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TOP MODEL

Montalbetti+Campbell

In professional photography, one job often leads to another. Denis Montalbetti and Gay Campbell were working on Fashion Lab, a re-branding campaign for the charity Fashion Targets Breast Cancer. With a tight budget, Denis and Gay decided to use 3D computer-generated backgrounds instead of building expensive studio sets and three of these images helped Denis win the Open Category of the 2009 Canon AIPP Australian Professional Photography Awards (the images can be seen elsewhere in this issue).

The patron for Fashion Lab is Sarah Murdoch and she was working on a television show at the same time: FOX 8 *Australia's Next Top Model*. Fashion Targets Breast Cancer here in Australia had arranged for half a dozen famous Australian fashion designers to each donate a one-off, high couture gown to be showcased at the benefit function launching Fashion Lab and then auctioned online to raise funds for breast cancer research. Denis and Gay were given the job of photographing the *Australia's Next Top Model* contestants in the gowns.

But there was a catch. Denis and Gay had to photograph all the contestants in a single day with television cameras following their every move, and in addition to the gowns, their photographs would also be auctioned for charity. Nothing like a little pressure to get the blood moving! The photographers would be given just 30 to 40 minutes with each model. Fortunately, Denis and Gay weren't completely new to working in front of the television cameras. They had also worked on *Make Me A Supermodel* for Channel 7 the year before.

"With *Supermodel*, we spent a month researching our ideas, but for *Next Top Model* we were shown the gowns and asked to build a concept around them. The clothing dictated what we could do and it was challenging because we had to take six diverse outfits and turn them into a series of cohesive images.

"When you work on a television show, the whole day is mapped out. Crews aren't allowed to work more than 12 hours, so there's no overtime and no budget for adding a second crew, so you are committed to the time frame. When the producer says you're shooting a model between 11.00 a.m. and 11.40 a.m., then you're shooting exactly then and you can't extend your shoot by even a minute because that throws out the rest of the day. And in any event, we were being interviewed at the end of each shoot, explaining to the camera what we thought about the model's performance. It really was a matter of locking everything down so there would be no hiccups.

"Production schedules are relentless and we felt a lot of pressure to produce a first class image for every model. Normally we would spend one day per image,



Adele Thiel

OPPOSITE PAGE: Tahnee Atkinson



OPPOSITE PAGE: Clare Venema

or maybe two shots in a day, but six in a day was challenging to say the least for the standard we like to deliver. It was a lot like shooting fashion editorial on film prior to Photoshop days, when you have to get everything in a single shot – you have to direct the models so that you can nail every aspect of the image in camera.”

For much of their other work, Denis and Gay will ‘Frankenstein’ their subjects, their way of explaining how they will take an arm or a face from one shot and paste it into another to produce a perfect pose. There was to be no such luxury with this shoot, although they were going to deep-etch the models and drop them on top of a series of backgrounds that Gay had already created.

“These photographs were all about the girls, the stars of the show. They had to show how they performed in front of the camera, so the poses had to be theirs. This was no doubt good for television, but it meant there was yet one more element over which we had little control.”

Pre-Production

Prior to the shoot there was a lot of planning. “From our perspective, we needed a series of backgrounds that were similar so the photographs looked like they were part of a set, but different in colour and form so they would complement each gown.

Explained Gay, “We had recently created a portrait using lots of vintage floral illustrations, but for a shoot like this I didn’t want to photograph real flowers and nor did we have the budget to create our own large backgrounds. That would just add to the shoot’s complexity. Instead, I was thinking of using the flowers as a background, like a fresco.

“I’m an unfulfilled artist at heart who loves painting and illustration. I also love plant matter, so when I look at vintage engraved plates by botanists like Sir Joseph Banks, my heart weeps over the precision and intricate beauty.”

Gay knew what the gowns and the models looked like – in some cases which gown the model wore depended on if it would fit her – so before the shoot she worked the illustrations into a background plate.

“While the gowns looked beautiful, we also needed a way to bring them to life with movement and colour.” Their solution was to use a trampoline, a technique they had used previously on many occasions, so the models could let the gowns float around them.

“We also hired a model to jump on a trampoline with each gown, well before the shoot, just to make sure it was going to work. It’s not easy to jump continuously on a trampoline in a garment that is so expensive. What happens if the model lands awkwardly and tears the dress? And there was a time element – we were shooting on Tuesday and the gowns would have to be repaired and cleaned ready for the runway show the following Thursday



The set-up for the first TV show, *Make Me A Supermodel*, showing how Gay and Denis work. PHOTO: ALEX PORTER
 night. The last thing you want to do on television is try something that doesn’t work.”

