



## **“A Blank Canvas”**

### **American Society of Photographers Fellowship Thesis**

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Before each of the great masters began their portraits, landscapes, and still life paintings they sat down in front of a blank canvas. Ready to pour all they knew of their craft into creating brilliant works of art. As I've grown and matured as a photographer, I've learned to approach my work from an artist's perspective; each session brimming with the potential of a blank canvas, beckoning me to awaken it with my skill and vision.

#### **Early Influences**

My love affair with all things creative began as a boy with a box of crayons. You know the box: the Crayola 64 with the built-in sharpener. I remember selecting the flesh colored crayon for skin, cerulean for creating water, and mountain meadow for grass. The importance and impact of color in a composition was undeniably shaped by my early love of coloring.

My next artistic discovery came at the hand of my childhood friend Doug Emmons who would years later stand up as my best man when I married my wife Lesa. Doug had received a tracing book for Christmas and I was dying to try it. Creating my own image while being guided by the original underneath was of particular interest and is something I often think about when using Photoshop and Painter.

Always desiring to discover new things, I came across a stainless steel reel when I was 12. It was a reel that my dad used to develop film when he was in the Air Force. At the time I could not fathom how winding film in the reel and adding a smelly liquid could make images appear. The idea intrigued me. I soon found myself with the opportunity to choose an elective class in school and the discovery of the reel helped me decide on a course in photography. I was hooked from the start, partly because the

instructor took an interest in my work. My first camera was a Kodak Instamatic that had an auto winder. One of our first assignments was to take pictures of anything we wanted to photograph in Titusville. One of my best friends, Lynn Meadows, and I took our bikes and cameras all over town photographing buildings, broken down cars, old roads and trees. While making these photographs I had an experience that would change my life forever.

Next to our courthouse stood some very small, one room, early 1900s government houses. There was an elderly man on one of the porches in a rocking chair. His skin looked like weathered leather and his veins were visible on his lean body. He allowed me to photograph him sitting in his rocking chair. I felt I had captured a piece of him on film and I couldn't wait to watch it come to life in the darkroom. My first darkroom experience brought forth much excitement when I saw this old man's life story appear to me on a piece of Kodak mural paper in an 8x10 developing tray. The next day I rushed out to share my photograph with the elderly man. I never could have expected what happened next. He was astounded that I actually came back to show him his photograph. As I proudly presented him with my first portrait, he looked it over long and hard. Then with pain and suffering evident in his aged eyes, he began to weep. I imagine after years of feeling alone or forgotten, that portrait rekindled in him a feeling of connectedness to a world he thought had passed him by. I was deeply moved and touched by his reaction and his memory still lives in me today. A little piece of him is in every image I create.

## **An Emerging Career**

My experience as an entrepreneur began with my first job as a paper boy. Every afternoon a large stack of newspapers would be delivered to my house. I took extreme pride at perfectly folding and efficiently loading the papers onto my bike. I threw the paper with extreme accuracy to each of the customer's doorstep as I pedaled through the neighborhood come rain or shine. I was eager to please and I wanted to ensure dry

delivery in hopes that my customers would be persuaded to reward me with warm smiles and generous tips.

Those tips were important because they slowly accumulated in a glass jar until I was able to buy a new Konica T3 35mm direct from Japan. I would carry that Konica with me as an annual staff photographer at Astronaut High School and eventually to my first job with a fellow photographer. I landed a job at a local camera store and was trained to be a “combat” wedding photographer. The pay was low, but the experience was priceless. I learned how to think on my feet, create salable images under the worst conditions, and establish calm amongst the chaos.

As the early stages of my career were taking shape, I continued to be drawn to the paintings of the great masters. It wasn't until my visit to the Smithsonian Institute Art Gallery in 1983 that my intrigue turned into fascination. I was in awe of the elegance, beauty, and sheer size of the works of Renoir, Sargent, and others. I could see the texture of the canvas beneath the layers of paint and lacquer surrounded by intricately carved gold frames. I found myself imagining the artist sitting before his blank canvas and beginning to sketch and paint his subject. These images would soon influence the direction of my creativity and my budding business. We knew we would set out to build an elegant brand with an emphasis on wall portraits. Our strategy would be to create an individualized emotional experience resulting in a desirable distinct brand of personal art. Executing the strategy would involve creating desire among the public to own a Gregory Daniel portrait, building relationships through consultations, and fulfilling my customers' needs through a joint artistic vision. Although we've changed some things along the way in striving to become better, this original vision has been the blueprint of Gregory Daniel Portrait Artist from day one.

## **Blending Work and Family**

In 1983, my wife Lesa noticed an ad in the Professional Photographers of America (PPA) magazine advertising a business management class taught by Tom McDonald and Charles (Bud) Haynes in Orlando. I wasn't sold on going but she convinced me that attending this class would be advantageous for our relatively new

business. The class could not have come at a more appropriate time. The course laid the foundation for the business principles we still employ at our studio. An additional benefit, albeit an unexpected one, came in the form of Tom McDonald himself. Tom saw something in me he would later describe as a burning desire and he would become my professional mentor and life coach. Tom would stay with me throughout my career and be there for my triumphs and defeats- at my most cherished personal achievements and tough family tragedies.

