

WRITTEN BY AUSTRALIANS FOR THE WORLD!



\$12.95
(NZ \$13.95 incl. GST)

NETF 250208

ROYAL RANDWICK NEWS
PH (02) 9314 8503

047 512 495

**BEST VALUE
116 PAGES!**

Photography

Number Fifty One
Autumn 2008

WIN!

**\$10,000 CANON PRIZES
PHOTOGRAPH OF THE YEAR
Details Inside**



Get Your Exposures Right
How Tough is Your Equipment?
Shoot Contra Jour Lighting
Photograph Asia
Choosing the Right Lenses

DARKROOM
Re-Visiting the Zone System



ART PHOTOGRAPHY

Minescapes by Edward Burtynsky

PROFESSIONAL

Christian Fletcher: Stress Free

Montalbetti & Campbell: Cosmic Fedex

Rocco Ancora: Client Experience

Charlie Lim: Light Painting

Spencer Platt: About 'That' Photo

HISTORY

**Paul Hill
Fox Talbot**



**WIN A SONY
α200 SLR KIT**



Photographers: Gay Campbell & Denis Montalbetti

Cosmic Fedex

Interview by
Peter Eastway.
Quotes supplied
by Gay and Denis

Gay Campbell is the 2007 Canon Australian Professional Photographer of the Year, although she point-blank refuses to take all the credit. This is simply because of the way she works and lives. Everything she does is with her life partner Denis Montalbetti, so even when Denis says the winning photos were Gay's ideas, you know that it was really a collaboration.

Really.
Montalbetti and Campbell.
M+C.

The last time I interviewed Gay and Denis for *Better Photography* magazine we talked about their amazing darkroom techniques. Shortly after they jumped on a plane and moved to New York, experienced the 9/11 atrocity first hand, and are now back in Australia. Photographically, I think they greatly enjoyed their stay in NY.

This time I met up with them in their Sydney apartment and was shown the expansive view out their back door where Denis captures the many cloud studies that end up as backgrounds in their amazing portraits.

If there's one thing Gay and Denis have achieved with their photography, it's a distinctive style. Or perhaps that should be a series of distinctive styles because their work has evolved with experience and changes in technology. Yet underlying these changes there is a clear thread that is uniquely theirs.

Gay's winning portfolio is from an unfinished series, highly refined and very sophisticated. Many photographers believe the images to be an amazing conglomerate of Photoshop layers and masks, like the Tim Tam photos they shot a couple of years ago. In fact, the recent shots are a lot simpler in design and execution, even though an M+C studio session is more like a film shoot than a stills shoot, often with a small entourage of stylists, make-up artists, models and computer operators.



The set for Katiana

Cosmic Fedex

The following quotes are either Gay, Denis or both. It doesn't matter as they speak with one voice. I began by asking Gay where she got the ideas for her winning images, to which she answered they were 'Cosmic Fedex's'. An idea came to her: an Elizabethan collar embedded with baby roses.

"I was electrified by the concept and I knew it had tremendous potential. Why? It's just one of those things, an unspoken thing, an energy thing. I literally

Photo Notes: Katiana

Hair and make-up: Orlando. **Assistant:** Alex Porter. **Digital Retouching:** Marcus Thyer/Cave.

Gay and Denis consider most of their work to be illustrative rather than photographic. Even when they worked in the darkroom, their imagery had an illustrative nature.

M+C photographed Katiana for a book cover and thought she was so amazing to look at, they have worked with her regularly ever since. In this image, the model, costume and curtains were captured in the studio, while the clouds were dropped in afterwards. They used a Mamiya 645 AFD II body and a Leaf Aptus 22 medium format digital back.





Above: Denis high above the set for September.

Top: Another image created at an AIPP T-Day workshop.

sat outside on the steps here with pen and paper and drew up these thoughts with the idea of creating a calendar."

The calendar, still a work-in-progress, is to have six images planned around the seasons.

"We spoke about it with our stylist friend Jennifer Smit, while Sun Studios (formerly Baltronics) came on board by providing the studio, lights and the Leaf Aptus 75 digital back.

