

THE HEART OF PORTRAITURE

EXAMPLES OF PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY BY DON GIANNATTI

To me, portraiture is about the subject, the light, the gesture, and the emotion created by the image. This little book is intended to give you some insight to what I am thinking about and striving for in my portrait work.

Thanks to my many fans for the encouragement to write this little book. I certainly look forward to doing some more.

Thanks also to the models, friends, and strangers who were so willing for me to make an image of them. And of course to the wonderful Makeup Artists and stylists who participated in the creation of these images, my heartfelt thanks.

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*For more information on portrait photography, lighting and more, visit my Lighting Essentials web site:
www.lighting-essentials.com*

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www.learntolight.com*

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1

SUNSHINE DANCER

LIGHT AND LENS

Florida, on Anna Maria Island. The sun was bright, and the sky a bit hazy. I wanted to show some blue in the sky, so a bit of underexposure was necessary. Underexposing the sky by a stop will give it more color, and let my model be framed with some blue. I placed the sun directly behind her head and it created a very bright “halo” effect.

Lens was my older 20-35MM L at f-22, @ 1/250. The 20MM gave me the ability to get in close. I used a Bowens Travelite 750 WS above her in a white satin umbrella. It was boomed over her from slightly to the right of camera and high enough that she looked up into it.

THE PORTRAIT

I wanted to fill the frame with her delicate arms and shoulders. The power lines I saw as something like a marionette's strings.

Placing her where the lines went through her shoulders, and keeping the sun in back of her made the portrait theatrical. The natural vignette around her also gave the image a graphic feeling and I like graphics in my images.



GESTURE

I wanted a feeling of dance and space in the image. Having her outstretched hand pull all the way through the photograph filled the frame. It is this 'dance-like' pose that makes image work for me. Her glance down is one that could be interpreted as sadness, or a bit of melancholy. I thought it felt right for the shot... a giving in to the marionette's strings and possibly a final pulling back, with resignation.

2

BEACH DANCER #1

LIGHT AND LENS

Full Florida sun on Bean Point, Anna Maria Island, Florida. The defined shadow shows where the sun we coming from, and the lights were placed right out of camera view, and on stands at chin height.

Lens was a 20-35MM L at f-16. Zoom at 26MM, and shutter-speed of 1/250. Two opposing speedlights at full power are on either side of her to open the shadows on her face.

THE PORTRAIT

I love dancers. The grace and lines that they can portray are one of the more beautiful of endeavors. I also like color and light. Combining the two for a dramatic leap makes the image more visually exciting. This little beach area and the sand is such a great location, and she looked great with the all white wardrobe. Keeping my subjects active also keeps the portrait more “alive” and sets it apart from the static ‘posed’ picture.

GESTURE

A leap against the sky, the surf and the sand. Throwing the scarf as she leaped, I gained even more movement. The wind was a bit brisk, so her hair and dress blew back away from the camera and kept her face from having something block it.

I had her walk through the surf and then come straight to the camera to keep footprints off the sand in front and on both sides of her. I would then wait for that little ripple of surf to add some texture to the bottom of the subject.



3

WINDOW LIGHT, KANSAS

LIGHT AND LENS

It was snowing outside in Kansas City. I put the subject next to a window and added white cards on both sides of her. The cards were facing the window and set to allow me a narrow space between them to shoot. Exposing for the face and opening two stops gave the blown out window light behind her.

I love the limited DOF of a long lens wide open. This was the 80-200MM L at 200MM @ f-2.8

THE PORTRAIT

She had a lovely smile, but I wanted something different... more haunting and intimate. Having the subject look right into the lens can create an instant connection, but that also was not what I wanted. I saw an image that was almost a candid, a moment in time that would seem as if it weren't created at all... just a moment captured without too much planning or contrivance. The light and gesture were perfect for the image.

GESTURE

Simplicity in gesture and her natural grace is used to provide a quiet, reflective portrait. Having her look down a little also gives the portrait a bit more intimacy– as if the photographer had captured a private moment.



4

CLASSIC BEAUTY, KANSAS CITY

LIGHT AND LENS

She is leaning against a window in a loft/studio in Kansas City. It is snowing outside, and there is precious little light... but there is enough to get a beautiful portrait. I had an assistant hold a white fill board just out of frame camera right. It is totally in front of her face and angled a bit toward her to get as much light on the shadow side as I could get.

Lens is the 80-200MM L at 200MM, f-2.8. I love the DOF that the lens gives me, even on a crop sensor camera.

