



LARRY CLARK marfa girl

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by interview
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portrait
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pictures extracted from
MARFA GIRL

After working for 50 years as a visual artist — in photography, collage, film, books, and installation art — the 70-year-old American artist Larry Clark has never been more productive, nor has he ever felt so free and inspired. His energy seems to rival that of the kids of this generation. This may be due to his natural affinity to youth as well as his respect for them. Larry Clark may steal their energy, but he has never sold them or himself out, whether to commercial or financial interests. He's a role model for them and for anyone who refuses to conform.

His latest film, *Marfa Girl*, shot in the small town of Marfa, Texas is a revelation in American contrasts.

Decades ago, New York artist Donald Judd transformed an Army fort in Marfa into what became an outpost of a Minimalist Art. Despite the art connection, the town of Marfa, located just 68 miles from the Mexican border, is a bastion of conservatism, with 11 o'clock curfews for young adults, spanking of children in schools, rampant racial suspicion between Whites and Latinos, and police surveillance. It's also the headquarters of the West Texas border patrol.

Clark has always made films about teenagers on the edge of society, chasing the "American Dream," but trapped in the radar of cultural control, such as the 14-year-olds

he met in Marfa, whose story about local realities are seen through the eyes of a boy named Adam and an unnamed "Marfa Girl," an artist from the sophisticated, and in Adam's eyes, otherworldly New York City.

We met Larry Clark in New York the day before he flew to Rome, where he showed his film at the Rome Film Festival, and where won the award for Best Film. But *Marfa Girl* is now shown exclusively on Clark's website, larryclark.com. Why? Because the studio-run Hollywood censorship board refused to give his film a rating. We asked him about that.

OLIVIER ZAHM — How do you feel these days?

LARRY CLARK — I feel good. I've done more work this year than I've probably done in any other year of my life. I started out the year making photographs, and then in a frenzy, I made 18 big collages.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Collages of your photographs?

LARRY CLARK — Yes. I had all these color 5x7s. I did two big collages of the actor Brad Renfro, who passed away a few years ago and was really disrespected by Hollywood. He was the star of my movie *Bully*. I knew him well. He had a lot of issues with drugs and alcohol. When they did the *in memoriam* at the Academy Awards, they gave five minutes to Heath Ledger. He was up for an Oscar and he had OD'd on prescription drugs. But Brad had OD'd on heroin, so they didn't even mention him. They mentioned Frank Sinatra's publicist and didn't even mention Brad Renfro. I got so pissed off. When the press asked about it, a spokesman said, "Well, we can't mention everybody." I mean, it was just the biggest insult. So I did these in homage to him. They're all photographs of him right at his 18th birthday. They were just shown in Berlin.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Beautiful. Are they big pieces?

LARRY CLARK — One is like 4x8 feet

and the other one is double that size, so very big. After doing the collages, I went to Marfa, Texas, to see a friend of mine, the painter Christopher Wool, and his wife Charline von Heyl. I met this kid there, who was 15 and he was a skateboarder. There were about three skateboarders in town because it's really flat, there's no place to skate, and I was inspired to make a film. So seven months later I got the money to make it and I wrote a screenplay.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What was it that struck you about this kid?

LARRY CLARK — Someone had told me a story about him that turned out not to be true at all. But the story got my mind thinking. And the story was that this kid, who was 14 or 15 years old, had a 28-year-old girlfriend who was pregnant. And they were going to have the kid. I said, "Well what do the families think about this?" They said, "Oh, the families are OK with it." There's no abortion, it's all very Christian.

OLIVIER ZAHM — There is also a culture clash in Marfa.

LARRY CLARK — Marfa is full of white people, like cowboys, ranchers ... just white people. There are also Mexican-Americans, who were born and raised there. It's 68 miles from the border. The border patrol headquarters is there, so it's swarming with border patrol agents, but it's still 68 miles from the border, so the agents fuck with the locals. I mean it's horrible. They fuck with the kids, and if you happen to be brown, Mexican-American, born and raised there, they stop you and ask you for your papers, even though you were born and raised there. And it's a tiny little town. There are 1,800 people. Donald Judd discovered it. His foundation and library are there. So there are Mexican-American locals, there are the white locals, and now there's the art crowd. Somedays you look around and you think you're in Chelsea.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Do these groups coexist well?

LARRY CLARK — They live together, but it's a culture clash. That's why I was inspired to write a film about it. The bad guy is a border patrol agent.

