



Seconds earlier, this girl was happily sucking on a lollipop. Once the candy was taken away, the waterworks began, and Jill Greenberg snapped her shutter, capturing the moment for her controversial “End Times” series.

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Shiny, Unhappy People

Jill Greenberg, “The Manipulator,” wows her clients, but makes kids cry.

By Laurie Fronek

Studio photographer Jill Greenberg raised the ire of self-appointed child advocates everywhere — or at least in the blogosphere — with her show “End Times,” an unusual collection of images of unhappy children in tears, which opened at the Paul Kopeikin Gallery in Los Angeles last spring.

Using the stylized, shiny-people look sought after by her commercial clients for magazine covers and advertising, Greenberg printed the distressed youngsters larger than life size. Still, she didn’t expect the larger-than-life backlash her work inspired.

Critics, some in photography and others not, reprimanded Greenberg for making the children upset.

Except for Greenberg’s own daughter, the kids were models. They were moved to tears with techniques such as offering and then taking away a lollipop. Greenberg selected and titled the resulting images to comment on the Bush

administration’s policies.

The successful exhibit followed her more popular show, “Monkey Portraits,” at the same gallery in 2004. Her subjects then included not only monkeys but apes — specifi-

cally orangutans, chimpanzees and bonobos. Calm and intelligent, apes tend to be easier to work with than monkeys, who are more skittish, Greenberg observes. “You just have to be patient shooting animals.”



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A precursor to her “End Times” series, Greenberg’s “Monkey Portraits,” shot in 2004, focused on classically posed primates to bring out their eerily human characteristics.

IN THE LOUPE

Location: Studio in Beverly Hills, Calif. (www.manipulator.com). Resides in Los Angeles with her husband and two children.

Number of assistants: Two to three, depending on the job.

Preferred equipment: Profoto, Elinchrome, Mamiya. Although Greenberg says that she prefers to use film to achieve her signature burnished look, she relies on digital image manipulation during production. After all, she is known as “The Manipulator” on her web site.

Clients: Phillip Morris, Proctor & Gamble, Kraft Foods, Target, Microsoft, RCA, Compaq, Polaroid, Dreamworks, Sony Pictures, MGM, HBO, Disney, USA Networks, Discovery Channel, Anheuser Busch, Pepsi, Coca-Cola, Frito Lay, Smirnoff, Seagrams and many others. Her work



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Greenberg poses with an orangutan friend from her “Monkey Portraits” series.

also has appeared in magazines such as *Rolling Stone*, *Interview*, *Wired*, *Spin*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Seventeen* and *Vanity Fair*.

Jill Greenberg

Major awards: *Communication Arts* Photography Annual, *Photo District News* Self Promotion, *Photo District News* Website Design.

Latest assignment: Photographing Christina Aguilera for the cover of *The Advocate*.

Favorite assignment: It’s hard to choose one particular assignment, she says, but top picks include shooting the Dixie Chicks for a *Time* cover story and snapping images for Damon Wayans’ “The Underground,” a sketch comedy series that premiered on Showtime this fall.

Advice for aspiring studio shooters: “You have to work really hard in the beginning — and ultimately, you have to work really hard forever. It’s really competitive. It’s always a bit of a scramble to stay at the top of clients’ minds.”

If the same is true of celebrities, Greenberg doesn't say. But she's in a position to know: She has shot scores of movie and music stars and famous people, among them Clint Eastwood, Jon Stewart, Herbie Hancock, Venus Williams and Jeff Bezos. She also has produced numerous advertising and product images in her characteristic hyperpolished style for clients from Procter & Gamble to DreamWorks to Smirnoff.

That stylized, perfect look

"She's an amazing photographer," says graphic designer Brent Piper of Henderson Bromstead Art. "She's got a great eye."



Piper first worked with Greenberg in 2003 on a photo shoot in Los Angeles for C9 by Champion, a brand of athletic wear sold exclusively at Target. The company wanted

"I don't often make friends with the celebrities, though it might help my career if I did!"

a fashion-forward look, he says, that would appeal to trend-conscious shoppers.

"The way that Jill shoots, and then also manipulates her photography, was perfect for

what we wanted," says Piper. "It gave everything that stylized, perfect look."

In the initial week-long shoot and subsequent product-specific sessions, Greenberg photographed men, women, boys and girls wearing various C9 by Champion garments and holding exaggerated positions designed to communicate motion. Watching men strike odd, over-the-top running poses in their underwear, Piper was a little fearful of what the results would look like, he recalls. But Greenberg's technique made it work.

"That style brought it all together," he says, "and made it more like a piece of art than a product shot."

From the get-go, Piper says, Greenberg has been extremely professional, and has hired a great team of people, such as stylists and make-up artists. "You can tell she's got a trusted group of people she works with to execute her look, and she knows what they're going to do."

"She's the only photographer I've ever worked with who has her own DJ!" adds Piper. At the C9 by Champion shoot, Greenberg brought in someone to spin music and get everybody in the zone, he says.

Piper admires Greenberg's personal artistic projects, too, and remembers seeing one of her large monkey portraits the first time he visited her studio. "It was mesmerizing," he says. "It grabs you. That's so one-step-away-from-human!" The crying children had a similar effect. "They're disturbing," says Piper, "but you can't stop looking at them."

