It's a gauzy-bright day but Max Kütz isn't wearing sunglasses. Even when he squints, he's still looking around. "Creating art is about saying something," he says. "Even if it's just showcasing a model. That's what you're saying: You're putting it out to the world. You create art to ultimately say something. Because it can say so much. Right?" Occasionally he blinks at the color from shifted clouds, and there are even ugly things: We pass a half-rotten mess of orange-red food in Styrofoam. Max had just been talking about taste. Lately, he's drawn to vibrance. Vibrant, yet muted at the same time. But always toward a refinement of vision. Max values taste. "If I had the best skills but no taste, I could make money, but no respect from people. But I know people who have no idea how to use a camera, and their work is incredible." He nods, "It's all about that taste, it's all about developing that taste. Soaking in all these different tastes."

A June heat smacks through the air, the first brutal heat of the Dallas summer, intermittently sunny, then hidden, then sunny. It's lunchtime. Deep Ellum bustles from all sides. The sidewalks are crowded with the absence of flowers. Rows of bottle caps like swollen grapes glued pallid to soot. Half grime, half racket, clotted, shit-caked, whimpering, platform to wall murals, entrenched in the concrete death of neglect, stomped on, widowing, a slant worse each day, trodden, cracked and chipped and puked on by the hour. "Art is about loving people," he says. "Love has to be the force behind what we do, right? It's naïve to say that our personality, our taste, doesn't show up in our work. Or that what defines us doesn't show up in our work. *Who a musician is* shows up in the music, *who a writer is* shows up in the writing. Because everything you are goes into to creating it. So therefore what *made* you must also *be* you."

All of these elements—the gentle commotion, the sharp figures, the renewed background—appear in his photography. Max finds the abstract everywhere. When he catches

himself adrift, he'll smile and return . . . He notices it now, jokes that all week he's stayed up late playing *Zelda: Wind Waker*, warmth to his eyes. After a moment, he renews an idea from earlier in the day: "I'm here to be creative," he says. "I'm not here to take pictures—taking pictures part of it, but that's not *why* I'm here. I'm here for the conversation, I'm here for the relationship, I'm here for good will, and for opening the door to conversations." If you saw his artwork in a gallery and had to guess Kütz's age, you would might make the assumption I made and go with late-30's, maybe 40. The angular sleekness alone. But he's 25 years old, with three older sisters and a 6-year-old sister.

He's dressed mostly in black, and his black hair and his black beard give him a sturdy look, like a Parisian in April. Serious, yet tranquil, without pretense. He has a contagious laugh and a silver bracelet. "The ultimate goal," he says, "is that Jesus comes out in my work, when Jesus isn't even talked about. Or people look at it and say, 'There is something different about this guy's work, something different about this guy's writings, or different about what this guy made.' And it's almost frustrating. Then we can have a conversation about it."

There is nothing explicitly Christian about Max Kütz's work—no crucifix, no Madonna. He is not a Christian photographer, if there is such a thing. He's an artist and a believer, both. He maintains his identity outside of possession: "I could lose all accreditation, I could lose every photo, and become a worker in an assembly line or clean a pool for the rest of my life, and I'd be okay with it, because my identity must be found in something greater."

On our way to the restaurant, we pass The Bomb Factory, a uniquely Dallas music venue, and I tell Max that I've never been but have always wanted to go. Max mentions that he was there for the recent (sold out) Chance the Rapper show. I gasp a bit. That new album. He laughs heartily: Yes. We talk about Chance's unabashed belief in God. "You'll find Christians in the

hardest of worlds," Max says. "Like Kendrick Lamar, and Chance, all these guys who by all means probably shouldn't ever be Christians, by the industry that they're in. Even some of the best photographers I know: strong believers. It gives me faith." When he talks, his voice is steady, and the words flow out: "I hope that, as I keep going, and as the Lord keeps bringing things along, I hope that I can go into the world, and go into people's lives, and be an influence in the world that I'm in. That's really all I want. The only reason for accolade, the only reason for acclaim, for advancement is, I think, to show love. To open your world, to show love to more people. To be a comforting light to people." With the shake of hunger, we turn into Cane Rosso, the hostesses greet us, then hand us tickets: "Free show at the Bomb Factory in an hour."

