



Up Close & Personal

With Matthew
Jordan Smith

By Martha Blanchfield





Los Angeles-based and NYC-bred photographer Matthew Jordan Smith, whose studio is named Matthew Jordan Smith Experience or MJS-EXP, has been causing quite a stir in recent months. Not only for his guest appearances on *America's Next Top Model* and poignant celebrity and beauty imagery, but also for his various philanthropic projects with organizations like the National Association for Missing and Exploited Children.

In addition to these accomplishments, Smith was recently appointed to Sony's professional photographer team, the Artisans of Imagery. Smith is an outspoken fan of the new A900, Sony's first full-frame Alpha DSLR model with a 24.6-megapixel CMOS sensor. "For my work, the Sony A900 is the best camera to use because it's

lightweight and has superb ease of use. The lenses are incredible with the Carl Zeiss optics. I started using this camera just as it was being introduced in fall 2008."

Romancing the Stone

Luscious, precious gold. Deep, vibrant gemstones. Flawless skin. Moody and sultry models. Diffused looks. Elements of a vision that started in Smith's mind, then were fashioned one June afternoon in Los Angeles. "Romancing the Stone" is Smith's creative departure brought on by a desire to not only escape the gloom of the economy, but to take time to play and recharge. "Bringing together a team for a collaborative shoot like this offers a great time to clear your mind and invent. It can also give new vision to your work," says Smith, who

ended up posting eight of his new images as a focal point on his website; one image was also used in his June email marketing campaign. "I had no idea I'd end up using these images for self-promotion. It wasn't until after I received such great response from people around me, my agent and production team, that I decided to profile the work."

Over the course of a full day, Smith worked with hair, makeup, stylists and several jewelry pieces. Production was shot outdoors in full light using the Sony camera, plus a Zeiss 85mm f/1.4 ZE Planar T* and a 100mm f/2.8 Macro lens. "Even though we worked in ultra bright sunlight, I was able to tone the brightness using white sheers and a few placed mirrors," shares Smith. "One mirror was positioned at an angle so that it wouldn't be seen while shooting. White was placed around the edges of the mirror in the event that some of it was caught in the frame. The effect worked wonderfully! I shot around 1500 photos, but pared this down to eight once I started editing. I posted images to my website and used one view in an email marketing piece."

Smith has more than 22 years experience shooting for the beauty, fashion and entertainment markets, so he knows what clients want. His commercial work for companies like Pantene, L'Oreal and Revlon has taught him what attracts the eye. "To build an effective creative spread, art directors pick images that are able to stand on their own, but also ones that can also tell a story when placed side by side. Each individual photo must be a strong, well composed shot, and if paired with other images must complement one another."

Speed of Light

The Internet and digital technology have changed the way business operates, and seemingly more projects and assignments happen faster; most everything is immediate. "There are instances where the edit process commences while the shoot is still happening; the client is previewing as I continue to work with the model," shares Smith. "And then the client may walk out the door with a drive full of selects. Other times I am transferring photographs via the Internet within hours of completing a session to a destination on the other side of the planet. Each client has a different need—I think this immediacy is being



fueled by the economy and the speed that Internet technologies bring.”

No matter the pace, Smith has a simple routine for image file management, favoring Phase One’s Capture One Pro software to download and manage image selects. He then backs up to two drives. (“It’s not if a drive will fail, but when it may fail.”) At the top of his workflow is doing all keyword and tag activity right then—at the backup stage. “Adding metadata is very important and has become a routine in the studio the first time I touch the image files.”

Says Smith, “In fashion and beauty photography everything is retouched! I work with a very talented artist who handles this, from perfecting complexion, tones and shadows, to adding special touches. After basic adjustments there are usually stylistic

considerations to take into account.” Sometimes the client dictates and sometimes Smith advises as to what he feels will be most effective. “For ‘Romancing the Stone’ I wanted to heighten the illusion process—to go beyond the reality and bring a touch of fantasy. I’m always striving to create a timeless look and show intimacy with my subject.”

Within days of debuting the “Romancing the Stone” images, a creative director at the Milanese publication *Zoom* was inspired to call. The contact yielded a personal profile of Smith and his work that will appear in a fall issue—just one result that easily supports an argument for taking the time to do personal projects. “Yes the market is slow, but don’t stop the creativity, don’t cut back!” exclaims Smith, whose primary

objective for that shoot was to play around a bit with new shoot scenarios and his team. **“What resulted was a great new look that paid off. During a downturn you have to keep active, inspired and in motion promoting yourself.”**

Another personal project that Smith hopes will also land in print is what he calls “Madame Butterfly.” It was inspired by an insect exhibit at the Natural History Museum in LA. On the photographic side Smith calls this a colorful and vibrant evolution of makeup that takes his model through different stages. On the technical side, he shares that its production was staged and shot two different ways. “One used a typical lighting situation I often use with a single main strobe. The second was to use the strobe source as an ambient light source. The strobe images were shot at 1/125 at f/16 and the ambient images were shot at 1/125 at f/1.4,” he notes. “The images shot with ambient light are just stunning! I used the Sony A900 and a Carl Zeiss 85mm lens wide open at f/1.4.”

