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PDN's list of the people who can launch fine art photographers' careers

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ART FOR COMMERCE'S SAKE

Advertising agencies occasionally turn to fine-art photographers for commercial assignments, particularly if the creative wants to give the brand a distinct visual twist. Sarah Coleman looks at three such collaborations.

In the past, something of a church-state barrier separated advertising photographers from fine-art photographers. Telling them apart was easy: the former worked collaboratively and made good money, while the latter toiled alone and hoped to earn enough for the next grocery bill. In recent years, though, many clients have hired fine-art photographers, hoping that the choice results in a distinctive print campaign that raises their brand's profile. As a result, artists are edging their way into the advertising market. But does their work always survive the leap to commerce? With that question in mind, we studied three recent campaigns shot by established fine-art photographers.

STEPHEN SHORE/ BOTTEGA VENETA/ LAIRD & PARTNERS

In 1995, Stephen Shore was in London when he heard that an advertising agency was looking for a photographer whose work resembled his. Shore went in to the agency, whose creatives looked at his portfolio of off-beat, colorful views of Americana, and then showed him the door. "They admitted that yes, my work looked exactly like Stephen Shore's—but they said they'd be more comfortable with a photographer who'd had more commercial experience," says Shore.

Art directors are no longer so literal-minded, but even so, when Shore heard in the fall of 2005 that Bottega Veneta creative director Tomas Maier wanted him to shoot a campaign for the Milan-based fashion house, he was astonished. "I'd never worked with fashion or models before," he says. "I thought

it took a lot of imagination for them to choose me. It was gutsy; I respected them for doing it."

Bottega Veneta had been acquired in 2001 by the Gucci Group, which hired Maier to overhaul the flagging brand. Within a few years, Maier managed to turn the small accessories company into a highly successful, full-fledged fashion house. As part of the company's re-branding, Maier hired high-profile fine-art photographers to shoot a series of print advertising campaigns: along with Shore, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Tina Barney and Lord Snowdon have contributed work.

"Stephen's name came up because of his sense of light and color," says art director Hans Dorsinville, of the New York boutique-advertising agency Laird & Partners, who worked on the campaign with Maier and Shore. During pre-production, the three men reviewed many locations, bearing in mind Shore's preference for shooting with natural light. Eventually, they settled on the ornate Woolworth mansion on Long Island, then started grouping Bottega's spring 2006 collection into color groups and matching each color with a room in the mansion.

Dorsinville admits to a slight fearfulness in advance of the shoot: would Shore's idiosyncratic, spontaneous style translate to the staged world of fashion? At the Woolworth mansion, he tried to ensure that everything was in place for Shore to bring his magic. "I was concerned to create a safe environment for him where he felt he wasn't just there to push a button," Dorsinville says. "If photographers aren't used to doing something they can feel pressured and end up not doing their best work."

For his part, Shore wanted to make sure that he correctly interpreted Maier's and Dorsinville's vision.

He knew that the two men particularly liked his 1973 image "Room 125, West Bank Motel, Idaho Falls, ID," in which a pair of legs rests languidly on a motel bed as light streams through a nearby window. "It doesn't look at all like a fashion shot, but I understood that they wanted those muted colors, the quality of soft, natural light and that sense of composure," Shore says.

The three-day shoot resembled no other fashion assignment Dorsinville had directed. "We're usually so focused on the model—the hair, make-up and styling," he says. "With Stephen it was almost the opposite. He treated the people as still lives. The location, and how the light streamed into the room, was just as important. It was all about subtleties: he'd direct a model to look at a tree outside the window, then at a certain leaf on the third branch from the bottom."

During post-production, Shore was heavily involved with color correction. "We shot traditional film, and he has a specific printer he works with for his museum work—so the prints we got were amazing," says Dorsinville. The delicate, ornate shots have an Old World elegance that delighted the client, he says.

The photographer's fee was very much in line with that of established fashion shooters like Michael Thompson and Regan Cameron, says Dorsinville, though "less than superstars like Annie Leibovitz and Mario Testino." Shore, who went on to shoot a fashion feature for U.K.-based *Another* magazine, says he was amazed with the results. "It looked so beautiful," he says, adding dryly, "I couldn't believe it, actually. It really looked as though I knew what I was doing."