THE PORTRAIT

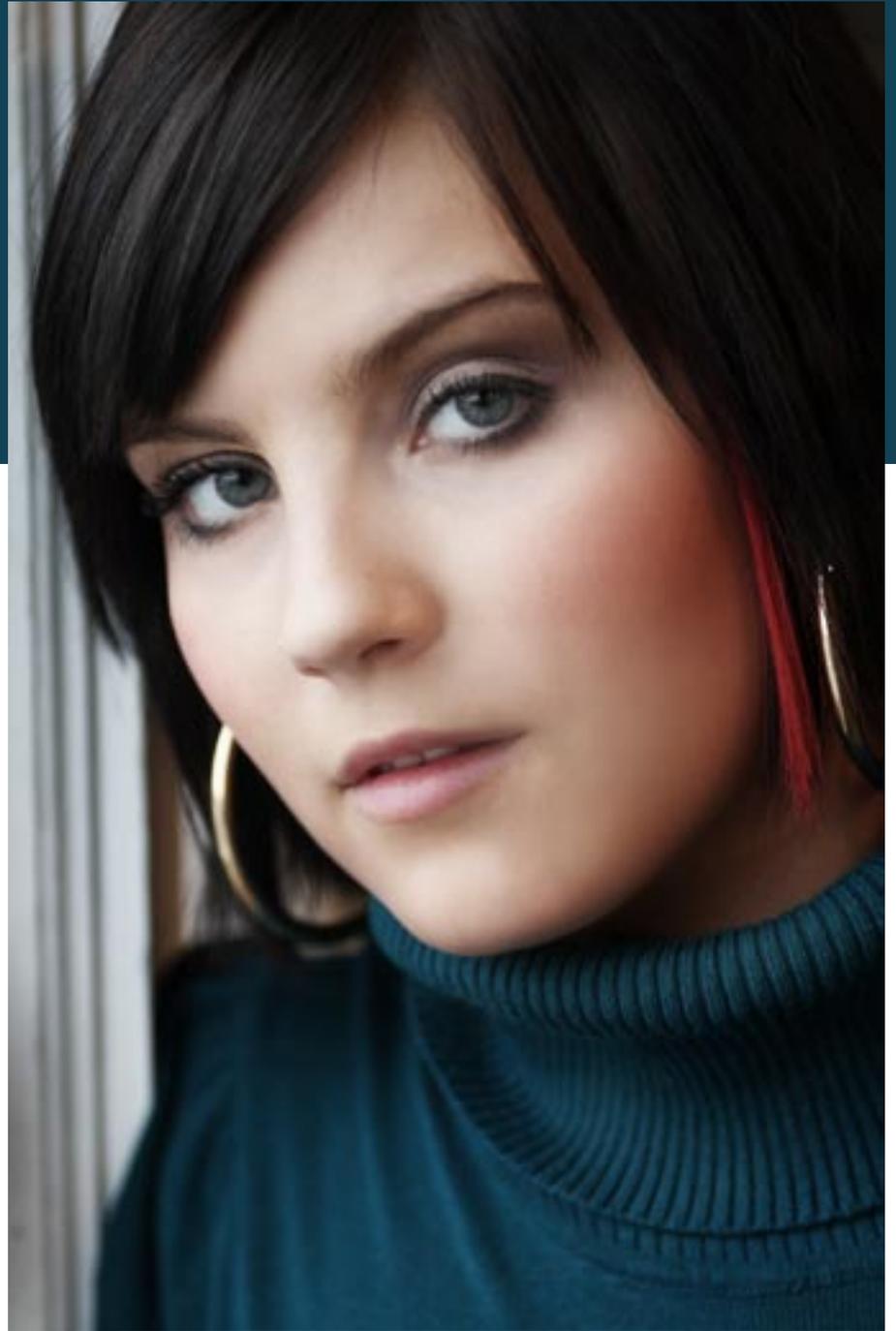
A classic beauty shot was all I was after here. I loved the sweater and the way her hair and the neckline framed the beautiful face. The image needs to be no more than that and I let it be itself.

GESTURE

I love the look of the face turned slightly away, but with the eyes coming back to the viewer and catching the look is something I strive to do with a natural feeling.

The gentle position of her shoulders to the side and her gaze on the viewer makes the shot very accessible and comfortable.

There is a gentleness to the expression as well.



5 SILVER REFLECTIONS, SEATTLE

LIGHT AND LENS

I wanted some drama, so adding a bit of strobe to the shot was the only way to get her face and sky to be exposed correctly. I wanted a stop difference to keep her looking lit, without looking “strobed.” A 430 bare was brought in to give me f-8, 1/8 power. The flash is directly on axis of her face.

20-35MM L at f-8. at about 24MM. The shutter speed of 1/160 kept the dark clouds dramatic. I exposed her for one stop over the clouds for dramatic effect.

THE PORTRAIT

We were shooting on the beach near Seattle on a rather cold and blustery day. The clouds were amazing and I was trying to keep them in as many shots as possible... to convey the feeling of shooting on that windy, cold beach.

I saw her sitting and waiting for someone in our group. Without saying much I knelt down to get that sky and she knew instantly what to do. I wanted a dramatic shot and got it.

GESTURE

When I was shooting this I knew I wanted it to be a square. I thought the silvery blanket and similar looking sky complimented each other as a way of setting off the beauty with the funky hair.

She is wrapped against the cold, the angle of the camera is low to show the angry clouds and she has her head high, glancing down on the viewer with a captivating half-smile.

There is a lot of emotion in this shot.



6 REDHEAD, DETROIT

LIGHT AND LENS

Bright setting sun behind her, and a very bright set of buildings behind me were all I needed to get the shot. But I wanted a little more smoothness to the light on her face so I had an assistant hold a bright white fill card under her chest scooping in the light from the buildings behind me.

The limited DOF on a 200MM L lens was exactly what I wanted to use. F-2.8 for the aperture and a fast shutter speed to catch the hair was a result.

THE PORTRAIT

Late in the Detroit afternoon it started to get a little chilly, but the light was spectacular. It was behind the subject and lighting up her beautiful red hair, as well as two large bright buildings behind me.

I had her keep her gaze on me and we agreed to let her sweep the hair away from her face every few frames so we could try to get “that” shot. We had fun with it and the resulting portrait was worth the wait—and the tangles.

GESTURE

Light, wind, hair and attitude. The hair blowing in front of her face was driving her crazy, but I loved it. I took some shots rapidly hoping to get what I got... hair and light framing those dramatic eyes.

I like the action of the hair in a breeze and I detest the perfect, over-the-top glitz that some MUA's do. Unless we are shooting something that must be 'perfect' to the style, I prefer real-looking situations and light that seems ethereal and natural.



7

ON A ROOFTOP IN MEXICO

LIGHT AND LENS

A white walled villa in Mexico provided all the ambient I could want for this shot. No additional fill cards or lights are used for the shot.

Canon 80-200MM L at f-2.8 and 180MM for shallow DOF.

THE PORTRAIT

We were working on the sun-washed terrace of our Villa in Mexico when I noticed how much light was bouncing around in that little courtyard. I took full advantage of it and had the subject sit down against the wall.