It isn't lost on me that silent miracles gravitate towards Max Kütz. Call it luck, call it charm—he draws events and people to him. In our three hours together, I've determined that the Philosophy of Max Kütz is composed of Balance, Love, Taste, and Harmony. These four concepts define both what he makes and why he makes it. One of his older sisters lives in Greece, where she started a children's home. "A good portion of the work I do is for her," he says. You should know that 90% of Max's work is unreleased, including photos he took at a refugee camp in Greece. Unlike most refugee camp photos, these are not black-and-white horror stills of children being shoved through barbed wire. They're bright. Bursting with color. The children, though surrounded by filth and rot, are happy, with emergency blankets as capes. They're just kids. The photos capture something new. Suddenly, the plight of displaced children is alive, visceral, all the more harrowing.

The pizza arrives, all honey and crust and mozzarella. Max describes the migratory nature of Christianity. Unlike other faiths, Christians have no consistent hub. "Christians have been really comfortable for a while. And I don't think Christianity thrives in comfort. I don't

think it's made for it. I think it thrives in being satisfied, and being fulfilled, but I don't think it thrives in comfort." Upheaval brings community, like Max's 2016 gallery piece "En Masse," which ran for three days: On the first, the gallery was white, with white photography featuring a white model; one the second day, black photography, a black model. The third day brought the coalescence of the two, black and white, intertwining.

We talk for an hour or so, then wander to the Bomb Factory. It's some sort of traveling circus, with women on stilts and clowns on garish bicycles. David Bowie's "Let's Dance" blares through the speakers. When the song ends, we leave. "In our world now," Max says, as a couple dozen mini-bikes blare past, "it's really easy to get so dissatisfied with everything, because things disappear constantly— 'what's the next thing, what's the next thing?' This is useful for creativity, but it can also be unhealthy. Why are you creating it? Is it just so can seem cooler? Or so the photographers you follow can recognize you? Or are you creating it to say something? Or to do something greater than yourself? And when I find myself going away from that, I've got to step back, and realize what I've been able and blessed to come to, and then it re-orients and it restructures myself, to remember why I make art in the first place."

His senior year of high school Max decided against going to college, and after touring with a band for a year, he was overtaken by what he describes as an unearthly dissatisfaction, a nagging displacement. Yet he also filled with excitement at the same time. He decided to attend ORU, studied music technology. A year from graduation, he left for musicbed. While there, his photography had developed a measured balance. Then the unearthly dissatisfaction came over him again: "I had this pull towards doing something of my own, and I quit and started freelancing and it was just right. It's been the scariest thing since but it's been really fulfilling."

As we drive toward Dallas Contemporary, Max points out hills and buildings and signs. It's foolish, he says, for an artist to be territorial about trade secrets. If someone asks about the techniques he used, he's more than happy to share them. "Any of it. All of it. Do you want the lighting? Do you want the place I bought this? Do you want the filter I used? Sure, message me on Instagram, call me, e-mail me. Whatever you want, I'm fine with it. Because it's not about that. I could give someone every single step I took—it would still be different because our taste is different. And you can't teach taste. You can grow with it. But it's up to each person to find it on their own." Max Kütz and I have talked for six hours, on a Saturday, wandering around Dallas, through the June heat of new summer. It hasn't been an interview, really. It's been a conversation. I've witnessed the human behind the artist, the sanctity of vision.

There's something Socratic, something peripatetic to how we're wandering around the Dallas Contemporary, amid concrete and steel and fabric. I smile every time he asks, "What do you think about that one?" We are alone in a big room, peering into Pia Camil's metalwork portraits. He talks quiet yet unwaveringly: "It's not about the gear. I mean, the gear helps. But the place of the gear is that it should help create a vision. Vision is king. It always has to be king. Whether you're running a company, whether you're writing an article, or whether you're taking a photo, vision must be king." Several years ago, during a trip to Munich, he took pictures with Snapchat. He shows me one. An elderly man, crouched in a chair in front of a battered wall, plays a saxophone, in black and white, begging for spare change. Max squints with thought, an idea in his grasp: "I don't think we were created to create alone. We're always creating together. And the things I've tried to create alone have been terrible. But when a team happens, when you push past that ego, and when you put things in the right perspective, people can come to help, and influence your decision and how you do it: That's when that true art happens."