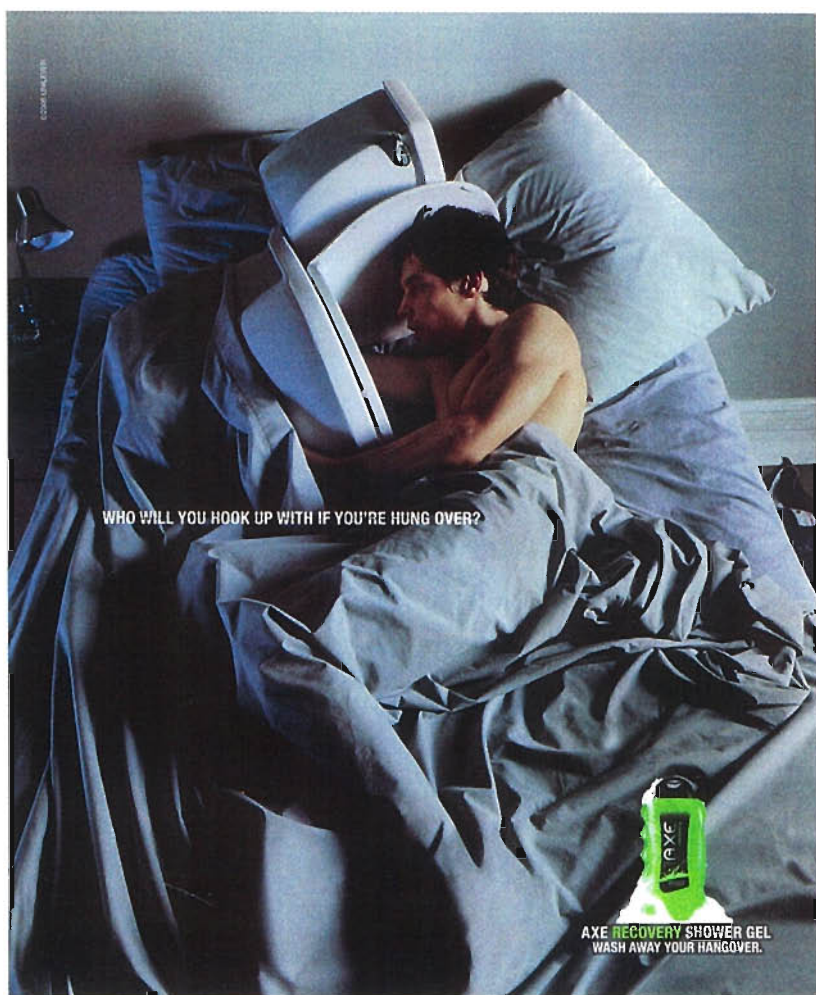


Images by Stephen Shore that were used for the fashion label Bottega Veneta's spring 2006 collection. The campaign was inspired by the muted colors and natural light in a photograph Shore had taken in the Seventies.

“The [the agency] admitted that yes, my work looked exactly like stephen shore’s—but they said they’d be more comfortable with a photographer who’d had some commercial experience,” says Stephen. Shore.

ART FOR COMMERCE'S SAKE

The morning after. Far right:
The 2006 campaign for Axe shot by
Hido and created by Bartle Bogle Hegarty.
Below and right: Hido also
photographed the previous year's
campaign for the agency.



ALL THREE IMAGES © UNILEVER/PHOTOS BY TODD HIDO

“My sense of who I am as a photographer is fed by my books being published and my art being sold, not by commercial work,” says Todd Hido.

TODD HIDO/ AXE SHOWER GEL/ BBH

The 2006 advertising campaign for Axe shower gel visualizes a hangover so effectively that, looking at it, you might feel a little queasy yourself. In each of the campaign's three shots, a young guy, bleary-eyed and unshaven, lies in various misery-inducing positions: clutching a bathmat on the bathroom floor, burying his head in a sofa cushion and—in the most provocative of the three—cozying up to a toilet that he's dragged to bed with him. The tagline, “Who will you hook up with if you're hungover?,” floats over a small graphic of a bottle of Axe “Recovery” shower gel.

