

# Photographer Larry Clark turned failed life into art

## Pictures of drug culture illustrate his own story

By Hunter Drohojowska

**N**EW YORK — To look at him now, you wouldn't guess that Larry Clark had been a drug addict, an alcoholic and a convict. Dressed in neat gray flannels and a smart striped shirt, his brown hair and mustache neatly trimmed, only his elegant black leather jacket seems at all suggestive of his career as a hood. But it's those misspent years that provide the subject matter for Clark's book of photos, "Teenage Lust" (selections from which will be on view at the Tortue Gallery in Santa Monica through March 10).

Clark, 41, stood in the pristine Freidus/Ordovery Gallery in New York's SoHo district (his photographs are also on display there) looking at the pictures from his life with an expression of wonder. The grainy black-and-white images of scroungy kids — sticking needles into their veins, brandishing pistols, lolling in poses of casual nudity or spaced out and staring — are somehow as familiar as family snapshots. But for Clark they function in somewhat the same way. He captured these incredibly candid photos of the underworld because he was part of it. Even now, each picture calls up memories of a drug he happened to be using at the time.

Clark takes it all in with his soft dark eyes and says, "It still doesn't make sense to me. To have it all work out so well. Here I am talking to you, with my pictures on the wall and a couple of books out, and it doesn't seem like the logical conclusion of it all."

Indeed, it doesn't. Especially after one reads the first-person confessional text of "Teenage Lust," a harrowing account of Clark's life and near death: Shooting amphetamines from the age of 14, living with prostitutes who could procure drugs, shooting a man in a drug deal and winding up in the McAlester Penitentiary in Oklahoma.

The text was compiled from more than five lengthy interviews with Andrew Wylie (a poet and literary agent) and conveys no remorse, judgment or nostalgia — just the very disturbing quality of a life laid bare, an admission of failures and loneliness that most autobiographies evade.

"When most people do an autobiography, they're not telling it the way it is. They romanticize or clean it up. I was trying to tell it the way it was," said Clark. "As I was doing the tapes, I tried to remember what I was thinking at those times, at certain ages. I would try to think as I felt then. Everybody looks pretty bad in the text. It's almost as though the reader is eavesdropping on a convict telling his story to a cellmate."

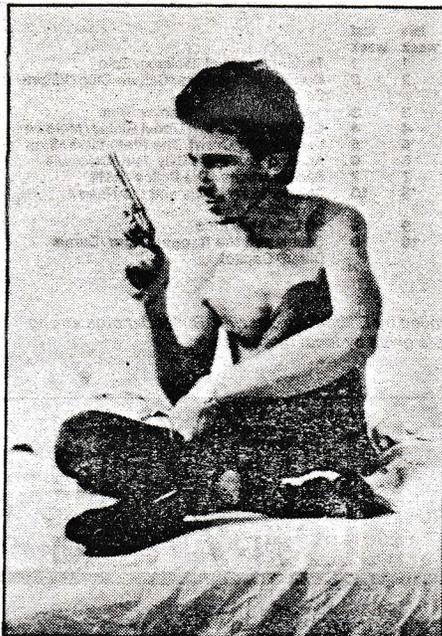
Without the help of clinics, support groups or therapy, Clark stopped his self-destructive habits three years ago to write the text. He also married and now has a 7-month-old son. Clark said the writing was his therapy, a "painful and upsetting" but necessary catharsis which closed that chapter in his life.

"I never really quit, I just burned out on everything. I drank as much as I could and it didn't kill me. I took as many drugs as I could and it didn't kill me. I did all this and most of my friends died from it. So I guess I'm a survivor."

Clark achieved national acclaim as a photographer in 1971 with the publication of "Tulsa," a book of photographs of his drug-addict friends in the raw Oklahoma town where he grew up. Ironically, Clark was introduced to photography as a teen-ager, when his mother began a business as a baby photographer. He went on to study photography at Layton School of Art in Milwaukee, Wis., but when he came back to Tulsa, he returned to drugs and documented the scene.

Clark tried to exhibit the photographs in 1963, "but nobody would show them, nobody would publish them, and people wished I hadn't even come around. It scared them."

During the next decade, the entire country was forced to confront the reality of a drug culture. Clark, meanwhile, went to New Mexico with a girlfriend and lived a somewhat healthier life until 1968, when he returned to Tulsa. Some of his friends had died, others were out of prison and now



From Larry Clark's first book, "Tulsa" (1971).



