

The Elementarists

By Priscilla Thomas

Courting his second lo-carb Monster energy drink within four hours, he casually sips while unpacking gear strewn about the concrete path in front of Scott Quad's archway at Ohio University. It took two car trips to unload four light stands, a beauty dish, colored gels, a Nikon 24-70mm lens, an external flash, a spot grid, pocket wizards, synch cords, a Nikon D3X camera body, a 5 foot 4 rectangular softbox, and three monolights each partnered with a battery pack. Additional accessories handy for worst-case scenarios include extra lighting, power extension cable, tape and bungee cables. Aside from technical equipment, he pulls essential props from his neutral beige sedan, champagne flutes and a twelve pack of Canada Dry ginger ale.

"This is a giant game in my mind," Rob Hardin comments while moving stands and tilting lights.

For outdoor photographers, inspiration comes from various environments, including architecture and nature. Hardin lies on one side of the spectrum. Focusing on fashion and commercial photography, he develops an image with the use of outside locations, which have ranged from parking garages to abandoned buildings. The other side of outdoor photography requires stamina in patience while waiting for animals to appear or for light to strike perfectly on a flower. Alex Snyder has been a wildlife and nature photographer since his early teens, and has traveled throughout Ohio and beyond for the sake of capturing an animal in its natural environment. Though these two photographers' perspectives and aesthetic passions differ, both must work with elements of the outdoors to create successful images.

Hardin is a mad scientist of on-location photography. Uniting thousands of dollars in artificial lighting with natural outdoor sites in such effortless maneuvering that one may consider him a photographic alchemist. Each element is a piece in a puzzle he hopes will mirror the mental image he envisions.

The theme of this shoot is a dramatic perfume ad. The model, Megan Westervelt, is a friend and fellow photographer now attending graduate school at Ohio University. Her walnut brown hair lies pinned back, leaving several strands with curled tips to hug her right cheek. The A-line black sequined gown and sable high heels with satin ankle ribbons embrace an imaginary scene of an enchanted night gone awry, and she is now left alone in the faded red brick archway poorly comforted by a glass of virgin bubbly.

"Look off camera," Hardin directs from about 10 feet away on his knees while snapping a few consecutive frames.

"For further away shots, getting down to about the model's hip level and shooting from there is the most flattering angle," he notes aloud.

Photographing a glamorized fashion shot is a sharp contrast to Hardin's photojournalism roots. While a freshman in high school, Hardin enrolled in a black and white photography course after encouragement from the instructor, Scott Moore, who had first taught Hardin in a television broadcasting class. His father purchased Hardin's first camera for \$30, a 1979 Nikon EM camera with a 50mm manual focus lens. Six days after relishing his first film camera, the internal light meter broke. Though an inexpensive purchase, scrounging for vintage parts and repair added to \$400.

"You have to know my father. His response was, 'Well, he'll have to learn photography without a light meter then,'" Hardin laughs. "And I did learn photography without a light meter, which was a great thing."

Even though he was cultivating his passion for photography, he enrolled in Ohio University's Honors Program to study video production. After photographing for Ohio University's student newspaper, *The Post*, he realized that broadcast work wasn't in his future and began taking fine art photography and photojournalism courses. After graduating Ohio University in 2008, he hopped around interning for newspapers and commercial photographers, but wasn't content with photographing dailies or assisting. Vowing to change his professional direction, Hardin applied and was accepted into the fall 2011 graduate class for commercial photography in visual communication at Ohio University.

Hardin admits his jesting nature had muted during the years outside of Athens, Ohio. A previous newspaper co-worker of Hardin's and now a fellow graduate student, Abigail Fisher, has noticed the change and hopes to never see the "Old Rob" again.

“He was just so quiet,” Fisher notes. “He was already checked out the first day he started.”

Finally embracing his commercial shooting inclinations, Hardin is still surprised to be back at Ohio University for a field drastically different than photojournalism.

“In undergrad, these are the things I was told to stay away from, and now, I’m being told that not only what I do is OK, but that I can push it further.”

Though his previous days shooting daily assignments for a newspaper didn’t fulfill his artistic goals, Hardin found some relief in creating environmental portraits. For a few years, he would develop themes and photograph portraits of people who restored motorcycles and were highlighted during the annual Vintage Motorcycle Days in Lexington, Ohio. He constructed the portraits to coincide with attributes of the bikes such as setting up a shot in the woods for a man with a Honda dirt track motorcycle or using a speedway racetrack for a man with a high speed bike.

If preplanned portraits weren’t possible, then Hardin was fortunate that nearby were dilapidated Quonset huts, prefabricated semicyndrical structures made from corrugated metal. A quick photo could be constructed by placing a biker in front of the entrance or take advantage of natural light streaming in through the windows.

Adapting to circumstances is the nature of outdoor location photography. The potential catastrophes capable of ruining a shoot ranges from crowd control to threats of a lightning strike during a thunderstorm.

Hardin acknowledges the numerous obstacles stating, “There is definitely a special kind of technical nightmare that comes with having to deal with all those separate variables. And to me, trying to match everything together is a lot of fun.”

