



AFTER

# PICTURE PERFECT

*Digital retoucher, tech, and printer Stephan Sagmiller draws on his technical training and artistic education to build a career in collaborative image making.*  
By Aimee Baldrige

It's all in a day's work for a high-end fashion photographer to shoot five models nearly singlehandedly, take a walk in the park, then spend the evening cavorting with nubile young women while making prints—in the classic Antonioni film *Blowup*, that is. In the real world of working photographers, though, things are a little different. Given the increasing complexity of both technology and business, creating professional images often involves a whole team of specialists in addition to the photographer. With graduation day still visible in his rearview mirror, Stephan Sagmiller has arrived at the heart of that creative collaboration, as a successful retoucher, digital technician, and printer.

After receiving a bachelor's degree in Digital Arts from Henry Cogswell College in 2003, Sagmiller went to work for a firm that produced illustrations for children's books. He moved on to photo assisting after about a year, freelancing for numerous clients in a wide variety of genres. That experience allowed him not only to fill gaps in his knowledge about lighting and studio gear, but also to get a sense of how his particular skills could be useful to the photographers he worked with.

Over three years of assisting, Sagmiller developed the unusual combination of on-set and postproduction skills that he now offers to



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Clockwise, admirers viewing President Obama's inauguration on the big screen; Obama on the campaign trail; Hillary Clinton in the shadows, all from Paskova's political coverage.



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photographers as a successful independent professional working under the moniker Cyan Jack (cyanjack.com). With a studio in Manhattan's photo district, Sagmiller provides his services to a steady stream of advertising, commercial, editorial, and fine art photographers.

Sagmiller traces the roots of his success to the general artistic education and specialized digital techniques that he acquired during his years of study at Cogswell, in Everett, Washington. The Digital



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Arts program there (unfortunately no longer available, as Cogswell has since closed) gave its students an education in the fundamentals of art and photography history, color theory, basic principles of design, and drawing and painting studio courses. Then it showed them how to build upon that foundation with sophisticated digital tools.

Sagmiller remains a great believer in being guided by core artistic concepts in his digital work. "I know the inside walls of the Metropolitan Museum of Art as well as I know the controls on a camera," he notes. Sagmiller describes this balance between technical ability and artistic understanding as a requirement for high-quality postproduction work. "Photographers come to you not just for your technical know-how," he explains. "They're really after you because of the specific decisions that you make. You're only as good as what you decide to retouch and decide to not retouch."

Like his general arts education, the technical training Sagmiller received acquainted him with basic principles and tools, instead of focusing on particular software brands or products. Although the training process could be tough at times, he insists that it gave him an ability to pick up new software easily, which has always paid off in his professional life. "We were expected to know a piece of software within a few days. They just threw it at us," Sagmiller recounts. "You had a project you had to finish, so it was kind of trial by fire."

While Sagmiller began his studies with a strong interest in 3D graphics and computer animation, and feels that he has benefitted



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from his experience with the complex software used in those media, he found that spending all of his creative hours in front of a computer monitor didn't suit his outdoorsy nature. "There was this moment when I just sort of cracked," he recalls. "I took a film and video class that had digital photography components, and I was so excited to touch a piece of steel. I took one of those C stands and tweaked a knob. I got to move it and see the light actually change, as opposed to moving a light in my three dimensionally-rendered computer image. That was just it for me." Combining on-set digital capture work with postproduction work allows him to balance his interest in digital tools with his need to interact with the physical world.

But working on location doesn't just suit Sagmiller's personality. He also feels that it improves his work as a retoucher and enhances his value to the photographers he collaborates with. "There are all kinds of problems that I can solve being on set that were very difficult to solve with post effects only," he explains. Understanding postproduction techniques and printing allows him to make stronger recommendations about lighting, color, and exposure during the shoot. He also notes that just being on set and hearing the comments of art directors and stylists gives him information that helps him meet clients' retouching needs. "All those little comments don't always make it into the notes for the retoucher," he remarks. And by being on the spot, Sagmiller can answer questions that the photographer can't necessarily address about what can and can't be fixed in post, how much it will cost, and how making changes to the set can reduce the postproduction costs. That not only makes him more valuable to the photographer but also makes the

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photographer more valuable to the client.

Sagmiller confesses that at first he was surprised at how little some photographers concern themselves with the technical aspects of shoots. "Now I know better," he says. "In higher levels of photography, you've got photographers who are far more concerned with things like emotional impact, and trying to keep track of the shoot as a whole—making sure that the clothing is right and that the art director is happy, and that the shoot says something about their unique vision. The last thing they need to think about while shooting is what the camera is doing or whether I want to use sRGB or Adobe RGB 1998."

When he's not on the job, Sagmiller spends time following his own artistic whims as a photographer, and experimenting with new techniques and styles. But the opportunity to collaborate with other artists is obviously one of the main pleasures that he gets from his work. "I'm trying to develop relationships with photographers that I feel are mutually and creatively beneficial," he says. "I want to be a part of their team and really collaborate with them in developing the image, both as a technical masterpiece and as creative expression." ⊕



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