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# THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

Four pros talk about the thing nobody's talking about.

By Benjamin Wright | Illustrations by Dylan Kahler

## The Up-and-comer

Ed opens his desk drawer and pulls out a small disposable camera. "I'd never used one of those before last month," he says with a wry smile. We're surrounded by several thousands of dollars of high-end equipment arranged in dangerously teetering stacks along the wall, and he's hunched over a five-dollar piece of plastic and cardboard. He winds it noisily and snaps a picture of me.

There's a brief interruption as his Blackberry buzzes loudly in his pocket. He grabs for it hungrily, his bohemian cool slipping for a second to reveal the desperate hired gun just beneath it. His eyes flit across the screen for a second before he tosses it onto the desk. "Thought it might be work," he says needlessly. I ask, also needlessly, if he's had trouble finding gigs.

Like a lot of young and unestablished photographers, he has existed in panic mode since moving to New York, even before the bottom dropped out the bucket and set everyone's struggling to come up with new and increasingly dramatic ways to describe just how badly everything sucks right now. For him finding work has always been a struggle, and now is no different. A week of assisting in April kept the lights on in his apartment, but after that his calendar is one big blank until the middle of June, where a day is circled in red. "I'm supposed to go home for my sister's birthday, but I don't know," he says. "I'm afraid that if I go home, I might stay."

It's a familiar refrain these days, and one honestly earned—his prop-stylist roommate flew home for Christmas and never came back. "She didn't call or anything. I was actually starting to wonder if she was dead." Then the call came. She wasn't even coming back to get her possessions. "I sold her stuff to cover the rent and used the rest to buy that." He points to three big cases of instant ramen stacked on top of a pelican case next to the door.

Craigslist turned out the expected parade of weirdos, and for a few weeks he used the empty room as a storage space. Then a friend asked if he could use the room for a shoot. They threw some drop cloth over the windows and tacked a bunch of butcher paper onto the walls and floor and turned the room into a mini studio. The

next week the friend returned with two more people in tow, and soon after Ed got a call from someone he'd never even met, asking if the space was available for rent. Today is the third time he's rented the room, and we're waiting for the guy to show up.

We slip off our shoes and step onto the papered floor. The money isn't anything special, but on days they don't work—which these days is a lot—his friends come over for test shoots. When the weather took a turn for the better, they took their cameras outside.

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"At first we were just shooting to keep busy, but then we started coming up with a goal for the day, like a theme or a restriction or something to work around." He opens up his blog and shows me the photos he'd taken a few days before. There's a dog in every shot. Another day it was pedestrians framed in windows. Another run is nothing but bicycles chained to poles.

"It can be cheesy, but it helps keep our spirits up. We make each other shoot every day, no matter what. It's like a little community." *Shoot every day.* I write it down, underline it, circle it.

There's a knock on the door. The photographer has shown up with his model. Ed welcomes them in as I say my goodbyes and slip out the door.

## The Vet

"Photography itself isn't going anywhere," says Brian over the phone, a 30 year veteran who splits his time between Boston and New York. "It's changing a lot, but it's important to keep that in mind: things get bad, then they get better."

While a young kid like Ed has the benefit of coming of age in a time of adversity, a vet like Brian has been through bad times and knows how to make it through to the other side.

"Things were bad for a while in the 70's, they were bad for a while in the 80's, they were bad for a while in the 90's," he says with a nonchalance that might suggest – incorrectly – that he has been insulated from the problems besetting the rest of the industry: after two bread-and-butter accounts went belly-up, two long-time assistants quit rather than take a cut in pay. "I

can't really blame anyone for not wanting to work in the industry, especially right now," he says. "Both of them liked photography, and both were immensely talented. But neither of them really wanted to do this for a living. It just took this recession for them to see that."

Brian insists that the split was amicable.

"I sat them both down and we talked for a long time. We all cried. I love these girls, I wanted to do right by them, but they need something with less uncertainty built into it. They would have realized it eventually. Something else would've come along and they would've said, screw this, I want be a math teacher!"

Would he hire them if they came back and asked for their job? Brian starts to answer, then stops himself.

"If they came to me tomorrow, definitely. But if they came to me in a year, or even six months from now?" The thought unwinds itself over a long, silent stretch. "The people who are going to find work when the recession is over are the people who are able to tough it out. If you quit now, you're done."

I ask Brian for some solid advice, something concrete I could take to Ed or a thousand other kids just like him just trying to get their start. He just laughs.

