

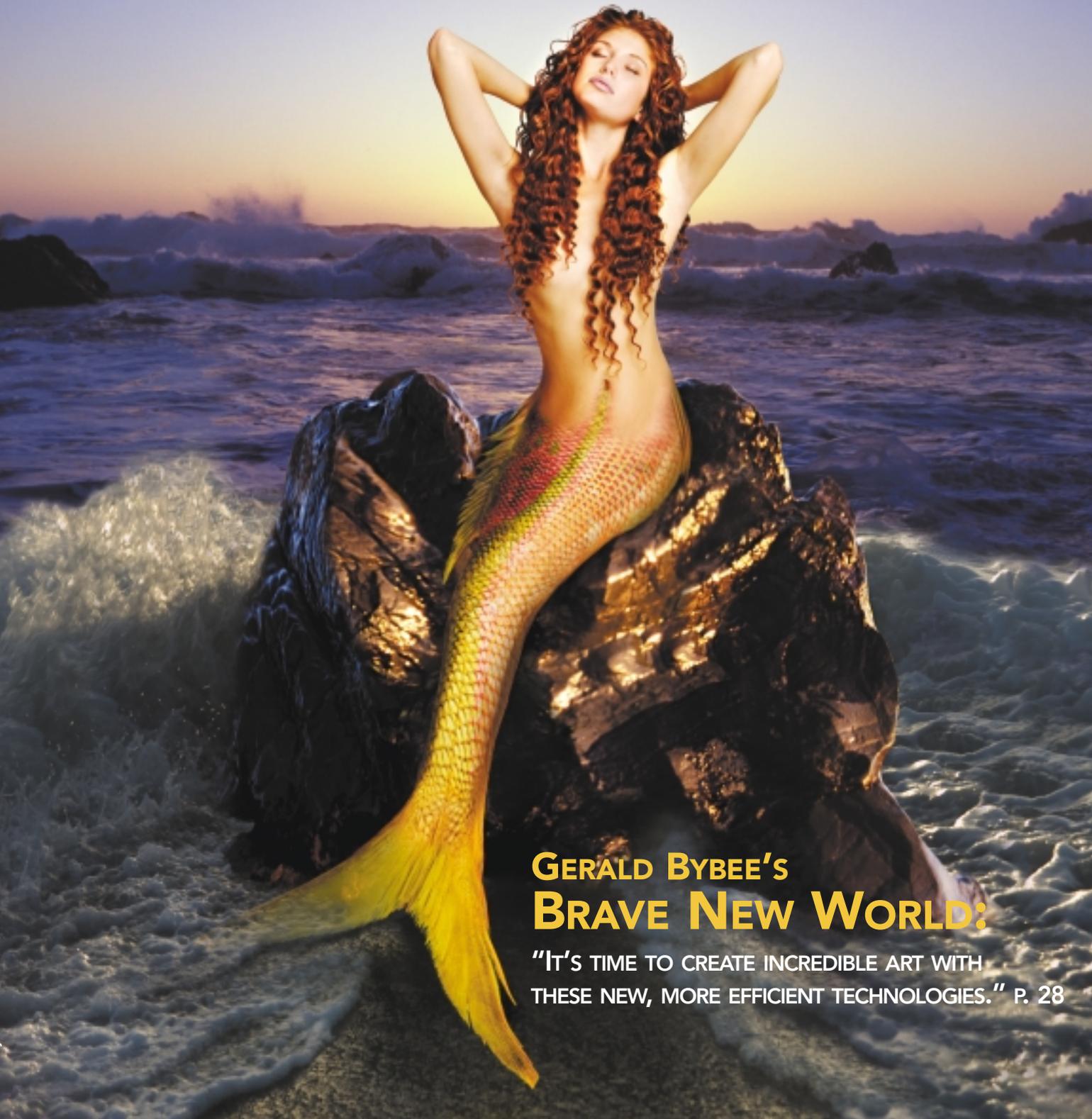
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GERALD BYBEE'S BRAVE NEW WORLD:

