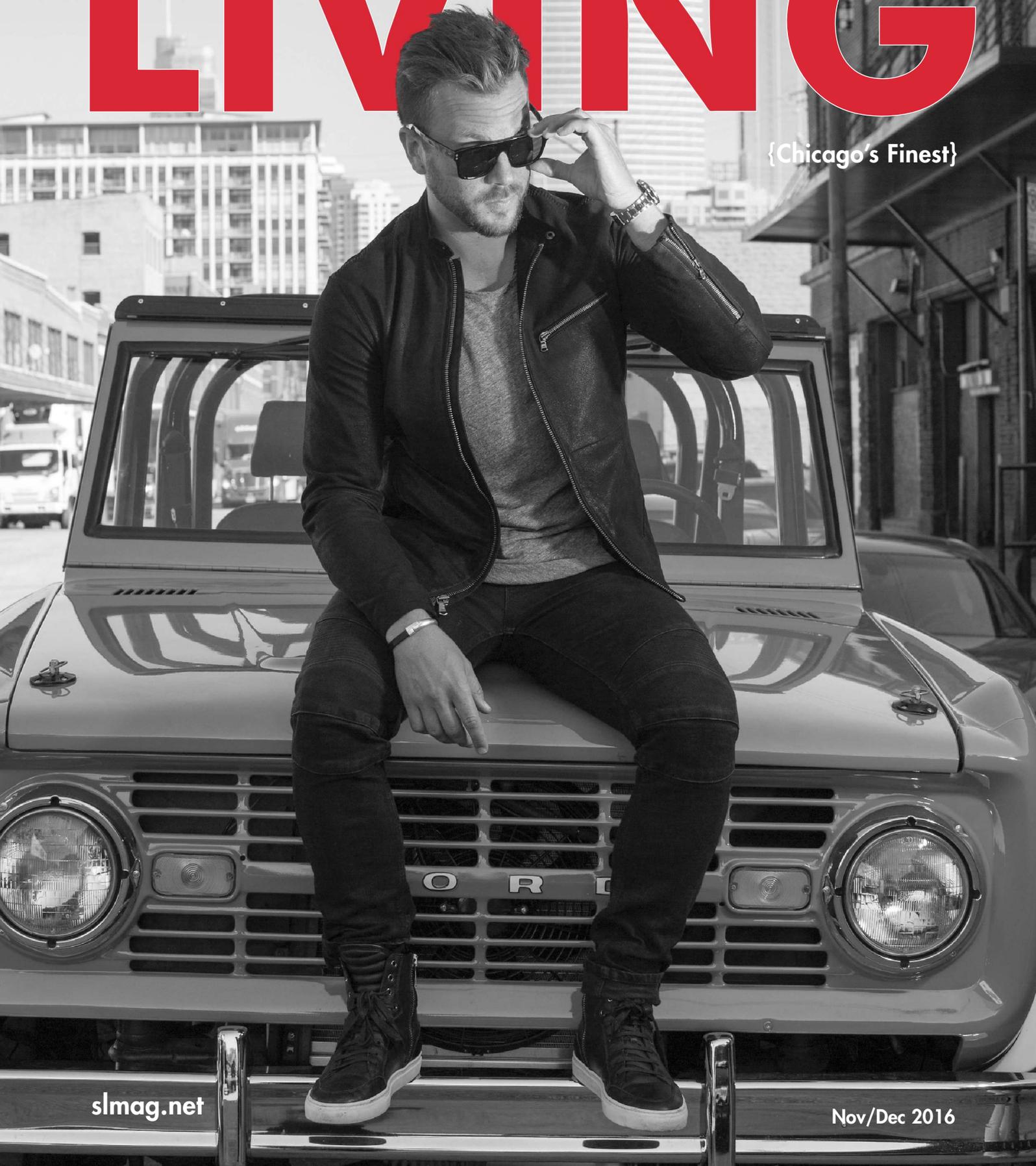


SOPHISTICATED LIVING

{Chicago's Finest}



JOHN ROA'S SECOND ACTS

Entrepreneur John Roa made his imprint on Chicago's tech scene with UX consultancy ÄKTA. With a host of projects on the way, however, that may have been just the beginning.

By Matt Lee

Photography by Fig Media with travel photos by John Roa

Sitting in the tranquil environs of his self-designed West Loop loft sipping a cocktail, John Roa is relaxed, composed—a picture of self-possession. As our conversation drifts from his many projects to philosophy to his habit of fostering kittens, he is, at turns, contemplative and almost whimsically reflective. And why shouldn't he be? At the age of 32, Roa has the world on a string. The founder of user experience consultancy ÄKTA, he sold the firm in late 2015 to San Francisco-based tech giant Salesforce for an undisclosed sum—walking away, one presumes, set for many lifetimes. Cut to a mere few weeks before the sale, however, and Roa's life was anything but meditative.

“The last few months [before the sale] were so unbelievably stressful, it was at a level that I didn't even understand stress could get to,” he says. “Debilitating stress, if I'm honest.”

