

Telegraph

Ride of the ocean cowboys

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Surf photographer Jeff Divine talks to Ruby Russell about his iconic images

• **In pictures: Jeff Divine**

In 1966 Jeff Divine, a 16-year-old growing up on La Jolla beach, California, was captivated by photographs taken of him and his friends by a surfing buddy. "It was an ego thing," he says. "It was such a thrill to see yourself on a wave." Between getting up at dawn to hit the surf before school, and hanging out on the beach, he saved money working part-time in a bookstore and bought himself a camera.

A surfer first and a photographer second, Divine would come inshore and snap photographs that were infused with his passion for the sport. By 1968 Surfer Magazine was buying these images, and it put him in touch with Scott Priess, a boat-builder who made waterproof camera housings. Knocked together in Priess's garage,



In which we surf: Surf legend Rory Russell

they were cumbersome and required the photographer to paddle out on an inflatable raft. But, using Priess's creation, or swimming with a fixed-focus diver's camera, Divine could bring his eye for a picture and his feel for surfing a step closer.

"I understood the ocean, but once I was out there with a camera it was a whole different thing. You really had to be a surfer to adjust yourself and stay away from the waves - stay within distance, where you can get the photo, but stay away from jeopardy. Swimming around, you could go right into the barrel of the waves."

Divine's work, currently on show in Brighton, went beyond sports photography. In vibrant, saturated colours, he created beautifully composed images that draw you into his world of free-spirited kids living their own American dream. Being a part of the scene enabled him to capture off-guard moments - in and out of the water - with a naturalness that conveys timeless energy.

"We looked like hippies but we weren't politicised, we were kind of environmentalist athletes. Surfing is like a wilderness experience. All the rest of the stuff going on in society was peripheral. It had to do with other things, like Vietnam. But surfing was the centre point, that was how we could escape. More recently, America has made an iconic figure of the surfer; in the past it might have been the cowboy."

Divine is recognised as one of the greats of surf photography. His early work is now reaching a wider audience, with prints selling for up to £3,500. These images have become a nostalgic record of a subculture that has changed beyond recognition.

"There's a three billion dollar lifestyle and clothing industry around surfing now. My generation tends to look lovingly back at how it was. But what it all comes down to is a guy on a wave. It doesn't matter what he's wearing - it's just one guy on one wave and he gets a ride for 30 yards down the beach. All the rest is BS."

- 'Jeff Divine: Surfing's Golden Age - The Seventies Kodachromes' is at Crane Kalman Brighton (01273 697096) until Aug 31.