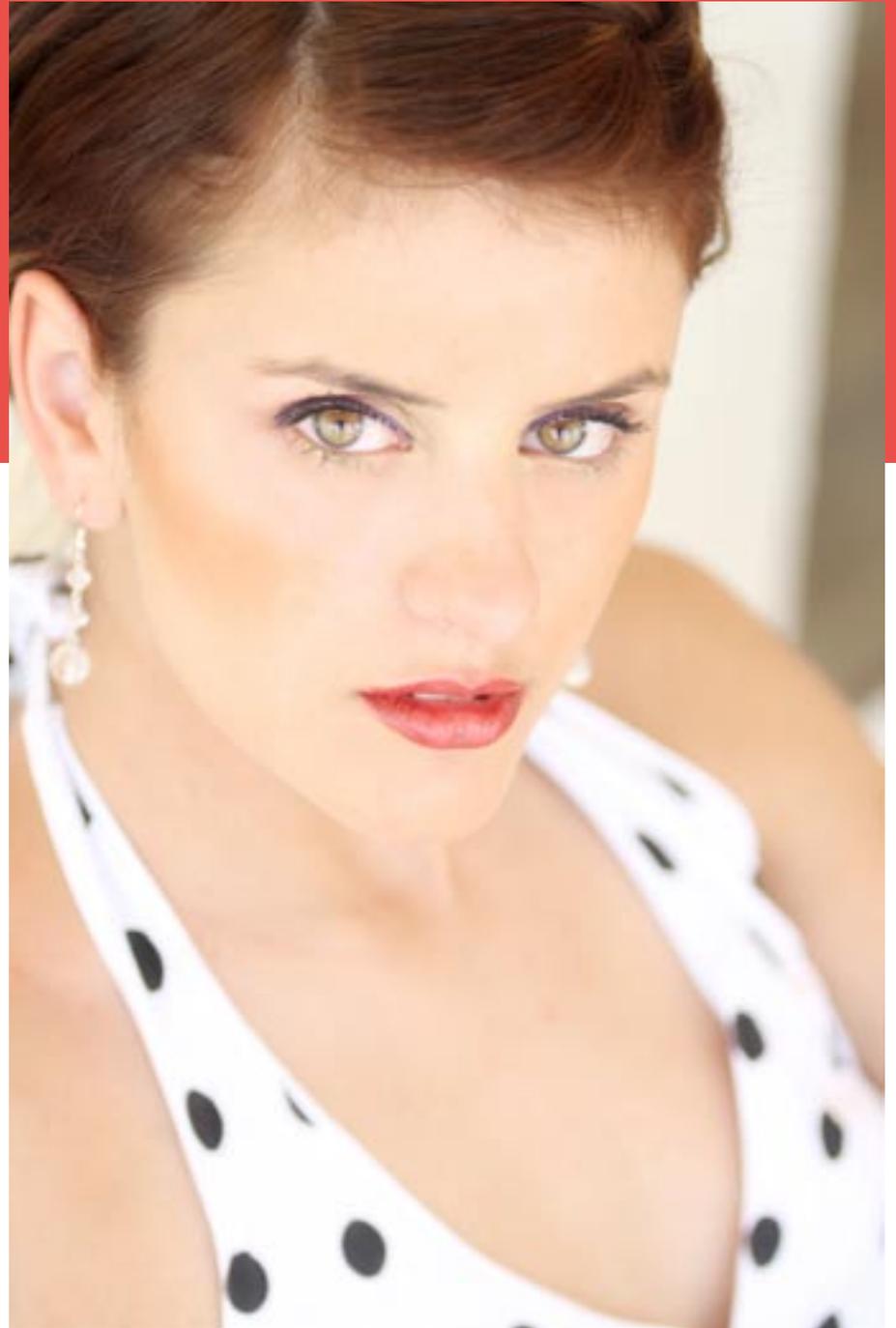
Standing over her a little, I had her turn her gaze upward. We made sure that no direct sunlight was on her, and I shot rapidly as she moved through the poses I coaxed her through.

GESTURE

Shooting down on someone can add a sense of place as well. It creates a less seen angle and one where the natural look of the model can convey many emotions.

Here I had her simply glance up, as though catching the observer looking at her. It is that “spontaneous” moment I am looking for in my work, and these little gestures can help me convey it.

The eyes seem to almost penetrate the lens, and her expression is so ambiguous that it can mean many things to many viewers.



8

ON THE TERRACE

LIGHT AND LENS

A bright day with a slight overcast lent itself to making wonderful soft light with some direction to it. Coming from over the models shoulder the light bounced off the white floor and white walls that made up the terrace. Light coming from all directions with the stronger direct light on her hair makes the shot seem nearly studio lit.

Lens was an 80-200MM L at 200MM and f-2.8. ISO is 100.

THE PORTRAIT

We were on the roof of a villa in Mexico and shooting rather early in the afternoon for me. Thankfully the heat was not too bad and the light was nice.

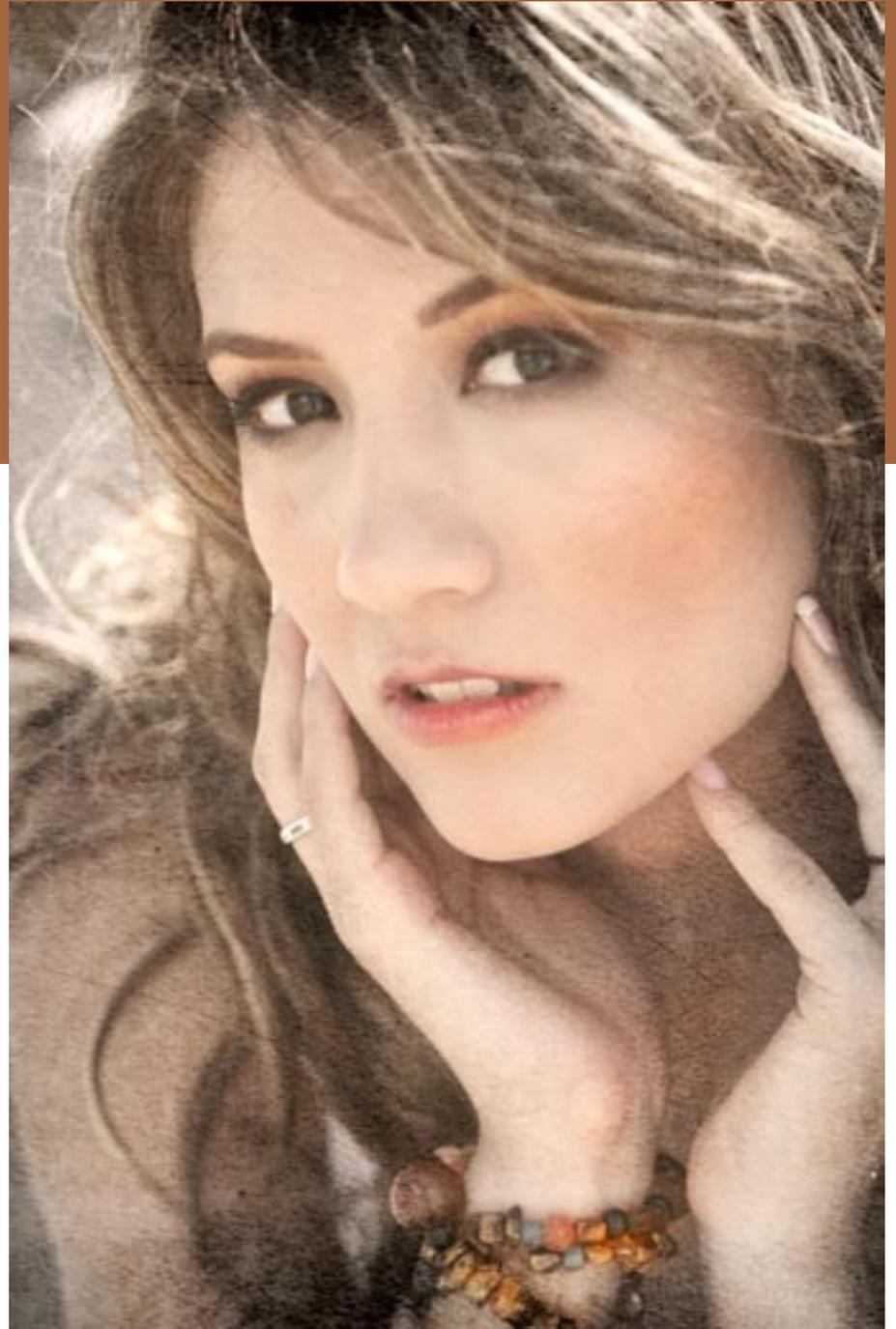
I noticed that the model was working well with the light all around so I worked into the set and decided for a tight headshot. The breeze was nice and it gave the model something to do with her hand around her face. Simple portrait of a beautiful girl on a terrace in Old Mexico.