"IT'S TIME TO CREATE INCREDIBLE ART WITH
THESE NEW, MORE EFFICIENT TECHNOLOGIES." P. 28

Gerald Bybee's brave new world

One of digital's earliest converts dives into the uncharted waters of a changing industry

by Leslie Hunt

Gerald Bybee is a sought-after advertising/design photographer based in San Francisco. His specialty is highly original, digitally created photo-illustration, and his illustrious client list includes Adobe, AT&T, SAAB, Pentax, Neutrogena, Jergens, 3Com, Intel, IBM, SGI, HP, Novell, Polaroid, Fuji, Levi's, Wells Fargo, PacBell, Visa, Nickelodeon, Sutter Home, Gallo, Rizzoli, Oracle, *Sports Illustrated*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *Psychology Today*, *Outside* and *Time* magazines. He has won multiple gold and best-of-show awards in the Art Directors and Ad Club San Francisco Shows, and numerous other national art and design awards.

All images ©Gerald Bybee



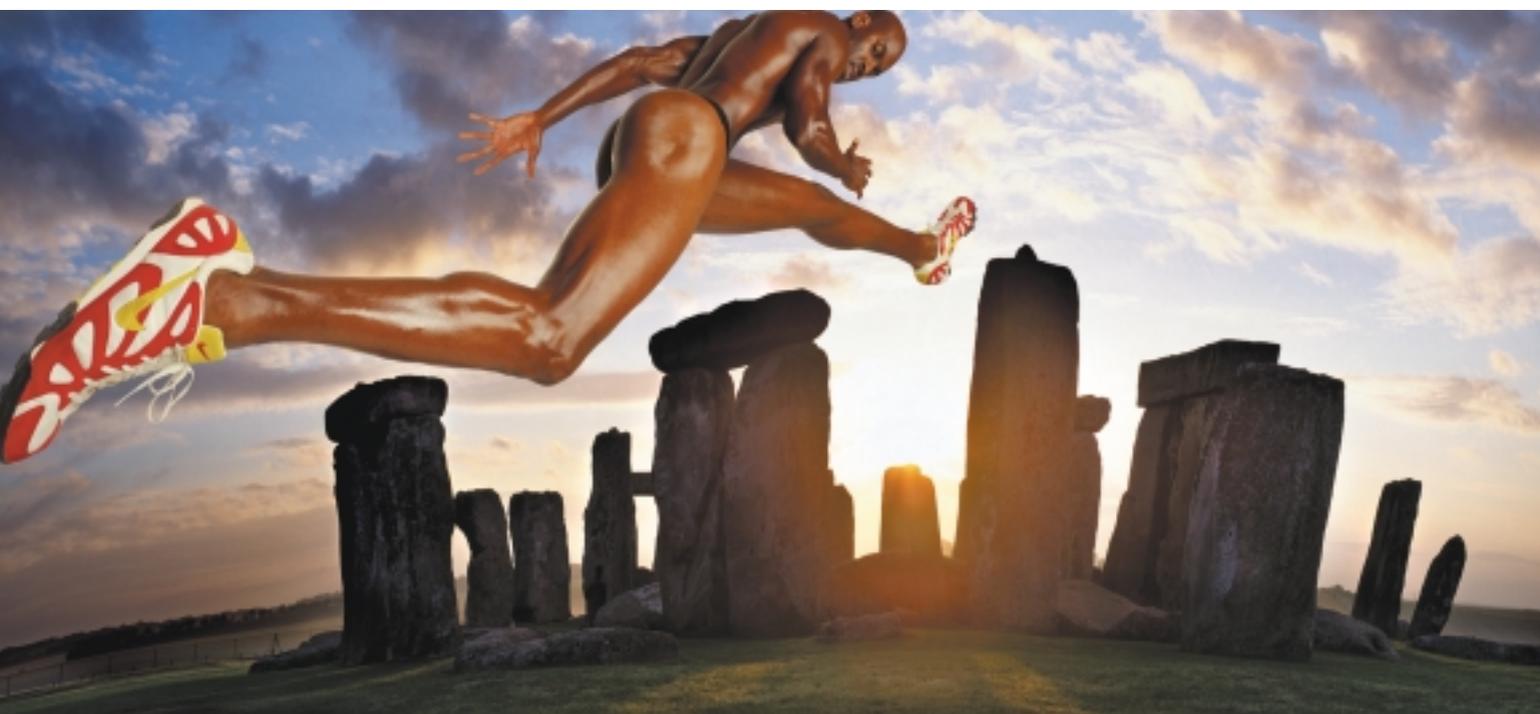
**“I love the collaborative process
and provocation of a
good creative team.”**

PEI: Tell us about the enchanting mermaid on the cover. Love the tail. Is this a personal piece?