"Man, those kids are going to be fine! They're coming out of college, out of SVA, and they've been trained to do more for less. That comes naturally to them, and that's what the industry wants right now," Brian says with unmistakable admiration in his voice. "They have a much firmer grip on the technology that's changing the industry. Guys like me can still learn how to use a new program, or a new camera, stuff along those lines. Blogs. But it's like learning a new language, you know? I can't *think* in that

"Don't ask old guys for advice," Brian sighs, the bombast in his voice dialed down to zero. "All we can do is throw around a bunch of platitudes. Work hard, don't give up, you can do it. But stuff like that still applies."

I press him on the matter. Surely there's some piece, some carryover between the older generation and the new? Brian laughs.

"I could argue either side of any piece of advice, but in the end it comes down to hard work. Get a rep or don't, lower your rates or don't, take an internship or don't, go back to school or don't." I picture him counting off each option on his fingers. "Everyone is going to tell you to do

for photographers like David LaChapelle and Gilles Bensimon and as a senior executive at Ford Models. He's now running Creative Procurement, an off-site creative services agency. "I heard someone say that doing okay is the new doing great," he says with a shrug. "I guess I'm doing okay."

As a businessman in a field of artists, his advice tends to be direct and unsentimental: Re-evaluate yourself and take stock of your brand. Determine your unique skill and try to find ways to stand out in a crowded market. Be realistic about your abilities, find the thing you're best at and perfect it. For the record, it's the same advice he would've given a few years ago.

"This industry can tend to be a fairly unbusiness-like business," Roark says. "It's all about perceived value; so much is negotiable, and my fear is that an increasing number of clients have found that they might not need to spend as much money doing beautiful images because it might not necessarily affect their ultimate bottom line."

Despite the incredible amount of money changing hands, the photography industry has often been as much a bazaar as a business. Much of this has to do with the subjective nature of the medium—it is, after all, more art than science, and with few objective criteria in place to determine how much a given image is worth. Rates vary wildly, often determined as much by the fame and reputation of the photographer as by the harder-to-quantify notion of simply being better. This has in the past led to a relatively small group of highly prized and sought-after artists and technicians selling their services to an eager and well-funded clientele.

"There was kind of a deification of the top photographers and models," Roark says. "They could charge whatever they wanted to; they could act like the client was almost bothersome. Now, if you're not ultra-easy to work with, you're not going to get much repeat business."

So who gets the work that's out there? For many, the quickest and easiest thing to do has been to offer lower and lower rates, which has proven to be particularly attractive to cash-strapped corporations and agencies needing more for less. But rates, already bottoming out due to dwindling budgets, have been driven to new lows by aggressive low-balling, and may not rebound when things pick up again.

"There's a difference between making yourself competitive and giving it away. Always start by learning what the project's budget is, and work within that." Roark leans in across the table. "It's a tough call. If you're concerned about your longevity in the industry, you sometimes have to be able to say no to work. Know your value."

Of course the idea of value is much more far-reaching than the cost or quality of the finished product. That is not to say that quality or cost is irrelevant—far from it—but the fact is that there will always be someone who is better than you, or who will work for less money. Value, then, must

## In an industry turned upside down, the old guard has found that much of their experience and expertise no longer has any coin. The accepted logic—that the young and inexperienced have the most to fear from trying times—has been knocked back on its ass.

language. It's not natural to me. This generation, it's amazing how fast these kids are able to handle new technology right away, and figure out how to make the best use of it. I can't tell you what an advantage that is."

Brian and his contemporaries—a generation going gray at the temples—were part of an industry that faced an entirely different set of challenges, that operated along an entirely different set of rules. In an industry turned upside down, the old guard has found that much of their experience and expertise no longer has any coin. The accepted logic—that the young and inexperienced have the most to fear from trying times—has been knocked back on its ass.

something different, because different things have worked for different people. Johnny has a rep because he's got a kid and can't spend all his free time tracking down work. I've never had a rep because I lucked into a couple of big clients early on in my career and got my name out there that way. I can't tell anyone what's going to work for them."

Brian thinks for a second and sums it up thusly.

"You have to do what you have to do to make it work. There's no one right answer."

Survival of the fittest, I ask.

"Survival of the most willing to adapt."

### The Business Guy

I'm sitting with Roark Dunn on a rainy Tuesday afternoon, the city still shaking off the last few days of a long and nasty winter. Roark has experienced the business of fashion photography from many angles, having worked as a rep

"I try to look for people who do exactly what I need done. If my client needs someone who can shoot skin, I look hard to find the person who does amazing skin. If it's landscapes, then of course I try to find someone who does the most gorgeous landscapes," he says. "It's nice to be good at several things, but artists who specialize will always have an easier time standing out."

