



## Portfolio: Tobin Yelland

Interview by Kelly D. Williams and Mark Whiteley

Photographer Tobin Yelland's work was featured early on within the pages of Thrasher magazine, capturing the muck and aggression of an entire culture of seemingly unassailable youth. Yelland was one of the original Alleged Gallery exhibitors, and since then his photos have been displayed worldwide, including in galleries such as The Luggage Store, Deitch Projects, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, and many others. As a filmmaker, Tobin has been behind the lens for many great projects in and related to skateboarding, from Stereo's A Visual Sound to the recent award-winning documentary Beautiful Losers. Tobin, artist Kelly D. Williams, and SLAP editor Mark Whiteley had a conversation about skateboarding, our founding fathers, and photography...

**KW: Tell me about your beginnings as a photographer.** I started as a young grom. Getting heckled by the older kids. Once I found photography, I didn't do anything else. I took some classes and found I really liked taking photos, and just read tons of books and tried to emulate my heroes and be a hero myself. Nowadays I stare at the computer too much.

**MW: Your photos helped viewers (who were open to seeing it) discover the personalities behind the tricks during a certain era. When you were shooting more action stuff, did you take equal pleasure in shooting tricks and shooting portrait/lifestyle kind of stuff, or did you always gravitate more towards the personalities?** I think my main focus was always action photos, and people photos were just a by-product of having a camera and wanting to document everything. Also, if I went out all day and shot photos and didn't get any action shots, maybe I would get some other cool shots.

**MW: You've shot more than your fair share of classic skate photos over the years. Any favorite skaters (beyond Julien—ha) to shoot with?** Ray Barbee, Jason Lee, Ethan Fowler, Brian Ferdinand, Karma Tsocheff, Dan Dreihobl, JJ Rodgers, Wade Speyer. It's fun developing a relationship with a skater, and a trust, then building on that over time. Going to shoot a photo is best when it's a mission or an adventure, and it's even better when you come back with a good photo.

**MW: Any photographers who have influenced your work from outside of skateboarding?** I read the Day Books of Edward Weston, and got really into him and David Bailey for a while. Weegee, Mary Ellen Mark, Gary Winogrand, Robert Frank. I read Eugene Smith's biography. In high school I read a lot about photographers, and that got me inspired. Also going to the MOMA in San Francisco.

**KW: If it weren't for skateboarding, what would you be doing with your life?** I don't know, but it would be less fun. I would most likely be some kind of tradesman; an electrician or carpenter. Skateboarding offered me an opportunity to use my photography as a way of making money, and in return I didn't have to have a "normal job." Which is really special, and a curse at the same time.

**KW: At what point did you decide your work would evolve from highly-committed skateboard photography to secular venues like galleries and major corporate clients?** Bridging from shooting for skate magazines into working on gallery shows and commercial photography all happened through the kindness of others. Thomas Campbell hooked me up with a group show at Alleged Gallery in New York in 1994, and Spike Jonze hooked me up as a still photographer on a Wrangler Jeans campaign he was shooting. After that, I've tried to explore more of those avenues of photography.

**KW: We recently worked together for Analog Clothing on their Permanent Light Archive photo series product. That was a pretty cool thing to be a part of. Were you pleased with the results?** Yes, the PLA project is fun to do. Making something that's a limited edition that comes and goes fast is nice to be a part of.

**KW: To date, what's been your favorite project?** I liked shooting The Beautiful Losers film. It's really fun because it's showing right now and people are getting to see it. Making films and collaborating with people is awesome!

**KW: You not only shoot pics and video—you also draw, right?** Yeah, I like to draw when I'm bored. I have tons of shitty drawings. Cleon Peterson saw my drawings and said, "I wish I could draw shitty." I was like, "Thanks man!" I did a few board graphics for Ethan Fowler when he rode for Stereo, and I'm working on an adult children's book about a kid who grows older but his body stays five years old forever. He smokes and drinks, but looks like a little kid.

**KW: How did you become such an able artist?** Thanks. I guess a mixture of the repetition of doing something a lot, and really liking what I do. Having good teachers and friends. In my case, not going to college and being able to engage myself in trying to make things work on a small budget. Being on the Atlantic now is inspiring because it's such an opposite from the Pacific. Its harshness is stimulating and lame at the same time. I've been in New York for seven years, but when people ask me where I'm from I say San Francisco because I've lived there for most of my life. When I've lived in New York for 10 years, then I'm going to say I'm from here.

**MW: At one point you lived in SF with several other noteworthy skate photographers. Any memorable stories from that living situation?** I lived with Luke Ogden and Bryce Kanights in 1989. Bryce worked full time at Thrasher as a photographer and Luke worked in the darkroom printing all the photos full time, and then shot photos after work and on weekends. I worked as an electrician's assistant and was just getting a taste of what it might be like to shoot skateboarding full time. I remember it seemed impossible to be able to make a living shooting skating. I was so broke that I ate chili for four days straight once. Stories: Luke caught a fly and super-glued a thread to it as a leash. I have photos. Julien brought Jason Lee over and they made quesadillas with Bryce's cheese, and Bryce got mad and I had to pay for it. Luke had a ferret and a goatee and was into Henry Rollins. Luke got fired from Thrasher for telling Mofu to F off in a phone message.

**KW: With this particular election that just happened, we witnessed a lot of artists rallying around their champion candidate. I thought it was awkward seeing artists put so much trust and anticipation into a politician, but that's just me. If any politician since the beginning of time asked you to do a portrait for them, who would you most like to photograph?** Since it's the beginning of time, I would say George Washington. I just read a book called 1776, and reading about how close we came to the American revolution failing—and that we would have been subjects of the King of England—is really crazy to think about. In the book, George Washington pretty much made it happen against all odds.

**KW: What's the funniest story you have of doing something for a maddening client?** When I was doing stills on Another Day In Paradise, I was introduced to Melanie Griffith as the photographer—she let out a drag of her cigarette and told me to stay out of her fucking face. Women have it hard in Hollywood, but at the same time, why be so serious?

**KW: What do you think GW would say about our country today, if he were to visit it from "the other side"?** Well, I'm not that politically adept, but I think in George Washington's time they were right in wanting the separation of church and state. I think he might question the influence that corporations have on our government. I wonder if our founding fathers were to write a new declaration of independence and constitution, if they would see the influence that corporations have on our government as good for the people or bad for the people.

**KW: Are you a family man? Got a wife or any kids?** I'm married and I have a year-and-a-half-old son. Super fun!

**KW: Ever woken up for the day and just said, “What am I doing? Am I supposed to put a suit on today like everyone else?”** Well, in a way, I’m half-business and half-creative. The economy sucks right now, so people are having to make things work with lower budgets. But I can’t complain. I would rather be broke doing creative work than making good money and having no life.

**KW: How much do you still skate?** I skate a little bit every day. I’m a fan of the ’70s boards that are really skinny, and I just carve around. My friend Antonious just hooked me up with a Blood Wizard board which is 8.25, so I’m looking forward to setting that up.

**MW: Where can people see more of your work? Any thank-yous or hollers?** Check out my website. I update it on a regular basis. [Tobinyelland.com](http://Tobinyelland.com), and [Marketeast.com](http://Marketeast.com) for posters. Thank you SLAP magazine. Thank you strong coffee.