

d i g i t a l
D I A R I E S



delving into the world of commercial photography

w o r d s : y v e t t e c r a d d o c k

d e s i g n : j a s e n p a n t o j a

imagine yourself

reading your favorite Sunday paper or monthly glossy without photographs. Can you? Or does the nature of the concept seem eerily unfamiliar? Photography is an emotional journey we experience daily, yet seem to take for granted. Without our beloved photographic storytellers, what would we do?

Jim Arndt describes a time when these artists apprenticed for up to six years to learn the fundamentals of their craft; to understand the processes involved and to master the art of telling compelling stories to suit the medium and the subject. Today, the artistic training varies, but the ultimate mastering of visual communication through a photographic lens remains fundamental in every professional photographer's soul.

Most of today's photographic artists combine old-school techniques with new-school possibilities. Their artistic angles vary from telling the story through the lens and lighting to mixing the elements after the fact. They all embrace one unified goal that Greg Phelps eloquently expresses, "to create an emotionally compelling image that tells the purist form of a story interpreted by the reader."

For lifestyle photographer Lori Adamski-Peek, the story is in the faces, the emotion, the light, time of day and the action. "Today's slice-of-life images are more intimate, which is achieved through the use of shorter lenses and more close-up shots," Adamski-Peek says. "In addition to the subject, the environment is an integral part of the story and creative process."

The creative processes used by photographers are as unique as their various styles. Tom Bear prepares for shots in advance, similar to storyboarding a commercial. John Johnston finds that working intuitively during the photographic process provides him the optimal desired outcome. And Ryan Obermeyer begins with the foundation of a painter. "Photography is a means to an end," he says. "I shoot pictures that I can use as a palette to create a perfect digital amalgam; essentially painting with pictures."

To achieve the deepest human connection, most often a team collaborates to conceptualize the desired end result. Participants include art directors, agency account managers, clients, the photographer, stylists and a retouch





Photos courtesy of (top to bottom, l-r) Tom Bear, John Johnston, Jeff Newton, Mando-Matic, Jim Arndt

master. Retouch pro Armando Martinez says that project parameters are discussed during planning and the team challenges each other's imagination. When the idea manifests, Martinez begins problem-solving with the image. He is a self-described craftsman who "uses an electronic tool to get images to look the way the creative team envisions." His role also includes accenting a photographers' style to "keep the image consistent." In that way he is very much akin to a brand manager.

It seems like everyone plays an integral part in that managerial role. Bear sums it up best: "The days of one person credit lines are gone." According to Jamey Stillings, "A synchronized team ideally captures an image that both answers and asks questions, providing interest and intrigue for the viewer." The one element providing the outlet for a group's fusion of intellectual and creative depth is digital technology.

"The digital age has freed photographers to focus more on the creative process, which I believe can only strengthen our industry," declares Michael Mayo. Jeff Newton states that, "The megapixel race over the past five years has been crazy." This race has nearly mandated that everyone keep up at enormous financial investment levels. It has been keep up or get left behind.

Thankfully, as Stillings observes, "We are close to a leveling out point. Image quality improvements are now incremental, rather than tangible and readily visible. Lenses still need to catch up with camera sensors, internal image processors and RAW file conversion."

Overall, digital is an artistic and technical conduit that has set the pace with delivering the visual sizzle and instant gratification clients want, anywhere in the world. And it opens up more possibilities for both the photographer and the client. Phelps expounds, "The new technologies have given more flexibility and opened up additional avenues for explaining concepts. Photographers now have the power right at their fingertips to more deeply explore their own vision, thus making it easier for them to distinguish themselves from their competitors. Plus, digital adds a great degree of insurance to the shot that film didn't accommodate."

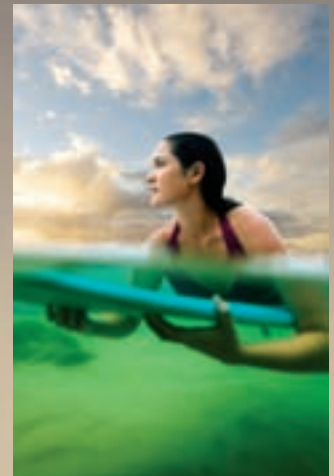
"One great thing about digital is that you can change ISO speed, frame by frame, during the shoot which enables me to be very flexible," Adamski-Peek says. "I can handle a variety of lighting options. In fact, digital technology handles low light situations better than film and is producing greater results."



And lighting is key for all. Newton says, "I came from a film background, so we still treat digital with the same respect as I would my old Hasselblad. We take our time to meter the lighting, to measure everything out properly. I am known for my lighting and the emotion in my lighting. Technique-wise, we try and get as much as possible done in the camera."