I really make him bad. You've never seen a badder guy than this guy.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Did you cast a real agent?

LARRY CLARK — Oh no, this is an actor. I cast professionals from Austin, which is about seven hours away. They have a very good acting pool there. And then I cast local kids from Marfa. If you look on the website, you'll see Adam Mediano and Mercedes Maxwell. Adam was the one I heard this story about, which turned out not to be true. He plays the ingenue. Everything happens to him. He witnesses everything. He and Mercedes are both 16 — I decided to give him an age-appropriate girlfriend. And then there's the actual Marfa girl, played by Drake Burnette. She's an artist in residence at the Donald Judd Foundation at Chinati.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What was your process making this movie, from idea to end result?

LARRY CLARK — The initial spark was the character of Adam and his pregnant girlfriend. I sketched out all these ideas in this little notebook and went to LA. I saw someone I know who has money and pitched it to him. I kept telling him what was in the notebook, but I wouldn't show it to him. And he said, "OK, I'll give you the money to make the movie." I wanted to make it with small digital cameras because you can do miracles with those things. So it wasn't that expensive. The budget was \$450,000. We've probably spent about \$700,000 now with post-production and everything, but the quality is incredible.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What did you shoot with?

LARRY CLARK — Canon 5Ds. They're amazing. I had a very good crew from Los Angeles come in. My cinematographer and everybody came from LA, and I cast professionals out of Austin and local people from Marfa. We got ready to shoot and they said, "Well look, we have to have a script to schedule it," like what day to be where, and I said OK. So I wrote a 25-page script that was double-spaced, I stretched it into 25 pages; it was very hard. I gave

them just enough to schedule the film. Every morning I would wake up at five o'clock and I would write like mad. It was very organic that way.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Where did you stay in Marfa?

LARRY CLARK — *So Mary Farley* — who used to be married to Matthew Barney, and whom I've known for over 20 years — lives in Marfa, and she likes birds. She has chickens and fresh eggs and parrots and birds everywhere. She doesn't fly because she has to take her birds with her when she travels. I'm not kidding. I was going to stay in the *casita* behind the main house, but Mary was in Austin visiting her boyfriend for a long time. I had the main house, the *casita* and the chickens.

OLIVIER ZAHM — And the birds.

LARRY CLARK — No, no, no, she took her parrots with her, but the chickens stayed. Every morning I would go out and get two warm, wonderful fresh eggs from the chickens. I was writing, and so I wrote Mary into the script. She plays Adam's mother. Adam's chore is to get the eggs.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What else drew you to Marfa? There is definitely something in the air in this town.

LARRY CLARK — There are all these things. Marfa is where they shot *Giant* in the 1950s. That was James Dean's last movie, with Elizabeth Taylor and Rock Hudson.

OLIVIER ZAHM — There's something in the air.

LARRY CLARK — Yes. Donald Judd discovered the place when he got out of the Army — he was in Korea in the '50s — and passed through it on a bus. He came back years later with a grant from the Dia Foundation and bought this Army fort. He turned the barracks and mess halls into permanent galleries. There's a gallery for Dan Flavin, there's a permanent gallery in town with John Chamberlain's sculptures from the '70s, which is amazing. There are about 40 of his sculptures in the middle of the town.

OLIVIER ZAHM — How long did it take to shoot the film?

LARRY CLARK — I shot the whole film in 19 days. During that time

I had one day off, when I did a fashion shoot for V to promote the film. They were doing an Americana issue, so they called and said, "Would you be interested in doing something?" I said, "I'm in Texas making a movie!" So they sent all these fashion people down with racks of clothes, and I did a fashion shoot with the kids from the movie. I had no days off. I just kept working. It was pretty crazy.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Where will I be able to see the movie?

LARRY CLARK — On larryclark.com, which was built for this movie.

The only way anybody can ever see my movie is to go to larryclark.com and stream it. For \$5.99 you get the film for 24 hours. That way we cut out all the crooked distributors and Hollywood bullshit. I'm the first filmmaker to do this, I think.

There are probably three or four filmmakers in the world who could do this and get away with it. There are people waiting for my films. I have a following because I'm so old and I've been doing this for so long. I think

this is the future, because the small theaters that show indie movies and art movies are disappearing. Everything is going digital, and they can't afford to switch over. Plus, I've noticed that everybody under 35 watches all their media on their computer, on their laptop. So why not go straight to them? They don't watch TV, and they only go to the movies when there's a blockbuster movie as a social event with 12 of their friends. It's not really going to the movies, it's a social event. They all go see *Batman* or something. The small theaters that show the art movies are a thing of the past, so I'm a pioneer and I think this is going to work. This is what all the young filmmakers are going to start doing. I'm leading the way.

