

Christopher Wilson

Man in motion. Christopher Wilson slips his Audi A3 into fifth gear as we glide onto the highway connecting Durham to Raleigh. A landscape unfurls soundlessly outside while a life story unfolds inside. An education in ancient Greek and Latin at Dartmouth, a later passion for dance. Classics, dance, writer, advertising, art director, MPLS, Raleigh, photographer... How did a man well into his advertising career move into photography? The answer is more interesting than the question: He is an artist, not just an ad man, and his experience and interest inform both his art and his vocation.

by Matthew Porter

Great image makers,” says Wilson’s friend John Doyle, “create photographs that allow the viewer to *visit* the subject, to get to know it, to feel something about it.” Wilson’s images are “painterly,” a shopworn description he dislikes but that helps us understand what he does with an image—and how he got from the study of languages and movement to the world of advertising. He manipulates, contrast, color and focal point. He adds elements from other images like clouds or birds to create a mood or suggest a message. “You can tell if a photographer has studied great painters because he has a well-developed eye for composition and color,” notes Doyle. “They know how to put it all together to make something special.”

For Fiat, a cloud of yellow balloons against a brooding sky, cheerful yet dark. For Nokota Horse Conservancy, an iconic cowboy standing horseback contemplates a roiling sea of grass, ominous yet hopeful. As different as these images are, they convey expectation and trepidation. Is this art or advertising? Honesty or manipulation? Wilson makes no apologies. “You never see the raw footage of a feature film. You see what the director or editor wants you to see. You feel, they hope, what they want you to feel.”

New capacity

As Wilson describes his influences, the connection between his earlier interests and later successes comes into focus. “I am informed by George Balanchine’s line, ‘Hear the dance, see the music,’” says Wilson. He hasn’t stopped learning since leaving college, or pushing the limits of his own capability. He reveres Irving Penn because, he explains, “Penn’s appetite for learning was insatiable. He worked past 90. He was driven to create things new and beautiful his entire life. I want to do that, too.”

Wilson’s artistry and his industriousness earned him his first break in photography—and it was a big one. Chris Graves at Team One Advertising gave Wilson his first photo assignment for Ritz-Carlton Hotels. The shoot was in Vietnam and led to several other assignments for Ritz-Carlton.

Wilson’s next opportunity came with creative director John Doyle at Young & Rubicam. As a veteran of fourteen automotive accounts, Doyle hired Wilson to shoot for his prestigious Jaguar account. “John kick-started my photography career with Jaguar,” Wilson says. “That then led to work with John at StrawberryFrog and Morgan Stanley.” This act of faith put Wilson’s photography on the world map. Doyle insists hiring Wilson to shoot was not a leap of faith; it was of mutual benefit, he elaborates:

“Showing stock is problematic. Some insist but I resist. I prefer to sketch the compositions and ask the client to trust me to create them. Finding someone who can help me do that is not easy. It is not difficult to find an image-maker with many awards and accolades to their credit—but fame does not guarantee that you will be able to work well together. You need a person in whom you may confide. Someone with whom you share a connection or an artistic sense. Chris does that for me. As soon as I met him I knew he could quickly assess a situation and help me realize my goals. His background provided a shorthand that allowed us to communicate quickly and easily. I believe that I help him reach beyond his existing capabilities; and I know he helps me execute images that exist mostly in my mind. We are aligned.”

Right: “An outtake from a StrawberryFrog shoot in and around Dubai. Part of Morgan Stanley’s continued **World Wise** branding campaign that communicates its global investment strategies in emerging markets, including the United Arab Emirates.” John Doyle, art director.

“**Amor Da Terra** is a Brazilian jewelry company that is launching in the United States. The jewelry is made from objects found in nature and has a primitive, tribal aesthetic. To capture that tribal-made-from-nature feeling, we painted the models with colored mud (inspired by fantastic body decorations of Ethiopian tribes), and then dressed them in objects found in nature, i.e., corsets made of coral and grass. I had a fantastic team of artists working with me.” Priscilla Miranda, Amor Da Terra, client.