Digital also brings other technical skill sets and talents to the surface. Camerawerks duo, Jon Balinkie and Jason Grubb, liken shooting digitally to being a professional scanner operator as well as a photographer. "You must really know color well in order to have a file reproduce accurately. When we shot film, it was out of our hands once it was delivered. The client would have it scanned and returned typically by a third-party source. With digital photography, you are delivering files directly to the client and you must have confidence in the way they will reproduce on press. It's really important to make sure all your shadow and highlight detail is in

Newton admits that he had to adjust to post-effects. "Over time, I started to realize that with time and budget constraints, the mind of an illustrator could do things we just physically couldn't do in reality. I began to respect it more and understand that sometimes it was more appropriate for a piece than something I would have done." And for his own work, he does tend to treat Photoshop like he would a darkroom. He was always experimenting there and treats Photoshop in the same manner.



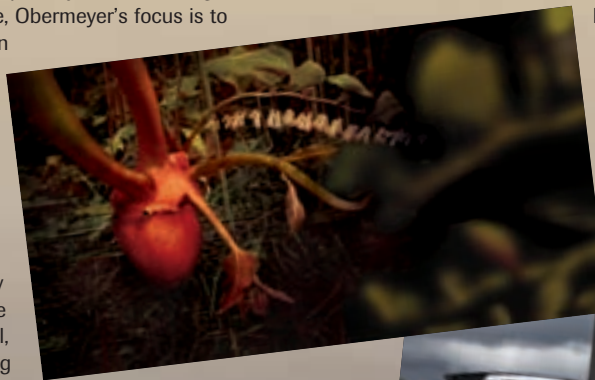
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the file. If doing CMYK conversions, as we do, you must also know how to color-correct files. That's really important when shooting product. The color must be accurate to what the consumer will see once it is in their hands."

This level of acumen makes the pros stand out even more and provides them new ways to step up their game. "The accessibility of technological advancements makes the competition stronger so people will take more risks with their work. Things are becoming more grassroots in the creative industries, so people are going to be challenged more to create an individual style," Obermeyer says. However, he is part of a group of photographers, like Brooks Freehill, who caution against too heavy a reliance on technology. "It can make people lazy when shooting," Freehill explains. In order to advert such a state, Obermeyer's focus is to "be resourceful and creative to make an image that you've never seen and will never confuse with another."

Throughout the industry, there is no wonderment about the future of digital versus film. The consensus is that there will be a role for film, although diminishing, in commercial projects. Most likely, its importance will apply more to fine art applications and the consumer markets going forward. Still, Freehill, Arndt and a few others bring both film and digital to shoots, just in case there is a request or a specific look they want to achieve.

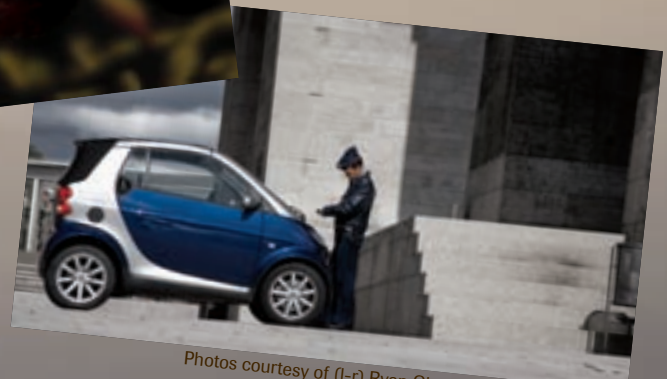
Just like in the movies, special effects with photography are increasing. The trend is moving toward more illustration, refined retouches and a future look yet to be crafted. All photographers agree that the post-production process is just as important as the actual shooting process. Obermeyer thrives off the post. "Most of my work begins after the shoot," he says. "I mix any media possible to create an aesthetic that viewers emotionally connect with."



Stillings predicts that the retouching process will become even more sophisticated. He continues to follow retouching protocol based upon the type of work he does. "For documentary work, only dust spec removal, tonal, contrast and color adjustments are involved. For advertising projects, anything goes!"