OLIVIER ZAHM — But aren't you nostalgic for the big screen?

LARRY CLARK — Well, I mean, of course, but what are you going to do? There'll be no theaters to show film anymore. You gotta move ahead. You gotta keep moving man. Of course I love film and I love 35mm, but if there's no place to show it... Even if you do shoot in film, they're going to digitize it anyway. Plus the equipment is getting so good now. You know the great film camera, Arriflex, has finally made a digital camera called the Alexa which is comparable to 35 mm film. That's what people are using now and it's amazing. The problem with digital at the beginning was you couldn't shoot with shadow and light at the same time, but now there's latitude like film.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Does putting it online get around the issue of censorship?

LARRY CLARK — If I put this film out regularly, I would never get a rating. There'd be two theaters in the United States that would show it: one in New York and maybe one in California, and that would be it. It would be unrated and it would be ridiculous. But on the Internet, the kids see everything, they see pornography. All they have to do is push a button saying I'm 18, so this is it. The idea really came to me because I have this 22-minute short film called *Jonathan* that everybody's afraid to show. I asked to



have a special screening at Cannes and I talked to the director of the festival, Thierry Frémaux, who, by the way, turned down *Ken Park* and has rued the day ever since. I told him I didn't want to be in competitions, I just wanted to screen this little 22-minute film and they were afraid to do it.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What is it about?
LARRY CLARK — It's about Jonathan Velasquez, who was in *Wassup Rockers*, and who has a band in Los Angeles now called reVolt. Terrific band. And the film is Jonathan at 14 and at 21. We switch back and forth. He's talking about the future when he's 14, and we show him at 21. They're all afraid to show it.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Why?
LARRY CLARK — You'll see. After *Marfa Girl*, I'll put it on larryclark.com. You've never seen anything like it.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So *Marfa Girl* is just the beginning?
LARRY CLARK — I'll keep going. It's a trilogy. Next April I'm going to shoot *Marfa Girl II*, and one year later I'll shoot *Marfa Girl III*. I'm writing the second one now.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Can you tell us about the Marfa girl from the film's title, Drake Burnette?

LARRY CLARK — She's great in this film. She was born in Texas. I couldn't find the right girl to play the Marfa girl and a friend of mine, Jim Lewis, insisted I call her. She was living with her boyfriend in Louisiana. I Skyped her and we talked for about four hours. I cast her on Skype. I said, "Get in a car and drive to Marfa, we're shooting." She was perfect. I told her what she had to do. I told her everything. I don't trick people, I tell them. I said, you know, there's a lot of nudity. You have to be comfortable with your body. You have to be comfortable walking around naked a lot, and she was. She's absolutely amazing.

OLIVIER ZAHM — There's a lot of nudity and sex in this film?
LARRY CLARK — Well, yes, of course. It's my film, what do you think?

OLIVIER ZAHM — We are in such a dark political situation. Abortion is now a political issue. What's going on in America today?

LARRY CLARK — The country's a 50/50 split. You're out in California and New York. Go into the provinces and it's a totally different world. The Republicans want to go backward. Oklahoma, where I was born and raised, went for Bush more than any other state in the union. Driving around Texas, the radio is anti-Obama 24 hours a day. I've heard shows where the whole thing is: Wait 10 years and you're going to find out the truth about Obama. You're going to find out the truth about what's really going on. He's the devil incarnate. What the fuck is that about? I mean that's some crazy shit to say to get people against Obama. It's complete nonsense. And the main reason that the people don't like Obama is because he's black. That's the reason. They can't imagine having a black president and the Republicans, *en masse*, just say no to everything.

OLIVIER ZAHM — But Texas and the "real" America have always been very conservative.

LARRY CLARK — That's America and that's the way it is. In the '60s, everybody thought that was the way it was going to be, and it turned out to be an aberration, right? It wasn't the way it was going to be. It was just a period. The pendulum swings back and forth. America has been divided for a while.

OLIVIER ZAHM — How can kids accept this situation?

LARRY CLARK — It's their world. It's not my world anymore. It's their world and they'll figure it out and survive. I just wrote a little bio about Adam and Mercedes for the press kit for the Rome Film Festival. I said Adam's dream is to be an actor and her dream, since she was five years old, was to be a model.