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True north

Wilson's faith in his own instincts has also been essential to his success. "Trust your compass," he advises; it worked for him. When he graduated from Dartmouth, Wilson moved to New York City to pursue dance. After a move to Minneapolis, Wilson eventually became disenchanted with dance. "It was an endless cycle of practice, try-out and rejection that was getting



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me nowhere," he recalls, "and nowhere is not a place for me." Tapping into his love of visual and language arts, he tried commercial advertising. A career was born.

Wilson spent six months creating a "spec" portfolio. Spec books rarely

prove to be gilded pathways, but Wilson isn't like most. Dayton-Hudson, Target's parent, liked his book and put him to work. Martin|Williams saw his work and hired him in 1989. Wilson's partner there was Jim Henderson. They turned out to be each other's great friend and inspiration.

"For some time we had lost touch," recalls Henderson. "But then one day a few years ago he called and told me about his new focus on photography. At that moment, I was preparing to leave Martin|Williams and was mulling over my options. I asked Chris to send me a link to his work. When I visited his site, I was blown away. He then invited me to North Dakota where he was shooting for the Nokota Horse Conservancy and I readily agreed. I borrowed a good camera from a friend because I didn't own one. We spent four days together—and I was hooked. He encouraged me all the way."

After ten years in Minneapolis, Wilson left to help lead the Audi account at McKinney & Silver Advertising in Raleigh. His partnership there with Robert Renaw would lead to award-winning work and national recognition. Renaw and Wilson remain close friends. As Henderson before him, Renaw says the "connection" between the two creative men led to great work and growth: "We connected as soon as we met. Chris

and I then teamed as co-creative directors on Audi. He was the first partner who pushed me to be a better art director. It was a great creative time."

Home studio

The Wilson family's former working-class bungalow is in the Historic Oakwood neighborhood of Raleigh. The house has been lovingly restored, its wood siding sanded smooth and painted gray with white trim and red entry. Inside, it is cool and dark, with contemporary and folk art adorning the colorful walls. Wilson apologizes for the stack of books on his office floor but there is no need: The home and office are exquisite, like his images.

We look at some photos. He shows me the original images and the final versions. The difference is dramatic. "Anyone can take a photograph. The artistry comes in the composition at the shoot and enhancements in post-production." Not many will admit this level of manipulation. Fewer can do it themselves. Wilson does both. He explains: "You have to have a point of view. You must listen and be open to collaboration. But in the end, you must follow your instincts. You have to believe in it yourself."

Henderson echoes Wilson's point, adding, "Years ago, Chris taught me that no one gave a shit about you, your work or your product—but you have to care about all three. That is the only way you can make them care about your work."

The final act?

How does a man with no professional training in photography find himself featured in the pages of this magazine? To begin with Wilson has an enormous amount of experience in creating visual imagery. He was an art director for years. But he insists his success in photography is largely due to the support he gets from wife Cathy, his executive producer. "She is," says Wilson, "my fifth Beatle. She handles the details that if left to me would not get done."

Has Wilson found his final act—or is this profile premature? Dancer. Writer. Art director. Photographer. What's next? A musical score? A screenplay? On the way back to the airport, I ask him about his future. He demurs, preferring to envision family time: "When I get home my plan is to just be with Cathy and my girls. My idea of peace is cuddling on the sofa next to my daughters watching *SpongeBob*."

Right: "This image is of the new **Fiat 500 Pop**. We spent almost a month shooting this car and the other new Fiat 500s—traveling up and down the whole of the state of California—as part of a new branding effort for Fiat introducing this fantastic, fun little car to the United States." Clark Evans, art director; Joe Shands, writer; Impatto Custom Marketing, ad agency; Fiat, client.

"One in a library of beauty and lifestyle imagery shot for **Natura Brazil**, the industry leader in cosmetics, fragrances and bath products for all of Latin America. Photographed as part of Natura's global marketing expansion into Mexico and France, we spent three days in Miami shooting some of the most beautiful Brazilian women we've ever seen." John Doyle, art director; StrawberryFrog, ad agency; Natura Brazil, client.







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His answer is sweet—but it does not ring completely true. This is a man who likes fast cars, big accounts and the attention that goes with them. He is a man in motion, driving not driven. What will be his final act?

