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September/October 2008



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August Bradley
High-Style Beauty



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The Stylish Storyteller

By William Sawalich >> Photography By August Bradley

"Fiction's about what it is to be a human being."
—David Foster Wallace

"Why should things be easy to understand?"
—Thomas Pynchon

Steering clear of photographic formulas and even simple rules of thumb, **August Bradley** embraces any method that gets his ideas in print

(As the son of a photographer, August Bradley grew up studying the medium closely, yet he says the primary influences on his work aren't photographers, but authors. It makes sense, really, when you consider that his objective is to tell stories. He just uses a camera to do it.

"I was increasingly drawn to crafting scenes out of my imagination," Bradley explains of his early transition from adventure and sports photography to a more fantastical subject matter. "I wanted to create stories, rather than capture events unfolding before me. I've always been a big reader, and I've found that there's every bit as much truth and insight in the best literary fiction as in nonfiction works. I try to bring a literary sensibility to my graphic images. My work has been influenced as much by authors such as Thomas Pynchon and David Foster Wallace as by any photographer."

If you're familiar with the works of Pynchon and Wallace, then you expect a densely nuanced twist on the typical photographic fare. Sure enough, Bradley's images are often surreal and conceptual—as



The Stylish Storyteller

Truth isn't any stranger than fiction for Los Angeles-based conceptual photographer August Bradley, whose body of work consists of an odd amalgamation of fashion, beauty and literary imagination. People, places and props are carefully orchestrated into poetic metaphor, while the look of the images themselves is hyper-real, an illusion that heightens the fantastic qualities.



much illustrations as photographs.

“It’s a stylized look that I would describe as an illustrated feel with dramatic shadows,” he says, “polished and sharp with a nuanced color palette of muddy, nonprimary hues. Even though there’s a flood of imagery out there, if I create something worthy, it will be noticed. It’s helpful to go out of the literal realm of photography, to leave the boundaries we typically view the world from within. The stylization helps enable the viewer to forget about what they have come to expect from photography.”

Bradley’s work is certainly unexpected, but as much as anything, it’s new. After winning the 2008 Hasselblad Masters award, along with notable recognition from Graphis and IPA, Bradley’s career only recently has taken off. He has just completed a project for



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Hasselblad’s upcoming *Masters* book, one that showcases the type of work for which he’s increasingly sought after—which also happens to be the kind of work that he enjoys doing most. As with presumably any hot new photographer, the computer is a crucial part of Bradley’s workflow, but the very foundation of his stylized look comes from a firm grasp of traditional photographic techniques.

“The stylization is so dependant on the lighting,” Bradley explains. “It’s exaggerated, but building on tones that are all there in the way the image was lit. Tonality and

mood come 80% from lighting, 20% from post. Color comes from precisely defined palettes for wardrobe and set design, with overall tweaks to enhance mood applied in post. The look would be impossible without very controlled, deliberate lighting shot in-camera. All things equal, I prefer to capture as much as possible in-camera because it’s more efficient and avoids a lot of complications. My hair and makeup team knows to make things as finished as possible in-camera; we never rely on a fix-it-in-post mentality. Post is for taking something to new heights in ways the camera cannot, not for correcting photographic mistakes.”

Whether it’s fantasy or reality that Bradley is taking to new heights, one thing remains consistent in all of his images—the models are rendered meticulously and beautifully. He stops at nothing to show them in that light.

“I don’t *make* her look beautiful,”



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Bradley says. “She is that when she arrives. I simply reveal the beauty in the clearest, most unobstructed way. Sculpture artists talk about how they don’t carve the object, but rather find it within the rock and merely remove the excess debris around it, revealing the final piece. Same thing with beauty images.”

“It’s doing every tiny little thing that cumulatively has a big impact,” Bradley continues. “It’s casting, makeup, lighting, composition, posing, camera settings, RAW conversion and postproduction all being done to their very highest potential that ultimately leads to an appealing look on skin—or anything else for that matter. To get that high-impact look, you have to have the cumulative benefit of every little ingredient. If the makeup is bad, I can cover it up in post, but to do so, you have to damage the texture, which is never ideal. To get the best possible look, one aspect of the process can’t be covering up a shortfall elsewhere; it must be the cumulative effect of every element contributing to a whole greater than the sum of its parts. There are no shortcuts.”

When pressed for specific insights about exactly how he creates such perfection, particularly in terms of retouching skin for his beauty and fashion photographs, Bradley cheerfully bristles at the idea that there’s a formula. In fact, he seems to oppose any suggestion of following a rote technique or adhering to general rules of thumb.

“I’m not sure how to explain ‘how’ I remove distracting elements,” he explains. “It’s on a case-by-case basis. The art isn’t the mechanics of how something is done, but knowing what to do, how far to do it and what not to do. It’s all about having a clear vision in your head of where you want to go. No hardware or software will lead you to something great; the image needs to be in your head and you



“Everyone gets hung up on postproduction when discussing beauty images; the magic is really in the lighting, composition and the model’s expression.”

simply find the tools to make your way toward that vision.

