

FEATURES

TURNING OBJECTS INTO IDEAS

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By Kris Wilton



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For a *Real Simple* story on cleaning, a bunny made of dust, photographed by Jamie Chung and styled by Megan Caponetto.

“If you take any obnoxious hairstyle and think, ‘How can it be more obnoxious?’” says **photographer Brock Davis**, “eventually you’re going to get to a stallion pompadour.”

Davis is describing a photograph he took on an assignment to illustrate an *Esquire* editorial package about grooming, which included an essay by a staffer at the magazine who was growing out his ginger mane. Davis photographed a wig that had been molded into the shape of a horse—red, to match the author’s evolving ‘do—perched atop the head of a rather serious-looking model.

Conceptual still-life photographs like this one have become an essential tool of magazine design. As *Esquire* photo editor Alison Unterreiner notes, they provide a way to communicate the most abstract or least visual topics in a magazine, and also add an element of surprise and often humor. “For a grooming story, sure, we can hire some great still-life person to make a beautiful image of a product,” Unterreiner says, “but how can you take it one step further? How can you make it more interesting? How can you make people stop and look? How can you make them laugh?”

Unterreiner suggested Davis for the grooming story after seeing the personal work on his [website](#). A former creative director turned photographer, he's made a career out of the kind of freewheeling thinking that went into the *Esquire* assignment. His website showcases a variety of conceptual still lifes he's created: a tree house built into a head of broccoli; a banana sporting a tiny trucker hat crafted from its own peel; the explosion of the Hindenburg recreated using a piece of cauliflower on black seamless. Unterreiner recalls, "He had a demonstrated ability of creating these interesting or funny or quirky photos that got an idea across pretty clearly—and it didn't look like he used Photoshop." And that, say many photo editors, encapsulates what they look for when assigning a conceptual still life. *Esquire* would love to use even more conceptual still life, she says, but "we can't find [enough] good people. It's really hard to come by."

"Every general-interest magazine is going to have certain articles that are abstract in nature that need to be visualized," says Brenda Milis, director of photography at *Bloomberg Markets*. "How do you picture Alzheimer's? How do you picture breast cancer?"

Advertising clients who need to communicate ideas like financial well-being or saving for retirement also turn to conceptual still life, though less frequently than editorial clients do.

"It would be great to see it more," says Chris Peters, a senior art producer at Minneapolis-based ad agency Colle+McVoy who follows Davis's work via Tumblr and other social media. "But it seems like maybe it's just harder for creatives to sell it to a client."

Not for lack of interest on the creatives' part. "I think it's a great genre," Peters adds. "When it's done well it can be so simple and smart at the same time, and really make the viewer think about the concept or the idea." Clients may be less willing to go in that direction, he speculates, because it's less obvious. "It seems like European advertisers are more inclined to take a chance on an abstract concept or conceptual still life than American advertisers are."

Finding the Metaphor

The challenge for photographers is to shoot an arrangement of still-life objects in a way that communicates a fresh and unexpected perspective.

"It's really hard to come up with an original visual that conveys an idea, is clean and is a cool image," says [photographer Adam Voorhes](#), an experienced practitioner of the genre. "It's so much about metaphors but most of those things are cliché, so you avoid that," he adds.

Voorhes works with his wife, Robin Finlay, a prop stylist and former art director, to create graphic tableaux of objects. For Caesars casino hotels, they did a series in which they replicated the Caesars logo using objects associated with the chain's various attractions: a ring of chef's knives to evoke celebrity chefs, a ring of golden high heels to call to mind luxury shopping. For "Help Wanted," a story on the most secure jobs in a down economy, shot for *Texas Monthly* when Finlay was the magazine's art director, they arranged office supplies in a way that recreated objects associated with different occupations: a syringe for a nurse, a calculator for an accountant, a construction crane for a civil engineer.

Coming up with an idea for a still life is a collaborative process. "Magazines always need help with conceptualizing because still life is really hard," says Milis. "It's hard making a powerful but also elegant still life that's conceptual without going clunky, overwrought or cheesy."

In many cases, art directors and photo editors will have at least a rudimentary idea, which will evolve and improve over the course of sometimes lengthy e-mail or phone exchanges with the photographer. Working with talented prop and food stylists, Milis says, is also "hugely, hugely important" in this collaboration.

Sometimes, editors do the lion's share of the conceptualizing themselves. [Stephen Lewis](#), who's established himself primarily as a still-life photographer, describes working closely with *Psychology Today* creative director Ed Levine, who devotes a lot of time to brainstorming and working through ideas with photographers. But for a story on whether or not to undergo DNA testing to determine one's likelihood of developing a particular disease, he hired Lewis to execute a clear, already finalized idea: Two juxtaposed images showing, on one side, a white cotton swab on a red background, and on the other, a single drop of blood on a white background, evoking positive and negative in the visual language of medical testing.

"It's ridiculous how much time and energy goes into the conceiving and building of the thing" versus how long it actually takes to make the photo, Voorhes says. "When it's finally there, I've already done the prelighting, so I turn the lights on and take a picture. I might tweak it a little bit and hit the button again and I'm done."

Keeping It Real

While "conceptual photography" has come to connote a photo illustration concocted on screen, clients who want to use still lifes to illustrate abstract topics prefer to keep the Photoshopping subtle.

For a *Real Simple* article titled “Act Small, Save Big,” the magazine developed an idea based on some shots seen on Lewis’s [website](#), featuring, as he says, “a bevy of piglets.” Riffing on the idea of a piggy bank, Lewis and the *Real Simple* team came up with ways to illustrate saving money using a real pig. In one, the piglet rides in the back of a miniature convertible. In another, he turns off a hanging light bulb by pulling the chain with his mouth. The images were created entirely in camera. “You can tell,” Lewis says. “If that pig wasn’t really pulling that light, it would have taken ten hours [in post] to make that picture look right.” He used Photoshop only for the usual polishing and to mask the cereal with which they’d plied the pig: “That pig would do anything for Cheerios,” he says.

The still life also has to conform to the visual style of the client and its audience. “We have a female audience, many of whom live in the middle of the country, and they want something that’s approachable and accessible and gentle,” explains *Real Simple* photo director Casey Tierney. At the same time, “It has to have bite and some sort of point of view that distinguishes us from other magazines. It’s a lot of columns to check.”

Tierney and the photographers she hires also face the challenge of having to come up with new, engaging ways to depict the types of stories that recur every year, or even every month. One of Tierney’s favorite recent treatments was for a story about cleaning. “Instead of showing actually dusting under a couch,” she says, they came up with the idea of showing a bunny constructed from dust and some lint; [Jamie Chung](#) landed the assignment.

“Conceptual still life has always worked well for *Real Simple*,” Tierney says, “and I think we’re doing it more graphically and more cleverly than we ever have. People like Stephen Lewis and Jamie Chung are helping us do that.”