Axe's initial brief encouraged a playful approach, says art director Nick Klinkert of New York-based Bartle Bogle Hegarty (BBH). “The Axe team identified an insight that guys know they need to look and smell clean to get the girl, and will do whatever it takes to get ‘dirty’ in the mating game,” he says, adding, “It was a creatively fertile area for all of us.”

Clearly, the campaign cried out for a photographer who specialized in the dark and grungy. Even so, when BBH art buyer Marissa Eller was looking

for the right candidate, she didn't immediately pinpoint Todd Hido, known for his moody shots of tract houses and empty rooms. “Todd had shot a campaign for Axe the previous year, featuring empty shower stalls, but I thought they were a bit different from his usual style and I didn't immediately put two and two together,” says Eller.

After a week spent researching photographers “who had the moody look,” she stumbled on a copy of Hido's book *Outskirts*, featuring his signature nighttime shots of run-down houses. “I thought, ‘Oh, this is very interesting. I like the lighting and the mood,’” she says. Hearing that Hido was “a really nice guy who's easy to work with” also helped her make the selection.

Since Hido had worked fairly extensively on commercial shoots, he got through the competitive bidding phase easily, but Eller admits that the client needed some persuasion to take him on. “There was a concern that his portfolio was a little too artistic and dark,” she says. “We had to make two rounds of edits and assure them that he knew how to shoot commercially.”

Hido says he can understand why a client might be hesitant to hire a self-directed art photographer, but adds that when he's on a commercial shoot, his ego takes a back seat. “My sense of who I am as a photographer is fed by my books being pub-

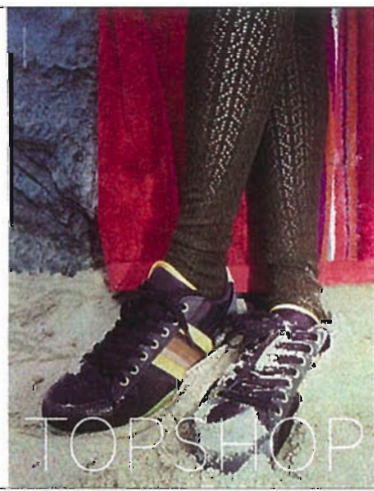
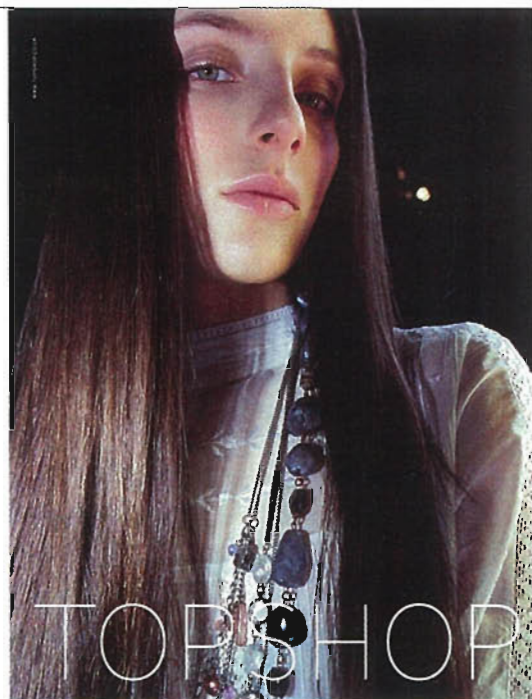
lished and my art being sold, not by my commercial work,” he says. “I'm not a rugrat who'll do anything anyone says—but I'm open to collaborating and incorporating other people's visions.”

For the hangover campaign, Hido worked closely with BBH during the pre-production phase, approving locations and casting choices. The shoot took place over three days at D.C. Studios in Los Angeles, where the crew could choose from among two dozen or so disused sets from television shows. Post-production was straightforward, with BBH doing minor retouching. “Some photographers are very sensitive about that, but Todd didn't mind,” says Eller.

