

Master Of The Future



August Bradley's conceptual approach to fashion and commercial imagery is heavy on mystery, allegory and visual narratives that have their roots in classic literature as much as they do fine art—not an easy sell for a photographer working in the gentrified world of advertising. Yet Bradley, a relative newcomer to the photography industry, is highly sought after for his singular vision in an environment where established photographers are working against a tough economy and the upheaval of existing business structures.

Densely complex in theme even if minimal in composition, Bradley's dramatic photography is hyperstylized in technique and often centered on a "style" component, he says, "though it's not really about the clothes." He has many clients that come to him specifically for commercial or fashion photography, but Bradley notes that the stylization is less his brand of fashion photography and more to complement each story and to give the imagery more of a "detachment from our day-to-day perspective." Props and surreal backgrounds play a big part in selling the riddles in his images, and he prefers to have an element of literary fiction, noting that as an avid reader he has found the best literary fiction to reveal more fundamental truths than the objective world of nonfiction ever could.

"What I love most about great fiction, be it literature or artistic images," he muses, "is that this is the only way in which we can experience another person's consciousness. We come closer to experiencing another person's mind through this kind of art than in any other form of communication. I personally prefer artwork that rewards effort from the audience, that the viewer has to invest something in, and if they do, then there's a more rich experience as a result."

While other photographers struggle in the new digital business model, **August Bradley** is turning his meticulously composed

fine-art imagery into commercial success

By David Willis >> Photography By August Bradley



August Bradley describes the methodology that keeps him ahead of the game: "I'm not setting out to make a 'photograph,'" he says. "I'm setting out to communicate ideas, moods and, hopefully, articulate something unexpected and unfamiliar while also fundamentally true to the experience of being alive. Unfortunately, most commercial work is totally disposable. It's all about the one-second glance. But I'm acutely aware that if there isn't something immediately engaging at first glance to catch a viewer's attention, nobody will ever make an effort to struggle with a piece. So there needs to be a hook; then on the more successful pieces, there are layers to explore and meaning to extract."

70 | Digital Photo Pro digitalphotopro.com

I don't even care if the viewer gets the full concept I had in mind at the point of creation—though I think it's important that there is one—but I want there to be a sense that there's something bigger than the immediate impression, that something is unfolding, that there's depth to be explored.

"You can learn more about human psychology from Shakespeare's plays than from most books on clinical psychology," he continues. "I strive to depict fictional observations that have an authentic emotional or psychological resonance, despite looking odd and out of the ordinary. I also like my images to

have the sense that there's something bigger going on than what the viewer sees in the frame. I want to convey that something meaningful happened just before the moment was frozen and we're witnessing the aftermath of it, or that something compelling is about to unfold afterward. My characters are also often engaged with elements of the story outside of the field of view—part of the story is unfolding beyond the frame—which adds a sense of mystery to the narrative."

Bradley began as a market strategist for a variety of big brand names like Gap, Banana Republic, J.Crew and others, and it also probably helps that he earned an MBA at Harvard Business School while doing economic analysis as an undergraduate. He has recently revamped his website in partnership with liveBooks and Vimeo to offer an immersive experience that's designed to present an audience with much more than just a portfolio. The site is customized to allow Bradley to present his multimedia content in a format closer to that of an online magazine.

"In the new economy, with new digital distribution tools," Bradley explains, "we need to think of ourselves not only as service providers to commercial buyers, but as our own magazines or TV networks providing content directly to large public audiences. Through this direct dialogue, we can build an audience that has an ongoing interest in our work and has a curiosity in how we engage in the process of interpreting our environment and transforming these observations into artwork. I think this active conversation also enhances the work itself because now the work is linked to a larger ongoing communal dialogue that frequently references the images and films, instead of being merely a stand-alone entity. The result is increased and longer-lasting relevance to a greater audience.

"I first started this on Twitter," he says, "which I use as a 'thought column,' sharing things that inspire and interest me, and more recently starting an open policy of answering any photo or filmmaking questions. I get a lot of





world in which too much freedom can end up being a limitation.

“It’s pretty clear that while digital technology gave us phenomenal capabilities, it undermined a lot of business models,” he answers. “One, digital capture technology made it much easier to do the technical, mechanical part of photography to the point that most anyone could do that aspect of it. A major barrier to entry dropped significantly, flooding the market with new supply. Two, severe uncertainty and instability in the economy since 2001 has led to aggressive cost-cutting and cost-monitoring by clients. Three, digital distribution severely weakened the print industry, as well as broadcast TV and other distribution channels, and replaced it with a platform based on an endless supply of free content, devaluing all types of media content, including photography. Nobody is immune from the effects of an economic downturn or a flood of competition or a market-wide devaluing of the product.

“As a relatively young artist,” Bradley concludes, “my growth has been defined by getting known in the industry and having been fortunate to strike a chord rather than following the general economic curve. But creative fields have never been easy and never will be. Any field that looks fun will draw a huge number of people aspiring to compete in that area. We all come in with some unique qualities, and it’s a good idea to figure out how to effectively use the things that set each of us apart. I tend to have a distinctive aesthetic sensibility, and while it’s not right for most jobs, when it’s right, it’s really right, which enables charging a premium for it. I think part of the solution is to avoid being a commodity and make one’s work distinctive. Anyone can capture a digital image, so put some style and spin on it that makes it different, and put some ideas behind it.” DPP

To see more of August Bradley’s work, visit www.augustbradley.com. Bradley will respond to any and all questions about photography or filmmaking at www.twitter.com/augustbradley.

such questions by email, but it’s impossible to respond to them all. With Twitter, if someone can keep the question tight to 140 characters, I’ll give a direct answer every

time in a tweet or two. Furthermore, with the new website, I’m putting a lot of thought and effort into substantive blog posts with behind-the-scenes content, as well as thoughts on art, creativity and the process of making images and films.”

Though the move to professional photography as a career came later in life for Bradley, his mother was an artist with her own photography studio, and he literally grew up assisting her with lighting, even as a toddler. This, no doubt, was an important

>> More On The Web
For more on the exciting work of August Bradley, read “The Stylish Storyteller,” our previous article on the talented commercial photographer in the Profiles section of DPP at www.digitalphotopro.com.

educational background for someone known for their impeccable lighting and precise composition, and his images are perfected in the real world

before they ever hit a computer.

Like many photographers, Bradley is also moving into a wider range of content creation beyond still imagery. He has already shot TV commercials for brands like ABC and Nestlé, and is excited to be expanding into physical art and design, as well. In fact, he’s ever on the forefront of technology, and when asked, as a former marketing analyst, if he has any opinions on the digital revolution and how it has wreaked havoc on existing business structures, he has a lot to say about a