Simplicity and Elegance through the Lens

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Introduction

Since childhood I have been intrigued by visual images and have always looked at light a little differently than others do. I always wanted to know about how the visual effects seen around us are created. I believe that my insight and attention to detail in viewing snack wrapper or a magazine advertisement, has led me to the direction of commercial photography.

The majority of images that we see around us, such as those in magazines, in store advertisements, and product packaging, make up a large segment of professional photography known as commercial or advertising photography. This type of photography is used to sell a product, convey a message or a service or to instigate some action on the part of the viewer. The aim of these photographs goes far beyond conveying an image. I believe in order to be successful as an advertising venue, the photograph must convey real feeling and evoke an emotional response. As a photographer, I always strive for pictures that have an immediate impact as well as draw an emotional response. This may include various subjects, such as buildings, models, merchandise, artifacts, and landscapes, which are used in a variety of media, including books, reports, advertisements, and catalogs.

Nowhere is the old saying “a picture is worth a thousand words” more true than in the world of advertising. As we live in an increasingly jaded and advertising-saturated world, there has been a constant increase in demand for photographs to be used both by businesses and by individuals. Commercial photography and the power of images continue to play an important role in this new age, and these photographs are finding their way into all sorts of unconventional spaces. From traditional banner ads and pop-ups to flyers on the sides of buildings, commercial photography is everywhere.
I consider numerous factors to address in my photographs, meant to appeal to a large group of people. To create commercial-quality photographs, photographers need technical expertise, creativity and the appropriate professional equipment. Producing a successful picture requires choosing and presenting a subject to achieve a particular effect, and selecting the right cameras and other tools for photographic enhancement.

After learning various techniques, attaining enough knowledge, and experimenting with wide ranging aspects of digital photography, I found myself most inclined towards product and portrait photography. Turning simple ideas into unique concepts and cementing them with visual style and grace, forms the backbone of my digital images. It has been a long journey of research, experiments and learning that has led me to decide on the work for my final MFA thesis.

For my thesis exhibition, I have created high-end professional photographs from a unique practical perspective. Though I enjoy working with versatile subject matter and approaches, for my MFA Thesis Exhibition, I have narrowed my subject categories to People and Objects. All of my images have a contemporary and distinctive appeal, which are intended to provoke a response from the viewer. I strongly believe that in addition to beauty, an image should evoke a sense of mystery and wonderment in those who see it. A photograph should transport the viewer to a time and place with eternal beauty and timeless moment. For example, some of my created images when placed upside down form an abstract like the image Incense as shown below (Fig1 & Fig2).

![Fig. 1](image1.jpg) ![Fig. 2](image2.jpg)

Good images should be attractive and appealing; they should convey an idea or a thought, motivate
the viewer's senses and at the same time draw attention. Most importantly, an image should be simple, clean and subject oriented, which means that it should be well composed and should have a specific focus point. An image with too many objects is usually very distractive and is not appealing. Extensive use of space (negative space) in my images makes them pleasing to the eye and the subject gets the direct attention of the viewer.

Another aspect, which makes my images work together as a group, is the use of intense and vibrant colors. Rich, bright colors are eye catching and helpful for selling a product or service. No matter what the product being sold, many companies have found that bright vibrant colors help to move more products off the shelves. Consumers have a naturally strong reaction to these bright and cheerful images, and companies selling everything from perfume and clothing to cars and boats have used the power of color to push their products. Just like a painter, a photographer should be aware of the colors in a composition. Unlike a painter, a photographer does not have complete control over the colors of our palettes. When we shoot in a controlled environment like a studio we have much better control than when we shoot in natural or existing situations.

**Inspiration**

The inspiration for my work comes from seeing works by other commercial photographers and stock images. While photography itself may be close to 200 years old, pure education within professional photography is considerably younger. Even shorter are the number of years when a handful of dedicated photographic educators made their mark on our industry. Starting in the 1980's a very special photographer, Dean Collins, had a very important impact on professional photography and is one of my key inspirations. For over twenty years he was one of the few working photographers who influenced the way an entire generation saw its profession. He taught us to not only see the light, but to move it, bend it and most importantly control it, no matter where or when we were creating images. With a combination of wit and ability he reduced complicated
concepts to workable solutions. Most of his work consists of products, still life and people as subjects. One of his images that highly inspired me is of a Motorcycle (Fig 3)

Fig 3.

I was really overwhelmed when I saw the video showing how he did it. This image was taken within a studio. With his knowledge and skills Dean makes truly complex things appear simple. It's remarkable how he creates the illusion of motion by moving the background, and not the motorcycle.

Joe McNally, a photojournalist turned commercial photographer, is another inspiring photographer. He is famous for capturing great people images and is known for heavy usage of CLS (Creative Lighting System) and Speed light. His use of small flashes in unusual kinds of situations and balancing flashlight with ambient light (sunlight/available light) mark his unique style of photography.

