

COLOR chameleon

One glance at Leslie McIntosh's work and you get hit with instant color. Whether it's a brightly colored peacock fan paired perfectly with a green sweater, or a brunette in a fire engine red cowboy boots and jacket leaning against a red fence, it's hard not to stop and stare at her senior portraits. The daughter of veteran portrait photographer Bill McIntosh, Leslie's background in art history, design, and fashion make for a powerful combination in taking senior portraiture to the next level.

By Jennifer Chen



design. You pick up on how the human figure looks best in certain positions and angles, and which colors look good together.

JC: When a senior girl or guy comes to your studio, what is your process from the first meeting to the actual shoot?

LM: After welcoming them, I immediately analyze their face and body type, and get right into the clothing. We pick out their outfits together, and I comment on what will look best for their portrait and explain that this is not a fashion shoot, and that I'm more concerned with their face and making them look good, not their clothes. We then make their drape or tuxedo portrait, which they need for their yearbook and also happens to be popular here in Virginia because we're traditional. I use four lights to light them for that portrait, so they'll always look better than with their school photographer. I do the makeup on all my girls, giving them a natural look. We then pack up and go to the outdoor location. Since I'm limited on available light, I take two seniors at a time and alternate them back and forth.

JC: I read on your Web site that all senior sessions are outdoors. Have you run into problems shooting outside?

LM: Shooting outdoors is a challenge I love. The light and weather conditions are always unpredictable and change constantly in the duration of the shoot, which gives each session a different look. I have to deal with a lot of wind, which makes the portrait look really good because it adds a real element to the image, instead of looking like a Photoshopped background. But the wind will completely dictate the pose and background I'll have to use. It's the same with the sun or lack of sun. I have to re-meter and reset my exposures about every 5–10 minutes.

JC: Do you have any senior programs like hiring seniors to work in your studio or Facebook presence? What is your marketing campaign to get seniors into your studio?

LM: I only use ambassadors for senior programs, and I have a display at the mall. I get a lot of traffic from our Web site and we have a Facebook page, but most of my business is word-of-mouth. I make everyone look really good—that's my job. I make average-looking teens look exquisite. They know I can do it because they tell me how I made a certain friend or acquaintance look so good.

JC: Your father, Bill McIntosh, has been a pro photographer longer than many pho-

Jennifer Chen: The color you use in your senior portraits is exquisite. How do you work with your seniors to prepare the colors that will be used?

Leslie McIntosh: I consult them ahead of time, which is usually done on the phone. I ask the mother (who typically calls to book the appointment) everything about what they look like and their style; for example, how tall they are, their pant size, weight, and skin tone, eyes, hair color, etc. I then advise them on what colors and styles will suit them best and ask them to bring more than is needed so we can weed through it all. I also have a collection of clothes myself in case their clothes aren't right for the portrait. I have my own locations picked out. They can choose a beach or a garden.

JC: The seniors you've shot seem to glow with a great smile, which isn't easy to capture. What are your techniques for capturing a great smile?

LM: I talk to them constantly, telling them to think of different imaginary situations or act goofy myself. I personally don't like huge smiles because they look

fake and it makes their eyes look squinty. I tell them that I want their eyes to look big and dreamy. I act out the expressions myself, having grown up in the business and worked with models on fashion and advertising shoots. They usually laugh and then they do it themselves pretty easily.

JC: Your posing is really beautiful. Natural, but at the same time it makes your subjects very engaging to look at. How did you develop your posing style?

LM: I grew up with a portrait photographer dad [William McIntosh], who had six to seven photographers working for him in the past. He trained his photographers constantly, and I was always observing. My sisters and I would sit and pose for them. His friends and colleagues were great photographic masters. When they were together socially, someone was always photographing the group and they all put in their two cents on how everyone should be posed, down to the finger position. This would be just for a snapshot!

I also went to art school for five years and studied art history, painting, drawing and





tographers who are currently in the industry. What have you learned from your dad? How has he helped you grow as an artist? Growing up, did you also know that you wanted to be a photographer too?