OLIVIER ZAHM — They dreamed of escape.

LARRY CLARK — Yes, the main dream is to get the hell out of West Texas. You know, driving into Marfa, you go to El Paso, you drive for three

and a half hours and then you make a right and it's 60 more miles. Just before you make that right, on the American side, they stop every car. They have dogs, they have masks on, they have AK-47s and they say, "Are you American?" and if you happen not to be an American or happen to be brown, you've got to show your papers. Christopher Wool was driving through in a rented car, and because it was a rental, they stopped him. They took the car apart. He said, "What the hell are you looking for?" And then Charline, who is German and has a green card, they detained her for a couple of hours doing a background check. It's crazy. And if you happen to be brown, just get ready to be stopped. They're going to search your car, you're going to have to show papers, they're going to look for drugs. This is on the American side. Is that even legal? I don't think that's fucking legal, man. Every car gets stopped.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It's like a war zone.

LARRY CLARK — It's totally nuts. Jeff Elrod, who's a very fine painter, drove out of Marfa one day and then remembered something and had to come back. He gets stopped by a border patrol, and usually he would just tell the guy to fuck off, but he was in a pretty good mood and so he started talking to the guy, and he said, "Why did you stop me?" But in a friendly way, and the border patrol guy said that when somebody goes out of town and then turns around they stop them. They're watching everybody. They have a drone blimp that's over the town so they can see everybody. They can also see the border and they have infrared, and so if someone goes out of town and turns around, they think that they're either picking up drugs that have been left there for them, a bundle of marijuana or something, weed, or they're picking up an illegal. And so Jeff starts talking to the guy and he says, "You're looking for illegals and drugs all the time?" The guy looked at him straight in the eye and sincerely said, "We're really waiting for al-Qaeda." I mean... They pledge allegiance to the flag of Texas every morning. They pledge allegiance to the United States of America and then to Texas. And they still have

corporal punishment in Marfa.

OLIVIER ZAHM — In school?

LARRY CLARK — They paddle kindergarteners up through high school. No one should hit a kindergarten kid. That's ridiculous. Like, how old are you in kindergarten? Five, six years old? When I was there, they paddled a 17-year-old boy in high school.

OLIVIER ZAHM — That's really twisted.

LARRY CLARK — It would be against the law in most states. It would be child abuse, you'd be arrested, but Texas is different, man. So there's that going on. It's kind of like the '50s to me. Now I'm talking to the art crowd that has moved in ... I did a radio interview and the guy interviewing me said, "Marfa reminds me a lot of Los Angeles." I said, "What? Marfa reminds me of the '50s!" I was raised in the '50s and they paddled kids in school.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It reminds you of your childhood?

LARRY CLARK — Exactly. We shot a scene in the high school. They wouldn't let us shoot in Marfa, but we were able to shoot in the high school the next town over. The principal was just great. I had lunch with him and I said, "You know, you still paddle kids in school. It's like the '50s when I was growing up in Tulsa, Oklahoma." And I asked him, "When was the last time you paddled a kid?" He said, "Well, I paddled two 15-year-olds last week, but I don't enjoy it like the coaches do."

OLIVIER ZAHM — What is your writing process?

LARRY CLARK — I'm just writing as I go along. I'm just making it up and writing like crazy, waking up in the middle of the night with ideas and thinking about things that happened to me, and things that happen now. The kids are telling me stories about what's happening now in Marfa to them. There's a scene where Adam and his friends were walking down the street and the border patrol pulls up and basically attacks them and tackles them and all this shit because they happened

to be Hispanic. They happen to be Mexican-Americans. I got the scene from Adam himself. There's an 11 PM curfew for teenagers. So Adam and a friend of his were out past curfew and were hiding in the grass because they wanted to cross the little road here, right. There's no one around, so they run across the highway and all of a sudden, the lights go on, and they get hit with flashlights like crazy. The border patrol has nothing to do since they're 68 miles from the border. Adam and his friend started running. Adam tried to go over a fence and the border patrol pulls him down and body slams and punches him. He's 15 years old. And his friend got caught going over a fence by the other border control agent and the guy flipped him back over the fence. He landed on his head. These are 15-year-old kids walking down the street not doing nothin'. It just happened to be a little bit past their curfew.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Did they get arrested?

