

Working

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SEMINES

The Many Manipulations of Steven Barston

By Martha Blanchfield

Spontaneous, motivated, confident, social: words Steven Barston tosses up to describe himself and his work. This Los Angeles-based commercial and editorial photographer smiles and says he might also label himself distracted, or even a space cadet at times. But as he digs his heels deeper into building a successful career in a competitive market, it's doubtful the space cadet moniker will stick for long.

A 2000 graduate of RIT, Barston breezed through assistant photographer jobs for a few years, took on various small editorial gigs and shot a few hip-hop assignments. His first full-time job was as a photographer of local restaurants and their owners for *Chicago* magazine. "I was covering a range of everything, from music to edi-

torial portraits, but mostly magazine work," says Barston. "By the time I left, I had just shot a McDonald's ad for Leo Burnett [one of the world's largest ad agencies]."

SoCal Shifts

In 2002 he and his wife, a budding ac-

tress, moved to L.A. for improved career potential. Then it happened: He had his first few rubs with California cool. With references to his persona, Barston says, "I thought I was fairly low key, but the natives here put my cool to shame. In Chicago I was labeled hip and laid back and this

helped me land jobs. I soon learned that a 'too cool' recipe wasn't going to work to my favor professionally; my Chicago chill was no longer a competitive advantage, so I changed strategy and went counter-culture. I became the most reliable, punctual, organized person around—to contrast with the

general vibe here and set myself apart."

Expanding on his new identity, Barston reveals that his signature look also started shifting. "My images became more about beauty," he says. "Instead of dilapidated hotels and edgy urban settings, I found myself photographing in Topanga

Canyon and these stunning, natural environments." Grunge and grit gave way to glamour. "I also found clients were asking for a lot more edit work to heighten the fantasy and glam look."

In his heart, Barston loves photography at its cleanest form and prefers to produce





a final image nearly in line with what he actually sees through the viewfinder. “But I understand the needs of the clients and their desire to create new and different looks to attract buyers,” he shares. “It’s often the client who dictates the call for crazy processed looks.” In a recent series produced for client Janine Jarman’s Hairroin Salon in Hollywood, Barston definitely pushed his images toward the surreal. Jarman required three images for entry into a high stakes competition with the North American Hairstyling Awards (NAHA). “We used three models in a swimming pool—each with fabulous coif,” he says. “We were going for a Greek siren look [see Page 49] with porcelain monotone skin contrasted against ultra deep-toned, sculp-

tural hair.” Barston employed a Hasselblad H3DII-31 camera and 80mm lens at the brightest point in the day, intentionally overpowering the daylight while underexposing the ambient light in-camera to get maximized highlights from light reflecting off water. This technique also added to the dreamlike quality of the series. “I always try to shoot for a fairly flat curve, knowing that the digital medium is not too forgiving and I’d lose some detail in the blacks and whites. I know what I want when I go into a shoot, and I try to get as much information as possible into my file so that I have more to work with in post.” For added contrast, it helped that the models had a heavy layer of body makeup to smooth their skin.

While on set, Barston gave the client a sneak peek by using Adobe Lightroom to run a few files through presets. Giving a glimpse cuts down on overall shoot time and total number of files he has to produce. “We were outdoors for about half a day and I took roughly 250 images. I am producing RAW files that process out as TIFFs of around 90MB each, so getting a perfect base photo in-camera saves time.”

Barston favors clean and beautiful lighting, so the pool environment yielded great fill for his base image. “Trends and gimmicks come and go. Right now this hyper-reality feel, with its hard lighting lines at the edge of the face, is fairly popular,” says Barston. “It happened that this super-edited look was just what the client wanted.”

In post, Barston uses Adobe Lightroom to edit, citing its speed and intuitive interface. His Hasselblad files are processed through Phocus. When shooting with a Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II, CaptureOne is employed for file work. He’ll enlist Photoshop to do rudimentary edits in-house, such as removing imperfections, smoothing skin, tweaking saturation and cropping. The presets favored by the client are relayed to one of his trusted retouchers (chosen depending on client, budget and project needs), who then takes the file through final edit steps.

