WE OFTEN EMBARK DOWN A CAREER path only to discover a side path that leads into the unknown. We take that path and can be pleasantly surprised where it leads, especially when we find that it leads us home.

While studying electrical engineering at Brigham Young University, Gerald Bybee won a photo contest in a freshman class about the physics of light and photography. His material prize was a new tripod, but the real prize was a new-found love for photography. Gerald took that side path and never looked back.

"I was raised Mormon, and I went to BYU intending to study electronics," Bybee says. "But my family was very creative. I found that with photography, I could merge technology with all these creative images I had in my head from my grandfather's painting and my mom's crafts."

Bybee has walked that "side path" for over twenty years, starting out as an assistant to still-life and beauty photographers, moving on to "tons" of exacting catalog work, and finally emerging as an innovative commercial and advertising shooter for such clients as Sutter Home Winery, Knott's Berry Farm, Silicon Graphics, Adobe Systems, Windham Hill Records and HSC Software. "I find that art directors are comfortable with me because I can be clean and technical, but also add an edge," Bybee says.

JOURNEY TO THE EDGE

The 42-year-old photographer remembers coming to that edge over time, beginning with his traditional camera work. "We were doing a beauty shot and the model was just stretching her neck. I said, 'Hold it,' and she pulled her head around. She was very limber. I just loved the angle and I shot it," he explains. In the image, the model's head is turned unnaturally around on her shoulders, almost facing backwards. Without a visual reference point you can't see her arm or any other part of her body, or anything in the background-the image appeared all the more strange and unnatural.

By the late 1980s, Bybee found himself working a lot with sep houses and printers to maintain the aesthetic and technical quality of his work as they composited his images on Scitex and other high-end turnkey systems. He gained a great deal of insight on how to shoot for compositing and what was possible with current technology. When Steven Mullens, an art director at Foote, Cone & Belding, came to him with a concept for an ad for Sola Barnes Hine, Gerald saw his chance to put his digital ideas into practice.

The ad headline, "It's easy to spot the original among copy- cats," features a Dalmatian sitting among thirteen spotted cats, each wearing a different expression and a different coat of spots. FCB had gone to different photographers and asked them how to do the shot. Several suggested painting spots on the cats. "Anyone who has a cat knows that all they would have gotten was a shot of cats licking themselves. We suggested that it be done digitally," Bybee says. He had seen and was impressed with the retouching work of Raphael Digital Transparencies, a retouching and imaging house in Houston, Texas, and he decided to work with them to composite his images.

He spent several days in the studio shooting the Dalmatian and two cats at various angles and with a variety of different expressions. Eager to experiment on his recently acquired Mac, Bybee and Mullens created a low-resolution composite of what they wanted using Photoshop and ColorStudio. They sent this to Raphael, which recreated their vision in high resolution and output it to film.

Later, when a retoucher working on several Intel ads was unable to meet production deadlines, Bybee decided to try his hand at finishing the composition on his newly upgraded system. He

had the agency ship all of the digital files to his studio, locked himself in for the weekend and, when Monday rolled around, delivered the finished file to the service bureau for output to transparency. "It looked as good or better than the test transparency that we had done before," he says.

Bybee did the rest of the campaign in house on his Mac llfx with 128MB of RAM and 1.2GB hard drive. Even though this setup was the fastest Mac around at the time, there was still a substantial wait time and compositing large files was still very tedious.

RESPONSE TIME

Once down the digital road, Bybee didn't look back. He continued refine his technique and then"took a gamble and showed Picasso Man and Nude Wave. Suddenly, the phone rang," he says. He kept getting feedback that his images were too clean and precise-but they did evoke strong reactions.

People either really liked the images or were afraid of them, and Bybee has come to appreciate those negative reactions. "At first that bothered me, and then I realized that if someone can look at an image and they are bothered by it, it's a valid response to art, as much as someone looking at an image and liking it. There is nothing wrong with that," he says.

Other artists have faced similar strong reactions to their work. Even though his images are heavily manipulated, they still look photographic, and the lighting is always classic. He cites classical photographers and artists such as Irving Penn, Edward Steichen and Auguste Rodin to be among his formative influences, yet he is continually intrigued by the Surrealist and Cubist works of Man Ray, Magritte and especially Picasso. When Bybee began experimenting with digital effects, he had been studying Picasso's Cubist portraits and noticed that the painter always revealed at least two sides of the subject's face, a trick that required exacting technique but gave a disturbing beauty to the subject.

