

DANA NEIBERT

SHOOTING FOR THE SUN

BY DZANA TSOMONDO

When I call photographer Dana Neibert to discuss visiting his studio in Coronado, California, he warns me, “There isn’t much to see.” Coronado is an island connected to San Diego by a 2.1-mile-long bridge that boomerangs over the azure waters of the San Diego Bay. I get to Neibert’s picturesque home, replete with a charming Dutch-style front door, and a small dog greets me first, trailed by a smiling Neibert. After his wife, Heather, plies me with cookies in their kitchen, I follow Neibert across a sun-dappled patio to his studio, a single room attached to the garage. It’s tidy, and the combination of French doors and a skylight makes it feel bigger than it is, but still, I get the joke. “Sometimes I get young photographers telling me they want to apprentice in my studio, and I have to explain to them that there literally isn’t room for two people to turn around,” he says with a laugh.

Small studio or not, young photographers and mammoth corporations alike seem drawn to the otherworldly quality of Neibert’s work, a cinematic hyperrealism that leaps off the page. As in a dream, the colors and textures of his images are plucked from the stuff of our lives, but rendered so vividly that they occupy a realm all their own. In that world, an omnipresent sun waxes platinum and wanes soft gold, and the ocean is its glittering mirror or a deep blue foil. Neibert’s portfolio is thick with exceptional work across the breadth of his field, for companies such as Four Seasons, American Express, the usps, Chevy, Dodge, American Airlines, Intel, Frito-Lay, MassMutual, Olympus, the United Way, AT&T, Farmers Insurance and more. However stylized or naturalistic a particular image may be, Neibert’s ability to harness the sun, Earth and water in service of his subject is remarkable.

The Jet Ski days

Neibert grew up on the other end of California as the oldest of three siblings, born and raised in Kentfield, just north of

San Francisco. “I played around with cameras in high school. I always liked photography, but I was too naive to know you could make a living from it,” Neibert says. He did some desktop publishing while working on the student newspaper, which touched on elements of design. That would carry over through a stint at the local junior college and into a graphic design program at California College of the Arts in San Francisco.

Consider the fact that one could credibly say Neibert’s climb to his status as elite commercial photographer began with a professional Jet Skiing career after college, and you get an idea of how unusual his journey has been. He was introduced to Jet Ski racing by a friend in college and continued to pursue it after college, eventually turning pro. “I was making a little bit of money, between what you could win at a race or get from a sponsor.”

One of those sponsors was a wetsuit company that offered Neibert a job in San Diego designing suits, catalogs and ads. He worked Monday through Friday in the office and raced on the weekends, but eventually that ran its course as Neibert’s interest in the sport flagged. He transitioned to a design firm and, finding he enjoyed the occasional ad campaign that came through the office, moved into advertising. It seemed that he had found his niche as an art director; his eye for visuals, his design training and his ability to manage a team all helped him become quite successful and still left room for his own creativity.

“I worked for a lot of small agencies, so we would either use stock [photos], find a type solution or shoot it ourselves, and that last part is what helped me break into photography,” Neibert explains. His passion for photography grew, but he still felt hesitant about his ability to turn it into a career. “When the agency did have budgets to shoot with pro photographers, they always had all these high-end cameras and strobes, stuff I really wasn’t familiar with. I always thought,

Right: “A self-portrait of myself in the **Grand Canyon at sunrise**. As much as I document my travels, I still feel like I miss so many opportunities. This is one that I made sure to capture.”

“A few years ago, I was up for a running shoe campaign, which I ultimately did not get. But for the treatment, I went ahead and scouted locations all around **San Diego** that I wanted to shoot for the campaign. I ended up taking most of the shots with my daughter, and now we periodically continue the work in new places that we travel to.”





© Dana Neibert

“Wow, this is over my head, I’m glad we are using this guy,” Neibert remembers.

Then he met Andy Anderson. While with Matthews/Evans/Albertazzi, Neibert booked the critically acclaimed commercial photographer for an agency project and was shocked when Anderson arrived without the bells and whistles he had come to expect. “We start shooting, and I notice he is using the same

Graflex Crown Graphic 4x5 camera as I do, he is using the same Polaroid Type 55 film, he didn’t have any strobes, it was almost all natural light—just like me,” Neibert says. There was a down day on the job, and Neibert took the opportunity to invite Anderson to San Diego to shoot some personal work. “I showed him my stuff, and he said, ‘If you want to make that switch to commercial photography, I think you can do it.’” Six months later, in 2003, Neibert left his advertising job.