Clark in 1958

shooting Desoxy. Another generation of adolescents was taking drugs. And by recording the scene then, Clark completed the series.

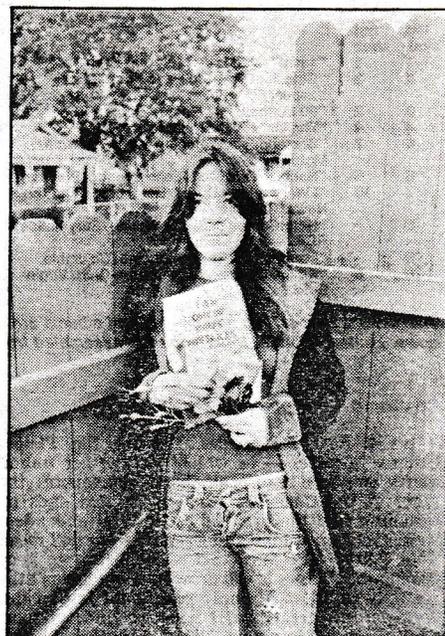
Clark's images were finally brought to the public by Clark's friend, a fellow junkie photographer Danny Seymour (who made a controversial documentary about the Rolling Stones with photographer Robert Frank). Seymour used money from his inheritance to finance "Tulsa," the second book published by Lustrum Press, a company started by photographer Ralph Gibson. Suddenly, Clark was an overnight star.

"It made a lot of noise, too much noise," said Clark. "Most of the people in the book were still involved with what they were doing." So was Clark, and for the next decade he became famous not only as a photographer but as a junkie.

"Suddenly everybody thinks I'm a great photographer and people would like me for different reasons. People would be scared of me. Girls in black leather jackets would try to sleep with me all the time. It was very bizarre — these different reactions. And I got this image as a tough-guy photographer."

"Teenage Lust" completes the picture of Clark's life before and after Tulsa, stripping it of outlaw glamour and adding despair. "I would give these talks at colleges and it was like there was this hero-worship happening. They'd say you're so brave, and it's so nice to see someone out there in it, doing it. And I felt that people were looking up to me and I didn't think it was right. So when I did the text, I thought, 'I'm going to tell these people what's happening with no romanticizing, no glorifying.'"

During the 1970s, Clark lived off a prostitute because she could get drugs by turning tricks with



From the photographer's recent "Teenage Lust."

doctors. He saw his best friend die of an overdose. He stabbed one man who was supposed to be an informer, and shot another man in the arm. (He used the money from a National Endowment for the Arts grant to pay his attorney's fees.) While stoned on Quaaludes, he was busted for shoplifting and causing a brawl. On probation, he was picked up for drunk driving. He was drinking tequila, taking myriad drugs, and unable to leave the Tulsa milieu.

In 1977, he was arrested for carrying a concealed pistol and violating parole. Clark was sentenced to five years in McAlester Penitentiary. Nineteen months later he was released and returned to Tulsa only to pack his things before moving to New York. He's lived there ever since. "I was so happy to be out," said Clark, "that the first thing I did was get drunk and get some dope."

In New York, the pattern began to wear off. With ulcers and a pancreas illness, Clark physically couldn't take drink or take drugs any longer. "It's a corny thing, so many people get out of prison and say, 'It saved my life.' But it turns out to be true. It gave my body a time to rest a bit. Most everybody in the penitentiary has a drug or alcohol problem."

"Teenage Lust" concludes with photographs from 1979 and 1980 of young boys working as hustlers on 42nd Street, around the corner from Clark's parole office.

But although Clark stopped drinking and taking drugs to write the book's text in 1981, he finds that to his public, he's still a famous junkie. Addicts often try to seduce him into shooting with them again. "People try in different ways to trick you and bring you back into that world. It's a coup for them to say they shot dope with Larry Clark. I did it a few times and I realized what was going on, that I was being used."

Clark is now thinking of making a film, not about the drug scene, but featuring the adolescents who populate his books. He has no regrets. "I like drugs, I really enjoyed them. I had a lot of good times. It's an accomplishment to take a lot of experiences, things that drive people to suicide and make something out of it," he said.

"The main thing about photographers is that there's so many good ones but they just don't have anything to photograph. I think that's why I'm liked, because I've had some exposure. No matter how stupid I think the experience was, at least I had an experience to photograph. And so many people haven't had any experience at all. They don't know what to do."

Larry Clark's books can be purchased for \$35 each (plus \$2 postage and handling) by writing to Box 171, 70 Greenwich Ave., New York, N.Y., 10011.