Explained Denis, "I've been shooting with Leaf since 2000. We have tried other medium format digital backs, especially while we were working in New York, but I just prefer the Leaf. It's a bit like choosing a film stock. Once you find one you like, it's just one less variable you have to worry about when you're working on a job."

Continued Gay, "We'd seen this glass casket (we're not going to tell you where because we have more plans for it!) and we just had to photograph it. However, the only way to fit it into the keyhole format we'd chosen for the calendar was to shoot it from above."

The keyhole format – the curved top of the frame – was another 'Cosmic Fedex', so it was time to ask exactly what was a Cosmic Fedex. Gay's answer began with a quote:

***"There are two ways to live your life:
One is as though nothing is a miracle.
The other is as though everything is a
miracle." – Albert Einstein.***

"While in New York, we had the privilege of meeting visionary artist Alex Grey and we have embraced his concept that we are all conduits for a unified field of energy.

"He says that when we have inspired thoughts that seemingly come from out of the blue – a 'Cosmic Fedex' – this is in fact where they are coming from, from that unified field of energy, from the collective consciousness."

Montalbetti and Campbell could be described as 'New Age' in their thinking and their approach to life, although they ambiguously spend part of it on the periphery of the advertising industry which, along with the art world, is one of the few avenues willing to embrace their remarkable visions.

***"Seek not to follow in the master's footsteps.
Seek what the master sought."
– Matsuo Basho.***

"We see ourselves as artists working in a commercial field. We've worked extensively in both editorial and advertising, shooting people and fashion.

"And since the outset of our career we have admired photographers who had distinct styles that transcended a mere commercial reading of their work, such as Richard Avedon, Irving Penn, Helmet Newton, Victor Skrebenski, Guy Bourdin, Duane Michaels and Mary Ellen Mark.

"We began photography as teenagers when we'd go to the library together and look at books. That's the time when you'd open up a magazine and you could tell whose photos they were without looking at the credits. The work was distinct because, as photographers, they were so far ahead of everyone else.

"Today it is quite difficult to pick up a magazine and know whose work it is. You can flip from page to page and not have any idea. Of course, there are still a few photographers whose work is distinct, but generally most photographic styles meld into one another. What we're trying to create is a style that is distinctly ours."

***"The externals are simply so many props.
Everything we need is within us."
Etty Hillesum.***

"I remember when we were with an agent years ago, there was an agency book which showcased all the photographers. Unfortunately, you could flip

Photo Notes: September

Stylist: Jennifer Smit. **Costume:** Master/Slave. **Hair & Makeup:** Jacqueline Cookson for ChanelLook Productions. **Assistants:** Steve Rowson & Alex Porter.

Digital Retouching: Marcus Thyer/Cave.

"I am seriously into plant matter", explained Gay. "I love flowers and for this shoot we went to the markets at 5.00 in the morning to get the blooms we needed."

When asked if there was a story behind the image, Gay looked back blankly. "It's a promotional device. We just saw this nice casket and wanted to photograph it. We're not that deep, but it amazes me what people read into our photographs sometimes!"

The casket was photographed from above, placed on top of black fabric. The vines, the model and the flowers are all really there, although they have been tidied up a little in post-production.

The posing was tricky, said Gay, and she literally moves the models into position, tilting the head, moving the hands.

"For every one of the shots in this series, there was so much preparation time we really didn't have enough shooting time. It's funny because, for a personal shoot, it had all the pressures of an advertising job."

Everything about the shoot is planned, from make-up, costumes, posing, lighting. Sketches are made and colour palettes decided. "We have meetings just like we do for a paid job. You want to be creating an environment where people can feel free to do their best."

Gay used to be a make-up artist and does much of the skin retouching herself. "With medium format digital, you get everything, but I see many people over-retouching the skin, so much so that it looks plastic. If the make-up is done correctly, there should be very little need to retouch. I find I do lots of colour adjustments, but very little change to the skin texture itself."