LARRY CLARK — The border patrol can't arrest them. All they can do is say, "Oh, I thought they were illegals," and take them to the sheriff. Then the sheriff calls their parents and their parents get up out of bed and go get them.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Why do you like working with kids so much?

LARRY CLARK —

The kids like my films, and they understand what I'm doing. They trust me and I trust them. I get real honest performances.

Wait until you see this movie. It is as good as anything I've ever done.

It's really going to knock you off your chair. It's very contemporary. And of course I've been a visual artist for 50 years, so it looks good. It's really a handsome film; it's pretty amazing.

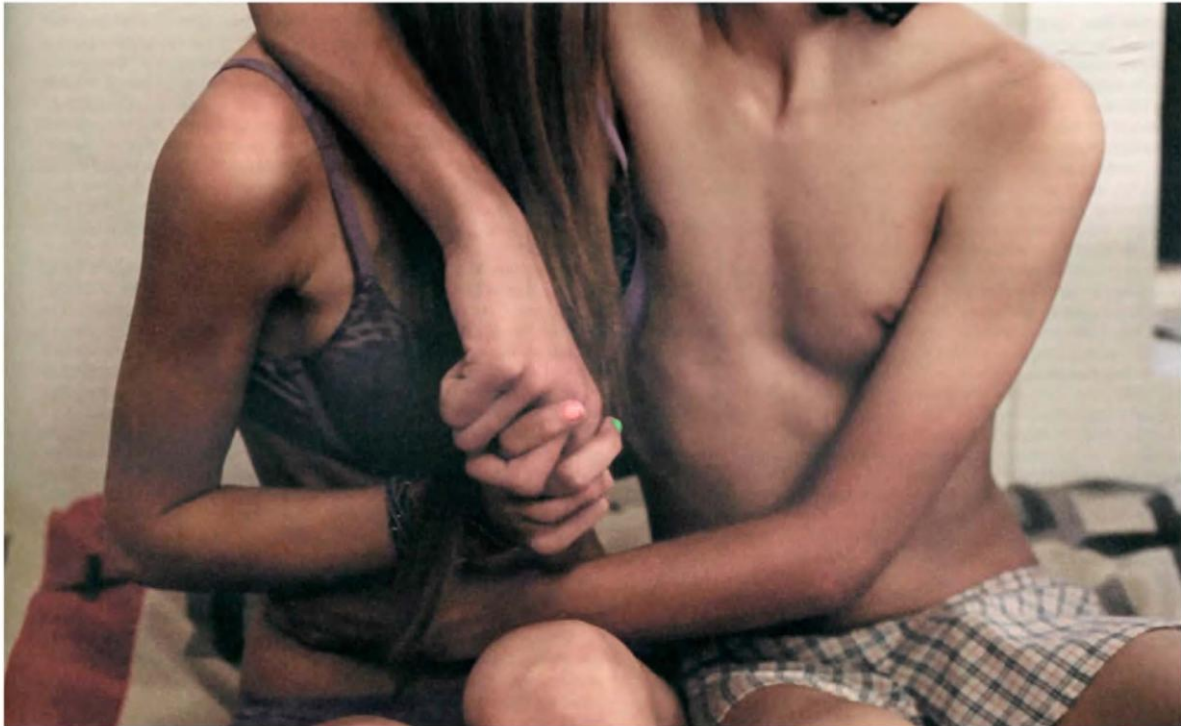
OLIVIER ZAHM — You've been working with teenagers for 50 years. Is it different now than it used to be?

LARRY CLARK — It's not like when I was a kid, when you asked a question you got slapped. "Shut up, kid." Now kids know everything. You just have to go on the Internet. School is boring because they can go on the Internet and learn more. It's a different world and it takes someone like me who's lived through everything to really see what's going on and recognize it. But now they know a lot more, and they're a lot hipper and smarter and more aware of what's going on around them. They grow up a lot quicker. They have to learn how to navigate all the shit that's going on around them. The big difference from the '50s, of course, is that it's a lot easier to get laid. It was very hard to get laid when I was a kid. Now, it's hard not to get laid.

OLIVIER ZAHM — What do these kids incarnate for you? Why are you still fascinated by them?

LARRY CLARK — No matter how the world changes, they're still teenagers and there's still that innocence. I think that's the age where we're really formed. Things that happen to us at that age inform the way we're going to be as adults, affect us for the rest of our lives. I could tell you hundreds of examples of people I know. My adolescence and childhood affected my life, and I just keep revisiting it in certain ways, just like we all do, I think.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You said they incarnate a sort of innocence. Is it that



they incarnate a spontaneous resistance to society?