Gerald Bybee: No, the mermaid image was produced for EnCad. The art director was John Meyer from MEA Advertising in San Diego. We've worked together before creating amphibians. I created a man with frog's feet with him for another client. So I guess he figured if I could do frog feet I could also do mermaid

tail. Her scaly half was captured digitally in the studio during the beauty shoot with our lovely redhead, Ryan Eddy, of City Models/SF. John and I selected real yellow and bluefin tuna along with some red snapper at the local fish market. We shot them with a Sinar digital back as well as a Canon 1Ds, matching lighting direction and positioning. Now I'll get pigeonholed as an amphibian specialist.





PEI: How did you come up with this particular mermaid design?

GB: When the assignment was offered I immediately researched the spectrum of existing mermaid imagery; everything from bronze sculpture to airbrush van art. The image had to be sexy, real, yet pure fantasy. I made several trips from my Sonoma County studio to the nearby Bodega Bay area, where Alfred Hitchcock filmed *The Birds*, to photograph the background elements. I shot both 120 film (Fujichrome Velvia 100) and digital capture on several occasions to get the Maxfield Parrish blue sky, waves, and the golden rock throne for our erotic aquatic princess.

PEI: Your images are so varied in approach, from whimsical to intellectual. What's up with that? Where do the ideas originate?

GB: I'm known now for distortions and composites, but my background is classic portraiture and large-format still life. I've also shot tons of retail fashion and corporate assignments. Some of the image ideas are entirely from my own often twisted vision; others are reactions to and interpretations of classic or well-known pieces of art, parodies if you will. (See the nested woman figure on p. 31, a Magritte inspired image) Some

are just cool images that unveil themselves as I play on the computer. Still others—like the Bonzai Tree woman done for the Hotel Nikko, or the Land's End image, art directed by Scott Mercer—are interesting ideas brought to me for development by very talented creative directors, writers and photo editors. I love the collaborative process and provocation of a good creative team. But I have to add that I also dread over-direction and dilution of the creative process when there are too many cooks with their fingers in the soup. I have seen too many good concepts and layouts get killed by committees of lemmings.

PEI: What commissions are you working on at the moment?

GB: Some ongoing projects for Fuji, finishing the project for EnCad, completing a private commission of five original fine art prints for a collector in Silicon Valley, some new work for Marmot, a performance outdoor gear manufacturer, and FLOW, a snowboard company. I'm also concepting and in pre-production on some potentially very cool editorial work for the redesign of a women's fitness magazine. In between I'm trying to produce promotional work and complete some stock mermaid variations. Oh, and I'm doing pro bono work for

my daughter's school, shooting their circus performances and a high-end custom portrait commission we donated for the fund-raising auction.

PEI: What is the one piece of equipment they'd have to pry out of your cold, dead hands?