GESTURE

I am not usually a fan of hands around the face. It seems to cliché to me. But in this case, Prescilla had such a perfectly angled head and shoulders that the hand actually worked well.

Notice how her fingers curve ever so slightly, and how the hand cupping the face frames her chin and the other brings attention to the hair and eyes.

Post processing with some texture and the lowering of saturation helps give the image some romantic and somewhat antique feeling.



9

STUDIO BEAUTY IN BLACK

LIGHT AND LENS

Shooting in the studio with small strobes and modifiers, this portrait was one of a series I did with this light. A speedlight with a round reflector attached to it was in very close to the background to provide a slight “spray” effect. The main light is in a 12” DIY Beauty Dish in very, very close to the subject. It is mounted on a boom to get in tight to the face. A very low power setting (1/16) was all I needed at f2.8, ISO 100.

80-200MM L Canon Zoom at 200MM. I love the way this lens works at the full extension. The slim DOF and the flattened features are the reason I use it.

THE PORTRAIT

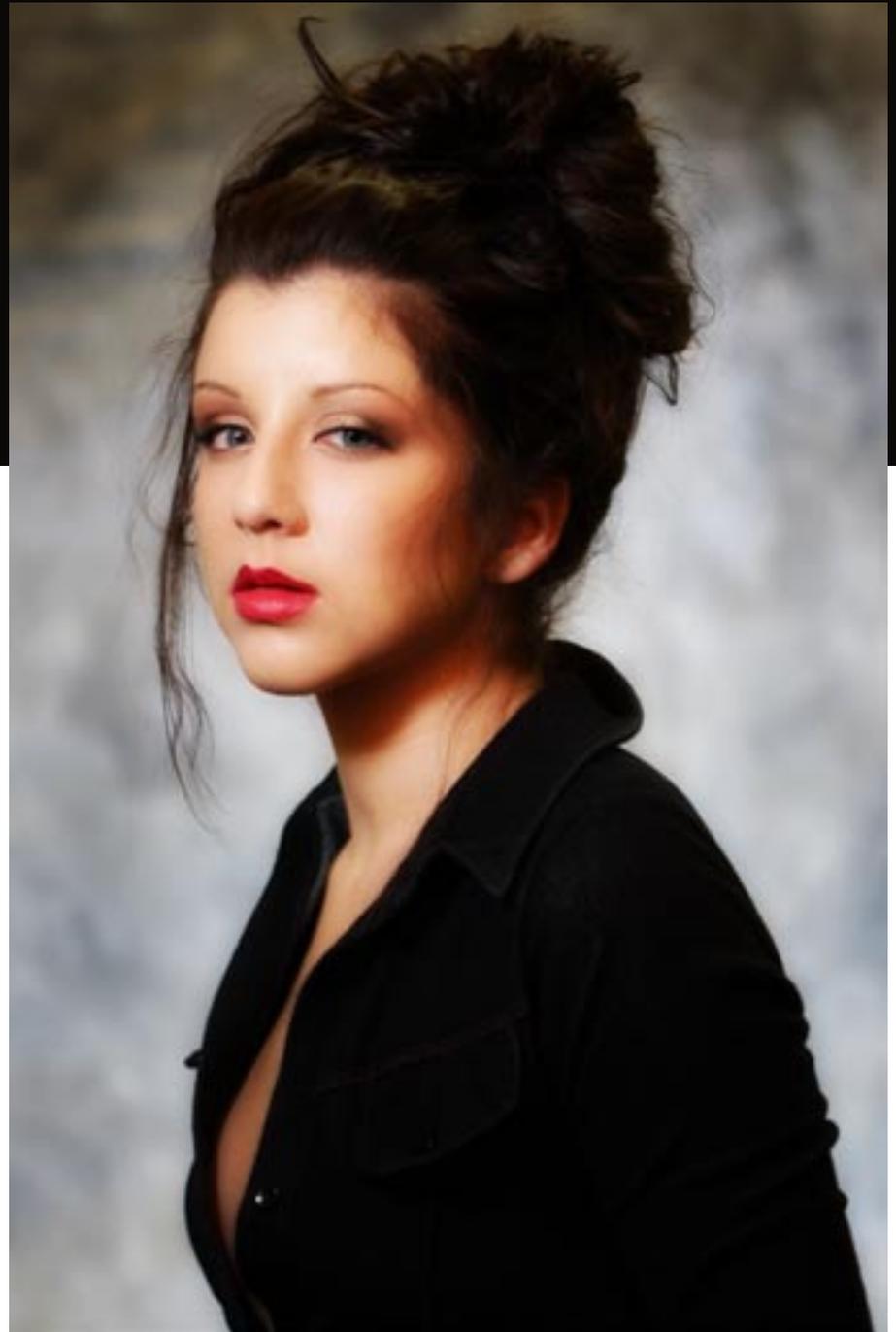
Black/White/Gray/ and Red. I loved the informal black shirt with the ‘up’ hair and regal pose. Using the spray behind her gave her a even more ‘importance’ in the frame as did the limited DOF.

