

jamienelson

hanging on BILLBOARD dreams

BY ABIGAIL RONCK

Her work is an evolution of moments, of packing up suitcases and jumping on planes to unvisited places. The photography world has adopted its own version of Hollywood fame in Jamie Nelson, whose visual impact roams the earth in the most modern and cosmopolitan sort of way. Even before the age of 25, Jamie found herself with a billboard in Times Square, 100,000 adoring friends on MySpace, a published coffee-table book of her fashion portfolio and a pixie-cute, montage dance video (in which she stars) that was displayed in an art gallery in Rome.

"Oh, there's still so far to go," Jamie tells me from her 1500-square-foot studio space in Jersey City, seven minutes by train from a Manhattan day, which is surprisingly rainy and cool for summer in New York. "There's so much I wanted to accomplish by now. Bigger magazines and campaigns," she continues—before pausing to consider her statements. "I guess I'm really hard on myself, but the magazine industry is extremely difficult to break into right now. In the United States, photographers are becoming more famous now than the models! You'll see on the cover of some publication, 'Mario Sorrenti shooting for *V* magazine this month.' It's about being a celebrity and having your name known as a photographer. You really have to get out there on a global scale."

The question at hand, it seems, is how Jamie has done just that. The answers, multiple as they are, are both singular and

synergistic: the element of gutsy surprise, the graphic design of 1960s *Vogue* covers, models with insanely expressive lips, the fundamentals of photographic collaboration and modern social networking.

Born and raised in Colorado Springs, CO, Jamie had always intended to study medicine at Stanford. "I guess it was my last semester in high school when I completely fell in love with photography," she says. "I took an art class. I was horrible at sketching and painting so I did all of my assignments with a camera." From there, it was actually Jamie's mother who stumbled upon Brooks Institute in Santa Barbara, CA. After a rigorous four-phone interview application process, Jamie was in the car, heading west. "I just moved out there at 18," she says, having never been to California. "My mom drove me, dropped me off and left five minutes later. And that was that. So it's been kind of a risky ride I suppose. Everything has been done on the fly."

While Jamie took traveling breaks during summer sessions to the UK (where she had also never traveled) to shoot castles and fields of sheep, in her later years at Brooks she found her dual-punch passion laid in beauty and fashion photography. "I love shooting dramatic close-up shots," she shares, for which Jamie has since landed jewelry and cosmetic campaigns appearing in publications like *Vogue*, *InStyle* and *Elle*.

Given the ethos of her generation and the quirky, freshness of her personality, it's ultimately surprising how classic and



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seriously fundamental Jamie is when approaching her education and work. “For me, I’m really disappointed with current fashion photography. It feels like it’s really gone backwards in the sense that a lot of people just put a beautiful model on a gray background and don’t pay any attention to composition or graphic elements,” she says. “I want to create a timeless piece that has purpose to it, real elements that can be defined as art—something that you’d love to put on your wall as a gigantic poster. It needs to be hangable.”

Maybe, in some ways though, going backward isn’t always a detrimental option. When I ask Jamie what exactly it is that she sees as beautiful, she answers, “I take inspiration from film, from 60s art, old *Vogue* work (she embraces an endearing vagabond habit of collecting magazines from stoop sales and the public library), my environment and architecture.” And those fantastically Angelina Jolie-esque lips that define her work? “I’ve always had a thing for lips,” she confesses. “Whenever I cast models, it’s always girls with big lips. It’s just kind of a style. I really love classically beautiful women.”

While Jamie’s imagery dabbles with vintage motifs, it has a certain edgy, distinct quality born of mingling modern makeup and clothing design with lighting, and the careful placement of saleable products. “It’s always been a collaborative effort,” she says of her hair, makeup and art direction staff.



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“I met them in California and all three of them followed afterward. The whole team collaborates on absolutely everything. We all sit down after a shoot and spend three hours editing the photos. And I don’t think a lot of photographers do that.” She continues—emphatically personifying her human counterparts as their products—“When makeup’s happy and hair’s happy, then I look at overall composition with my art director, Danielle Brown, to make sure absolutely everything in the image is strong. It’s tedious—but really powerful to have four sets of eyes on an image.”