Along the way there would be other mentors, each impacting my life and my career in their own unique way. God's light is a photographer's best asset and David Leon Smith and Leon Kennamer each taught me how to use it to my best advantage. David helped me understand the power of natural light beaming through a window and Leon helped nurture my ability to use outside light effectively. David LaClaire, a second-generation Michigan photographer, explained design and composition possibilities within groups. In light of my constant work with families, advice on group composition would become paramount as my career continued. Noted California artist Christopher der Manuelian helped me discover how to let go and let the image happen. Allowing my creativity to flow freely is one of the best lessons I've ever learned. David Peters enlightened me in communicating with my heart and soul, and Frank Cricchio versed me in the science of our art. It's amazing to me how a true understanding of equipment and technology can elevate the level of portraiture. Knowing my equipment inside and out allows me to tap into its ultimate potential and use it to create special images consistently. Music played during a session invigorates my sensibilities and those of my subjects; a lesson I learned from Gittings' former chief photographer Arthur Heitzman. Music, much like art is a universal language and nothing gets my juices flowing like the right music for the right session. Al Gilbert trained me to capture the strength and power of my subject in men's portraits and Don Blair taught me how to define depth and perspective with edge lighting. Rocky Gunn demonstrated effective posing of women and Charles (Bud) Haynes' business skills really emphasized management for profit. Each of these men helped make me the photographer I would become over the next 20 years. It's fair to say without them, I wouldn't be the artist or the man I am today.

During these formative years of the business, Lesa and I became parents after six years of marriage. People told us having children would change everything- this would become the ultimate understatement. On June 9, 1987, Ashley Brooke was born at 7:30pm. At 7:31pm I knew what everyone had been talking about. Two years later, Kyla Renee was born on June 21<sup>st</sup> and our family was complete. From that point on nothing was more important to me than being the protector and provider for my new family. Ashley and Kyla didn't come with operating instructions and I soon discovered parenting, much like my art, was like starting with a blank canvas. The responsibility to inform and mentor an individual was never so important. My relationship with my wife and daughters and with the rest of my family profoundly contributes to my love of family portraiture. As I believe in my family, I also believe in the value of the family unit. Many of our sessions in and out of the studio are with families of all shapes and sizes. I believe children especially bring out the best in me and I work hard to gain their trust and friendship during our sessions. It's those connections that ultimately lead to my best work and the most satisfied clients.

The success of our business, among other things has been heavily dependant upon the brand Lesa and I have crafted over the years. Our emphasis is on the artistic quality of the portrait. Although we sell portraits of every shape and size at a variety of price points, large, often painted wall portraits are our signature pieces. They aren't simply photographs, but many times they are key art pieces that are hung prominently in the homes of our clients. I'm often inspired by the family's home or relationship with one another. Creating a portrait that tells their story is the cornerstone of our business. Lesa and I work to create a memorable experience for our customers from start to finish. Our studio is elegant, warm, and welcoming. We've fashioned small intimate rooms for consultations, slide show presentations of the images, and a frame room for purchasing. The charming atmosphere makes the client feel at home throughout the process and goes a long way to maintain the trust they have in me in capturing themselves or their family.

In my portfolio, you'll notice each of the images is printed on white canvas. Most of the portraits we create are either paintings on canvas or emulsion stripped

photographs embedded on canvas. Because we work on this surface most often, it made sense to submit the portraits to you the way many of them are presented to our clients. The white border on all of the portraits gives them an art gallery feel, which seems appropriate given the gallery display style and the artistic interpretation of the photographs. In contrast to a traditional full bleed, the white border represents a remnant of the creative potential in the original blank canvas.

I have dedicated my life to hard work, experimentation, and improvement, striving constantly for fresh poses and unique composition. I refuse to put my camera down until I am pleased with what I see in the viewing screen. But seldom does true achievement come suddenly. Step-by-step, I move closer to my goals by reaching beyond my grasp. In photography, as in all arts, one begins by being willing to accomplish what is needed. I tell myself and affirm over and over again that I am ready to reach for the next level. I commit myself to doing what I am divinely guided to do. I am blessed each day by the prospect of filling a blank canvas.

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## Professional

- Photographic Craftsman, Professional Photographers of America, 1988
- Master of Photography, Professional Photographers of America, 1989
- Imaging Excellence Award, Professional Photographers of America, 2005
- Best of Show, Southeastern Professional Photographers Association, 2005
- Service Award, Florida Professional Photographers Association, 1987
- Degree of Excellence, Florida Professional Photographers Association, 1988
- Highest Print Case Score, Florida Photographers Association, 1985, 1986, 1987
- Kodak Gallery Award, four years
- Fuji Masterpiece Award, three years
- 95 Exhibition Merits, Professional Photographers of America, 1985-2008
- 18 Prints in Loan Exhibit, Professional Photographers of America, 1987-2008
- Several Prints exhibited at Epcot, Walt Disney World
- PPA affiliated instructor at Texas School and Image Explorations, 2008
- Platform and safari speaker multiple years for the PPA National Convention.

## Education

- Graduate, Astronaut High School, Titusville, Florida, 1978
- Graduate, Industrial Photography, Brevard Community College, 1985
- Student, Winona Professional Photography School, 1984 and 1986
- Student, Georgia Professional Photography School, 1984 and 1985
- Student, North Carolina Professional Photography School, 1984 and 1985
- Student, Texas Professional Photography School, 1985 and 1986

## Affiliations

- Member, American Society of Photographers
- Member, Professional Photographers of America
- Member, Florida Professional Photographers Association
- Member, Professional Photographers of Central Florida
- Secretary, Cameracraftsmen of America
- Member, Park Avenue Baptist Church, Titusville, Florida
- Founding member of the International Society of Portrait Artists