Risking it all

While it sounds romantic and daring, to some extent Neibert’s career shift was a serious leap of faith. By then, he was married with a baby at home and no formal photography training outside of a darkroom class in junior college. He had put together a website and booked some local work before he left his job, so it wasn’t a complete shot in the dark—but San Diego is not Los Angeles or New York, and it wasn’t easy to gauge what his long-term prospects might be. He credits Heather for putting on a brave face, given that she had left her full-time job when their daughter was born. For her part, she remembers it as a nerve-racking time, but says she never doubted their decision. “I sincerely believed he could do it. He is the hardest-working person I have ever met,” she explains. “I made a commitment to encourage and support him no matter what. I didn’t know what would happen, but I wasn’t going to be the reason he didn’t pursue his dream.”

Neibert started bidding on as much work as he could, sending out more than 1,500 promos, including some to reps and agents he knew from his time as an art director who were “out there really hustling.” He ended up signing with the New York-based agency Fox Creative, which is still his home today. And though he wishes he had gotten serious about

photography at a younger age, Neibert values his time in advertising. “I know when I am on a job that everybody has to answer to someone,” he says. “The art director is answering to a creative director, the client on set is answering to somebody else. I know that if someone is saying ‘no’ on set or is making a request, it’s not just [to be difficult], it’s because they are thinking down the road.”

Every campaign is its own beast, so although Neibert tries to be consistent in his approach, flexibility is a must, from the bidding phase, during which estimates have to be recalibrated as a client’s plans coalesce, to treatments that must be tweaked to accommodate the most Byzantine of parameters. “You end up shooting a pharmaceutical job, and they might say you can’t use anything green because that’s the competitor’s color,” he says. One variable Neibert does control is his crew, and he prides himself on working with the same tight-knit team of about a dozen on every job. “That’s why I am successful, because of the people who support me,” he explains. “They make it so all I have to do is press the button. That goes all the way back to my wife, who, when I’m shooting on a beach at a Four Seasons resort on the Indian Ocean, is back here taking care of the kids on her own.”

Michael Ancevic of the Boston-based advertising agency Fantastical was with Neibert on the aforementioned trip, and he watched the photographer cover every base. “Dana has the skill sets to think on his feet in a very collaborative way and deliver stunning shots time after time, while also having the bedside manner to be comfortable with an agency and their client for three weeks in a row on the go,” Ancevic recalls. “Some photographers aren’t capable of being ‘on’ that much, both in terms of a creative performance level and a client skill level.” Brian Wood of rcb Chicago echoes the sentiment. “His personality is calm, collected and positive. No matter what gets thrown his way on a shoot, he’s ready to deal with it and make the best shot happen.”

Old meets new

Neibert had started this portion of his career working exclusively with film, and he held on for a long time, wary of the depth and noise problems that plagued early digital photography. Even though he eventually made the transition, Neibert’s background in film—and not just film, but 4x5 and 8x10—informs his technique. “I’m not a spray-and-pray guy,” Neibert says unapologetically. “I don’t go out and shoot 1,500 frames a day. When I was [working in large format], composing with a ground glass, I might only have had 10 or

Right: “This image was part of TD Ameritrade’s print campaign illustrating its understanding of the sacrifices that brokers make. We shot this at night from a 75-foot boom lift in the middle of New York City. It only rained a little bit while we were up there.” Maciek Skorek, art director; Paul Hackett, creative director; Jina Park, producer; Carly Chappell, art producer; gyro, ad agency; TD Ameritrade, client.

“This image is part of a campaign for the Barclays Center’s campaign Bringing Sports Back to Brooklyn. We lugged this pair of bleacher seats to various locations around Brooklyn. This particular image was shot on a very cold and rainy morning on the Brooklyn Bridge.” Cory Smith, art director; Carly Chappell, agency producer; Translation, ad agency; Barclays Center, client.





DANA NEIBERT



20 sheets of film with me, and each one had to load individually in a dark room.” When shooting in large format, he explains, “I started making images I was really proud of. And it’s because of that process, that slowing down.”

Neibert takes that same deliberate approach to post-production. Before printing, he lets the work sit for a few days, visualizing where he wants to take the image before he returns to it. When he picks it up again, he already knows exactly what he wants. “Most of the major adjustments are done in the first ten minutes,” he says. If a client’s schedule allows, he will set it aside again, then come back to see if the treatment is still working for him.