Digital Wizardry

Barston’s tools of the trade are not elemental. He owns a Hasselblad H3DII-31 and Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II. Lenses include his Hasselblad 50mm, 80mm, 120mm and 150mm, as well as his Canon 24–70mm f/2.8, 85mm f/1.2 and 70–200mm f/2.8. With lighting being so important, Barston opts for Profoto 7a, 7b and Profoto Acutes. When needed for personal work and smaller jobs, he sets up this gear in downtown Los Angeles’ Brewery Lofts, a former Pabst Blue Ribbon brewery now shared by a community of artists. When he cannot shoot in this space, he rents.

For a more complex ad campaign for hair care company got2B’s new Magnetik hair gel, Barston rented a larger studio in L.A. On this spacious set, he was able to work some weird science and digital mastery. Shot on a completely white background, Barston manipulated eight models and a team of four hairstylists, two makeup



artists, several assistants, a digital tech and a retoucher. He dives right in by starting to describe the coffee spill—a very small piece of the picture puzzle, yet one of the trickiest: “Twenty-four times my assistant had to toss a cup of coffee onto the floor. And I actually used a composite of four files to get it to look just the way I wanted.”

Over the course of a full day, numerous composites with a cast of characters were obtained to produce the assignment. “The advertising vision has the scientist guy surrounded by all his fantasy women—message being: use Magnetik and attract,” quips Barston. “I started by photographing the guy standing alone in several poses. Then I added one woman to the right, then one woman to the left. Next I shot the same woman without the scientist.

“Pulled together in a final, we’ve got a unique sense of motion and energy here because the majority of the players were side-by-side acting out the shots. I wanted the energy to really come across in the look, so I felt the best way to obtain spontaneity would be to have elements happening live and at once. All the ladies—including the rope model—were together on set.” Bar-

ston adds, “Thank goodness for having my retoucher on hand for such a complex work. Not only were his eyes on the individual shots, tracking consistent camera placement and continuity for lighting, but he helped me quickly throw together a few rough composites while on set during lunch. This allowed the client to view progress.”

The retoucher later built a composite image from the best shots. Wizardry was needed to place the client’s favorite representation of each character into the exact right position. The extensive work paid off; the contract yielded both vertical and horizontal looks that got2B has been using for two years now.