Production

The show hired B2 Studios in Sydney for the shoot. Denis and Gay arranged the lighting around a trampoline, using a large Octabank as the main light, a fill light and a few reflectors on the side. When photographing a subject that moves around, it’s important that the spread of light is wide enough. The background would be exposed to produce a light grey tone, which Denis finds is better than pure white, producing less flare and wrap-around on the subject. “It was pretty simple lighting,” he concluded.

Denis and Gay work as a team and while both can handle all aspects of a shoot, it often seems that Gay focuses on overseeing the creative aspects, working with their stylist, hair and makeup artists and directing the models, while Denis handles the camera and lighting. For *Top Model*, Denis shot with Canon’s EOS 1Ds Mark III and says it just flew. “You can shoot as fast as you want and for this shoot we needed to!

“Medium format isn’t always as fast or responsive as a DSLR. The power packs were recycling every 4/10 second and this was easy for the Canon to match. Plus the shutter lag is so short that it’s much easier to capture the peak of the action.”

Denis doesn’t look through the viewfinder, however, preferring to lock the camera off on a tripod and watching the model with the naked eye.

“With the model bouncing up and down, you get into a rhythm and you know when the action is going to peak. For some shots, the best images were when the model was on the way up (the short



OPPOSITE PAGE: Cassie van den Dungen

dresses), whereas for other shots the dress looked better when the model was on the way down (the longer gowns).” For one of the outfits, the stylist had to tack a necklace down because it was hitting the model in the face as she was jumping!

While Denis is shooting, Gay is directing. “I remind the girls to be aware of their body position, what the garment is doing, and how to move their body to achieve the best shape. Normally for a shoot like this we test our models first to make sure they have good body awareness, but that wasn’t possible for the television show.

“All the girls tried really hard – and it was a hard thing to do. They had to think about their legs, feet, arms, hands, facial expression, where they were looking and work with the garment all at the same time. And they couldn’t do anything that might damage the gown! Some of the models needed to get more height because the dress extended below their feet, so we had people standing nearby, ready to catch them if needed.

“It’s funny, there we are asking them to do all these things on a trampoline, but at the same time saying, ‘Don’t sweat,’ because the gowns were

Harlequin

The Harlequin image was part of the *Make Me A Supermodel* program and Gay and Denis think this is the best of the images produced. “Prior to the shoot, we worked out who we wanted in each scene based on the groups’ aesthetics and who would fit the costumes the best. Of course, a few days before the shoot, the show switched things around and while it was challenging for us, no doubt it produced more in terms of entertainment. After all, we were working on a television show!”

Denis and Gay worked with their favourite stylist and hair and makeup artists and sourced appropriate props and costumes from all over Australia. The background image was taken from Gay and Denis’s personal stock library and printed on a large format Canon inkjet printer resulting in stunning 3.7-metre square canvas backdrops. The large background required three strips to be then overlapped and joined with double-sided tape. The models then lay down on the set and Denis and Gay shot from above.

“We created four different scenarios and in this scene, the male model is the harlequin with the girl models acting as his muses. It was a love triangle and they are his inspiration.

“The models were generally very good. I told the girls to close their eyes and feel what it would be like to be in love with the harlequin – and I think they got it!”



Selecting images prior to retouching for the first TV show, *Make Me A Supermodel*. PHOTO: ALEX PORTER
worth thousands of dollars!”

The shoots lasted between 30 and 40 minutes and Denis says he took between 200 and 300 exposures each time. The Canon 1Ds Mark III was tethered to a computer using Canon’s DPP software. The raw files were later processed in Capture One 4.

“The girls were all different. Clare got the idea quicker than anyone else and that was part of the challenge. A number of the girls took a long time to work it out, to get the feeling of being in the air and producing a great shot. These girls weren’t experienced, so the results in some ways are based on what the model produced. On the other hand, one of the benefits of shooting these television shows is that the contestants are so eager to perform. You don’t get attitude, rather a willingness because they want to win. They tried their very best and we really enjoyed the experience.

“It’s been interesting working under such tight production schedules. I think we were pretty normal during the shoot itself, but it was odd to turn around at the end and be interviewed on camera. What was the model like, how did she perform... There was no time to look at our edits and then it was straight onto the next shot.”

Denis and Gay used two studio assistants, a digital technician and two producers on the day. After the shoot, they spent a couple of hours editing the images. “Each capture was different because everything is random when you’re jumping in the air and a wind machine is blowing. It was important to not just pick the best shot from each model, but rather a series of six images that worked well together. For instance, we had a great shot of Cassie but her hands looked too similar to the pose selected for another girl, so we chose another. It was essential to get the images to work together as a group.

“The retouching was done by Marcus Thyer at Cave who had been briefed and knew what to do. He received the files on Wednesday morning and we had the final prints ready for the function the following night.”

Some people think fashion is hard enough, but fashion and television together – an energetic combination! ■

