discovered in Crotty just an interesting surf partner. There were some curious exceptions. No matter where I traveled in that year, a conversation with Crotty would invariably reveal semi-secret or localized spots, and even distinctive, underground surf cults. Once, while on the Central Coast I received an unexpected call from Crotty. When I told him where I was, he said, "Oh, do you know people there? You'll have to find Blank-blank jetty. There's this draining wedge and a crew of Greenough spoon riders dedicated to it."

As with the dappling light in the redwoods, these insights came mostly in flashes. But now, on our north coast wandering, Crotty opened up. He'd always been obsessive, he admitted. Before the surf characters, he drew lumber mills over and over, thousands of them. His father Harry was a sculptor and instructor at the Mendocino Arts Center. He'd bring home exactly 500 sheets of typing paper a month. Crotty dutifully filled each sheet. Harry lamented, "We'll have to break both of his arms to keep him from becoming an artist." It was Crotty's brother Jim who first got into surfing. There was a fat reef wave directly below the house. Harry cut down a long board to 7'6" for Russell. They took a family trip to Ensenada in the late 60s. On the way home, Russell caught his first wave ever at Doheny. That was it, he dropped the mills, and began drawing waves. Harry died unexpectedly at the age of 52. Crotty was 12. The death devastated his mother. Sometime in the year of mourning that followed, the family noticed that Crotty's body

was simply wasting away. He could eat and eat, but nutrition simply drained from him. He was hospitalized, then diagnosed with diabetes. Nearly a year would pass before he was well again, and in that time, the obsessive drawing, the creative mind, the voice flourished.

Once we'd reached a wide river mouth on the coast, Crotty said, "As a kid? Can you imagine? We had so much fun here." The waves were tiny, almost unsurfable. Not incidental to his art, surf life or anything else: Crotty, I'd learned, was a knee-boarder. He didn't care how big it was, he wanted to go out. Brian and I shrugged. Every spot we'd surfed with Crotty had been tiny; a two-foot point break north of Santa Barbara, three-foot peaks in I.B. Crotty didn't care, he was getting barreled. Borrowing from a George Greenough quote, Crotty affectionately called this small stuff "Micro-brew." I began to suspect this micro-brew made for a large chunk of Crotty's surf time. Brian confirmed it. He said Russell had a favorite point wave he called "Little Anga," the name inspired by Australia's Angourie. But instead of a huge retaining wall, Brian said he could fit Little Anga's rock wall in his living room. Likewise, the reason Crotty caught this barreling wave to himself all of the time was because stand-up surfers could hardly fit in its zip-line tube. I eventually came upon the complete Greenough quote Crotty was so fond of. It read: "I wouldn't walk across the street to surf a micro-brew spot like that in a crowd."

Our day-long search finally brought us to the secret sand bar artistically identified with the mosaic eyeball. Everything was complete, there were the dark sea stacks, driftwood and cliffs, all as Crotty's hand had detailed them—all except for the surf. It was tiny and freezing and neither Brian nor I were going to cross the street for it, crowd or no. Crotty was miffed. We'd made plans to film him working, an electric sight, and Crotty only agreed contingent upon whether Brian and I paddled out. Miles after we'd given up and were headed back to Upper Lake, Crotty said dismissively, "Well, I guess you'll get your working shot . . . even though you never put your suits on." Silence ensued. Tree flicked past. Then the voice said, "I'm an optimist. I'll always get surf, even if I have to invent it."