Since entering the industry over twenty years ago, Roark has seen the field become saturated with cash and talent, with companies eager to pay top-dollar for expertly crafted images and an increasingly deep well of experts to choose from. While the problems facing the industry are certainly amplified by the recent recession, the cracks were already there in the foundation—a long period of ever-inflating budgets and desire to one-up the competition led to an arsenal of bad habits. In this era of what Roark calls "new pragmatism", however, the people who hold the money are paying a lot more attention to where it goes—and who it goes to. In this new environment, it's increasingly difficult for talent alone to help anyone stand out—and talent has become so supplemented by technology that it's considered in some ways less important. Personal relationships matter more than ever before.

## Survival of the hippest?

Living in a neighborhood like Brooklyn you come across two to three-hundred people a day walking along with a Pentax k-7 or a Nikon 5000 wrapped around their neck, hoping to capture "the different" with their lens. If you happen to be one of these people, you know exactly what I mean. There is a lot more to a photograph than snapping pictures of homeless models doing expensive drugs. The city needs to be redefined, and this recession is going to bring in its new meaning. The key to surviving this economic struggle is to think outside the box.

### Cut the line!

Here are a few ideas to put your motivation to good use:

**1) Event Shoot:** The human race has been dabbling in interests from microbiology to ancient roman philosophy for centuries. However, the ultimate interest of people is ... themselves at parties. People are constantly looking for affordable photographers to cover their event. It might not be the "coolest" or most "edifying" gig you will ever have, but with an open bar and a buffet styled dinner you will find yourself with some pocket change and a full tummy.

**Tips: Post an ad on Craig's list; use the word "affordable" in the description for your service. Have business cards that include the words "Event Photographer."**

**2) Photography lessons:** At fifteen, many kids dream of becoming rock stars, professional athletes, or actors. Some know it's all in the lighting. Taking a photography class in high school can be challenging and influential, but a bit general. This is where you come in to play. Not only would you be a personal instructor, you could act as a mentor or guide, someone with vast knowledge that can introduce a beginner to the finer things in the industry. Now this may all sound a bit heavy and serious, but if you are aiming to have some fun for an hour a day by showing someone the things you love, this might be the ideal side job for you!

**Tips: Make flyers and place them around college campuses and high schools. Make business cards and leave them inside of bookstores and music shops.**

**3) We need photographs** to capture the world we live in, to help educate future generations.

Take pictures now for "later", these photographs can be sold to online encyclopedias, school textbooks, and even documentaries. In a time of despair we may stop a lot of things, but learning will never be included on that list. This is also a time to collaborate with film; documentaries require a photographer going out and experiencing the hazards of life that we all tend to stay away from. Save yourself while saving somebody else.

**Tips: Take full advantage of online networking tools such as Twitter, Facebook, My Space, and other free blog sites. This will get the word circulating.**

### Small Talk. Big words.

I interviewed a select group of photographers and asked them if they had any advice for people in the industry. This particular answer embodies the heart solution.

"We are all tapping into our own creativity and expressing it with our camera. There is no need to judge others or constantly be competing with one another. I think in a perfect world our passion would come before the need to live comfortably, but that never seems to be the case. Being a starving artist isn't really the cool thing to do anymore. At least I don't think so. But that does not mean an awesome opportunity should be passed up because it does not offer enough money. Certain experiences will always be more important than how much money you make. A camera has the ability to capture the essence of a person. I want to know every person's life story and be able to have my one photograph tell that story."

— Ilysa Mitofsky, 22 yrs old.  
Freelance photographer.

# Surviving as a Freelancer in a Downturned Economy

By Liz Clayman

• **Hit up past employers for jobs.** There is a lot of talk mentioning that while businesses lay people off, their work load is still the same. They might not have the budget to hire new people, but a freelancer is the perfect fit to come in and help get deadlines met.

• **Branch out and diversify your work.** You used to be above shooting headshots or events? Not anymore....

• **Shop your photos**—it's cheaper for publications to use existing images than produce a whole shoot. Try stock agencies like FlashDen, Dreamstime, Veer, Getty, Template Monster, IconBuffet, etc....

• **Self-promotion**—not easy but definitely necessary. Use the time you used to spend working to put your name out in places so far unexplored. Give your website that much needed update. Put your work out on different industry directories. List yourself on Citisearch (not cheap but worth it). Join networking sites like Biznik, LinkedIn, Dripbook, etc.... Attend conferences you used to be too busy for, and pass out those business cards.

• **Try bartering** for things or services you normally would purchase.

• **If you decide that working pro bono** is a viable option for you and your portfolio during a slow period, make sure to set yourself a limit on how many hours a month you can afford to work in that manner. Everything in moderation.

• **If you've sold photographs** to companies with limited usage and let those dates lapse, send your clients a polite letter reminding them their usage is running/ran out. Would they like to renew for another X amount of years? And for X amount of money?