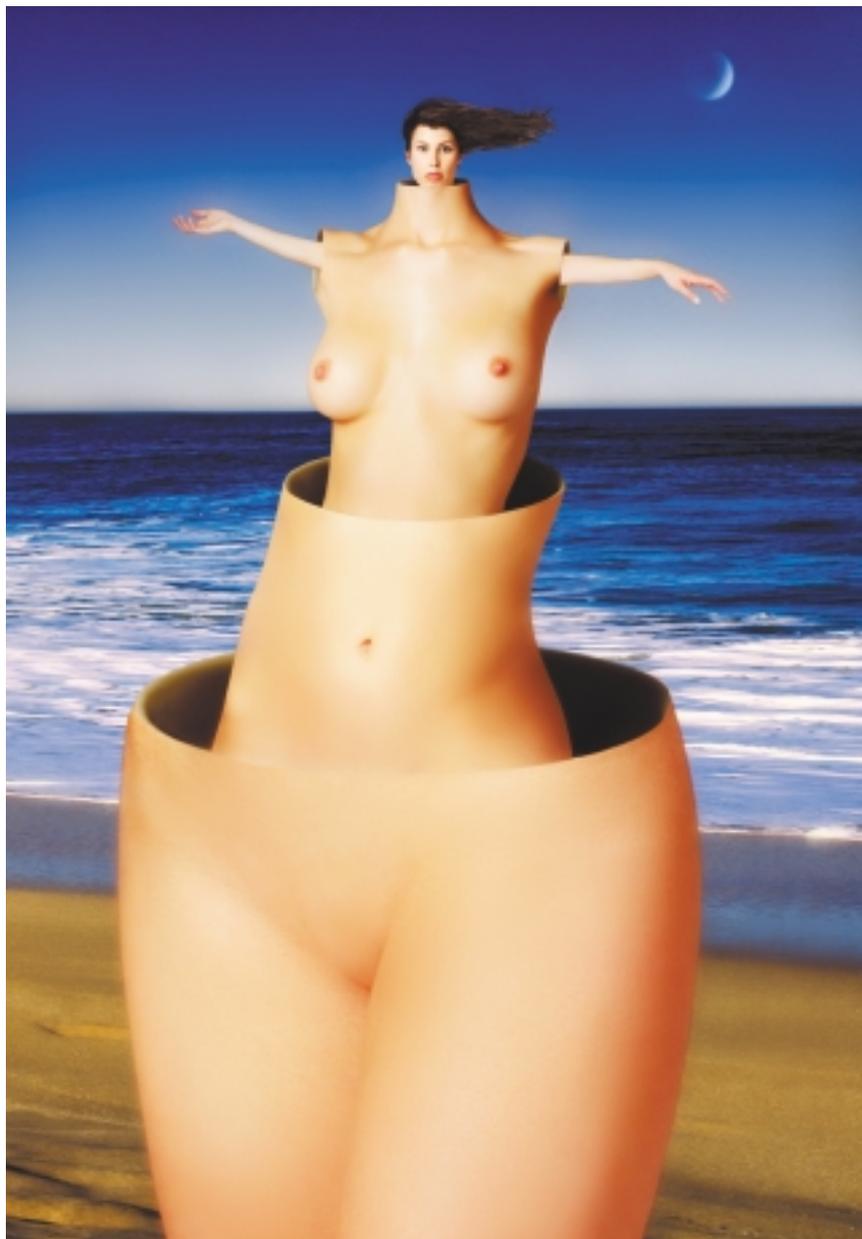
GB: That's a tough one. It is rather big for my hand, but over the years my Fuji Pictography has proved invaluable as an output device for creating hard copy proofs and color references for our digital compositions. My DSLRs are rapidly becoming an extension of my eyes and hands. The workflow of shooting with my Fujifilm FinePix S2 Pro or Canon EOS-1Ds is so freeing creatively. It's spawned a rebirth of the joy of photography I originally discovered back when I bought my first Canon FTB on my way to college in 1970. I've shot assignments with most iterations of digital cameras from the first Polaroid PDC to HP's first consumer digital, to Kodak's DSLRs and ProBacks on Hassleblads, my Fujifilm GX 680s, and now the Mamiya 645 AFD systems. I just did some testing of the 22-megapixel Sinar back, and am looking to test the other 22-plus megapixel systems that are emerging. I like to shoot single pop, untethered and with at least a histogram preview, so DSLRs for me are a dream come true.

To be concise, my cold dead arm would be clutching the Pictro, my hands would be grasping my DSLRs, and of course, the dual-processor 2GHz. Power Mac G5 and laptop would be wedged in there somewhere! (Sorry I can't narrow it down more than that.)

PEI: Do you spend more time shooting or on the computer doing illustration?