Picasso Man, for example, began as a "male scream" shot, but when Bybee saw how the face just stood out from the lighting, he decided to composite two calmer portraits on the computer-and achieved a far more disturbing effect. He also knocked out the color in favor of a sepia tone; the resulting clarity obscures the fact the man's face rather than his ear has been moved.

In Picasso Woman, a classic beauty shot Bybee done for Adobe's introduction of Photoshop 3.0, he used a flat perspective and the model's bright-orange, flowing hair to distract the viewer from her face. Is it a profile shot? Or isn't it? "I've seen from working with beautiful models that they're actually very insecure and uncomfortable with their bodies. The public only sees a beautiful model in the ad, but they're that way for only one-sixtieth of a second. We all have a beautiful side and a disturbing side," Bybee explains.

He learned that by tempering his digital effects, he can more easily bring out that edge between beauty and disturbance, as well as reduce a viewer's unease. An ear moved slightly or a body part subtly altered can have a real impact on how the image is perceived. Viewers tend to linger over the image. But when the viewer stops to examine what it is that's wrong, the potential impact can be even greater than that caused by an obvious alteration.

"I love that because I don't always want people to just look at an image and say, 'Wow. You did that on a computer.' The idea isn't that the image has been retouched, but enhanced. Suddenly you have an image that communicates the message much more quickly," Bybee says.

THE HIGH-TECH ROAD

Bybee still uses that old tripod, but has replaced the llfx with high-end Macs, including a Quadra 950 and a Power Mac 8100/110. He also recently added a Silicon Graphics Indigo workstation as well as a ScanView 5000-dpi scanner.

To get the exacting distortions in his images, Bybee uses merge controls, skews, pinches and wave filters. He still uses Photoshop a great deal but, with HSC LivePicture, he no longer has to work with low-resolution files before building high-res finished images. "Picasso Man took three days to build at high-res," he says. LivePicture also offers him greater freedom with brush distortion. On the Indy side, he uses Alias Eclipse and Barco Creator; and for Mac, Metaflow from The Valis Group, a Pixar-offshoot, for its freeform plasticity effects and animation capabilities.

When he's ready to output, Bybee considers which device to use in much the same way he decides on film. He outputs CMYK prints to a SuperMac SuperMatch dye-sublimation printer and RGB work to a newly acquired Fujix Pictography 3000. He sends out for transparencies to service bureaus, which record his images on either an LVT or a Fire 1000 film recorder. He likes the LVT for its smooth skin tones and subtle gradations of tone; when the image calls for extreme sharpness and enhanced contrast, he's more likely to go with the Fire 1000.

For much of his work though, Bybee can simply give his clients a Fujix RGB print and an electronic file; they in turn hand it off to a color separator who can convert it to CMYK. "Ninety percent of my clients are doing their layouts electronically in Quark or PageMaker. They can drop it right into their layout, do a quick proof and give it to their client for approval. If it's a finished piece, they just hand it off to their separator and it goes to press."he says. Both the agencies and the photographer save time and money.

In keeping with his early digital successes, Bybee says, "The best way to get great output is to contact the sep house even before I shoot, to let them know what I am planning on doing, find out what kind of a file they can use, what kind of media they can accept it on and how I should give it to them. I also try to talk directly to the tech who is going to be handling the job."

As for where he's going, Bybee says that he recently added a CD-ROM burner to his set-up and is hoping to deliver jobs to clients and put his portfolio on CD-ROM. "We can write a CD-ROM in house almost as quickly as we can a SyQuest," he says. He's a bit more cautious when it comes to online distribution of his work, explaining that resolution and image compression capabilities are still problematic. He is hopeful that these bottlenecks will be resolved in the near future.

On the software side, Bybee wants to begin experimenting with some of the 3-D software available for the SGI and model props and elements that now have to be constructed. He is also looking forward to a time when he will be able to send his images to clients as easily as he communicates with a fax.

One day in the future, Gerald Bybee will pull a page off that new high-tech fax machine, a page that was somehow garbled in transmission. He might mutter something about annoying new technology, but he'll certainly stare at the distorted image. A bad fax is a bad fax-unless... He'll begin to think. He'll remember where he's been, who his artistic influences are, and his belief that everything we learn is translatable into other projects as we move along. And Gerald Bybee will see around the next bend in his "side path."

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