After graduating from Brooks, commer-

cial fashion decisively on her career agenda, Jamie invited two more collaborating giants into her life—the city of Manhattan and digital photography. “I wanted to get to New York right away,” she laughs. “It was the only option.”

Jamie moved two weeks after graduation without any money saved or a job lined up, again arriving in a new city for the first time. “I basically got rid of everything,” she offers. “I actually sold my camera to have enough money to move. When I graduated, photography was at an interesting point. At the beginning of school we were shooting 4x5s—everything on film—and



then toward the end, everything was slowly converting to digital." Even though Jamie says she and her classmates were all terrified, their love of shooting film in jeopardy, given the pace of shooting in New York she had already begun to conceptualize the value of digital.

Now, Jamie shoots mostly with a Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II. "And for campaigns sometimes a Hasselblad with a [Phase One] P25 back," she says. "It actually depends on how much I need to impress the clients or what their resolution requirements are for billboards." As far as sticking with Canon, Jamie worked with its products through most of Brooks and loves their interface. "I feel as far as resolution goes, they are always ahead of the game."

It's wild to consider resolution requirements for billboards at age 25—a sizeable luxury to which Jamie pays credence to her agency. "Finding an agent is one of the hardest things a young photographer has to do." And still, with as many reps as Jamie visited, in the end, the agency Johnson and Friends actually found her—on MySpace. "I believe it was within the first year and a half of me living [in New York]," Jamie says. "I was freelancing and dropping around my book everywhere and they found me in the middle of doing that. I just fell in love. For me, it was being really comfortable on a personal, intimate level. If an agency is too big you can get lost in the crowd and if it's too small the company isn't built up enough to do you any good."

The best thing about having an agent for young Jamie Nelson? A little bark behind her initial bite—as she often finds clients fairly surprised by her age and gender. "A lot of



people think I'm a male just because of my name so every time someone calls they are extremely surprised. Also," she laughs, "I'm really, really petite so I walk through the door and here's this tiny little girl. People expect me to be a large male. It's always a surprise." That said, while Jamie's there to speak creatively, she likes having a male figure by her side to help negotiate costs.

Still, promoting credibility and marketing her talent hasn't been an issue these days. Likely even, much of her success doing so is a result of her maturation alongside that of progressive social media.

"I do a lot of marketing through websites that are unconventional. I think that a lot of people don't realize the value in marketing through those types of sites," Jamie says. "They think it's just social, and it is in a way. Still, they say in the advertising world it takes seven or eight hits to get someone to buy. For me, I'm hitting [clients] through my agency, my portfolio, my website, direct mail, email promotions, and then there are two or three left over that I still need to accomplish. So I leave that to more social outlets, like MySpace, Facebook and Iqons."

After all, fame in any industry comes from favorable character and perceived intimacy. "I've had a MySpace account since before college and I've found it extremely helpful for marketing myself both to the masses and to professionals. As much direct mailing as you do or cold calling, it's helpful to hit people on a personal level—when they're not in the office. They have MySpace and Facebook accounts too and they're just normal people. So

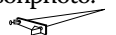


to be able to catch them and familiarize them with my name and work in a more relaxed mentality is extremely helpful for marketing in a casual manner," she confirms.

And yet, in spite of Jamie's openness in sharing her flight into spiking celebrity, her litany of accomplishments remains confounding. "So many people ask me how to do it," she tells me. "And for me, the whole industry is about being resilient. I love that word because I've been through so many hard ups and downs. But, as competitive as it is, there's a place for everyone. Everything is really just around the corner. It always is."

The advice, tendered humbly and sincerely, is in a way retroactive for Jamie Nelson. I say that because, in my view, she's already blown 'round the proverbial corner of which she speaks, leaving a trail of stardust and her name, whispered as tall as billboards, in the wake.

To see more of Jamie's portfolio, visit her website at www.jamienelson.com or befriend her on MySpace at www.myspace.com/jamienelsonphoto.



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