I wanted the image to convey a cool, collected and aware young woman with a bit of whimsy in the unbuttoned shirt. Her gaze made me think of a Romantic painting or sculpture, and the dramatic makeup only heightened my sense of a formal portrait.

GESTURE

Shoulders away from camera, with face slightly angled toward the lens and the back very straight and formal. This gives the subject an important base on which to play to the camera. The slight hint of a plunging neckline and the dramatic black shirt make the subject a little more mysterious.

There is a slight leaning into the image that also adds tension and drama to the frame. Not cropping into the hair gives a more formal look to a slightly vampy informal image.



10

BEAUTY SHOT, SEATTLE

LIGHT AND LENS

A bright and sunny day on the beach area of one of Seattle's little burbs. The subject is under the corner of a little picnic area roof and with a small amount of backlight on her shoulders and hair. In front of her and behind me is a large, white wall that is in full sun. That wall provides the light for this shot. Exposing for the skin tones at 2/3 over and processing with a little bump gives the image some more contrast and a very open feel.

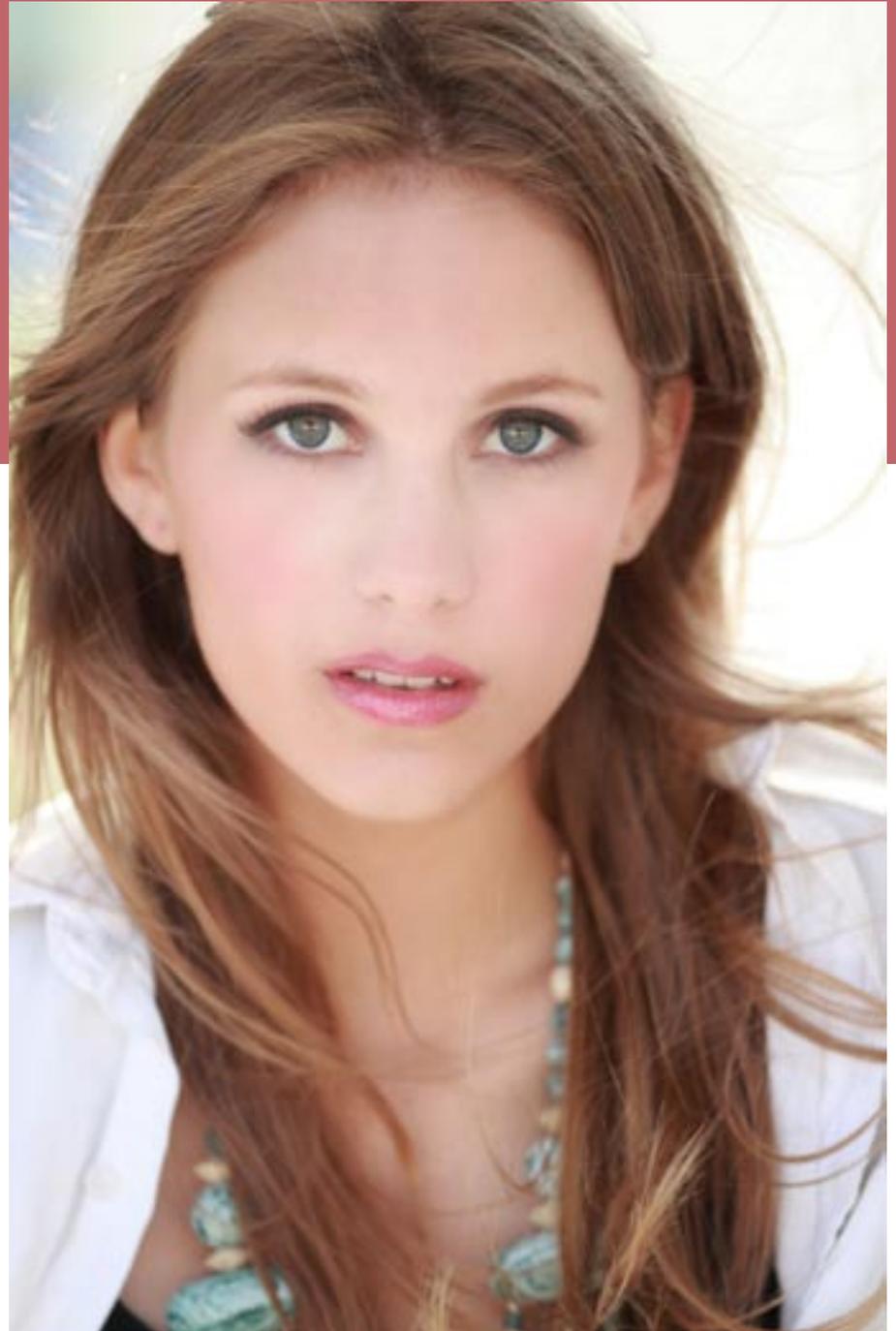
80-200MM L Canon Zoom at 200MM for a sharp as a tack face and limited DOF which helped set her off from the background with a flattening of the spacial relationships.

THE PORTRAIT

I just thought she was beautiful in a fresh face way. The light was so wonderful and provided such a nice catchlight. My concern was in how much background to show. I wanted it to be very much a location/environmental portrait, but I didnt want boring elements of the structure to be visible. There was a very small window of angles to be used to make sure I got her and the correct background to show her off.

GESTURE

Wind or even a small breeze can be very effective in providing some movement in the image. The model, while shaded from the brighter morning light, was in a place where the wind was blowing around her. This can be quite annoying to the model as the hair blows forward and onto her face, but for the photographer it is really a pretty cool event. One must pay careful attention that the hair doesn't obscure parts of the face that should be free of the distraction, and is as precise as the photographer wants it.



11

SUBURBAN FASHION #3

LIGHT AND LENS

A deeply overcast sky provides the soft, muted ambient wash. Adding a little 33" umbrella with a speedlight in shoot-thru position opened up the shadows on her face and provided a little bit of cinematic lighting to the photograph. The umbrella was just about 20" from the subject and centered on her eyes.

