

Rangefinder Magazine

August 2005

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Profile: Charr Crail by MARGARET LANE
Following the Band



Local designers displaying their summer fashions shot for Fork It magazine.

Charr Crail is both photographer and artist—working digital magic to produce both commercial and private art for clients. Her range of subjects spans from rock and roll and live-performance acts to corporate/editorial work to individual portraiture. She is this year's winner of the Grand Award in the Premier category in WPPI's Awards of Excellence 16x20 Print Competition. Her winning entry, "Standing Room Only" (this page), a candid nabbed during a show last summer at the Vans Warped Tour in Marysville, California, was a case of being in the right place at the right time amidst thousands of cheering fans. With a Canon 10D and zoom lens, Crail captured her subject in natural light at ISO 400. Back in the studio she performed minor postproduction work with Photoshop CS and the LucisArt Photoshop-compatible plug-in (www.lucisart.com).

"Shooting entertainers, bands and live acts presents all sorts of challenges," states Crail.

"Everything happens so fast, and you really never know what a performer might do or where the next shot will come from!" At the Warped Tour, professional photographers are allowed to shoot from a protected area in front of the stage often called the photo pit. Crail was shooting the band Flogging Molly when she turned around to glance at the crowd behind the barricade. She spied this stunning young lady sandwiched between two burly fans. "I snapped the picture just before all photographers were escorted out. Usually at venues like this you never think you'll see the people you photograph again." As it turned out, a friend of Crail's saw the image and recognized the young woman. She connected the two, and Crail was able to present the young lady with a print.

With both an art and photography background, Crail spent part of her career as a photojournalist and newspaper picture editor. Her last job was as a photo editor at The Sacramento Bee. "Photojournalism taught me to use available light very well, and even in the studio I can be a minimalist. I like contrast and simple lighting most of the time. The preference is to let content be the star of the picture, not the lighting." In late 2003, she left the Bee and started her own full-time freelance photography business. "Initially many of my clients were corporate and editorial. Now it's morphed into a fascinating mix of corporate, editorial, live music and portraiture."



The drummer for the band Guttermouth performing on the 2004 Vans Warped Tour



"Standing Room Only"—a crowd shot at 2004 Vans Warped Tour

Rock On

So how did a mild-mannered former staff newspaper photographer turned photo editor land in a world shooting rock bands? A few years ago Crail's best friend and fellow shooter Kevin Graft introduced her to live performance photography; since then it's a major tune in her professional life. Partnering with Graft, she's a house photographer for all live shows at the Empire, Sacramento's biggest club venue for national and international shows. Additionally, she shoots live acts for eMusiConnect.com: Cher, Van Halen, Dolly Parton, Avril Lavigne, Gwen Stefani, Tesla, The Scorpions, Willie Nelson, Slipknot and Jill Scott, to name a few. She enjoys producing publicity shots and CD imagery for bands such as Gooser, Brand X Savior, Mama's Pride and Larisa Bryski. Crail counts both print and Web-based magazines as clients, plus individual bands.



Promise Forever band publicity



Suicide Girls sign autographs

"Capturing live acts is technically challenging, not nearly as easy as it looks. It's physically taxing when you have to fight crowds. I have been hurt more than once. Last year I got a fat lip as a crazed crowd surged forward smashing me against the stage. Just recently a crowd surfer fell right onto me and sheered the lens right off the front of my camera just before kicking me in the head on his way to the ground. The sheer volume of noise during a show can be intense too," Crail says.

Despite working in often rough and unpredictable

photo after their performance at The Boardwalk, a Sacramento club.

environments, Crail has learned to harness available light, color, settings and the personalities around her to an advantage. She enjoys taking images to the next level,

assessing the potential for each to become a piece of art after a dash of software enhancing is added. Her images have an artistic and sometimes fantasy feeling only possible through a combination of knowing how to get a good shot and how to use post-production techniques with finesse.

