

Sandow Birk

**INDOEK**

## SANDOW BIRK – ON SURFING

By Michael Adno  
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Illustration by Matt Titone

From some far-off residency, away from his home in Los Angeles, Sandow Birk reflected on the ways surfing has informed his life and career considering he's been a lifetime devotee. Birk works as an artist whose work spans the spectrum from the recent war in Iraq, musings on the Constitution of the U.S., and the Qur'an. He's represented by Catharine Clark Gallery in San Francisco, P.P.O.W. in New York City, and Koplín del Río in Seattle. In his career, he has garnered Fulbright fellowships, NEA grants, and was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship in 1996. Along the way, he has spent great swaths of time suspended in water near his local haunts in north Los Angeles, balancing a life amidst being a partner, a father, a surfer, and an artist.

Can you describe one of the most challenging aspects of surfing to you?

There are sort of two answers to this question for me: I used to be a pretty good surfer when I was in my 20s and 30s, and the answer that I would like to say—the romantic answer—would be that I always love the challenge of showing up at a new spot, whether it's someplace like Steamer Lane or some unknown reef with no one out and then trying to read it, learn it, and figure it out. From putting on your suit and trying to figure out the paddle, where to sit, where the deepest spots are, who's ruling it and how you can get a good one. That's the part that is always challenging and thrilling to me about surfing, especially when you pull up to a place that you've always dreamed of in your head—like Jeffrey's Bay—and the first paddle out when your heart's pounding and you're so amped up just to be there and then the challenge of trying to surf it as well as you can. That's what I still crave— that feeling of surfing someplace new.

But in my day-to-day reality, what's becoming more challenging is just staying flexible as I get older, staying quick and sharp. It's hard, and as the years go by there's a growing difference in your head of what you're imagining doing on a wave when you take off, and then what you actually do as you go down the line. It's challenging in a really bummed kind of way.

What is one of the most redemptive or rewarding parts of surfing?

Like I said, the greatest reward to me is paddling out at a new spot, a good spot, and the thrill and challenge of surfing it as well as you can. And that usually involves travel, someplace new. So definitely traveling is the most rewarding part of surfing to me – just the adventure, from showing up at the airport with a bag of boards, to the rent a car and the maps, to finding spots, surfing, and the whole experience of a new place. It's thrilling to me; it's like normal life but better. I've always thought that there's nothing better in life than to be an ex-pat somewhere.

What has surfing afforded you in your life?

Surfing has been the thread through my entire life ever since I was a kid. It's dictated where I have lived, where I have traveled, what I do each day, who my friends/partners are or have been, what my work is like. It's given me stability in times of personal crises. It's been my motivation, my exercise, my routine in a vague life. It's been the most important thing in my life. And now I have a family, and the thing I hope for most is that somehow this lifestyle will be passed on to them – the travel, the adventure, the living for the moment, a life around the water. It puts things into perspective about what matters most.

How long can you go without surfing?

I've been surfing for 41 years, and the longest I've ever gone without surfing was three months. It was the fall semester of college and I was in Paris for art school. I didn't surf from late September until Thanksgiving break, when I got a ride down to Hossegor with a French guy from my school. It was terrible. I was skateboarding a lot, but my board was hung from the ceiling of my little apartment and I would just stare at it as I lie in bed, and it was like a real pain inside.

Nowadays, if I go a week out of the water I feel really bad. I try to surf about 4 or 5 days a week, and I'm lucky that I live where you can do that.

How and when did you fall in love with surfing?

I don't have that specific memory of falling in love with surfing in one moment. I remember the first times, the first summer of trying to learn to surf in tiny one foot waves with some friends, and it was hard; it was cold and not that fun. I never had a dad or anyone to teach me how to surf, and my parents weren't that supportive since they grew up in Ohio. But for some reason, some friends of mine decided to learn to surf, and we just kept begging to get dropped off at the beach. Pretty soon I was just a surfer. It was persistence and having friends who wanted to surf too that got me going.

What's one of your pre/post-surf rituals you hold dear?

I don't have a post-surf ritual. Or a pre-surf ritual. Now, I have two little kids and my surfing life has changed. Before kids I would look at the cameras and figure out where the best waves were that day and drive to them and surf, but now its more of just squeezing an hour in when I can and that means a lot of just showing up and paddling out regardless of how good it is. It's frustrating because it means I surf a lot of lousy days and surfing lousy waves is harder and can make you feel like you're a kook. But it's still something I have to do, get in the water as much as I can.