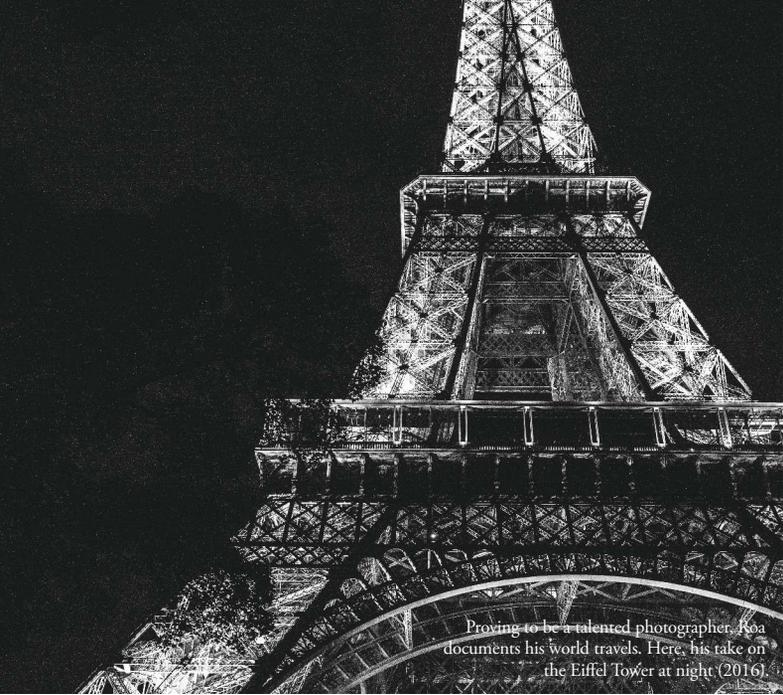
While anxiety levels understandably ramped up for Roa as the sale approached, his entire journey with ÄKTA was, he says, an incredible, years-long high-wire act. A self-described below average student from Grosse Pointe, Mich., with huge entrepreneurial inclinations, Roa was “struggling through a business degree” at Western Michigan University when he began running a video game marketing firm startup in Los Angeles. This exposed him to who would eventually become some of the sector's most talented designers and user experience personnel—relationships that would prove to have enormous consequences.

Though he eventually sold the L.A.-based start-up, it wasn't the stuff kids dream about. “I was more broke when I sold it than when I started it,” he says. Young and deeply in debt, he moved to Chicago, where, bouncing around the city's burgeoning, mid-recession tech scene, he started to notice something. “A lot of tech startups had begun to pop up,” he says. “And because I'd been through it once, I was very valuable to them. I started to advise them, coach them, just kinda mentor and be of assistance. What I quickly discovered was that the place I was most valuable to them was in the art and science of design.”

The story of ÄKTA is far beyond the scope of this piece. In fact, Roa's writing a book about it, with a goal toward deflating the pervasive romanticism that now pervades the tech scene and highlighting how difficult “making it” really is. Suffice it to say, however, that, by the time he sold the firm Roa really had made it. He had roughly 100 employees and contractors, and counted as his clients such blue-chip companies as BMW, Whirlpool, Starbucks and Motorola.



John Roa on the hood of his 1966 Ford Bronco in Fulton Market



Proving to be a talented photographer, Roa documents his world travels. Here, his take on the Eiffel Tower at night (2016).



Roa snapped this photo while on a hike through the Batu Caves in Gombak, Selangor, Malaysia (2014).



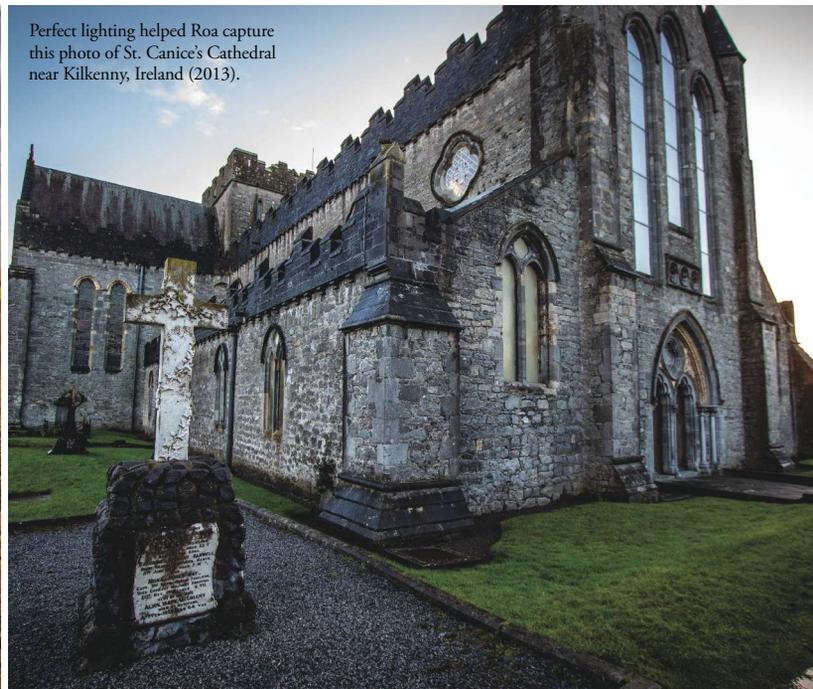
Roa's photo of a man weaving straw shoes in the Northern Province of Thailand, near Chiang Mai (2014).