When the files are completed, Denis remarked that it's now just a matter of hitting the print button from Photoshop. "With our Quato monitor and our Canon printer, using paper and profiles from DES, which are amazing, we no longer have any colour issues."



from one photo to another and not know whose work you were looking at. Yes, photographers had individual styles, but there wasn't anything that really differentiated them.

"When we began, we were influenced by people who had a distinctive style and that's what we've aimed at.

"In fact, we made a conscious effort to insulate ourselves from other photographers' work in order to remain uninfluenced... looking inward rather than outward. Developing our own style rather than following trends."

Denis says he looks back and calls the era of Avedon and Penn a time of 'craft'. "Those photographers really knew how to light. It was part of their craft, but Photoshop has changed the craft. On some jobs, the retoucher has more power than the photographer and can even dictate the look of the final image.

"However, it's not about the effect that's being applied, it's about the content. It's not about what you're doing in Photoshop, or the darkroom, it's only about the image and the energy that's created between you, your subject and the work.

"Yes, we're enhancing our work in post-production and as the industry changes, we will change too. We want to be leading, not following and today, Photoshop is just one of the tools we're all trying on for size."

"We cannot become what we need to be by remaining what we are. – Max DePree.

"I think this is crucially important. It is about the image, not what we are doing to the image. We happen to be doing something today, but in a few years it will be different.

"We hear many art directors and photographers saying they'll 'fix it in post', but we believe it's still about the craft.

"When we went to the Greg Gorman seminar, one of the questions he was asked was how did he get access to the celebrities. There are many photographers creating portfolios of famous people, but are they extraordinary photos of famous people or just ordinary ones? How many times have you seen photos of people in magazines just because they are famous? That's the difference between Avedon, Penn, Liebovitz and Seliger. There are some extraordinary photographers out there and it would be great to see them used more often.

"We keep our imagery simple – it's a person on a background and the photograph is always about the person. We've had meetings with art buyers who note that our subjects are not always famous, but it's not about fame, it's about the person – who they are, what they look like.

Moving Technology

"One of the things that drives us is the desire to create extraordinary images and this requires us to

keep up with changes in technology. We never stop or rest on our laurels, there is a constant need to improve no matter what the job is. We always put the same amount of effort into an editorial job as an advertising campaign.

"And technology is important because it assists us in delivering what our clients want."

One advantage brought by digital photography that's not always recognized is the ability for everyone to see how the shoot is progressing on a large monitor.

"On the shoot, we want to create an environment in which we can all give our inspired best. It's not just about us, it's about the make-up artist, the stylist and the model. Digital really works for us and, with a monitor, there are no guessing games.

"I think we work faster and the people working with us understand our direction much better when they can see the images too – or see themselves in the case of the model. And when we are shooting people, famous or not, we get more time with them because they can see the direction the shoot is going.

"If I'm directing someone and they're not feeling comfortable about it, the fact they can see exactly what they are doing on screen is a huge advantage. Suddenly they understand what the shoot is all about and can participate.

"One thing you always have to remember is that someone is loaning you their face, their most personal possession, and there is no way you should ever forget that. You should never take a photograph of someone that makes them lose their dignity." – Eve Arnold.

And according to Denis, the studio lighting is now also easier to control.

"I am very impressed with the work of Dan Winters. I saw him speak in New York. Dan said that he had learned while assisting another great portrait photographer Chris Callis, that once you understand the inverse proportion law as it applies to light, you have it. If you move the light further away, the contrast difference in the light across the scene is reduced, whereas if you have the light very close to your subject, there can be a noticeable difference in contrast and light quality – and in exposure.

"I like using ring lights, but they can be tricky to use effectively. But I really do enjoy lighting and if you get it right, your subject can really pop."

Denis says he learnt a lot about lighting by studying the work of other photographers, looking at the catch lights in the eyes in order to re-construct the lighting pattern. "These days it's a lot harder because so often the catch lights are retouched."

This is what I love about talking to photographers. You start with one subject and soon you're riding an erratic zephyr across a myriad of different subjects. And a wonderful insight into how two of Australia's most creative photographers think, feel and create. ■