GB: Right now, more time is being spent on marketing, studio and business management and negotiation than on shooting or imaging. That's been a very conscious business and personal decision. As much as it was a fun challenge running a big studio with multiple employees and a full-time producer, the realities of the economy, this time in my life, and my personal lifestyle led me to want to simplify and control the machine directly as I retooled it. I like being in touch directly with the art buyers and creative directors to put me back in touch with what the real marketplace is right now, when the photo business is in the midst of so much change. I like producing hands-on again, working with the talent agencies and bookers directly for the first time in 20 years. I like having only one full-time assistant and hiring really talented freelance technical and production assistants when I can. I like learning from new blood in the business, as well as mentoring. I like doing personal commis-

sions without the commercial influence. I like doing pro bono portraits as a fund raiser at my daughter's school and seeing the look on the parent's and child's faces as the digital portrait emerges from the



Pictro, and they discover they too can look like a professional model in a Gap ad. They realize that everyone has natural beauty that can be nurtured, emphasized, enhanced and captured and that professional models often look glamorous for just $\frac{1}{100}$ second.

This last year or so of total hands on has been cathartic. I'm ready now to collaborate again with a great producer/rep.

PEI: Has digital technology changed the way you work?

GB: I've been working digitally now for over 13 years. With most of my assignments, the actual studio or location

shooting time is equal to or less than the time I spend editing, imaging, manipulating and outputting the final composited image. Digital capture shortens the actual shoot, but now the processing and editing takes place in front of an LCD screen without all the chemicals—hopefully in a “greener” environment. There are major changes going on with digital promotion, image licensing and distribution as well.

I was among the first to incorporate an entirely digital workflow into a commercial photo studio. We were the first to bring drum scanning in-house. I worked with ColorStudio, and PhotoShop 1.0, Alias on SGI, and directed other systems before that. I was mentored by some very talented retouchers. I remember what a revelation

it was when I sent the first online JPEG proofs to a client attached to AOL emails and it actually worked!

Consequently, I realized I was finally liberated from my big white studio in the heart of the photo district. I could work from most anywhere, including an old dairy farm in the wine country. Now, six years later, many of my contemporaries are buying old barns on

rural properties or even moving totally out of state while keeping their local clients. The “cyber studio” model, working remotely, is becoming the norm. With the advent of incredibly powerful laptops, PDAs, cell phone cameras, hi-res digital capture, wireless broadband and low cost video conferencing, the photo district now extends to the limits of cell phone and satellite coverage.

I routinely work with clients around the world, often without meeting them in person. We cast digitally, and work collaboratively online, often with better communication than we had in the city. E-mail is vastly superior to messengers and faxes (duh, hello?) and many times

even better than a face-to-face meeting. (No body language attached!) The good news is we can build our photo businesses around our lifestyle and not vice versa. The bad news is that many of us aren't doing that very well. There are no existing models or precedents to follow. We have one foot in the old business paradigm and the other hasn't figured out where to step safely into an ever-changing environment. This is uncharted territory. We are exploring new seas, new worlds, for professional imagers.

We all need to open our eyes and see the revolution enveloping us. We need to consciously participate in creating a successful model for this new era in our business. We need to look at the music

and entertainment industries, publishing, and the stock photo business, and understand how we as artists have to step up and become informed, communicative business people. We can't hide behind our “creative” moodiness. We can't stay rooted in the past. If we try to, we'll either wither or get yanked out of the ground and cast aside for new rootstock. We can't expect the existing copyright laws or trade organizations to protect us without our active input. Now is the moment to create the business environment we envision and not wait for others to define it around us. We are part of the global marketplace, like it or not!

We have no excuses any more. Now as never before an artist can create self-assigned imagery, get it seen worldwide, and license it into literally millions of diverse markets with minimal out-of-pocket expense. The playing field has been leveled. Be aware on that field there are some gigantic contenders that can squash you in a heartbeat if you're not alert. But nimble players and clever cooperatives of artists can maneuver around these obstacles, and perhaps even slay a few giants along the way.

It is time to create incredible art with these new, more efficient technologies. It is time to deliver value as well as beauty that clients will compete to license. I hear so many people complaining that the business isn't the same anymore, the “good old days” are gone. Well, I've heard that consistently throughout the 25-plus years I've been in the business. They are still right. The complaining that “clients don't want to pay what the work is worth” I've heard for years. Nothing has changed there. I disagree now as I did then. The market and the artist determine the price, not the client. Yes, expense budgets are more closely scrutinized and assignments are not handed out to just anyone. Rightfully so! As a profession, we became fat. Just as every other business in the world is being forced to cinch in the belt and be ultra-efficient, is being held to higher ethical standards, and is competing in a global marketplace, so must we artists, photographers and imagers.



