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Photo Review

A U S T R A L I A



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**MONTALBETTI
AND CAMPBELL:**

Cosmic Fedex

FLAVIA SCHUSTER:
There and Then

**ALFRED
STIEGLITZ:**

The Lake
George
Years

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We did a live shoot in front of an audience at an AIPP Technical Day to demonstrate how we work together as a team', said Campbell. (The image was created over the course of an afternoon from capture to final retouched print).



Cosmic FedEx:

The photography of Montalbetti and Campbell



This image of Ethan was a Cosmic FedEx that I had about a young man in a fitted net top with flowers underneath. It is a single shot, lit very simply. We re-created the shoot in front of audiences in Sydney and Melbourne to demonstrate the Leaf digital back.

Katania (personal work).





The model for this image is fellow photographer, Emmanuel Gerard. The three serendipitously crossed paths the same day Denis and Gay had discovered this museum piece military jacket and were in a quandary over who would wear it. Emmanuel's shaved head has been illustrated by body artist Martin Bray who worked from a 19th century anatomical textbook from Montalbetti and Campbell's library.

WHEN IT COMES TO VISUAL SIGNATURES, THERE ARE FEW MORE DISTINCTIVE THAN THAT OF PHOTOGRAPHIC TEAM MONTALBETTI AND CAMPBELL.

By Don Norris

THEIR SUMPTUOUS, METICULOUSLY ORCHESTRATED PHOTOGRAPHIC creations are instantly recognisable. Intricately detailed, often multi-layered, their work has the high-gloss finish and exacting colour palette of elite advertising photography. But there is something mysterious at work, something that hints at the psyche's deeper currents. Little wonder then that Montalbetti and Campbell have picked up a swag of awards, and their work is represented in the permanent collections of the National Portrait Gallery and the National Gallery of Australia.

Whether in art or commerce, photography has always been about individual vision. Of course professional photographers have assistants, stylists, retouchers and the like. And it's not unknown for artistic photographers to turn over the printing work to others. However, when it comes to composition and choosing the decisive moment, there are never two fingers on the shutter button.

Denis Montalbetti and Gay Campbell have upended conventional notions of the photographer as individual visionary and replaced the model with their own distinctive form of creative collaboration.

But it wasn't something that happened overnight.

More than 25 years ago when the two Canadians first collaborated, Montalbetti was a photographer and Campbell specialised in makeup and hair. 'I worked as a makeup artist until we came to Australia,' said Campbell. 'But during that time I started assisting Denis in the darkroom. Ultimately I took that role over completely.'

Perhaps anticipating what was to come, Campbell explained that in that pre-digital era they were already evolving a distinctive visual style. 'We shot primarily black and white and then heavily manipulated and coloured the work in post. We would only shoot colour film if we had to.'

However, technological change was on the way.

'In 2000 we started shooting digital. That gave us the ability to make colour the way we wanted to see it,' said Campbell. 'Eventually I started spending more and more time with Denis behind the camera. Now, when he shoots, I'll direct. Or sometimes he shoots and directs. Or I shoot and direct. That's where we are today. I still do some of the retouching and I tend to set the template for the look when we work with professional retouchers.'

December from the series
"Collars and Corsets".



November from the series
"Collars and Corsets".



We're conduits for the creativity
that is coming from the collective
consciousness.

The Dream
Portrait of siblings Grace and Joe Barnes.





The Veronicas
Portrait, "Australia's 25 Most Intriguing People" issue, WHO magazine.

'We've been told that we actually work like a film director and DOP,' added Campbell. 'We're orchestrating what's happening through the rapport we're having with our subjects.'

Given that a shoot can easily involve a cast of many, it can be a challenge for Montalbetti and Campbell to work uninterrupted. The idea of being able to yell 'Quiet on the set!' has a powerful appeal. It comes down to mutual respect and respect for the creative process.

'We wouldn't stand over an art director's shoulder while they were working at their desk and tell them how to do their job,' says Campbell. 'We like to create an environment where those that we are collaborating with, our subjects, our stylists, hair, makeup and retouch artists, have the freedom to do their very best.'

'We're getting to the stage now where people are not supposed to be in the shooting area unless invited,' said Montalbetti. 'Too many people behind the camera's not a good idea.'

And too many hangers-on also have a way of breaking the creative spell, explained Campbell. 'We have had situations in the past where [we are] building rapport with a model and we're taking them to a place... then all of the sudden someone will make a dumb comment or crack a joke. They don't understand. We're working. It's not a day out of the office for us as it may be for them.'

'Our time constraints are getting tighter and tighter, we're needing to produce the images in less and less time. Sometimes you've got 20 minutes... an hour. Therefore we cannot have distractions,' she added.

When a shoot is under way, every second is adding to the costs, so Montalbetti and Campbell are utterly meticulous in their preparation. Whether they are working for an advertising client, or creating one of their signature personal images, little is left to chance. But this doesn't mean there isn't room for intuition and creativity during a shoot.

'I pre-plan the lighting,' explained Montalbetti. 'You bring it up on the monitor to see how it's looking and then you start making changes. If something's not working, then you take it down. What you can have in your mind and what comes up on the monitor can be another story. You can previsualise your lighting all you want, but when you get there, lighting does what lighting does, and sometimes things just don't work and you change on the fly. You have to be very intuitive.'

'I think the intuitive plays a huge part,' Campbell agreed. 'It's about getting your craft in place so that it doesn't interfere with allowing the intuitive to come through in you imagery.'

'We can plan all we want, but sometimes — as in the case with the new anatomical works we produced for our recent solo exhibition, *Montalbetti&Campbell*:



Clare, contestant on FOX 8's Australia's Next Top Model.



Tahnee, contestant on FOX 8's Australia's Next Top Model.

The Sensualists at the Australian Centre for Photography — we have an idea and then the images we produce look nothing like what we actually had planned. But it's fine. We let the images tell us how they want to be.'

Sometimes the images first start whispering to Montalbetti and Campbell years before they take form. 'We've borrowed a phrase from Alex Grey, a visionary artist in the States who calls it "Cosmic FedEx",' said Campbell. 'We're conduits for the creativity that is coming from the collective consciousness. What happens with both of us, but particularly me, is I get pictures. I was up at three in the morning last night, writing one down. I will receive images and then we act upon those images.'

'Most people don't pay attention to what they're receiving, but we've made a practice of recording it,' added Campbell. 'And we have found that many of our most successful images are by Cosmic FedEx.'

'We've come to believe that it's for a reason. This is why we as human beings get insight, it's to bring it out and to share it. You don't roll over in the middle of the night and go back to sleep and say I'll write it in the morning, you get up...

'Sometimes it will take 10 years before we can actually breathe life into an idea. But more often than not, that's where the best imagery comes from. I know many

photographers would have had the same experience; that is you don't act upon an idea and then, lo and behold, you see it come out in a magazine and someone else has done it.'

Montalbetti and Campbell keep a journal of all their 'deliveries' from Cosmic FedEx and they also consciously avoid being influenced by others. 'We do our utmost to have the images come from within and then out, rather than to be influenced outwardly [and have them come] in', said Campbell.

After five years back in Australia, Montalbetti and Campbell have returned to New York where they've lived and worked in the past. The reasons are manifold, but come down largely to the increased opportunities that arise from a much larger population. 'That's what we need for work as specialized as ours is,' said Campbell.

'It's going to challenge us and our work will shift, I think,' added Montalbetti. But, in the end Campbell said, 'We want to keep improving. Otherwise what are we here for? We want to be the best that we can before we leave the stage.'

To see more of Montalbetti and Campbell's work, visit their website at www.montalbeticampbell.com