

Sandow Birk

HYPERALLERGIC

Remembering Greg Escalante, a Gallerist and Friend to Artists

By John Seed
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Jon Swihart "Greg Escalante: Selfie in Heaven" (2017)

"One of the illusions that we live by is that we can really know anybody else, and we're often surprised by traits in people that we thought we knew very well."

— Thomas McGuane

When the news began to spread, on the morning of September 8th, that gallerist Greg Escalante had died, the shock was resounding. A much-loved figure in the L.A art scene — he was dapper, generous, and quick to smile — Escalante once stood in the center of his Chinatown gallery during a crowded opening, handing a sharpie to anyone who wanted to draw on his white suit. This gesture was, among other things, a ritualized way of letting others into his life while empowering them to create. Recognizing, encouraging, and supporting the creativity of others was

what Escalante lived for. His great reward in life was his circle of devoted friends, many of whom were artists.

Robbie Conal signs Greg's suit, (2016) (photo courtesy of Heidi Johnson / Hijinx PR)
"Greg had more friends that loved him than anyone I've ever known," says artist Jon Swihart. When public confirmation came from his brother, Joe Escalante, that Greg had taken his own life, the shock deepened, turned to sadness and generated a difficult question: How could such a beloved public figure — a man who meant so much to so many — have been in so much private pain? The answer soon appeared in a Facebook tribute from his sister Mary Ann Escalante Nasser: "My brother Greg was bipolar. He fought it most of his adult life. It was both a blessing and a curse."

One reason that Escalante's battle with depression remained largely hidden was

Robert Williams, Jorge R. Gutierrez, Greg Escalante (photo courtesy of Gregorio Escalante Gallery) that he drew attention to himself in order to serve others, especially artists: he was an introvert who posed as an extrovert. "Greg was the only art dealer I've ever met who didn't seem to give a damn about money," comments painter F. Scott Hess. "And look at all of his Instagram and Facebook posts. There is Greg with a gigantic laughing smile, eyebrows raised in excitement, and pointing his finger right at the artist he's with, saying with a gesture, 'Look how fantastic this artist is!'"

Artist Mark Ryden also remembers Escalante's altruistic selflessness:

I can't remember one of my art shows where Greg was not there wearing an appropriately themed, fabulous outfit. I realize now how much I took his support for granted. Greg was never interested in getting something for himself — not money, art, or glory. He was simply excited to connect people and make interesting things happen in the art world.

Laurie Lipton, who Escalante discovered through an article in Juxtapoz magazine. which he had co-founded, remembers him as very admiring:

At first, he seemed overwhelmed by my work, like a fan, but he was very, very encouraging. I was living in London when we first got in touch and he was instrumental in getting me a residency in Southern California. He could be very bashful and shy, but was also such a social guy, always out there. He did not complain or talk about himself though.

Greg LA Art Show Art Party at his Chinatown gallery (photo courtesy of Gregorio Escalante Gallery) Sandow Birk, who met Escalante when he was 11 years old recalls: "I grew up surfing with him, up and down the coast in long car rides, and around the world, from El Salvador to Ireland to Mexico and Hawaii and beyond." Escalante became an early supporter of Birk's art and also a business mentor. Birk says, "I used to discuss my gallery business dealings with him at great length and he always had good, honest advice."

Endowed with a great sense of humor — Escalante loved a good laugh and didn't mind a bit if he was the butt of the joke —he used humor to navigate situations that his underlying shyness might have otherwise caused him to run away from. Josh Agle (aka "Shag") recalls Escalante as one of the funniest people he ever met:

At one point he carried around a giant fake finger in his car. It would fit over a regular finger on one's hand. If somebody flipped him off while driving, he would slip the giant finger over his middle finger, and make a grand, overly dramatic unveiling of his enormous bird. The way he did it, and the unexpectedness of it, almost always left the other driver in fits of laughter.

Gregorio Escalante Gallery: Mural by Mikael B. (2017) (photo courtesy of Gregorio Escalante Gallery)
Behind all of the laughter was a man who knew despair well, and as everyone now realizes he was an alchemist who managed to turn his own suffering into empathy. No wonder he understood that being an artist can be a lonely profession and that his encouragement and support were life-changing. In obituaries that have appeared since his death, in the Los Angeles Times, the New York Times and the Orange County Register, Greg Escalante's many accomplishments have been fittingly documented. Still, the most moving tribute is the very simple statement made by Sandow Birk, and certainly echoed by many of Greg's other friends:

"He was my best friend."

A memorial for Greg Escalante is scheduled for Saturday, Oct. 14, at 2 pm, at the Claves Performing Arts Center at Cal State Fullerton (800 N. State College Blvd.) Fullerton, CA.