Finally, he relents, offering not a final act but an epitaph he hopes expresses his character rather than his accomplishments: “On my tombstone I want written, *‘He tried only to be honest, accessible and beautiful.’*”

On that score, Christopher Wilson has succeeded. **CA**



Left: “Part of a series of images documenting **extreme surfing** in Northern California. Commissioned by Swami’s, an English company based out of London that offers beautifully crafted, stunningly designed bespoke surfboards. We spent a week documenting these crazy surfers who brave extremely dangerous conditions for the thrill of the ride. Freezing water, 30-foot swells, shark infested, rocks everywhere, surfers die every year in these waters. It’s no wonder there’s a big red danger sign below these surfers—although completely ignored by these crazies.” Giles Dunn, Swami’s Surf Company, client.

“Part of a library of imagery for **Swami’s Surf Company**. This time we traveled to Costa Rica and spent a week photographing Freddie Meadows, a professional surfer and Swedish surf champion who is under contract with Swami’s. A beautiful country, we never wanted to leave.” Giles Dunn, Swami’s Surf Company, client.



This page: “Shot while on assignment for **Brocks Rockets** during Speed Week at the Bonneville Salt Flats. It had rained the night before, so when we got out to the starting line the next morning, it was completely under water and only one race car was there. It was a fantastic, magical landscape, with the water on top of the salt flats creating a perfect reflection of sky and mountains. I had been wanting to photograph the Salt Flats like this for years and finally got the chance.” Jeff Brock, Brocks Rockets, client.

“**Bombshell Betty**, a souped-up 1952 Buick Super Riviera. Designed, built and driven by Jeff Brock, this wonderful crazy Frankenstein of a race car holds the World Speed Record in its class. Twice. I had the wonderful opportunity to be hired by Jeff to document his journey to defend his title at the Bonneville World Finals last October. And of course, he won.” Jeff Brock, Brocks Rockets, client.

“While on assignment for BMW, AG, to photograph this new high-tech, **futuristic concept BMW 328**, we also photographed a 1928 BMW 328. Impeccably restored and now worth close to a million dollars, we shot the legendary, most-sought-after of sports cars—the car that defined BMW as the Ultimate Driving Machine—in a warehouse in L.A. It was wunderbar to say the least.” Phillip Schlegel, BMW, AG, client.



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Left: “Part of a campaign for **Gemesis Diamonds**, a jewelry company that ‘creates’ diamonds in the lab versus digging them out of mines. To help persuade potential consumers that lab-grown diamonds are just as real and as beautiful as ‘real’ diamonds, a slightly retro sensibility was created with the images, helping to lend a feeling of authenticity and history to these cultured diamonds.” Brendan Ward, art director; David Watts, creative director; French West Vaughan, ad agency; Gemesis Diamonds, client.

“This was shot for a hair salon. The idea was to create an image that communicated how **Caju** can transform the way you feel with a great new hair style using natural products. It was an extremely tedious studio shoot, using over 300 silk butterflies that we imported from China. This image was later picked up by the Cosmopolitan Hotel in Las Vegas and turned into a massive 7’ 12’ print that hangs in one of its casinos.” Christine Gill, creative director; Ogilvy & Mather, ad agency; Caju Hair Salon, client.



This page: “This shot was part of an ongoing project of mine to bring awareness to the epic struggle of this one family of ranchers who are trying to save the last remaining wild horses of North Dakota called **Nokotas**. Descendant from Sitting Bull’s horses, the story of the **Nokotas**, and this family who is trying to save them, is something near and dear to my heart.” Nokota Horse Conservancy, client.

“These images are part of a series of portraits of a soldier who was blinded and scarred in a horrific bomb explosion, and who has gone on to become a triathlete and an inspiration to countless disabled veterans—so much so that he was recognized personally by President Obama. Commissioned by a Dallas-based design firm, the images were published in a booklet as part of a campaign to bring awareness to the **Lakeshore Foundation**, a non-profit organization that helps disabled veterans. It was a moving experience for all of us involved.” Jeff Barfoot, creative director; Cathy Wilson, executive producer; Robbie Forrest, wardrobe/makeup; Sunset Lighting, lighting; RBMM Dallas, design firm; Lakeshore Foundation, client.

