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LOW-COST INVESTING

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She's L.A.'s pedal pusher

Monica Howe sees herself as the voice of a two-wheeled future, dedicated to the notion that an urban bicycle culture will make this a better place to live.

By John Balzar
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It scares her to ride her bicycle to work. A vague prickle of apprehension follows her along Sunset Boulevard and down Spring Street on her way into the teeming core of the city. But she rides anyway. Her faith in the future of the bicycle overpowers her dread of the cars that rule these impatient streets.

Indeed, it's Monica Howe's job to argue the case for the bicycle as everyday transportation in Los Angeles.

The bicycle is central to her social life in the city, her romantic life too. It's the source of her idealism. If you've known her for a while, you understand that the very thought of the bicycle in Los Angeles makes her smile.

Right now, she is awaiting delivery of that end-of-the-rainbow dream cherished by true-blue cyclists everywhere: a custom-built frame with hand-selected, jewel-like components, a precision machine that weighs barely more than a bowling ball but that can propel its rider at eye-watering speed more efficiently than anything else ever devised.

"My whole life is about the bicycle," she said. "I have to work to make time for anything else. I dream about this stuff."

In the last few years, without really trying, 31-year-old Howe, tall and blond, has become the voice of the emerging urban bicycling culture of Los Angeles.

Urban cycling

Here in the throne-room of the motor vehicle, the bicycle is not quite as improbable as it might seem — not as far-fetched, say, as icebergs in Santa Monica Bay. Indeed, urban bicycling as a mix of activity and cause has been on the upswing in Southern California for a few years now.

Small but lively, the city-center culture took root and gained attention around a neighborhood repair shop and hangout called the Bicycle Kitchen, off Melrose Avenue just west of Vermont Avenue. Whirly Girls emerged as a recreational and social club for women wanting to escape the masculine overtones of urban cycling. Midnight Ridazz, a free-form monthly nighttime ride through the city, grew from just a handful of die-hards to more than 1,200.

Howe, naturally, has been associated with all these activities and many others. They caught her interest, one after another, and the friends she made helped shape her thinking about the future of the city in which she lives. She became a champion of the idea that the bicycle makes Los Angeles a better place. She threw her spare energy into bicycles and bicycle activism. Because of her enthusiasm, because of her frequent and exuberant e-mails to fellow cyclists and because she always seemed to be close to the center of things, people listened.

She wasn't a founder of the scene. But, she said with a laugh, "I do tend to become the voice of things. I meet people and they've come to identify me as a bicycle gal around town, whether it's an important issue or just a ride somewhere."

In June, Howe took the final step. From avocation, the bicycle became her vocation. She took the job as outreach coordinator for the Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition. Right away she turned up the volume for this small advocacy organization that is dedicated to "improving the bicycle environment in the county." The traditionally conservative and cautious cycling establishment found itself with a genuine urban insurgent in its midst, and cyclists around the city could detect a fresh spurt of determination.

'Sick of driving'

There are plenty of excuses to have fun on a bicycle in Los Angeles. For Howe, it's time to turn the party into something more ambitious.

The inherent danger of confronting hot-headed motorists from the vulnerable saddle of a bicycle is a kind of daredevil endeavor on which the youthful urban cycling culture has thrived, first in cities like New York, Chicago, San Francisco and Seattle, and now in Los Angeles. But gladiator antics do not form a reliable foundation for a calmer, cleaner, more human-scale urban transportation system.

"We're really at a turning point," Howe said during an interview at an Echo Park cafe. "We've seen an explosion of cycling in this part of town.... There are multiple fun rides every day of the month now in L.A., from club rides to pub crawls.

"What has to happen now — and what I think will happen in five years — is we'll see new advocacy groups joining in the work of making room here for the bicycle. Los Angeles is really the last big city to realize that bicycling is a good idea.

"In Los Angeles, people are sick of driving, sick of looking for parking. And most trips are under five miles. But people don't want to ride in a city that feels dangerous."

She has thrown herself into the campaign to demand the stenciling of "sharrows" on city streets. A sharrow is a bicycle symbol with two chevrons that is meant to remind motorists to share the road and also to promote better lane positioning for those on bikes. Howe has rallied cyclists to demand safer streets. She has led efforts to support cyclists hit by cars. She has promoted group rides that bring residents in touch with unfamiliar neighborhoods. She hammers away on the idea that bicycles are the only zero-emission transit machines.

"It's a Catch-22," Howe said. "Officials in this city won't take the moves to make it safe until there are more bicyclists. Until they see bicycles all over the road, they will continue to regard us as freaks. Yet, those who commute by bicycle today are taking huge risks.

"I've had to visit friends in the hospital this year."

Riding in the country

Monica Howe grew up in suburban Texas. Her dad was "a very serious roadie," a Spandex-wearing road cyclist. She started riding with him. They would load their bicycles in the car, drive out into the country and ride. "There was lots of nowhere there."

She paused. "It never occurred to me to think of the bicycle as transportation."

She moved to Los Angeles in 1996 and studied photography and fine art at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. The bike faded from her daily life. "There's no nowhere here."

In the way of things, a friend introduced her to a friend and she was back on a bicycle, but this time riding with 40 other people exploring the streets and neighborhoods of central Los Angeles late at night. The informal group called itself Midnight Ridazz.

"It was unlike anything I'd ever done in L.A., and it was exactly what I was looking for."

It was performance art. It was a traveling party. It was a connection with the life of the city. It was a pathway to new friendships.

"It was like falling in love. I didn't have to think about it."

In fact, she did fall in love with a man who had similarly migrated to Los Angeles only to discover — and embrace — the bicycle. Today, her circle of bicycling friends extends from one end of the county to the other.

"For her, it's 360 degrees — engulfing her whole reality," said Ben Guzman, a friend and co-founder of the Bicycle Kitchen. "She understands the issues. She understands the culture. And she's capable of making it accessible to everyone. She's visible, she can talk and she can produce."

Intimate and vast

A list of attributes of bicycling in Los Angeles begins with the self-evident: economy, exercise, efficiency and, if you regard congestion as a wrongheaded way to live, even rightness.

Howe represents a school of thinking that holds there is more to it still. Bicycling is an expression of curiosity, Howe said: "the need to scrutinize and question the world around us."

Los Angeles on a bicycle is both a more intimate and a vaster place. Because the rider is exposed, and vulnerable, it is a more engaging landscape.

"To ride a bike in L.A. is to examine the accepted ways of doing things," she continued. "It's a way of stepping out and seeing things in a different way."

After all, the means of travel define a journey just as surely as its destination.

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