Bi-coastal Influences

Smith started his life through the lens when his father handed over a Pentax Honeywell camera. The innovative youngster was soon fashioning a makeshift darkroom and learning to process film. He later attended art school in New York City, and then worked as a photographer’s assistant for three years. Fast-forward 19 years and Smith has thoughts of promise: “I’ve lived through a few economic setbacks as a photographer—the dot-com bust, 9/11 and now the recession. You have to find a way to roll with the times, to survive and to keep your sanity. And you need to be open for change that keeps your career evolving.”

He’s probably alluding to the necessity to go where the best markets are for your craft. In 2006 the East Coaster relocated to Los Angeles. His entertainment photography stock is up. You bet Smith still heads to the Big Apple for work and “to get [his] NYC fix,” but he’s building a broader ring of contacts and is happy to find himself that much closer to another important inspirational influence—Hollywood movies. He recently photographed actress Phylicia Rashad for a Jenny Craig ad, which was followed by a NYC photo session with Aretha Franklin.

“I love shooting beauty and fashion

images, but working one-on-one with a celebrity usually involves a lot more skill to find and capture personality. Intimacy required to get a great portrait of a well known person is different than intimacy with a model," he shares. One of Smith's essentials for bringing out that personality and bridging that intimacy comes through music. **"No matter the session, music is a big part. The music has to fit with what I'm going after."** For the session with Aretha, lounge music poured into the studio, with Buddha Bar leading. "She immediately got into her groove; I could tell she was feeling good and I just knew this was going to help me create great photos."

Drive Your Career

Mixing it up with celebrities and taking time to shoot beauty and fashion sessions

is a 50/50 career split for Smith. While his agency, LVA Represents, Inc., keeps his name current in editorial and commercial circles, Smith's keenly aware that he too is very much responsible for his steady flow of work. "You need a good rep to get clients, but a photographer still has to remain in charge of his or her own career. One of the most important things I did with my rep was work out hand-in-hand a strategic plan at the start of our relationship. We periodically check in to see how things are going and to be sure the direction I'm headed is still the best. This is a must to determine an optimal course and keep on path." Smith adds he's also giving more credence to SEO (Search Engine Optimization) and SEM (Search Engine Marketing), and has engaged the services of a great Web person to constantly tune and tweak his website.

Between his NYC rep of 14 years and his own personal efforts, Smith is booking projects around the U.S. and beyond. "I had my first show in Brescia, Italy, last November, and I now have a second show in Verona, Italy, this September. While in Italy I will do a two-day workshop in Verona." He's also recently returned from a personal trip to Japan where he took time off to reinvigorate and rejuvenate. Cap all this activity with his involvement as a Microsoft Icon of Imaging, as well as guest instructor at the Sante Fe Workshops and other selective venues, and MJS-EXP has plenty of experiences to share.

For more on these images and Matthew's imaging processes visit www.matthewjordansmith.blogspot.com.

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"Romancing the Stone"

The reason I decided to shoot this segment outdoors is largely because of the lighting conditions. We shot a hair story first with the models in studio and then went to my outdoor studio to continue and shoot "Romancing the Stone." The light in Southern California is consistent most of the time and I'd tested my idea out with a neighbor before doing it on the story. I knew at a certain time of the day my light would look a certain way and that I'd get the look I wanted. Even though I softened the sunlight, the angle of the light was still very important. If I'd shot this story four hours earlier it would be a very different look and not one that I would want to use.

In commercial advertising the product must show or the effects of the product must show. I do a lot of hair care and the product is not really shown but instead the effects of the product are shown. A photographer must be aware of how light reacts to hair and all the subtle changes that make it stand out. Testing your lights is the only real way to learn. The way I shoot hair care with digital is very different than how I shot it with film because the media reacts differently. Test, test, test to learn and in some cases relearn your lighting.

"Madame Butterfly"

The setup, like many of my images, was very simple. One light is used in my traditional beauty setup but the exception was instead of using the strobe as I normally would, I wanted to explore beauty in a different way. We often see digital shot with tons of detail and very crisply. I wanted to go in the other direction and only focus on the eyes. To achieve this I needed to shoot wide open. I used the Sony A900 with an 85mm f/1.4 lens and shot at 1/125 at f/1.4 to get the look of this image. For the lighting I used only the ambient light from the strobes and metered the existing light. All other lights were off in the room except for the strobe and I captured what I feel is a subtle beauty that you feel almost as much as you see. I love this story and these images. Some images were shot with the strobe and some with just the ambient but I love the images with a soft focus more, but both work.

The lighting was Profoto Acute 2400 pack with a single beauty dish on a boom arm. The light is close to the model and directly over me. If you've ever seen me speak then you've seen this setup in my presentations—one single light for this image like so many of my images.