Lens was my trusty 20-35MM L at f-5.6. Zoomed all the way back to the 20MM length it gives me a lot of tree above her.

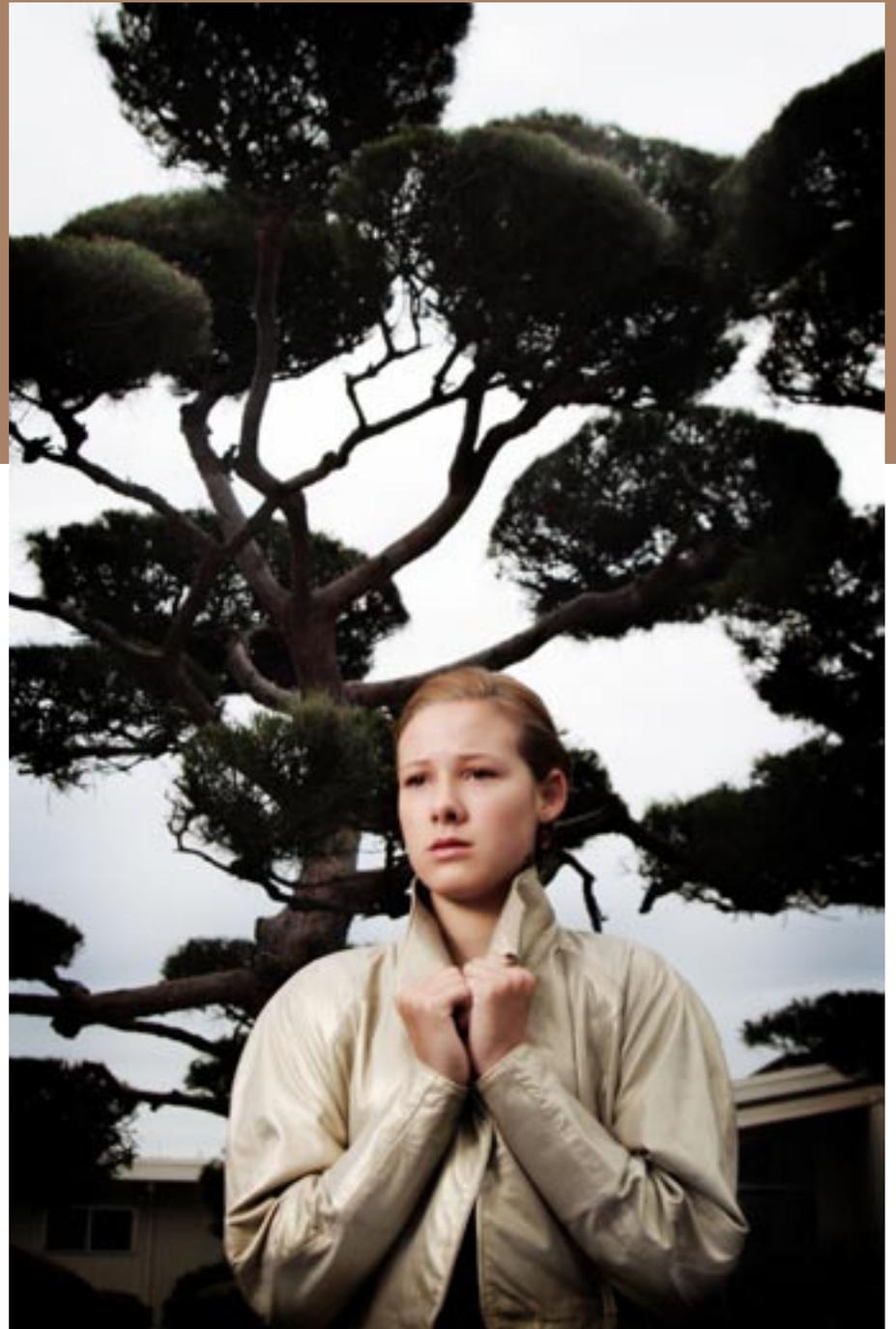
THE PORTRAIT

The image I wanted to project was one of a little bit of theatrical fear. As I drove up to the little neighborhood, I was struck by how some of the gardens and trees were manicured and shaped into some strange and wacky looks. It seemed somehow right to make photographs in that surreal environment. The model had a cool old vintage jacket in gold and the muted color of it and the tree was all I needed to make the shot.

GESTURE

Many times I will direct the subject to imagine themselves in a situation, like a scene in a movie, setting them up to feel a certain drama. In this case I had Serena react to something that was a little frightening to her. I love that weird tree and thought that the gesture to match was one of a slight, impending danger.

The tree's unique shape and the angle of the camera give the portrait a dramatic gesture. The subject's pose and look lend a cinematic flair as well.



12

ON BEAN POINT, FLORIDA

LIGHT AND LENS

Very slight overcast and a lot of sunlight on that little bit of Florida coastline. The pure white sand gave a nice bounce and filled in the shadows pretty well. I added a speedlight at 1/2 power at a distance to just open the shadows a little more. Not a 'flash' look at all, but a lessening of the contrasty light.

Lens was 20-35MM L at f-8. Zoomed to around 24MM on a cropped sensor. ISO 100.

THE PORTRAIT

I really liked that little pathway through the grass and the ocean in the background. When I saw the model's dress, I knew I wanted her dead center between the reeds and doing something different. We decided we would try something beyond the static 'sexy' standing there shot... it wasn't what I was seeing. Jumping for her in that dress was not working so we went for the hair flip. It gave me the movement I needed and the interesting gesture for the shot.



GESTURE

I am not into static photographs. This shot could have so easily been her standing on that little path of sand between the sea grass. I wanted to have some movement and excitement in the shot, so I had her flip her hair back a few times and tried to catch it in a cool position. As she looked up, she looked right at the sun, so having her close her eyes gave the shot even a bit more mystery.

13

JUMPING IN HOUSTON

LIGHT AND LENS

Blending sunlight and strobe can create a nice balance of light on the subject and reacting to the background as well. We had some bright light out there in the Houston skyline, and I loved the two matching windows adding a frame to the image. I added a single small umbrella with a flash and balanced the light by making it the same exposure as outside. This didn't require much power from the strobe, so I used a speedlight in a small, white umbrella. Placed high over her, the light forces the shadow down below her, adding to the feeling of height in her jump. A low camera angle accentuates the feeling of height.

