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Finding beauty in the punk movement

'The Beautiful and the Damned' exhibition in Santa Monica, made up of Ann Summa's images from L.A.'s vibrant scene, stays away from the grubby.

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On Nov. 20, 1980, Ari Up, the 18-year-old lead singer of the influential punk band the Slits curled up on the scuzzy AstroTurf that bordered the pool of the now-gone Tropicana Motel on Santa Monica Boulevard, her skirt clumped above her knees and a large dog with its paw over her wrist.

Photographer Ann Summa, then in her late 20s, snapped a photo of the moment with her clunky Nikon camera. Suddenly Up opened her eyes, looked at Summa — a dedicated punk rock fan who had been faithfully documenting the scene — and told her where to go, in terms both certain and unpublishable.

"I remember feeling really crushed," says Summa of that moment, which is part of a photo exhibit called "The Beautiful and the Damned" that opens Thursday at Bergamot Station's Track 16 Gallery. "I left, I said 'OK, bye.' But in retrospect I realize I didn't take it that seriously. I wasn't hanging out and smoking dope with people, I was documenting it."

Curated by journalist and filmmaker Kristine McKenna, the show features more than 60 images of L.A.'s vibrant punk rock scene taken by Summa between 1978 and 1984, many of which appear in a book of the same name recently published by Foggy Notion Books and Smart Art Press.

Other simple yet telling black-and-white images in the show and book include Dinah Cancer of the pre-Goth band 45 Grave walking through Hollywood Forever Cemetery trailing a long piece of black mesh; the troubled and savage Darby Crash, lead singer of the Germs, during the band's final performance at the Starwood, a West Hollywood club owned by the controversial Eddie Nash; Exene Cervenka of X standing on a toilet in the graffiti-ridden bathroom of the notorious club the Masque; and Lux Interior, the charismatic and wild-eyed singer of the psychobilly band the Cramps, at the Whiskey a Go Go wearing leather pants so tiny that they look as if they are melting off his scratched torso.

The images were selected by McKenna because to her, they represent the innate beauty of punk rock.

"Most punk books are really grubby," says McKenna. "People think they have to reflect the scene so they focus on this slobby-looking weirdness. I wanted to look for the beautiful images."

To find those McKenna sifted through hundreds of Summa's 35 mm negatives and contact sheets, searching for a private thought reflected in a singer's eyes; a quiet moment in the violent swing of a guitar; or a passing moment of unfiltered elation.

"For starters all young people are beautiful and all these people are in their early 20s," she says. "The freedom of that scene is apparent in a lot of these pictures because the people often look joyful; and they gave themselves the freedom to dress."

McKenna spent those same years writing music reviews of L.A.'s punk shows for The Times, where she initially met Summa, who worked for a year as a secretary at the paper.

In 1976 McKenna became enthralled with the untethered uprising of music and youth in the city and began writing letters to then Times' music critic Robert Hilburn encouraging him to cover it and offering her services as a writer. He agreed and so began McKenna's life of going to shows four or five nights a week, just like Summa.

"When the original punk scene started it was like some silent alarm went off and every weirdo in Southern California made their way to the Masque," recalls McKenna. "Those people really cared about each other and supported each other. But those magical moments can't last. Drugs started taking their toll and Darby Crash's suicide in 1980 signaled the closure of that first chapter."

"I saw people shooting up in the bathroom at the Whiskey and the Roxy. And then people started dying," says Summa. "I feel like that's still a part of music, but when you have a camera between you and a subject there's this distance."

And that distance is what gives the photos in "The Beautiful and the Damned" their eerie, resonant power. Looking at them is like peering through a looking glass into another time when music was made, however briefly, not for money or fame, but because of a deep need to be a part of something unique and autonomous.

The beauty was in the belonging. And then, in the snap of a guitar string, it was over.

"Hard-core changed everything," says Summa of the 1980s. "The scene got more violent. I'd come home and have spit and mustard in my hair. I got hit with a

bottle. I couldn't make a living doing that."

Summa went on to become a successful photographer, working for a variety of mainstream publications including Rolling Stone and the New York Times. She put her old negatives away and forgot about them. Then two years ago McKenna came knocking.

"Ninety percent of the images she chose I had never printed," says Summa. "It's such an enlightening experience to see your work through someone else's eyes."

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