The result was a campaign that contributed to Axe's meteoric success, doubling the company's yearly target and making theirs the biggest-selling shower gel targeted at men in the U.S. For Hido, there were significant economic benefits too. Though he says he isn't sure how his fee compares with that of mainstream commercial photographers, he says his agent, Rob Magnotta of Edge Reps, generally gets “really good fees.” He likens his income from commercial assignments to “a windfall that's really useful,” adding, “For a fine art photographer, it's like getting one of those no-longer-existing NEA grants.”

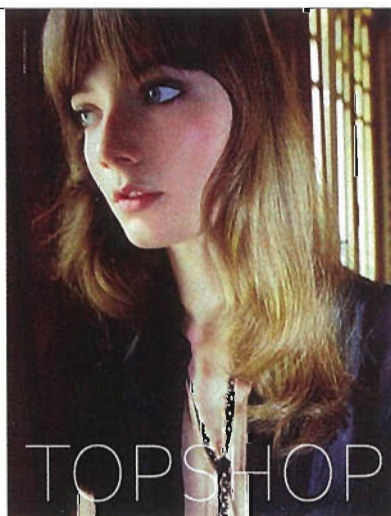
Art For Commerce's Sake continued on page 60

ART FOR COMMERCE'S SAKE



"If he [Jeff Mermelstein] hadn't felt that I understood his sensibility and could get into his head a bit, I think it would have been hard," says creative director Ronnie Cooke Newhouse.

Above and right: Images from the Topshop campaign. The overall vibe of the ads is playful and quirky. Mermelstein has shot six other campaigns for Topshop.



© TOPSHOP/PHOTOS BY JEFF MERMELSTEIN

JEFF MERMELSTEIN/ TOP SHOP/ HOUSE+HOLME

When New York street photographer Jeff Mermelstein and creative guru Ronnie Cooke Newhouse met in the early 1990s, they knew they wanted to work together—but weren't sure how. At the time, Newhouse was the creative director for Barney's department store. Impressed with her offbeat advertising campaigns, Mermelstein dropped his portfolio off at her office.

"I'd never received a book like his," Newhouse recalls. "It was a series of middle-aged women playing mahjong in his mom's friend's wallpapered kitchen in New Jersey. The images were extraordinary. I called him right away and said, 'I want to meet you!'"

It took a few more years before Newhouse and Mermelstein had their first creative collaboration, when Mermelstein flew to London to shoot Newhouse's wedding. Subsequently, the two worked together on a gritty advertising campaign for Comme des Garçons perfume, in which Mermelstein shot perfume bottles against New York City sidewalks. Still, it took a leap of faith when Newhouse, now based in London, hired Mermelstein to do a 2004 Christmas campaign for popular U.K. fashion store Topshop. "Jeff had never done a fashion shoot before; it was uncharted territory," recalls Newhouse. For his part, Mermelstein was thrilled. "It's over-the-top exciting when someone responds to my street photography and wants me to shoot a commercial job in my style," he says.

The 2004 campaign, a retro-Sixties shoot in which models in bellbottoms and fake fur pose on blue vinyl sofas in a London working men's club, was so successful that Mermelstein went on to shoot six more campaigns for Topshop, culminating in the summer of 2006. The overall vibe of the campaigns is playful and quirky: models dressed in hip, colorful clothes splay their legs, jut their elbows out and occasionally even smile. "Topshop has a lot of character: it's fun and accessible, and I thought Jeff would give the campaign humor, life and energy," Newhouse says.

For each of the campaigns, Newhouse found locations and cast models, keeping Mermelstein's esthetic in mind. "He's so great with colors—I needed to find places that would stimulate his eye," she says. Various challenges came up during the shoots; for example, Mermelstein didn't take Polaroids, which meant there was no way of checking if the essential elements of a shot were working.

Mermelstein and Newhouse both agree that ultimately, their close friendship and level of trust made the shoots a huge success. "If he hadn't felt I understood his sensibility and could get into his head a bit, I think it would have been hard," says Newhouse. "But I loved working with him, and I think the cinematic quality of his work contributed to the believability of the brand." Asked to sum up his contribution to the campaigns, Mermelstein remarks, "I'm sort of the anti-fashion photographer. I bring an element of surprise and unpredictability to a campaign, which might scare a lot of advertising people—but it's also very valuable and exciting." □