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Robert Mapplethorpe

USC cheerleader jumping by Jill Greenberg

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{THE INTERVIEW}

# PICTURE PERFECT

Jill Greenberg's flawless images cross the line from commercial to political and back again. Eleanor O'Kane talks to the Canadian-born, LA-based photographer to find out what lies beneath her perfect images.

It's 9am in Los Angeles, where Jill Greenberg is talking to me from her studio. I've managed to pin her down for a short while between clients and already her day is in full swing. In the background a printer is whirring merrily. I can hear her two children playing and, it transpires, a news story is breaking online about a controversial cover that she recently shot for a major US magazine.

A glance at Greenberg's website gives you an idea of just how prolific she is: five open-eyes, highly stylised portraits are in big demand and she is commissioned by major magazines and advertising agencies on both sides of the Atlantic. For one Greenpeace specifically requested that Greenberg shoot the cover of her 2006 album *The Secret Escape* after seeing the photographer's work. The name of her website, Manipulate.com, is inspired, or "born out" in her words, from the title of the large format German magazine, *Die Manipulative*, published from the mid-1980s to the

mid-1990s. Growing up surrounded by images born from pop culture staples such as *The Face*, fashion magazine *W* and *Interview*, the glossy so-called crystal ball of pop founded by Andy Warhol, has shaped her flawless style of photography.

"I have always played with images and not always used them in a straightforward way," Greenberg explains. "I've always achieved different kinds of effects, be it digital I was preparing on to subjects and projecting images on to cracked surfaces and photographing them." With an academic background in art, as well as a lifelong love of painting and drawing, Greenberg believes the manipulation is a way of making the images better, more interesting.

Greenberg has been working as a commercial photographer for almost 20 years, something she tries to juggle with personal projects as well as being a mother to two young children. "I have been travelling a lot recently. I do enjoy it but it's hard because I have two little children; I miss them and

they miss me." Over that time she thinks the industry has got tougher for commercial photographers. "There are a lot more of us than when I started. Sometimes it's hard when you're looking against someone who is just starting out and they'll go with the cheapest photographer," that perfection comes at a price, I suggest.

"The production value is what's expensive rather than the retouching. That doesn't have to be expensive at all. The number of lights and the quality of the camera that's what's expensive. Also the quality of the hair and make-up people, the studio, the props."

What may come as a surprise is that Greenberg's trademark images are less in Photoshop than to her lighting and make-up. "People assume my work is more manipulated than it is. It looks like that in the camera, it really does. I get the lighting and everything looking perfect so it almost doesn't need to be retouched."



Artwork: Lindsay Lohan

## {THE INTERVIEW}

**'I've been drawing and painting my whole life. I've always drawn animals that are interchangeable with people so I draw people with animal heads or vice versa. What interests me are different characters and emotions. I love doing portraits and I love doing portraits of animals...'** *Jill Greenberg*

As much as time and workload permits, Greenberg does her own retouching. "In the past I've done it all personally but lately, because I've been so busy, it's being done externally. I will do certain commercial jobs from start to finish by myself but because I've been travelling a lot, recently I've handed some jobs over completely, which is quite unusual for me. I've found some people I can work with who do what I want them to do without any interference from me.

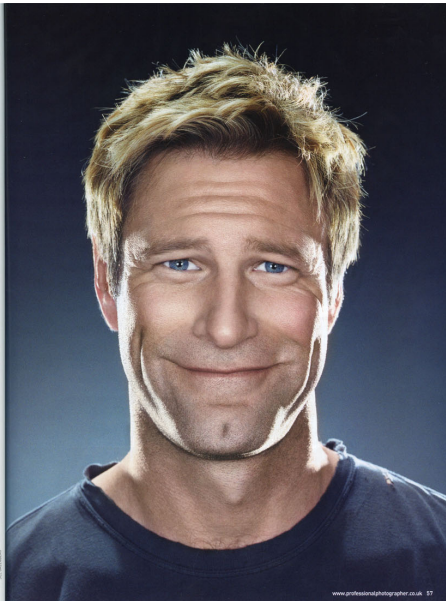
Sometimes when they send me a rough draft I'll do something in a layer and they'll put the layer on their screen." Does she have any say in how much retouching is done to an image? Does it ever go further than she would like? "In some cases I do have to retouch the subject in," she says. "But the client can have ideas about compositing and special effects."