• **Let your clients know** how much you value their business. Consider both the larger clients and the guy you shot one job for three years ago. Talk to them to touch base. Maybe they have a project that's been put off because they thought they couldn't afford it. Let them know you have flexibility in pricing and can work with them.

extend beyond the physical creation and manufacture of an image.

"Everyone's had to become much more service-oriented. I think the people who work the most are the ones who deliver to their clients more than just the right image. If you get booked, know what it is that the client actually needs. Ask questions and then be a good listener. Let them know you understand their goals and concerns. Think how you might even bring more to the table. Maybe let them see you figure out a way to save them a few dollars. Clients really value people who partner with them to solve problems, so remember you're there to solve their problems."

Roark, like Brian and everyone else you talk to these days, admits that adaptation is an absolute necessity for anyone hoping to live long and prosper in the post-recession world, but is less militant in his Darwinism. Those who are keeping their heads above water haven't made it this far solely by luck.

"Survival of the fittest' is too cold," he says contemplatively. "The ones who make it are going to make it because they worked hard and worked smart. Nobody's doomed to fail."

## The Boss

Crowded in among scores of photographs and pages from magazines, a map of the world is tacked to the wall above John Engstrom's desk, bristling with colored thumb tacks that mark the countries he has visited. He points at the map, to a smattering of colored thumb tacks dotting Africa, the Middle East, India. "Times are hard for us here, but go to Gaza or Iraq or Somalia if you want to see real suffering. This is not the end of the world."

Growing up in Michigan, John saw the bottom fall out of the auto industry and leave behind the smoking wrecks of Detroit and Flint. The experience left him with a sense of perspective; he radiates a calm that seems in short supply among the more volatile types that populate the photo industry.

"All industries go through periods of expansion and contraction. This is a period of attraction,"

he says. Then, for the second time, "This is not the end of the world."

It's almost 5 in the evening at the tail end of a busy day when we meet his office at Sheimflüg Digital. He looks a little ragged around the edges, but good. "For me, I know I will work every day for the rest of my life, and I'll be

**"I heard someone say that doing okay is the new doing great," he says with a shrug. "I'm doing okay."**

okay," he says with a shrug. "It's meant a lot of changes, but I've been able to evolve with the market and figure out my niche."

Like any business—sorry folks, there's that word again—the photo industry is subject to the natural and unstoppable ebb and flow of money as it cycles in and out, as businesses open and close or talent floods and flees; and while the world goes Chicken Little around us, it's absolutely vital to keep in mind that the recession is going to end, and that the people who can take the necessary steps to survive this winter will be the ones reaping the benefits that come with spring. Where will you be for the bounce?

"You've got to find some way to work just keep your name out there, but you've also got to think ahead for when work picks back up," he

The biggest problem for John, or at least the problem that inflates all the others, is boosting dangerously low morale. He, like every other boss out there, is responsible not only for their own career and wellbeing, but for that of everybody who works for them. But while many companies are hemorrhaging money and talent left and right, Sheimflüg has thus far been able

to avoid laying off a single worker, due in part to a newfound attention to the company's finances ("I saved \$18,000 a year just by switching phone companies," he says, as if he can't quite believe it himself). He also took advantage of a government-sponsored partial unemployment program that allows his workers to scale back their hours and collect unemployment while keeping their benefits. At times it can be tough to counter the low morale, but John and others like him are taking the long view.

"This recession isn't necessarily a bad thing, if you can learn from it," he says. "I'll never go back to just nodding my head and not questioning everything."

## The Up-and-Comer (Slight Return)

Two weeks after our interview, Ed calls me up and invites me to go grab a beer. It's the first

sitting on a couch in the back, a scene from *Mothra* flickering on the dark wall overhead. Ed gets up and reappears a minute later with three cans. Jesus Ed, I say, you're the last person who should be paying for drinks. He grins and shakes his head.

"Drinks are on the house," he says, beaming. "I

was shooting in Central Park and this guy just jogs up to me and says he needs someone to take pictures of his bar, so I give him the address to my blog and he calls me up that night and hires me."

Right place, right time, I say.

"Right place, right time," he agrees.

I accept the beer, and another.

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Essentially, freelancers have the ultimate control over their own overhead and pricing, and that flexibility compared to a large corporations will be the saving grace of freelancers.

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### 101 Essential Freelancing Resources

[www.freelanceswitch.com/general/101-essential-freelancing-resources/](http://www.freelanceswitch.com/general/101-essential-freelancing-resources/)

Great list of resources. Categories include stock agencies, ways to promote yourself, legal links, and job boards.



says. "Be more than just the person who'll do it the cheapest. You don't want to be the 99 cent store of the industry."

really hot day of the year, pushing well up into the 80's, and it isn't quite dark when I catch up with him at a bar in the L.E.S. The interior is dark and cool, filled with people but not quite crowded. I find him and a couple of his friends