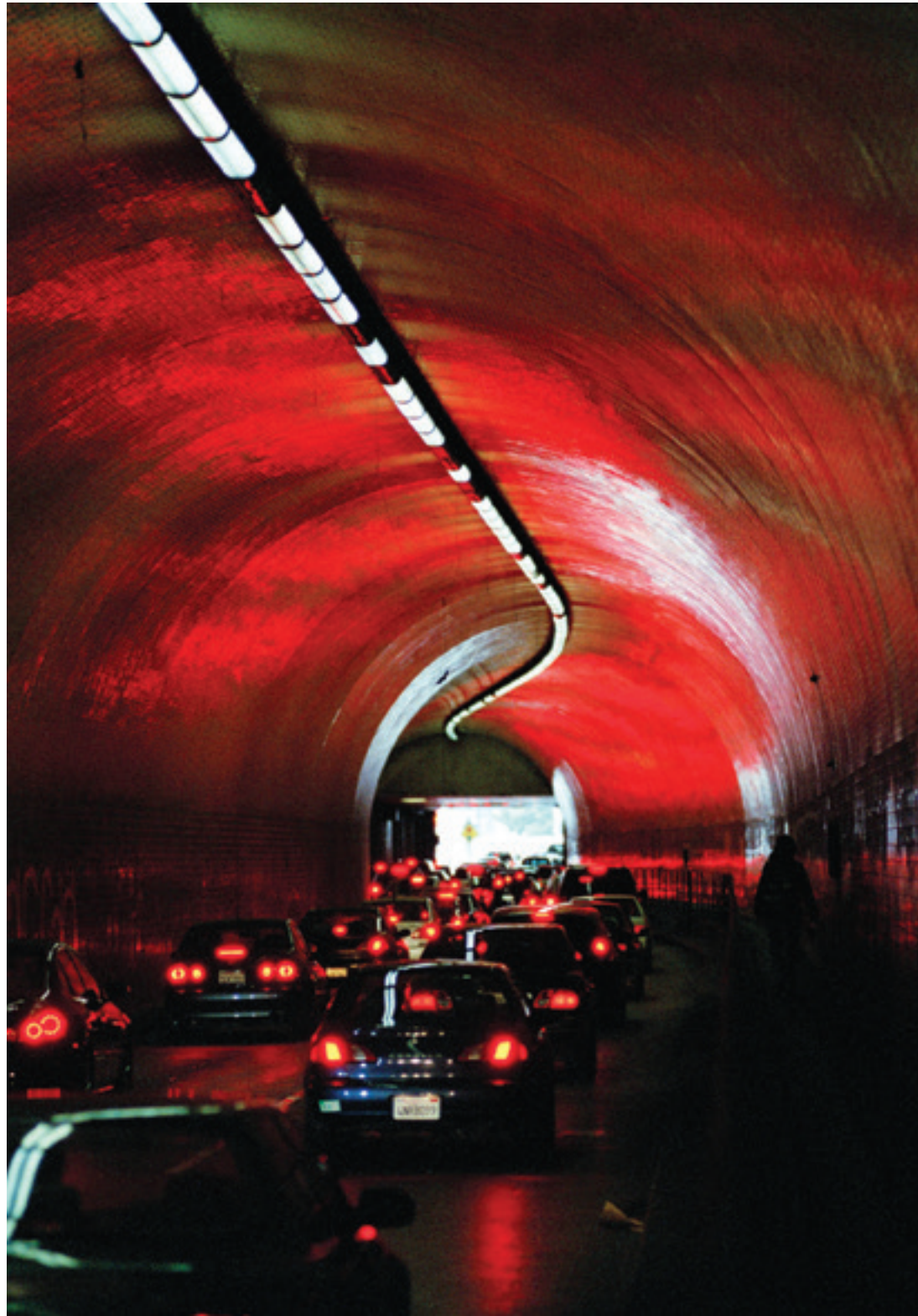


CHIP SCHEUER

Main Artery, 2016
35mm negative film, 36 x 24 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

REILLY NOLAN

Less Coughy

There was nowhere else to take me. Michael was gone and I was too young to stay home alone. Mom was traveling to Monterey with the gray beaches and the bright-gray skies of seabirds. A conference about body image, she told me. I asked her what that was.

“I guess it’s kind of how people think they look to other people,” she said.

“What’s that mean?”

Mom tapped her fingers on the steering wheel, thinking.

“It’s like a picture in your head of . . . what you think people see when they look at you.” Daylight shone through her sunglasses. I could see her eyes peer sideways at me. “But, sometimes the picture’s wrong. Sometimes people are confused.”

“Oh,” I said, no idea what she meant. “Is Monterey in the Wild West?”

Because we lived in California, I was stuck on this idea that everybody’s great-grandparents, or great-great-grandparents, were cowboys or sheriffs or outlaws from the Wild West. I imagined Mom at the conference with a bunch of middle-aged women in long-sleeved, dusty dresses, talking about their bodies around plastic foldout tables. Some women drew each other with reddish-brown colored pencils, the color of those old spooky photographs with unsmiling men and women.

“Yes, sweetie.”

“Why isn’t Michael coming?” I asked. Mom sighed and switched lanes.

“It’s complicated, sweetie. Just don’t worry about it. Remember what we talked about.”

“Why do I have to lie?”

“Don’t think of it as a lie, sweetie, okay? It’s like a story. Michael and his girlfriend got a beach house in Santa Cruz with their friends.”

Girlfriend. Santa Cruz. Beach house. These were the parts of the Michael story I had to remember.

We drove for three hours in the burgundy Cadillac DeVille—a hand-me-down from Uncle Peter—with the electric windows that didn’t work and the AC that smelled like old Chesterfields. Mom gripped the wheel as she accelerated. The car rattled below my seat.

Almond orchards bloomed white, a town with quick miles of walnuts followed. Grass grew through railroad tracks, and a crow lay dead on the side of the road, one