His nonchalant and carefree perspective is evident as he calmly migrates lights after shuttering through a dozen frames. Donning a lime round neck tee, cargo shorts, and flip-flops, Hardin might appear to be gearing up for an evening at Strouds Run rather than setting up a fashion photo shoot. Once Westervelt is in place and flute in hand, the flip-flops come off, and Hardin’s trigger finger conducts a chorus of strobing lights. He pauses for students crossing through the archway, headlights that shine too brightly on key elements of the frame, adjusting for the lights flickering on after sensing the ambient light darkening, and all the while he remains collected in the whirlwind of variables effortlessly teasing his production.

The other side of outdoor photography lacks the glitz, but roughing it for the sake of capturing the perfect image is an accepted way of life for nature and wildlife photographers.

Alex Snyder, born and raised in Southeast Ohio, sits at a small barista table at the Kroger Starbucks with coffee in hand and a handheld basket filled with produce. His golden curly locks are tightly woven mimicking cocker spaniel ears. A classic black T-shirt and slacks paired with casual sneakers, he is a man of simple and clean style that extends to his burgundy Saab sitting in the parking lot.

Snyder’s passion for nature and wildlife photography has taken him domestically as far as Alaska and globally as far as the U.K. He’s been caught between a baby moose and its mother on the Alaskan ice. During the twelve-day Alaskan excursion in which he led a photography workshop at Lake Clark National Park, Snyder also slipped into the icy waters after photographing puffins.

However, his current project is remaining close to home. Snyder is developing an in-depth book on the Hocking Hills for his master’s project. It’s intended to offer a detailed historical record as well as his personal reflections and photographs that he’s captured over almost a decade.

His affinity for Hocking Hills began with summer camping vacations with his grandparents since he was an infant. This led to volunteering, and when he was 13, Snyder finally picked up a camera, and his parents supported his newfound hobby by purchasing a \$400 Minolta HDI Plus.

“I realized I knew absolutely nothing about photography and that my pictures were awful,” he states. “Usually, when you’re 13 you give up a lot quicker, but this was such a big investment and we didn’t have a lot of money at the time, I thought, you know, maybe I’m going to learn how to really use this and really try to become a good photographer.”

Though he was primarily self-taught, it wasn’t until a competitive failure during his first time entering Shoot the Hills, an annual photo competition held in the Hocking Hills, did he meet his mentors Barb and Jerry Jividen. Losing was an ego shocker at the time.

“I thought, ‘Oh my God. How could I lose?’ I was so amazing at this. And I know Hocking Hills so much bet-

ter than anyone else. I grew up here,” he lamented.

Between his motivation to win and his photographic education with the Jividens, the following year led to first place in the Junior Division. By the third year of competing, Snyder dominated by placing first place in Landscapes, Grand Prize in the Digital Division, and Grand Prize in the Film Division. After achieving a record placement, he decided to return to his volunteer roots and has assisted in directing the annual competition ever since.

Aside from competitions, his primary focus is being a conservation photographer. Snyder believes that images highlighting the natural beauty of the world and wildlife provide people with visual narratives of a shared human responsibility.

“The pretty things in the world is what we need to remind people of. That what we need to tell people, ‘This is worth protecting,’” He adds. “You don’t need a picture of a whole bunch of trees torn down. You don’t need smoke stacks on the horizon to get a point across. You can say this is equally important and you need to protect and preserve this.”

This underlying reasoning partially drives Snyder’s motivation to create captivating images, but also personal adoration, specifically for birds, is what compels him to rise just past twilight and drive hours away in hopes of spotting a wood duck at Chagrin Falls, sandhill cranes cascading into a burnt orange rising sun, or stalking the elusive short eared owls.

Last year, the short ear owls proved inconsiderate of Snyder’s desire to photograph their migration. After waking in the wee hours to drive through a snowstorm to reach Kill Deer Plains, he arrived to an already abandoned homestead. The following weekend, he tracked them to Darby Creek just southwest of Columbus. Fortunately, that trip resulted in two boons.

Upon pulling into Darby Creek, Snyder was welcomed by a bison, not a common animal seen in Ohio. Later, he learned the bison are a part of a satellite breeding program conducted by the Wilds, an organization in Cambridge, Ohio. If nothing else, at least he would go home with the addition of a new species to his photo archive. However, his struggles from the previous snow-ridden venture were rewarded with owls known for their pensive beaks, jaundice-hued eyes, and kaleidoscope coats inclusive of a spectrum of browns and white pinstriping along the interior wings.

“I have one picture that makes it all worth it. A short eared owl with its wings spread. His eyes are so piercing with this beautiful mask. And the light is just gorgeous. And I think, ‘Oh my God. This is why I do this because of this one image that I can show people and say, ‘Look at what I saw,’” Snyder says.

Attaining that one flawless image entails an eclectic array of challenges from sleep deprivation to temperamental weather or subjects. But the triumph of freezing a fleeting moment that visually resonates and communicates to others is a boon that sustains Snyder and Hardin in a field that is rooted in changing variables and uncertain results. A photographer hopes for one image. A single frame that will move a person’s heart or entice the senses. But it never develops easily. In the end, it is born through sweat, preparation, flexibility, and a bit of serendipity.