She grants her personal projects closely, however, retouching all of those herself. One of her first major personal projects - *Monkey Portraits* - was inspired by an advertising commission. "I came across that idea a bit by accident. I was on a commercial job and had to shoot this monkey. I had some time so I decided to do a portrait of it for myself. I was a little thick and very proud with the results. I realised I'd never really seen portraits of monkeys before and I wanted to continue to do that. I took off from there." Although Greenberg had to return and rebuild the job with a pencil because the client thought the monkey looked too menacing, the human resemblance and apparent intelligence of the monkey in the resulting pictures sparked a desire in Greenberg to use her subjects as a method of social commentary. This was October 2001, the post-9/11 landscape.

Over the next five years, when minutes and time allowed, she shot 30 portraits of 20 different species of primates. The animal portraits are in turn humorous, unobtrusive and menacing, with a slight suggestion that the monkeys are looking back at us humans, their genetic cousins, in judgement. From there, Greenberg has also done portraits of 'tattooed' bears for her Cruise project, capturing them looking both ferocious and friendly. Like her urge to incorporate images, the fascination with animals stems from a young age. "I've been drawing and painting my whole life. I've always drawn animals that are interchangeable with people, so I draw people with animal heads or vice versa. What interests me are different characters and emotions. I love doing portraits and



Left: A portrait from Greenberg's *Drawn Project*. Opposite page: Actor Steve Eckstein for *Los Angeles magazine*.



I love doing portraits of animals, it's just how my brain works."

While the reaction to the animal pictures was overwhelmingly positive, one of Greenberg's subsequent projects, *End Times*, was met with an outpouring of vitriol for the photographer. The title, which refers to the belief held by some extreme religious groups that the second coming of Christ will be preceded by major natural disasters, famines and hardships, was Greenberg's photographic response to the George W. Bush administration and its environmental policies. It was a series of portraits of anguished, luminous children sobbing their hearts out and the previous best titles such as *Four More Hours and Forever*.

"It was a series of children crying as if they knew the direction that the world was going, that the environment was being ruined," Greenberg explains. "They are crying because George Bush was re-elected here [in the US], the religious Right believes in something called End Times, when people will go to heaven when Jesus returns. It's a real nightmare. The people who believe in End Times want horrible things to happen because that proves the end is near. It's a crazy, backwards logic where the more disasters and hardships we experience, the better. At the time these crazy religious fanatics had the ear of a lot of the politicians, including Bush, and a lot of environmental policies were being affected by this logic. The politicians didn't care that they were making the environment for the future, for our children, and the religious Right wanted it to be made known that meant End Times would happen sooner."

Instead of focusing on Greenberg's message, the public largely chose to focus on the methods she used to get her subjects to cry. One way to give the children — one of whom was her own daughter — a lullaby and then simply take it away and wait for the resulting wails. "People didn't really talk about the subject matter, they didn't discuss the children behind the work, but just how I was a horrible person for making children cry. Of course, children cry as if the world is ending when they can't have their lullaby!" It was upsetting because at the time it became a big deal for some reason." *End Times* resulted in national TV coverage in the United

Right: An image from *The Ocean Challenge* project, inspired by a story with the US Space Shuttle *Columbia* Team.

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**You need to be business minded so you spend the right amount of money on photoshoots; you don't spend too much money but you don't scrimp where you shouldn't and you save where you should be saving.** Jill Greenberg

Stars, was the coverline of the *Sunday Times Magazine* and provoked an outcry from outraged photographers who gossiped online rumour against Greenberg. The title of one such blog posting ran: Jill Greenberg: A 34-year-old woman who should be arrested and charged with child abuse.

Despite the negative reception for the project in some areas, Greenberg not only made her name, but also managed to win new clients with the discerning yet beautiful pictures. "When the *End Times* series came out I got a bunch of jobs because of the lighting in that work. People wanted me to do portraits just like those ones." As noted the studio, the setup Greenberg used for *End Times* is known as "moody lighting." "It's a setup that we use for the moosey, the boys and the children, and one which I use for some of my commercial jobs." Although the project brought her media attention and new clients, Greenberg is keen not to be pigeonholed. "I don't think it's appropriate for everyone to be lit that way. I have a bunch of variations on that lighting setup and I'm also looking at trying new things because I get bored of it. Sometimes people think I only shoot that way, which I don't like. It's nice to show my versatility."

Three years ago she was shooting her slick, stylized portraits, known as "blinky faces," all the time but says that as her commercial career develops she's doing more straightforward work. "I'm still exploring personal work and that can be more stylized or more manipulative," she adds. Working for so many different types of clients means she needs to "get into a different headspace"

for each one. "You think, 'Oh, this will make sense for this magazine' or 'I'm feeling this at this particular moment, a particular type of lighting.' That's the fun of photography, it doesn't have to be so rigid."

Working as a professional photographer, she says, means you have to be good at a lot of things. "Photography, obviously, but also client relations, marketing and recognizing trends. You need to be business minded so you spend the right amount of money on photoshoots; you don't spend too much money but you don't scrimp where you shouldn't and you save where you should be saving."