Being a digital photographer, I find it necessary to train myself with Adobe Photoshop as a main tool to enhance my pictures. Adobe Photoshop is an image editing software, extensively used by digital photographers. I keep myself updated with all the new techniques (for digital photography) in Photoshop, by doing tutorials and reading books by Scott Kelby and Martin Evening. Photoshop not only helps to enhance images and do post-production work but also to add some missing elements which otherwise would be impossible to include. For example, being a student I am not able to manage to pay for a make-up artist, I use Photoshop to suggest a more dramatic look in the final image.
Art and technique of commercial photography

Creating visual images that have the power to shape our world requires experience and in-depth knowledge of the art and technique of any type of photography. An open mind is necessary to formulate ideas, and a willingness and capacity for experimentation are key factors. Photography depends on light. Therefore, an understanding of light: what it is, how it behaves and how to use it, play an essential role in creating superlative photographs. The character of a photograph depends on how a scene is lit as well as what camera angles are used and the exposure settings.

My initial steps towards commercial photography were not easy, as it required more knowledge and skills. I began by studying the work of other photographers and deciding what I liked about their images and their style. To gain more knowledge, I studied lighting at different times of the day and about how shadows are formed, and applied similar techniques for studio lighting setups. I learned basic techniques for utilizing soft-boxes, umbrellas, large reflector panels, and large strobe reflectors with light inserts. Within my work, I have experimented with different ways of using light combined with the use of creative camera angles, which tends to give some interesting results. For example, enhancing the subject's appearance with natural or artificial light, shooting the subject from an interesting angle, drawing attention to a particular aspect of the subject by blurring the background, or using various lenses to produce desired levels of detail at various distances from the subject.

Most of my work is done within a studio set up where I control light, create backgrounds with the use of colored gels, and use a tripod with my camera. While taking pictures in the studio, I connect my camera to a laptop. This helps to analyze my pictures instantly on a bigger screen and immediately rectify the lighting problems and eliminate unwanted shadows, while taking care of other details that are not quite visible on the small LCD display of the camera.
People

Portrait photographs consist of pictures of individuals or groups of people. These may be taken within the studio or on location. Photographs of people are not only used in advertisements to promote a specific product but also in lifestyle ads and promotions for charities and other campaigns. Photographing people for a commercial assignment requires knowledge of fashion or editorial lighting as well how to shoot people with products, people “on location”, shooting in the studio and sometimes outdoors. These stylish, advertising, promotional and marketing photographs may be used for all kinds of businesses that use imagery in brochures, websites, catalogues, annual reports, advertising or editorial features.

I photograph people with an industrial/commercial appeal, which means that I take care of every detail in the image; starting from the clothes they wear, to the backgrounds and the pose of the model. While taking pictures of people, one of the most important details to be aware of is the eyes, as there should be enough light reflected through the eyes in the right manner to make them sparkle. I make use of round lights to add a catch light in the eyes rather than rectangular soft box. Another aspect that I keep in mind is to make my models feel comfortable while taking their pictures; it is necessary that the model should look relaxed and comfortable. Before the actual photo shoot, I take several test shots with myself or with a friend to set up the light and camera angle, so that my model does not have to wait for too long.

While shooting, it is significant to carefully decide on the background. Simple colored paper backgrounds are unobtrusive and subtle. I make use of gels and feathering effects for backgrounds to create the right kind of shadowing and mood in my pictures. Well-done make up on the models, their clothing, their posture; all these details play an essential role in the final image as well.

Extensive research and advanced planning for the shoot helps me instruct my models on the clothes they should wear and the way they should pose. I have also managed to learn Adobe Photoshop.
skills where I can correct a subject’s make-up in the postproduction work if a model is not skilled in professional makeup application.

Fig. 4

The image *Exotic* (Fig 4) from my exhibition is my favorite. It has a distinctive appeal as the image of the model is seen with a blurred background of rain and lights. There is motion in the picture but at the same time the image is very fashionable in its own way. This was an outdoor shot taken at night while it was raining with the use of one small flashlight. The effect of rain falling on the road with cars speeding in the background gives an unusual effect. It was difficult to capture that moment since the lighting was minimal and, while shooting, I also had to protect my equipment from the rain.

Another photograph I would like to discuss is the image *Anticipation* which is a portrait of my friend and his pregnant wife (Fig 5). This was a project requested by a friend of mine from Korea. I learned that it’s a tradition in their culture to get pictures of the couple while they are expecting a baby. The special kind of top worn by the woman is designed so the viewer can see her pregnant tummy. The concept was very personal, with the idea of babies being angels. I used a white background for this picture. A white background gives a “heavenly” feel to the picture and seems to take the couple away from the studio environment. Also, I used a vignette effect, in order to enhance the idea of the heavenly appearance.
Objects

Object photography, also known as still life photography is the depiction of inanimate subject matter. Object photography, more so than other types of photography, such as landscape or portraiture, gives the photographer more flexibility in the arrangement of design elements within a composition. Object photography is a demanding art, one in which the photographer is expected to be able to form their work with a refined sense of lighting coupled with compositional skills. The still life photographer makes pictures rather than takes them. This means that the photographer has the control over how to place an object (or objects) so that it can be captured at its best. Knowing where to look for props and surfaces also is a required skill.