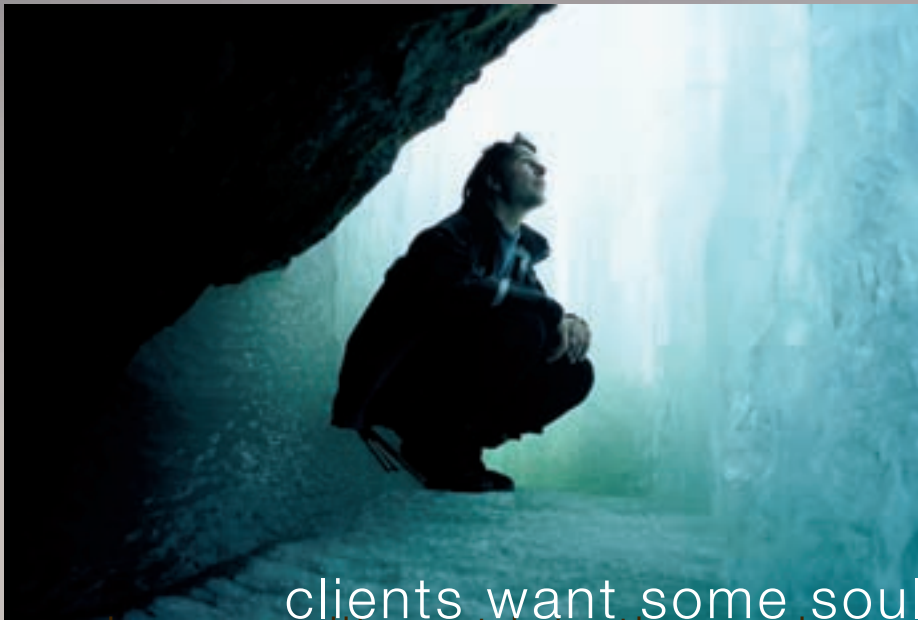
Projects that provide the forum for unabashed imagination and customization have been squeezed by the proliferation of stock photography inventory. Photographers are quite vocal about its impact, especially low-cost stock, on their businesses.

Balinkie and Grubb understand that clients may need those low-cost images in time or budget crunch situations. And Phelps elaborates that "stock serves its purpose when unique or hard-to-duplicate situations like wild animals or large groups are needed."



Photos courtesy of (l-r) Ryan Obermeyer, Jamey Stillings. Top photo courtesy of Lori Adamski Peek





clients want some soul and personality put into the work

Photos courtesy of (clockwise, l-r) Brooks Freehill, Greg Phelps, Camerawerks

Some of the group has toyed with ways to make their work needed. Bear confesses to submitting images to a stock house before, but has had a hard time finding a market for them. Stillings and a few of his colleagues have thought about stock's benefit as passive income.

Freehill believes that it doesn't hurt to diversify. Even post pro Martinez has experienced an increase in clients handing him multiple stock images with instructions to create one compelling image comprised of all of them.

Stock has changed the job for everyone involved in the creative process. That pinched nerve is not one left unattended by any of the pros. Adamski-Peek takes an adamant stance on the tarnishing role low-cost stock plays in the industry. "As a photographer, once you sell ownership of your creations, you lose power and devalue your work," she explains.

All photographers emphasize the fact that they are artists who have to run a business with obligations like all other businesses — and devalued, commoditized work does not grow a business or support an industry. Making a living through their talent is a necessity. One that they will not allow to be impaired to the point that pros are driven out of business due to the lack of appreciation or education about their role in communication. Phelps advocates, "We create and license the use of the most powerful tool in the worlds of advertising, editorial and corporate communication. That tool has value ... tremendous value."

Fortunately, there are a few signs that clients are beginning to comprehend the significant marketability professionals bring to their brands. The lack of creativity and individuality that generally pervades stock places them at a serious market disadvantage. They are unable to compete in their sphere,

especially if they are one of many utilizing the same photo to distinguish their brand. It just doesn't work.

Johnston is optimistic about his talent and clients' demand for originality. "I believe that if I keep challenging myself and trying new things, assignment jobs will continue to come. Clients want some soul and personality put into the work." Arndt also sees a demand for more creativity. "Clients want trusted sources for trusted outcomes," he affirms.

This level of professional pride, respect and optimism abounds among these professionals, who are excited about the infinite possibilities to create and inspire each other, themselves, clients and readers. "There will always be the need for a great portrait," says Newton. "No matter how much change we see technology-wise." And according to Stillings, "Every new photograph is a new experience; another opportunity to interpret the world in a unique way." ■

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Jasen Pantoja is an in-house designer for the Make-A-Wish Foundation® of America. Recently graduating from the Art Institute of Phoenix, he also practices freelance design, honing his skills and embracing all the elements that compose a successful marketing campaign. "The whole design solution must have purpose. Every line and every point must have meaning. Nothing is wasted!" More about Pantoja is available at www.Pantoja-Design.com.

Photographers All showcased images are courtesy of Jim Arndt, Tom Bear, Camerawerks, Brooks Freehill, John Johnston, Mando-Matic, Jeff Newton, Ryan Obermeyer, Lori Adamski-Peek, Greg Phelps and Jamey Stillings.