20-35MM L at f-5.6. Zoomed all the way back to the 20MM length it gives me enough of an angle to grab the windows and keep the subject in the center.

THE PORTRAIT

I love jumping shots, they seem to be more playful and convey such joy and abandon when done full out.

The subject's great wardrobe and styling made me think of having her fly between the two window casements.

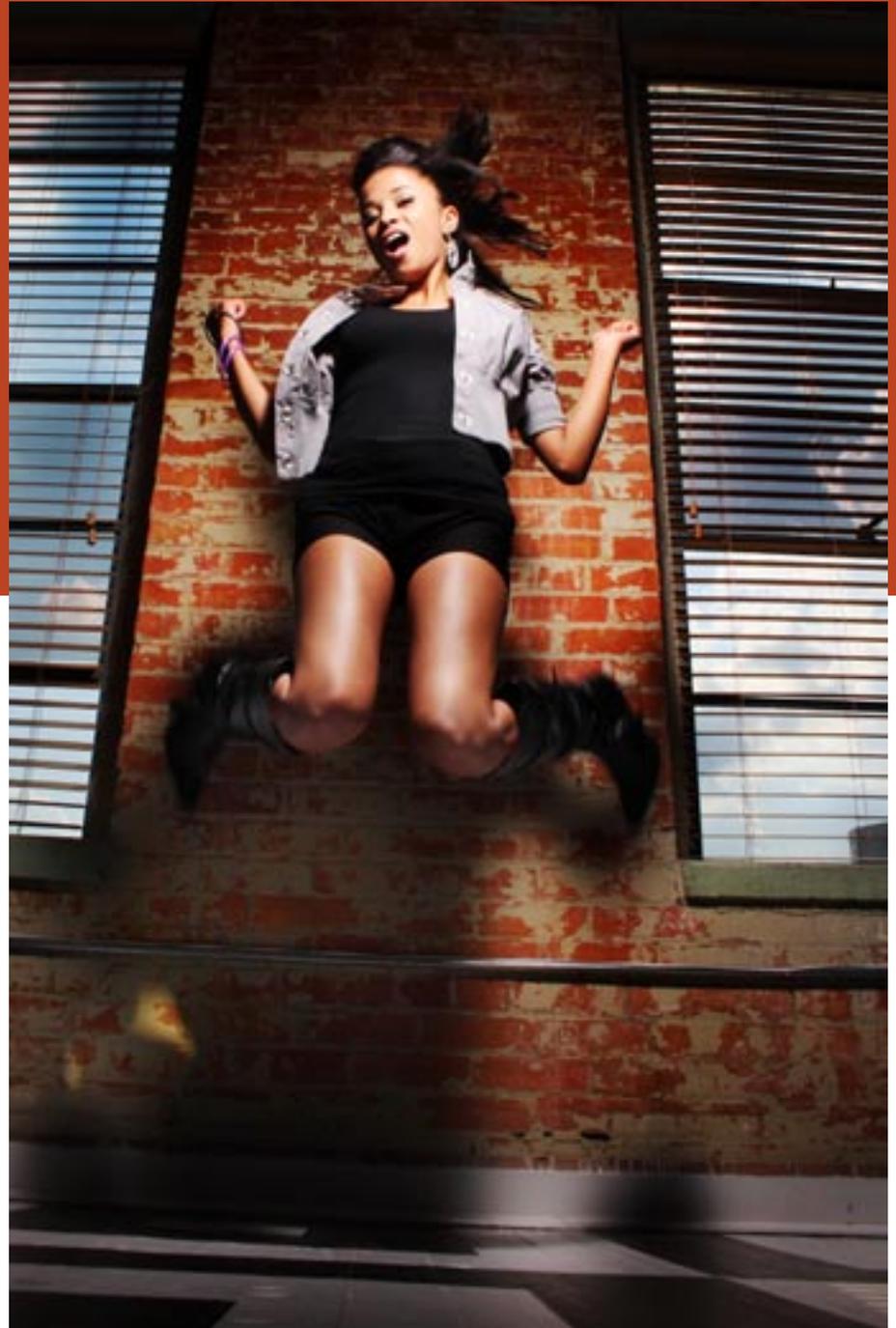
This portrait is a fun one that a model can carry in her portfolio to show how she can move and have fun in front of the camera.

GESTURE

Well, it is the jump, the hands and the expression that give the shot some theatrical dimension. Tie that together with the interesting shadow, and the old bricks of the location, and the image has lots of great fun with it.

All the lines are straight, and the subject is all over the place with arms and legs. A figure/base example for sure.

Having her in the center of those elements adds a sense of formalism, and her dynamic pose and attitude run against it.



14

GIRL, FASHION, AKRON

LIGHT AND LENS

Bright sun mixed with a little flash. I used a very small softbox with a speedlight boomed right over her head and shoulders to open the shadows a bit. I wanted the feeling of the sun without the harshness of the direct sunlight. The flash on 1/2 power gave me all the fill I needed - about 2/3 stop under the sun.

Lens was 20-35MM L at f-8. Zoomed to around 24MM on a cropped sensor. ISO 100.

THE PORTRAIT

The pattern on the dress seemed to be a modern print of leaves, and I wanted to place her in an area that would augment that pattern. I also wanted a portrait that “felt” the location as well as presenting the subject. This portrait is far more about where she is than who she is.



GESTURE

With all the foliage and light, I wanted something to set the subject off from the background. The open arms was one way of getting something a bit primeval from her. All those sun turned leaves, and she mimics them with an opening, welcoming pose that seems celebratory.

15

NOSTALGIA, MIAMI, AZ

LIGHT AND LENS

The car is placed on the edge of a shadow with a large white/gray building over my shoulder. The sun is actually in a back-light position, but it is not hitting the car at all. The light from the building is my main. There is a small Canon 430 placed on a stand and aimed at the back of her head and dash to add the feeling of sunlight. Flash is set to 1/16 power on a bare head.

Lens was the 80-200MM L Canon at about 130MM on a crop sensor camera. I was at f4 for shallow DOF.