LARRY CLARK — No, they're innocent because everything's new to them. But I think that right now they're rebelling more than they have in the last few years. When Bush was president, there were all these wars and shit going on and I didn't see anybody marching in the fucking street like during Vietnam. And now the kids are starting to get more militant. They realize that first of all, the economy's so bad because Bush ran up all this debt to fight his wars. When Clinton left office there was a surplus, now we're trillions of dollars in the hole because of Bush and Cheney. So now my daughter went from kindergarten up through grade 12, after that she went to college for four years, then she went to graduate school for two years, and then she gets out and there are no jobs. She was rooming uptown in what used to be Hell's Kitchen with four other college graduates, four girls. So there are five girls living together, none of them have a job.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You film teenagers in a very intimate way. How is it possible that people can label your work as using or exploiting these kids when, on the contrary, you're the one who is the most familiar with them? You're the one who understands them. How is it possible that today, we can label you as pornographic when you're the closest person to these kids?

LARRY CLARK — Well, because the rest of the people get old.

But the kids understand my work because it feels right to them. I tell the truth and they know it's the truth. They

know that this is what's happening and they trust me.

I think it's because when I did my first work, *Tulsa*, the book, I was one of the guys. It wasn't shot from the outside. I can do it because I've had such a life and I'm still alive. I'm lucky to be alive. I've done everything to kill myself and I'm still here. It takes the perspective of having been through it. Also, it would be very hard for them to do it themselves because they haven't lived long enough to be able to make the kind of work I make.

OLIVIER ZAHM — So you give them a voice. Who influenced you and gave you your voice?

LARRY CLARK — Well, my heroes were Lenny Bruce, who was telling the truth and got crucified for it. Bob Dylan came out at the same time, around '61, and said, "You don't have to be like your parents, you can do anything you want with your life." And there was a photographer back then named Gene Smith, who worked for *Life* magazine and he was all about telling the truth. He would go on assignment, maybe to photograph a black midwife in the south, or to do a country doctor, and he told the real story. So what *Life* magazine did, was they sent photographers out and they said, "This is the story, this is the beginning, the middle and the end." Like, it was a set-up thing. And Gene said, "No, I want to tell the truth. I want to go down and stay with them for six months." And he went and lived with Albert Schweitzer, and he did these great photo essays in the '50s. *Life* magazine said, "No, you can't go out and photograph someone for six months or three months or a year, because we're a weekly magazine!" They had a point, too. So he resigned from *Life* magazine, and he used to write these diatribes in magazines about the truth. I was influenced by that. I'm coming from people who were interested in telling the truth and I've always tried to do that and I'm still trying.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Do you survive without Hollywood budgets?

LARRY CLARK — Yeah, I have no money, though. But I never sold out. And you never hear that anymore. I had an old girlfriend call me a couple years ago. I hadn't talked to her in maybe 35 years. She said, "What you been doing?" and I said, "Well, I never sold out." And she said, "Gee, you never hear that anymore." I come from the Lenny Bruce generation, right after the beatniks. Selling out was the worst thing you could do. I'm the last of that breed. And I'm going to be around a while, knock on wood. I can't skateboard anymore, the legs go first, but other than that I'm OK.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Don't you ever do commercial work?

LARRY CLARK — I used to just dismiss the fashion world and, I mean, I used to get blamed for heroin chic, and I have nothing to do with fashion. I don't do commercial work and I don't do fashion, though I influenced a lot of people. A lot of photographers say that I influenced them, filmmakers, too. A lot of photographers say that they became photographers because of me, and I used to dismiss that. I said I didn't want to have nothin' to do with it. I said, "Stay away from me," you know? Then I met Tiffany Limos and she said, "How many people have influenced people like you have?" She told me to embrace it, and I became a much happier person. Also when I met Tiffany, I didn't have a computer. I couldn't do e-mail. She taught me how to do e-mail about eight years ago and now I'm...

OLIVIER ZAHM — And now you're larryclark.com!

LARRY CLARK — Yes. Speaking of fashion, though, Terry Richardson's father Bob Richardson was a famous fashion photographer in the '60s and there's a picture that he took of me on my website. I just posted that. Someone just gave it to me, I'd never seen it before.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Terry gave it to you?

LARRY CLARK — No, it wasn't Terry. It was someone else who gave it to me. A magazine called me and