



Little Boy



Kendra, Portrait of Ballerina Doll

You like Gerald Bybee. You may not know it, but you do. (That is, at least you like his photographs.) He's the prolific photographer whose distinctive digital imagery has appeared in numerous advertisements, editorial spreads and billboards. Perhaps his most famous—and most copied—image is a close-up of a man's eye as he peers at the viewer through a magnifying glass.

Bybee uses the computer, coupled with years of practice, to make his own creative compositions by heavily manipulating his photographs. Sometimes it's subtle, sometimes it's not. But it's always entertaining. He's known for his surreal, often Cubist digital photographic creations. He squashes faces, moves noses and adds eyes. He warps his subjects into surreal figures that are usually unlike anything we've ever seen before. Though they may sound like it, Bybee's photographs aren't creepy; they're playful. And they're even more fun when he gets kids involved.

Bybee's Kids

WHEN PHOTOGRAPHER AND ARTIST GERALD BYBEE FOCUSES HIS ATTENTION ON KIDS, THE RESULTS ARE ALL ABOUT HAVING FUN

BY WILLIAM SAWALICH

PHOTOGRAPHY BY GERALD BYBEE



Knott's Berry Farm Kids

Like most professional photographers, Bybee's subjects are as varied as his ideas. He doesn't photograph children as subjects exclusively, but because of the playful nature of his images, kids are a natural choice. He enjoys working with them, and they get excited about being involved in his process, too.

"Kids are very in tune with your energy, mood and stress level," he says. "They really love the idea of being silly, especially if their parents aren't watching."

Bybee was getting silly with computers long before the rest of us. He was truly a pioneer in using the

power of digital technology to dramatically alter photographs—even before warping filters were standard issue with most imaging software. Photos like those done for Knott's Berry Farm in 1993 were truly groundbreaking, and they paved the way for a new look in photography.

"When I first created the look, there were no software programs that specialized in distorting images," says Bybee. "In fact, the KBF series was the model for programs like Goo, Squizz and others."

Many photographers prefer to spend their time behind the camera, leaving the time-consuming task of digital

retouching to someone else. But since Bybee doesn't consider his photographs complete until he has altered them in the computer, he has been doing the hands-on digital imaging himself for more than a decade—just like he did for the KBF kids.

"Early Photoshop versions I used didn't have previews for the filter effects," says Bybee. "Consequently, I had to do many hours of experimentation to finally arrive at the combination of effects used on each face. Now the previews in Photoshop make it much easier. I actually use a combination of in-camera distortion, perspective distortions, scaling and hand-applied area-specific distortions, along with a little cut-and-paste. The difference you'll see between my images and most of those done with basic programs is that no one filter will provide the effects we achieve."

Because his process is so complex, and not easily duplicated with one-click filters, Bybee's images require a lot of forethought. They're usually shot with the finished creation in mind, but that doesn't mean he doesn't leave room for improvisation—or even completely changing his mind.

"At first, everything was scripted and pre-planned," he explains. "Now I deliberately work more spontaneously and shoot variations that I can explore. Even color is handled in post-production. While I used to use special processing, lighting or filtration, now I shoot just for the essence of the subject and lighting direction and then add the effects using digital tools."

And just like the kids he photographs, Bybee likes to make sure he's having fun. Digital-imaging tools only help with this approach.

"Playing with and exploring the elements is very satisfying to me. It's also very time-consuming. So I like to start with a basic idea, cover it, then add variations and possibilities. Digital cameras help this process immensely because once the session is underway, they speed up the creative process with immediate feedback. You also don't feel the limitation of shooting only the allotted rolls of film in the budget. One can avoid the whole Polaroid pro-



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cess and see variations even faster than instant film. And once it's shot, it's there ready for manipulation or output. You don't have to load film and try to catch the same magic you saw on the test shot."

Even when he doesn't use the computer to create otherworldly transformations, Bybee nonetheless incorporates it into the workflow.

"Most of my work now is manipulated in some way. It's fun to take the manipulation just to the point where the viewer has to question what, if anything, has been manipulated."

This is evident in photographs like the "Young Bride," where the computer came to the rescue of what was intended to be handled during the shoot.

"The bride image wasn't supposed to be heavily manipulated," says Bybee. "It just so happened that the wig the makeup artist brought sucked and didn't fit the model. We wound up shooting the model with straight hair and a silver streak spray painted in. The rest was manipulated digitally. It really isn't technically very precise, and there are pixelization and stretching issues, but it works because of the mood of the piece."

Other images may be intended for heavier manipulation, but Bybee might see something else along the way that steers him in a different direction. That was just the case with the "Ballerina Doll" shoot.

"This is a portrait of my daughter's earliest friend. I've photographed her many times. Her expressions and ability to pierce the lens with her eye contact have always captivated me. Originally, it was to be a cubist piece, but the simplicity of making the doll face just real enough that one has to study the image to determine if it's a doll or not was enough for me. It's hard for some people to look at the image because there's a beauty about





Young Bride

Kendra, but a creepiness about her holding a doll with a real head."