Every object is unique in its form and shape. While photographing objects, it is vital to determine its uniqueness and show it in the most unusual manner. It is necessary to highlight the best characteristics of the product itself. This is my approach to photographing simple objects. For my MFA Thesis exhibition, I have transformed mundane everyday objects into eye-catching images. My love for finding unique perspectives for simple objects has been a basis of my work. Also, extensive use of empty space of white and black background, vibrant colors and attractive shapes form the cohesive body of my objects.

Fig. 6

Of the images, one of the first to be photographed was the Green Apple (Fig 6). For that image I spent time capturing splashes of the apple in water, throwing it in different ways until perfection was reached. I was fascinated by splashing images seen in variety of advertisements, which inspired me to do this one. Splash photography is challenging, as it requires some precise coordination. But it is a lot of fun and the
results are wonderful. With some knowledge of the setup, I was able to get the splashes of water when the apple was thrown. When I looked at all my captured pictures, I liked the one that did not even have a splash; rather the water seems calm and serene. This composition looks perfect to me with a green color contrasting the white. The apple seems to be just settling down in the water where the bubbles are seen clearly. This image gives a sense of freshness and calmness. What I enjoy about this image is its distinctiveness and simplicity.

Following along the same series, I experimented with splashes of different objects in water. After working with an apple, jalapeno, pepper and strawberries, I tried with a Wristwatch (Fig 7). The idea behind this image was that the image of a watch in water might be well used for advertising a sports watch that is water resistant.

Though I had learned the technique of splash photography by now, this was not easy. I was not getting good images, until I realized the mistake of dropping the watch vertically in water rather than dropping it horizontally, which made the watch move slowly through the water. This was a stepping stone, where I learned that the way the different objects are dropped in different liquids gives different results. Thus, this was fun series of pictures, which leave the viewer in wonderment of the setup.

Another image that I would like to talk about is Spill (Fig 8). This image creates the illusion of water falling in the glass, which is not actually falling in the glass, thus creating an unusual effect. The striking contrast in black and red, achieved by the use of gels, makes the shapes of the half bottle and glass with water splashes stand out in the image.
In the image titled *Shapes* (Fig 9), I lit my object with a single source of light highlighting the unique form and shapes of the bottles and capturing them in a creative manner with the use of a vast black background.

One of my favorite images from the objects category is *Dice* (Fig 10). This is a conceptual photograph of a still life with detail in the background. The concept of this image is gambling, but it may also be used to present sporting or casino. For this image I spent time arranging the objects, moving the dice, cards and coins around until I felt perfection was reached. The background effect is created with a special technique of blocking some parts of the light with shaped cutouts.
Conclusion

I am a photographer and photography is my passion. Photography has not only shown me beauty in everything but has also enabled me to enhance the beauty of each subject. People and still-life objects are two of my favorite subjects and I strongly believe that with the right kind of tools and the appropriate use of light either of those subjects can be made to look their best. The subtle nuances associated with the details of a subject can infuse a great amount of charm and value that may be otherwise overlooked when seen with the naked eye. To me photography stands alone in bestowing a rare perspective and form to any subject be it a bottle of wine or an apple dropping into water where every detail neatly unfolds before your eyes.

I make my images with human subjects as unique as I can and bring out aspects that make my models look exquisite in their attire and the surroundings. The background on the other hand boosts the subject's highlights and complements the overall image quality. This is evident in all my images pertaining to human models none of which is identical to the other. Still-life images are a whole different story because I am handling subjects that are at the sole mercy of my skills which can give them rare perspective and an extraordinary dimension. On the brighter side with still life I am not under strict time constraints and am able to devise inventive ways to capture the jaw-dropping image that I visualized. Shapes and silhouettes have been two other areas of interest to me to portray still-life in all its glowing exuberance and appeal. The same outlines that define shapes in all my still-life images also make my human models more striking and give the overall image an artistic symmetry. This symmetrical end result combined with the innovative placement of subjects is another high point of my photography. In addition to compliance with the norms and rules of photography I also apply novel thought and reason and compose shots that may indeed turn out to be rare "wow" images. Experimenting with vivid angles and focus has always intrigued me and
though failures here are not that uncommon the small success rate each time gives me immense satisfaction and fills me with a sense of renewed confidence and accomplishment. In conclusion, photography has always kept me chasing my dreams and ever since I discovered photography I never stopped dreaming.
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