A Kayan Lahwi woman allowed Roa to take her portrait inside her hut on the border of Burma (2014).



A man preparing camels for a ride to a native Berber camp in the Sahara inspired this shot by Roa (2013).



Perfect lighting helped Roa capture this photo of St. Canice's Cathedral near Kilkenny, Ireland (2013).



"I've always loved vintage cars and especially trucks," says Roa. "My Ford Bronco is from the original year they were made, 1966. It's loud, fun, sexy and in demand."

If that sounds like a one-way success story, though, Roa says, don't fool yourself. "Many things could go wrong, all with the same deeply negative outcome," he points out, diving into a candid exposition on the inherent dangers of bootstrapping a rapidly growing private business. The explosive growth and requisite financing, he notes, require a never-ending cycle of larger and larger risk taking—and at any point, with just a few bad breaks, the entire operation could crumble. "Throughout the five and a half years we ran this firm, we were literally going from feeling really good and feeling really bad about what we were doing every single day," he says. "It was scary."

Whether Roa, who self-effacingly refers to certain components of his success as luck, did indeed catch a few great breaks or did, as one might surmise, also have a knack for making the right calls, ÄKTA thrived, being named to *Inc.* magazine's list of the fastest 500 growing companies in the country in 2014. When ÄKTA finally approached a Boston-based investment bank for a sale, a managed auction was held. Salesforce, a \$55 billion leader in the cloud-computing and customer relationship management field, eventually signed on the dotted line, and the rest was history.

Except, for Roa, it wasn't. Massive personal transitions were, he says, among the most challenging aspects of life after ÄKTA. After serving for nearly eight months as a Salesforce executive to help with ÄKTA onboarding, he finally resigned in May. "You wake up the next day and there are no employees, no email, no office, no co-workers," he says. "It was surreal. The day before you had hundreds of people around the world depending on you. The first thing you do is grab your phone to check your email and there is no email to check."

As one might expect of a type-A personality such as Roa, however, he hasn't been staying still. Far from it. Aside from designing his dream loft and traveling the globe, he recently launched Roa Ventures, which seeks to invest in lifestyle and hospitality businesses, tech interests and, occasionally, simply concerns he finds quirkily interesting. Additionally, he is building a massive villa on the Greek island of Mykonos, which he will use as an investment property (and for personal use, naturally).



Roa's open-concept loft features a custom bar and wine rack built with old barn wood from Montana.



Fight Club author Chuck Palahniuk and Roa became friends while working with an animal rescue shelter in Portland, Ore. "In exchange for a donation to the shelter, he said he would write me into his comic book—and he did."



Black-on-black damask wallpaper provides a masculine backdrop for Roa's dining room. "If you look closely, the print is actually made out of animal silhouettes."



Roa's ever-growing spoon collection boasts one for every country he's visited—except Slovakia. "Slovakia is the only country I've been to that didn't have its own souvenir spoon. So I stole a coffee spoon from a cafe there and used a piece of a box to make my own."



Roa photographed at his loft in the West Loop

Taking up much of his time these days, however, is the anticipated summer 2017 launch of Rose & Poison, a private cocktail lounge inspired by those Roa experienced in West London that will set a new level for service and exclusivity in Chicago. While Roa is still ironing out many of the details, one thing is clear: Members can expect the best in all regards. “It will be exclusive but not pretentious,” he says. “It will be the most fashionable place in Chicago to sit down with loved ones or colleagues and have the best cocktail of your life.” Think: no cell phones; no screens; a dress code; staff who take the reins and serve you a drink based on how you feel, not what you call; management that knows your kids’ names; live music nightly; and a level of near-prescient service most commonly experienced in storied European institutions.

It sounds like a fantastic place to relax. But as 6-week-old kittens Oscar and Olive, two of more than 70 that he has fostered over the years, crawl over him, Roa seems to have already found his Zen. “Relaxing to me is starting a business,” he says. “These projects like Rose & Poison and other things I’m working on are what keep me centered. It’s fun and relaxing and therapeutic. As a matter of fact, when I try to do the classic versions of relaxing I get quite stressed.”

Once, he says, he was working with a talented doctor specializing in biofeedback. When he finished the stress test, he saw that the doc was laughing. “She said, ‘I’ve seen this a couple of times before, and it’s kind of interesting,’” says Roa, picking up Oscar. “Turns out I’m actually far more relaxed during the stress parts of the test.” 