The "Ballerina Doll" photo illustrates perfectly how Bybee manages to bend realism while blending it with surrealism and always seems to strike an ideal balance. His work crosses the full spectrum of manipulation—from subtle to outlandish.

"It's hard to find the balance between technique, photorealism and blatant manipulation," he says. "Personally, I find it easier to do the over-the-top, obviously manipulated image than the more subtle ones where the manipulation is purely secondary to the overall image itself. Most of the images chosen for this article are extremely manipulated and no attempt

at subterfuge is even made."

But Bybee often utilizes the computer for photographic subterfuge—and he knows what works and what doesn't.

"I see a lot of nice composites that have no soul or message and some images that immediately grab you with the idea but fail to convince or allure because of poor craftsmanship. It takes a lot of patience and practice to successfully blend skin and human features. There isn't one trick—rather, combinations of many techniques. If I had to distill it down, though, I'd say one needs to start with good, consistent images and the highest-resolution captures or scans. It's hard to make something look good that's deficient in

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Trib Kid (for The Chicago Tribune)



Gerald Bybee's unique vision always results in remarkable images. In these photographs, he displays a sense of whimsy and a carefree take on the life of a child. Bybee shoots with a traditional camera and film, then scans the film himself. The control over the input process is important to him for generating the right finished product. The scanned image represents the essence of the photograph of the child. He often uses the computer to combine many individual frames to get exactly the right expression or body position. Then he subtly distorts various elements until he gets what "feels" right. Sometimes an image seems to build itself, while other times Bybee will work and rework it a very long time, like a painter adding layers in an oil painting. During the entire process, his young daughter acts as a critic, helping Bybee to make a perfect photograph.

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digital information from the get-go."

But that doesn't mean that he thinks technology should hold photographers back.

"I have to say that commercially there's less concern these days with resolution and detail. The MTV generation really doesn't care about seeing every minute detail; they just want the flash and the sizzle. Everything is so temporary that we don't dwell on the details anymore, or so it seems."

But Bybee certainly seems to dwell on the details, and it shows. No matter how crazy the juxtapositions in his images, they're convincingly realistic. The only problem, though, is that his images are so unique that viewers sometimes don't know how to take them.

"Early on, from a commercial standpoint, people had a hard time pigeonholing me and knowing where to put me," he says. "There's a beauty about my work, but there's also a dark side to it. When I first did these things, some people would say, 'Oh I can't look at this image.' At first that bothered me, coming from the commercial world where we idealized everything. But then to create something that has both a positive and negative response, well, that's what art is about. If you achieve some sort of response from the viewer, obviously the image is successful."

And Bybee's work does evoke reactions. Although no one has ever directly challenged his approach, he knows that some "purists" still have a hard time accepting any image that's computer-enhanced. But Bybee doesn't quite understand why.

"Photographers have always manipulated images by using special lenses, angles, composition and lighting. The computer just adds another level of control. No one really cares anymore if an image is 'authentic' or not, unless, of course, you're a defendant in a murder trial," he says. "Photography is, by definition, painting with light. What brush we choose doesn't alter the fact that, ultimately, the end result is a light-painted, edited, 2-D view of what we call reality. Digital imaging may allow for a more accurate view of real-

ity in that it allows multiple views to be rendered and combined to depict a singular viewpoint. Editing and capturing only one selective view in black and white and proclaiming it 'pure' or 'real' is the ultimate arrogance on the part of the creator. As if his momentary, selective point of view is 'reality.' Various creatures sense and perceive reality with various imaging eyes and sensors—black and white, infrared, wide fields of view, extreme near- and short-sightedness, sonar imaging. What is the pure reality?

"The bottom line?" Bybee asks. "Computers are but another brush one can use to paint with light."

As a photographer who believes no technique or tool should be off-limits, Bybee has to be up on the newest trends in photographic "brushes." He shoots with both film and digital cameras, but it's clear in what direction he's moving.

"I shoot whatever I can digitally. I'm testing the Kodak Pro Back and hope to test the new Phase One and other single-capture systems. Because I shoot primarily people or moving objects, the scanning backs aren't as useful for me. I even shoot with a Sony PC-100 and a Cyber-shot for some commercial projects as well as for personal family snapshots. Sharing images on the Web and low-cost inkjet printers are really pushing the digital cameras."

So what excites Bybee most about digital photography's future?

"Cheaper digital cameras, better output devices...more tools in more hands!"

And that's a good thing—not only for professionals like Bybee, but for amateurs and hobbyists, too. All that new technology makes him more excited about exploring digital-imaging techniques and how they find their way into his art.

"Virtually anything you can think of, you can make happen," says Bybee. "It's going to be interesting now with broadband to see how much art is going to be created for the Web. I think you can find an audience for anything you can create more easily than ever before. And that's incredibly freeing." PC

See more of Gerald Bybee's images at www.bybee.com.