The first camera she ever purchased was a Canon AE-1, and to this day she remains a dedicated Canon user. Recently she went 100 percent digital, pointing out that: "The shift in technology changed everything for me, both as a photographer and as an artist. It made me once again fall deeply in love with photography—something I confess I was once moving away from for a bit." She adds that she has not been asked to shoot film in over two years. Today her cameras of choice are the Canon EOS 20D and two Canon EOS 10Ds. To capture all shooting challenges, Crail packs a 50mm f/1.8, 16–35mm f/2.8, 70–200mm f/2.8, a fisheye, 28–135mm and a 20–35mm f/2.8, plus Dynalites and a Canon 550 EX Speedlight.

A Softer Side

While a significant portion of Crail's time is spent shooting live performers, she also walks a softer side of life doing editorial/corporate, commercial and portrait work. Presently, her main contract corporate clients are the Sacramento Municipal Utility District (SMUD) and the California Dental Association.

"Corporate work may not be sexy or scintillating like a rock concert or as personally satisfying as my portrait art, but I feel tremendous pride when I can pull a great image out of a board meeting." She's taken on editorial work for the Minneapolis Star Tribune, Gatorade, Parade and Women's World magazine, among others. She also shoots for ZUMA Press, a global press photo agency and wire service.



The lead singer for Sparrow's performing at DNA, a San Francisco club.



Snoop Dogg Live at Marysville Sleep Train Amphitheatre in California

But Crail's first love is portraiture, and she finds it satisfying to delve into creative challenges. "There are a lot of people who request something unusual. They see my style and work as fine art and envision themselves being immortalized in a dramatic way." She points out an interesting trend—much of her portrait work is kind of sexy. "Recently I shot a beautiful woman who wanted to create something special for her boyfriend's birthday—artistic nude photos with her two pet bearded dragon reptiles. I called in an amazing hair and make-up artist Paula Gudenberg to help style the shoot. I used a single softbox and a white reflector and had her pose in varying positions with the bearded dragons placed on different parts of her body—hip, shoulder, belly, etc. After the shoot I added dramatic toning and colorizing effects with Painter 8 and Photoshop CS."



Min, a fashion model, poses in studio—the picture is actually of her reflection.



A personal piece created for a friend, Kevin Graft, who has beautiful blue eyes.

Crail admits that shooting nudes is not for everyone. "One important thing about these sessions is that for the subject it's as much about the experience they have, as it is about the pictures I produce for them. They are sharing themselves in a deeply personal way, and it's my job to do my best to make them feel incredibly safe, at home and at ease."

After a shoot, Crail follows a straightforward procedure working with files from her studio in Sacramento. She downloads images to a hard drive, then immediately burns an archival CD or DVD of the entire take. You can't take the Mac out of the girl: Her hands-down computer of choice is Apple. She works with an iMac G5 with 20-inch screen and a Mac laptop when in the field. "I Love Macs—they're simple and user-friendly. I like the interface of OS X." She edits with Photo Mechanic, does digital darkroom and retouching in Photoshop CS, and then sends images to clients.

Corporate clients generally request a labeled and burned disk with proofs (either paper or print). Editorial clients often want images


emailed, but occasionally she is asked to send a disk as follow-up. Crail says her Web-based clients opt for FTP (File Transfer Protocol) transfer and portrait clients can view proofs online, make choices and order custom prints, which she hand delivers. Crail likes online resources for custom printing, such as Miller's Lab and MPIX in Pittsburg, Kansas. She loves the convenience of uploading files and having them delivered to her studio.



Once the job is complete, she archives again to an external hard drive, this time complete with edited/final versions. "In this digital realm you just can't do enough back up!"

Summarizes Crail: "All in all, the melding of art and technology for me has indeed changed my life. It's become my career, my passion, my hobby and my playground."

Margaret Lane is a freelance writer and amateur photographer. She has more than 15 years experience as a corporate communications professional for non-profit, photography and technology clients.



Former Sacramento Monarch's (WNBA) basketball player, Ruthie Bolton, posing in her home for Crail; painting with light technique used

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