THE PORTRAIT

Taken in an old car in an old town east of Phoenix, I wanted an element of 'the movies' in the image.

I chose that edge work to help the feeling of age along. The portrait is supposed to feel like a spontaneous moment of beauty. A glimpse if you will, of a beautiful girl in an old car.

GESTURE

Another cinematic “move” here. I had the subject act as though she were exiting the car. I wanted the attention on that moment—fleeting moment where the subject seems to make eye contact with the viewer. I didn’t want her smiling, nor any coy “flirtation” in her expression. I wanted a look of casual surprise, of connecting with the viewer.



SUBURBAN FASHION #7

LIGHT AND LENS

The sun was truly beautiful that Seattle morning. I loved the way the clouds were interplaying with the background. We took a small softbox and boomed it quite close to her from the left. This light was allowed to fall off quickly, leaving her in a small, soft spotlight. A Canon 580 was used at full power.

20-35MM L at f-16. I had the lens set at 20MM on the crop sensor to allow the subject to be part of the landscape.

THE PORTRAIT

I wanted her to be “in” the scene, and used the light to set her off from the background. Including the homes on the hills, as well as the magnificent clouds and that very cool old fence give the portrait a true “environmental” look.



GESTURE

Having her look off the page, out of frame, lends some mystery to the image. Her pose is somewhat 'defiant' with the open shoulders and hands near the back of the hips. Keeping the chin high, and eyes up and off, the portrait becomes one of strength and beauty. The subtle use of her hips helps create a nice line, and increases the power of the pose.

17

ABANDONED FACTORY, OHIO

LIGHT AND LENS

At first I thought of natural light, but the face was too far away from the window to allow that. I wanted the window to have some exposure, and texture. I took a 430 at 1/4 power and bounced it into the hallway behind me. It added just enough light to keep her within 2.5 stops of the background.

There was a large window behind her out of frame camera right. This light, and the window behind her to camera left also deliver the specular light on both sides of her face and hair.

Lens was 80-200 L at f-4 and 200MM to flatten her a bit, drop that background out of focus, drawing attention to her face.

THE PORTRAIT

The beautiful background is actually a very, very dirty old window in the factory we were shooting in. I loved the way she looked against it, so we set up and shot a few images along the stairwell. I ended up cropping in pretty tight. As I was shooting, I really started to see how that wonderful light was wrapping around her. The feeling of elegance in elegant light was what I was going for.



GESTURE

As the subject turns her shoulders toward and down, there is an open feeling—a welcoming feeling—that makes her more accessible. The slight tilt of the head adds to her overall composure and a relaxing, intimate shot is made. Notice how she is turned out of the frame, but seems to be turning back into it, and us, the viewers.

18

A GLIMPSE OF BEAUTY, OHIO

LIGHT AND LENS

The sun was late afternoon, and I had only a moment with her to make this shot. Sunlight over my right shoulder for main, a bright specular light from a window was filling in from camera left, and another bright specular was being thrown from camera right behind her. She is in the intersection and I am up on a small bench shooting slightly down to eliminate the buildings.

Lens was 80-200MM L at f2.8 for extreme shallow DOF.

THE PORTRAIT

It is that 'moment' of a glimpse that I strive to get in my portraits. Something that doesn't look "planned" but natural and fleeting. When I saw all that light converging at one spot in the street, I knew I had a perfect natural light setup that would help convey that feeling of spontaneity.



GESTURE

Wind, hair, tilt and “attitude” all blend for a fun portrait in the middle of a street in Akron, Ohio. The off the shoulder sweater adds to the feeling of wind, and it was part of the pose - not an effect of the wind. I had her grab the shoulder bag up high so there would be a feeling of tension in the shot.

19

RUNNING IN LAS VEGAS

LIGHT AND LENS

The stormy clouds in the Vegas desert simply called for something dramatic. I brought a speedlight in close to the subject and boomed it over her head. I only needed to light her face to add to the drama. Canon 430 at full power in small softbox.

Lens was 20-35MM L at f-11. All the way to 20MM for as much sky and rock as possible. A shutter speed of 1/250 kept the clouds and ambient nice and dark.

THE PORTRAIT

The wardrobe was kinda fun, and I wanted something different than the normal static pose. I knew we could add to the already mysterious ambient light and catch a different kind of portrait.

We already had the Vegas desert, those amazing storm clouds and the lovely model to work with, I just had to add something to it to make it more than a simple picture.



GESTURE

It's the run, and her arms that give the shot something more theatrical and interesting. Keeping her gaze over my head, and the attention out of the frame also adds to the mystery of the shot. Had she looked down at me, the viewer would be part of the shot - and she would be "performing" for us. With the attention and eyes out of frame, we are but a bystander in the drama unfolding in front of us.

20

SUBURBAN FASHION #12

LIGHT AND LENS

Deeply overcast sky provides the soft, muted ambient light for the scene and the porch area as well. I used the pop-up flash on the camera to give me a matching fill. I know they are considered to be silly, but those little pop-ups are really cool when you use them right.

20-35MM L at f-5.6. @ 28MM. I wanted the background to be evident, and bring in the feeling of the older lenses with more depth of field.

THE PORTRAIT

I am always interested in the classic little black dress. This shot came about as we were waiting for the MUA to gather some things for a location shoot.

I was standing at the door as the model was playing with her dress. I instantly saw the shot I wanted and had her do some old style catalog poses on the pathway to the front door of the residence we were using as a homebase for the shoot. I shot about 12 images and we were off.

GESTURE

The dress was so classic, and the model fit that classic beauty ideal so well. Even the perfect black pumps made the image seem from a somewhat different time.

Having her hold the dress out as though she were 'showing it off' simply added a bit of theatrics to the shot. The grand gesture is that of her in an obviously residential suburb with an almost comical expression of "fashion".



THE HEART
PORTRAIT

OF
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DON GIANNATTI

Technical Information:

The photos contained in this ebook were photographed on an entry level Canon DSLR with two older Canon L lenses. My beloved Canon 80-200MM 2.8 L lens, (the infamous “magic drainpipe) and the incredible, irreplaceable Canon 20-35MM 2.8 L.

Lighting tools consist of various brands and configurations. I use Canon small flashes, Norman 2000’s and ProFoto Compacts.

Some images were taken with lights owned by others and that includes Elinchrome, Alien Bee, Calumet and Dynalite.

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