She thinks she's landed because of her head for business. "I wasn't that great a math or school, but I'm good at running a business and not going over budget. I'm good at keeping budgets in my head. Sometimes I have agents and producers who help me with budgets but other times you have a client who wants you to do a job for \$5,000 or \$10,000 flat and you have to figure out how to do that. I think it's just the way I've been brought up, to be careful with money. It's a nuisance, this whole business thing but that's the way it is."

Although she loves shooting film, it's her business sense that often determines which camera she picks up. "I use digital for commercial jobs because it's easier. I don't own my own digital equipment but I do own my own film camera, a Mamiya. If, for example, I'm doing a small editorial job where I'm shooting a portrait it's cheaper for me to shoot film rather than renting out the gear that I don't own. For private commissions

I like to shoot film and all the *End Times* portraits and the portraits of the animals were film. I love how that looks."

Greenberg's career seems to travel along parallel tracks, the commercial one, with her glossy advertising and editorial commissions, and the personal path, where she explores her thoughts and ideas on society as she sees it. Sometimes those paths cross over, or blur together. A recent project, *The Glass Ceiling*, was inspired by a 2008 commission to photograph the US Olympic synchronized swimming team. In the series of serene, dreamlike images, women wearing high heels struggle to break the surface of their underwater world; the motions that don't just dance some on-foot advertisements because of all the commercial the following work. Personal projects are still important, she says, but admits that for young photographers it's hard to do everything when you are trying to gain a foothold in the commercial sector. "When I first started out I was doing art photography but when I was trying to establish myself I had to focus on commercial photography, getting work, working on my portfolio. It's not easy."

The list of celebrities she has photographed is vast, ranging from Arnold Schwarzenegger to

## THE INTERVIEW



**Shows Actor Zachary Quinto in Spock for the 2009 Star Trek Film.**  
Opposite page: Bill Auer/MAG/Mag.

## {THE INTERVIEW}

actress Zoe Saldana, star of sci-fi epic *Avatar*. Which is tougher, I ask, working with bears or celebrities? She laughs. "Well generally it's easier working with celebrities because you can tell them what to do. People are great because you can give them direction but with animals you have to be really patient. You are working with a trainer but you're working within the boundaries of what the animal is going to do. Or not do. Animals can be

so much somewhat concerned about. "I will have to schedule that around my commercial jobs. I'm also thinking about directing videos and working on some book projects related to fine art photography that, plus being a mother of two small children, it's a lot to do."  
As a palmy pleasure, she'd love to shoot fashion. "When I was younger I loved fashion photography. On a very surface level it's fun to photograph

"Photoshopped" and "retouched" *Wired* has been criticized online for its "cartoonish" Photoshop treatment of its cover star, the young American female electrical engineer and entrepreneur Linnet Fried. In an attempt to show how manipulated the cover image is, a snapshot of Fried looking vastly different - public, wearing glasses and a lip ring and with shorter hair - is circulating online. When I check back a day or two later, Fried herself has

**"When I was younger I loved fashion photography. On a very surface level it's fun to photograph beautiful people in beautiful environments. I think all photographers love making beautiful images."**  
**Jill Greenberg**

hard work so you need to prepare everything and try to make sure they don't think you're fly away."  
She has just completed a delivery of 110 portraits of horses in a few months' time, a project

beautiful people in beautiful environments. I think all photographers love making beautiful images."  
During our conversation a former boyfriend on the internet regarding a cover image she shot for the April 2011 issue of *U.S. Wired* magazine. "Good magazine is accusing *Wired* of retouching the subject beyond recognition," she says. After me hanging up I follow the story online. Amid cries of

stepred in ad defended both Greenberg and the *Wired* cover. It turns out that the "natural" image was taken over three years ago after a 20-hour flight and when Fried had short hair. Fried states online that due to the mid-air and lightning she was the girl in the cover image on the day and is happy with how she looks. The only elements that had been Photoshopped, she says, were the background color and the power and she holding.

Although Fried's subsequent defense of the image and its photographer seem set to come to light, Greenberg didn't sound in the least perturbed, confident in the knowledge of how the image was achieved. She tells me that after our interview she has to sit down and write a speech. She's due to return to her old college, Rhode Island School of Design, during its Women's Focus Week to talk to students about women's body issues and the media. "It's kind of good that there's a scandal," she says with a hint of glee. "It means I have something to talk about."

**Below: A head shot for a Russian vodka advertising shoot. Opposite page: *Wired* from the *EW* Times series.**



To see more of Jill Greenberg's images visit her website [www.manipulator.com](http://www.manipulator.com)

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