“Rules keep people out of trouble and avoid disasters, but they don’t lead to remarkable results,” adds Bradley. “The key is to study faces, study how light rolls across them, examine what angles are most interesting and create the strongest geometry. I think a lot about geometric lines and shapes. Everyone gets hung up on postproduction

when discussing beauty images; the magic is really in the lighting, composition and the model’s expression. Without that, don’t even waste your time on the image in post.”

Though he may prefer the spiritual aspects of the creative process to the technical procedures required, Bradley isn’t opposed to mastering techniques. Quite the contrary, he has customized his shooting and processing workflow

solely in order to be able to tell his visual stories more clearly. There appear to be few processes that are consistent from image to image with him, but those that remain are crucial to his workflow.

“I capture and convert all RAW files very flat in terms of contrast to give maximum flexibility for localized optimization,” he explains. “Every file

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gets contrast and color optimization. Every file gets capture sharpening and output sharpening. The degree varies by image.”

It’s clear that Bradley embraces the idea that he’s pushing the boundaries of the medium, leaving photography behind in favor of some new hybrid visual art concept. This is particularly noteworthy given his formative years spent in the household of a photographer and the time he put in learning analog darkroom techniques. You’d expect him to embrace the concept of photography above all, but in fact, he’s continually living the example of trying to remove the medium from the message.

“I care entirely about connecting the original vision in my head to the final image,” he says. “I’m not sentimental about process. I’ll go from the idea in my head to the final image in whatever way will most effectively deliver the best result. For so many years, the greatest drawback of photography has been that work created with the camera was limited by the constraints of the tool. Now, for the first time in photography’s history, there are no constraints to what can be done with images captured by a camera. The imagination of the artist is now free to explore endlessly. More than ever, it’s now about the artist and the imagination rather than about the peculiarities of the tool. This

Bradley meticulously designs everything in the real world to manufacture his imagined worlds. He relies heavily on careful and deliberate lighting, and uses a team of accomplished hair and makeup personnel to perfect the beauty of his models. A minute attention to detail ensures that every shot is perfected before ever needing computer adjustment.



freedom has been achieved by combining the camera with a second tool, the computer.

“So does that mean it ceases to be photography?” he asks. “Maybe, maybe not—that’s a semantic debate. The question is irrelevant if what you care about is the final image and how effectively it communicates what’s in the mind of the artist. Now it’s all about the artist’s imagination and the final image, and that to me seems like a remarkably good thing. The tool is no longer in the way; the tool has become invisible. It’s not about the tool; it’s about the art, as it should be.”

It may be easy to assume that Bradley is leaving photography behind in favor of new media and techniques. On closer inspection,

though, it appears to be just the opposite. He’s growing his chosen medium to encompass tools and techniques that infinitely expand its capabilities. The biggest difference between traditional photography and Bradley’s hybridized approach is probably a semantic one, argued in terms of fact, fiction, truth and reality.

For generations, photography has been assumed, correctly or not, to deliver an image of a factual reality. In truth, though, for just as long, creative photographers have pushed those boundaries and proven, time and again, that simply because it’s a photograph doesn’t mean it’s factual, or even real. Bradley is building on this tradition, utilizing tools that make the process more broadly

After perfecting the images on set, Bradley uses image manipulation to expand his vision beyond reality. He uses an assortment of custom Photoshop brushes and an extensive labyrinth of workflow processes tailored to each image. His particular style has garnered him so much attention on the Internet that he’s mentioned alongside modern luminaries such as David LaChapelle and Jill Greenberg.

Bradley’s Equipment

Cameras, Lenses, Digital

Hasselblad H3D-39
Hasselblad 120mm Macro,
80mm, 28mm lenses
Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III with a variety
of Canon lenses
Apple Mac Pro 8-core

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expressive. And he uses those powerful tools to make his fictional worlds look even more real.

“Some clients like a traditional photographic look,” he says, “and that’s cool. I love that, too. But I feel my contribution to the medium is in the realm of this newer, more stylized type of imagery. This is where my voice is, and I think there’s a lot to be said in this arena, as well. I like an image to look ‘real’ within the logic of its world. So if sharks did swim by windows in building lobbies, that’s what it would look like [with elegant lighting, of course], or at least what one’s mind imagines it would look like. Again, I’m stripping out details—even factually accurate details—if they distract from the idea or emotion of the image to hone in on the main point.

“More importantly,” Bradley adds, “these images are entirely real portrayals of what they’re depicting. And what they’re accurately depicting is a scene straight out of the imagination, usually a graphic representation or metaphor of an idea or emotion. Rather than documenting what’s happening in the outer world around us, it gets you inside the head of the artist. That’s what my favorite art has always done.”

When it comes to distinguishing fantasy from reality and fact from fiction, it would appear that Bradley not only has no problem discerning one from the other, but also doesn’t much feel the need to make such distinctions. His focus is to render his images precisely and to tell his stories as he sees them in his imagination. There’s only one truth he’s serving, and it’s personal creativity. Everything else is up to viewers to interpret as they see fit.

“There can be truth in fiction,” Bradley says, “even if fiction isn’t factually accurate. Truth and literal facts aren’t the same thing.” DPP

To see more of August Bradley’s images, visit www.augustbradley.com.