We can't blame anyone else for our situation. The solution is to create valuable commercial and fine art and then sell that value and license that art fairly. In short, beyond being talented artists, we need to be creative business people in the new technological and global market place. (Phew, I got a little carried away with that answer, didn't I?)

PEI: What would be your ideal week-long vacation?

GB: A sandy beach with crystal clear waters. Add a private dive boat and dive mistress, kite-boarding instruction, a masseuse, margaritas and great organic, healthy food—you know, organic lobster, organic oysters, organic caviar, stuff like that (grin) . . . hmmm, or how about a cabin on the runs at a great ski resort, say in the Rockies or somewhere in the Swiss/Italian Alps, but substitute heli-skiing and snowboarding, keep the masseuse, substitute red wine, local beer, pastas, and grilled meat. (Forget the organics, it's Italia not Sonoma). Can we make that a month? Otherwise, just a full week on our Sebastopol vineyard ranch, with my water-ski buddies, friends and family, and no ringing phones, or looming deadlines.

PEI: Do you like to travel?

GB: In theory, yes. However, the Cancer in my sign finds it hard to pack up my crab shell and leave home. Once I'm out the door I love the new experiences, the stimulation of all the senses that comes with a new environment.

PEI: What's your favorite art gallery or museum?

GB: The Picasso museum in Paris. Being within inches of his paintings and sculpture without crowds of people felt as if I was viewing Picasso's works in his own home or studio. My 7-year-old daughter, with whom I have shared Picasso art books since birth, gave me a running commentary on each piece, explaining how he might have created it, and pointing out each brush stroke and the various materials and objects incorporated into his sculpture.

PEI: Ever have a hankering to sculpt? I mean, the combo of shooting and illustration are a kind of sculpting, I would think. Am I so wrong?

GB: Sure, I've thought very seriously about taking up metal sculpture. I love the work of Richard Serra. I am also fascinated by the natural sculpture works of Andy Goldsworthy and the amazing environmental installations of Ned Kahn. I would love to collect sculpture, maybe creating a sculpture garden on the property will be the next big project.

PEI: What is the absolute most tedious thing about being you?

GB: All the routine things of life. From the time I've been a boy I've never been able to get out of emptying the garbage and toting the cans out to the street. I still get nagged at every Sunday night.

PEI: How old are you? Just curious.

GB: Well, if I live to be 104 I'm just approaching midlife.

PEI: If you had to change careers, what would you do instead?

GB: My Dad would have loved it if I had become a realtor or attorney or better, a real estate attorney. I've loved remodeling homes and rehabilitating property, so maybe a builder/developer would be cool. The process is much like retouching and compositing. It is building visuals not just to look at but to live in.

PEI: Ever had a creative slump, just run dry?

GB: Maybe. The creative process is about ups and downs, extremes, and exploring scary places and ideas without preconception or fear of failure. Mood swings are actually an asset creatively.

PEI: How do you "read" people?

GB: I think I'm pretty blessed with some amount of intuition and sensitivity. I guess you can call it my feminine side. I'm not as intuitive as my wife or mother, but some of that sensitivity has rubbed off, I hope. I only have a difficult time with

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egotistical businessmen with little physical confidence who attempt to control a portrait session of themselves. It is hard for many corporate sorts to yield that control to a lowly artist. However, since my hair has turned white I find that no longer to be a major problem.

PEI: Do you mind making alteration after alteration to a project?

GB: Not if the alterations are justified, improve the final results and if I'm getting paid fairly for my efforts. I do mind when the client's uncle makes suggestions that ultimately result in detrimental modification. It's also frustrating when an agency doesn't communicate well with their client so the work directed by the art director has to be changed because a client has too much control, the AE is a wimp, or no one has paid attention until very late in the creative process. I actually love tweaking an image over a period of time through collaboration with a talented AD, especially when that process is provided for upfront in the schedule and the budget.

I can think of little more professionally rewarding than being paid to create images from concept to reproduction, ones that are successful for the client and stimulating, perhaps even inspiring, in some small way, to the viewer. ◀