Throwing Money Around

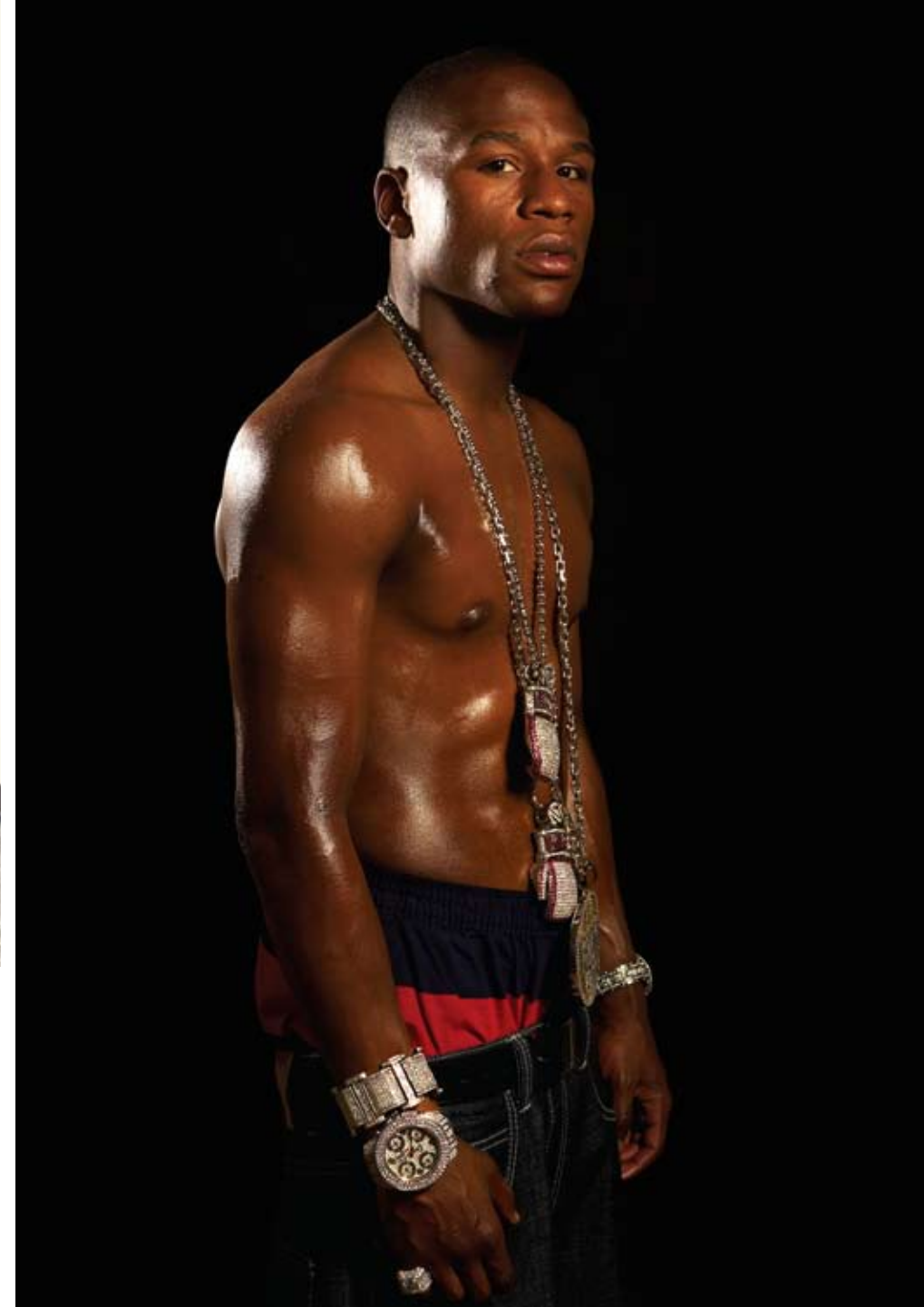
Striking a balance between the old, cool and laid back Barston and the new “reliable, punctual, organized” Barston is turning profitable. “Many of my clients talk about how difficult photographers are to deal with,” smiles Barston, “so I make it as pleasant as possible to work with me. I still attribute a lot of my success to the fact that I remain easy going.” Barston’s adroit execution of an editorial

shoot with impatient and assertive Floyd Mayweather is a case in point.

A challenging personality, Mayweather’s session took place at his Las Vegas mansion. The champ was in town prepping for a big fight and was revved. Says Barston, “I showed up at his house. We drive past an Escalade, Aston Martin, a Bentley. *King* magazine had given me a directive to snap bravado pics, a key image being the champ looking directly at the camera and screaming—pure attitude.”

Barston met Mayweather, decked out in an ‘I heart money’ T-shirt, mixing it up with his manager about an upcoming basketball game. Voices rose and Mayweather grabbed \$17K in cash from his duffel bag and shoved it at his manager: “Throw this on Cleveland!” he wailed. Barston was sure that this was the bit of attitude he wanted for the shoot. He could also see this might be a tough one.

To add to the confusion, Mayweather was under the impression he was doing a fashion shoot and was less than amicable when Barston had to convince him to stand for the typical pose: greased boxer in shorts and gloves. Diplomatic and



convincing, Barston nabbed the shots *King* wanted, but thanks to his own cool and calm he managed to come away with several personal, artistic images for his portfolio. Even against a 39–0 champion, diplomacy and a calming character prevailed.

Around the World

Barston covers a lot of ground doing production work in San Diego, Las Vegas, Chicago, Shanghai, Boston, Arizona and New York City for clients such as BBDO, Vidal Sassoon, Leg Avenue, *Modern Salon*, and Excel Sports Management. These days business in L.A., a city filled

with commercial/editorial photographers, is going fine. Barston keeps his cool about L.A. attitude and traffic, the competition and the client. “I’m completely aware there are really great photographers out there—some better, some worse; some older, some younger. There’s a lot of diversity. I, in no way, think I’m the only photographer for the job, but I try to distinguish myself through not only great work, but also by having a great personality that’s very easy to work with.” CC

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