LM: I've learned the most important things from my father—posing, lighting and composition—and I'm still learning. He's my best and worst critic. I get daily cri-

tiques from him. We always talk about how to improve our photography and bounce ideas off one another. He made me realize that if my lighting and posing are correct my subject will always look good, and if they look good they will always buy portraits. We have clients that span over three generations who are still coming to us because they have wall portraits hanging in their homes going back to the 60s. They choose us because they want classic, high-quality portraits that can hang next to each other for generations to come, so the quality has to be there. We still make classic, timeless portraits, but keep it fresh and modern looking without being dated. It has to look stunning on its own as a large wall portrait, so too trendy doesn't work for us.

I had no interest in being a photographer growing up. I wanted to be, and was, a fashion designer. That's why I am so picky and controlling about what the seniors wear. I just fell into photography.

JC: What do you enjoy about portraiture work, particularly working with seniors?

LM: I love to style my subjects and direct. Teenagers are the easiest to direct for me and they have a great insight on all

kinds of things.

JC: How do you capture a teenager's personality in one single image?

LM: I try to bond with them while we're deciding on their clothes and props. With my girls, it's usually when I'm putting on their makeup. I simply ask them questions about themselves, their likes and dislikes, where they want to go to college, what they want to study and then specifically what their views are in that subject. I act like I would when I want to get to know someone. I'm relatively low volume so I spend a lot of time with them.

From there I have a pretty good idea of their character and they are more relaxed, and then I capture them.

JC: Who are your photography mentors?

LM: My Dad. Photographers I've taken classes or tips from in the portrait community like Monte Zucker, Van Moore, David Peters, and Joyce Wilson. Commercial or fashion photographers I admire are Richard Avedon, Paolo Roversi, Peter Lindbergh, Annie Leibovitz and Grace Coddington, the head fashion stylist at *Vogue*.

JC: What is your dream photography project?



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Leslie's Lighting Techniques:

I have recently been using the Canon 5D Mark II. About one half of these portrait sittings were made with this camera along with the 85mm f/1.2 lens at about f/2.8 most of the time, at ISO 800. When the light is very low in the sky, I move the ISO to 1600 with an exposure of 1/2 second. I use the Signature Lumedyne battery strobe and barebulb. The watt-second power at this time is about 12 watts. The Signature Lumedyne allows me to adjust the watt-second power from 6 watt seconds to 200 watt seconds. This is very important; when the ambient light is brighter earlier in the evening, my shutter speed is about 1/200. Too much power on the strobe after the sun has gone down would make the background black, so the shutter speed is about 1/2 second.

Before I bought the Canon I used the Hasselblad H1 with 150mm f/3.2 lens. I used it at f/3.2 most of the time, with Fujifilm Pro 800Z film. Much of the lighting is just before the sun goes down or 20 minutes or so after the sun goes down. The exposure at this time, with 800-speed film, would be about 1 second at f/3.2; the 1/1000 second shutter speed of the strobe makes the subject sharp if the subject holds still. It stops their slight movements.

I always use a Gitzo carbon-fiber tripod; the studio strobes I use are 6 Calumet Travelite 750s. I use the Sekonic light and strobe meter and Pocket Wizard radio slave units.

LM: A fashion editorial shoot in collaboration with Grace Coddington, creative director of U.S. *Vogue*. She's a genius.

JC: What are five pieces of camera equipment that you can't live without?

LM: Canon EOS 5D with 85mm f/1.2 lens, Gitzo tripod, Lumedyne strobe, Hasselblad H1 with 150mm lens, Calumet Travelites 750 and Pocket Wizards.

JC: For senior photographers who are just starting out, what are some tips you can share with them from your experience in the photo industry?

LM: Learn all the basics because you'll need them. They'll get you through any difficult situation. Mentor with a master photographer. Make sure you know how to light and pose with ease. Take as many classes as possible.

More of Leslie's work can be seen at www.mcintoshportraits.com. 

Jennifer Chen is the former features editor for both RangeFinder and AfterCapture magazines as well as the former editor of the WPPI Monthly Newsletter. She writes regularly for Every Day with Rachael Ray and has written for Natural Health, Bust, VegNews, and Audrey. She is currently working on her first young adult novel. She blogs at www.typecraftwriter.com.