His meticulousness has charmed his mentor. “Dana has always surprised me with his sensibilities to the craft of photography,” Andy Anderson says. “His treatment of color and ability to bring emotion to commercial work is something I feel is lost by most photographers. Dana’s work has moved leaps and bounds. It’s matured to a wonderful visual place.”

To make these creative strides, Neibert sees his personal work as the key to a sustainable career in commercial photography. He takes on only a limited number of jobs every year; his own projects are where he is able to really grow as an artist. “The more you shoot and experiment, the more your

Left: “**Cruise ships** are similar to commercial airplanes in the sense that they have to be at certain places at certain times and follow preset ‘flight plans.’ Even though we had radio communication with the captain, we were unable to have the ship deviate much from its preset plan. We were given several dates, times and ports of entry where we could photograph the ship. There were no second takes or waiting for the right part of the golden hour.” Allison Hughes, art director; Kate Catalinac, writer; Joanne Davidson, producer; Jim King, art producer; Goodby Silverstein & Partners, ad agency; Princess Cruises, client.

“Many times on commercial jobs, the creative team doesn’t feel the same passion about your idea of a remote and **moss-covered path** with sun spilling through the trees on the model as she heads down to her secret surf spot. So then you have to create the shot yourself in someone’s backyard in Beverly Hills.” Carissa Malka, stylist; Shafia West, model; Jina Park, producer.

This page: “Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts continues to bring us amazing projects. They’ve taken us around the world, from mosques in Istanbul to **riding elephants** in a Thai jungle to **the clouds of Lana’i**. Almost all the images we’ve created for them are about the experiences rather than the hotel rooms—it’s the Four Seasons, so you know the rooms will be great.” Michael Ancevic/Jaimie Easler, art directors; Jean Herr, photo editor; Don Sumada, stylist; 3-D animator; Richard Gaul, producer; Tracy Maidment, art producer; Pace, agency; Mullen, ad agency; Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts/Four Seasons Magazine, clients.



DANA NEIBERT

work will evolve and become refined over time. Just like any craft, it's something that just gets better over time with practice."

We pause to mull over the idea of dedication as we sit on his patio. Then we talk about his daughter's athletic talents and his son's love of Polaroids. Soon the sun is beating a retreat over the treetops and the kids are trooping into the house, tan and limber, full of questions and stories. It's time for me to leave, and the Neiberts and their enthusiastic dog come out into the yard to see me off. I am reminded of his clearly true statement that the people around him make it possible for him to succeed. Driving away, I can't help but think that, during our first phone conversation, Neibert was wrong about one thing: seeing where he works showed me exactly how he thrives as a photographer. [ca](#)

Left: "As a photographer, you can't help but bring a camera on your family vacations. My family is very used to it, and much of what I photograph is documentary and fairly unobtrusive. Every year, we spend the last days of summer at Big Bear Lake. My wife's favorite pastime at the lake is paddle boarding and taking in the serenity right after the sun has gone down."

"We've shot a few campaigns for Ram, and they are always great to work with. They really appreciate the value of finding the right location and good talent and spending the time to prop out the set correctly. It's funny: We'll spend all day setting up the shot. Then, when it comes time to actually shoot, the shot is usually in the can before some people on set realize that we even started. I usually give the talent very little direction and just have them act out the scene." Parker Bell, art director; Justin McCormick, creative director; Steven Currie, producer; Julie Richards, art producer; The Richards Group, ad agency; Ram Trucks, client.

This page: "I made this image while on a recent car job. We traveled to Colorado to shoot in some of the only snow available last winter. One morning while my crew prepped equipment and cars, I wandered around to some of the horses as it started to snow and captured them at play, frolicking in the snow."

"This car belonged to a gentleman living in Slab City just east of the Salton Sea. It might have been his only possession, and he was very proud of it. After I made the image, he was going to drive his friend into town so they could pick up their government checks. I thought the car was beautiful."

"Most people come to me for timeless and unscripted moments for their clients. Many times I capture those moments when the talent doesn't even realize that I am shooting. In this particular instance, the girl was standing with her doll, waiting on other talent to come back from a quick wardrobe change. As time went on, boredom set in, and she started playing with the doll. I quietly documented the scene, which ended up becoming one of the favorite images of the campaign." Jay Marrotte, art director; Michael Tagle, creative director; Joanne Davidson, producer; Melinda Meinke, art producer; Publicis, ad agency; American Express, client.