Figuring out the puzzle

Though Greenberg's commercial work typically looks polished to perfection, it varies in other re-

Left: Magazine cover images, such as this one of "Daily Show" host Jon Stewart, shot for *TV Guide*, are becoming Greenberg's specialty. Today, she shoots regularly for *WEST*, the Sunday magazine of the *Los Angeles Times*, and has shot four covers for *Los Angeles* magazine so far in 2006.

spects, from straightforward portraits taken in simple surroundings to over-the-top portrayals of products or concepts using elaborate props or multiple layers. Her shot of comedian Jon Stewart for the cover of *TV Guide* hints at this. The portrait of Stewart, with knife and fork in hand, was fairly straightforward and presented no particular technical challenges, Greenberg says. But the White House-shaped cake he's about to dig into gives the portrait a twist. Prop stylist Peter Gargagliano came up with the idea, says Greenberg.

"He had that made at the Cupcake Café in New York, so it was actually a tasty cake," she says. "I think [the portrait] came out really well. It was fun to shoot Jon Stewart."

The process of collaborating to devise concepts and plan props is one of Greenberg's favorite aspects of both editorial and advertising work. She chooses her prop stylist depending on her needs for a certain shoot. Some bring a lot of ideas to the table and are perfect when brainstorming is called for. Others are best at carrying out Greenberg's exact wishes, so she may call on them if the concept is already developed.

She likes the opportunity to design her subjects' surroundings.

"It's sort of like you become an interior decorator sometimes. You have to keep up on furniture and fashion," she says, which is not hard for her to do because she enjoys it.

For a Post Honeycomb cereal print advertisement, Greenberg and prop stylist Bradley Garlock created a shower curtain, wall tiles, bathmat and soap adorned with Honeycombs motifs to surround a woman soaking in a bathtub of milk and cereal. Garlock had extra-large Honeycombs made for the tub so readers would be able to recognize them in the shot.

For a men's fashion feature in *Maxim*, Greenberg built on the client's idea of using the look of a jigsaw puzzle on top of a see-through table. She added numerous other elements to enrich that concept, including a woman's manicured hand holding a cigarette above the table and her feet seen through the table on the floor. Other items placed on the table tied into content in the fashion shots embedded in the puzzle: Near the image of a young man listening to music on headphones, Greenberg placed a portable stereo and a cassette tape; near the image of a man in black tossing a drink shaker were an empty drink glass and a dollar bill.

"It's fun to figure out the feel and the approach, the style it's photographed in, the lighting style, so it all makes sense together," Greenberg says.

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Elaborate "old-school" set design plays a major role in Greenberg's work, even in today's digital age. For this Post Honeycomb cereal ad, she and prop stylist Bradley Garlock built an elaborate bathroom set, complete with honeycomb shapes on everything from the bathmat to the soap.

For an advertisement for LensCrafters, Greenberg recalls having wardrobe pieces made from the same fabric as the background instead of digitally superimposing the background fabric on the models after the shoot. This is a good example of the problem-solving that goes into executing her shots. For each project, her team must consider various ways to achieve the desired look.

"You have to get your brain around it and figure out what's going to make sense," says

Greenberg — which means what will work best within the allotted budget. "You have to plan really well in advance so [the original concept] doesn't become a problem. It's all about planning."

"Money always has a big part in all of this," she says.

Asking why

Before the "End Times" exhibit and press coverage, one of Greenberg's assistants specu-

lated that the project might be controversial. “It didn’t really occur to me until someone said it to me,” Greenberg explains. “And I said, ‘Yeah, I guess.’”

To her, minor tears are a normal part of childhood. Her daughter cries all the time, she says; parents are told to let children cry themselves to sleep so they learn to self-soothe; and we can’t always give kids what they want to eat or they’d be terribly unhealthy, so simple everyday meal negotiations often inspire wet-eyed tantrums.

But an outraged blogger who goes by the pseudonym Thomas Hawk whipped up opposition to the show, saying Greenberg was “sick” and should be charged with child abuse. Readers posted comments both pro-Hawk and con. “I feel like it was really all started by one person, and then everyone jumped on the bandwagon,” says Greenberg.

The day before an interview for German television, she says, “I didn’t imagine it would be an international controversy.”

Asked about the differences and similarities

between “End Times” and “Monkey Portraits,” Greenberg says, “What I thought about afterward is that neither of them are consenting adults. To me, they are images that I haven’t seen before. I hope to try to do things that are unique.”

“‘End Times’ was immediately successful, though not as successful as the monkeys,” says Paul Kopeikin, owner of the gallery that host-

“Usually for advertising you have an exact brief that you have to follow. But in your personal work, you can follow accidents and see where they take you.”

ed both shows. Although the monkeys merely remind us of ourselves and the children actually *are* us — humans — the monkey portraits are more accessible, he says. But “End Times,” he adds, is more important.

“I think of ‘End Times’ as having a deeper message, and therefore, as more important

than the monkeys, which were really about nothing more than what you saw and the obvious link between us and them,” he says. “With the kids, one is forced to ask ‘Why?’ and that’s always a provocative question.”

Happy accidents

As early as elementary school, Greenberg began developing her artistic style. She’s been taking pictures and drawing since about second or third grade, she says, and at the time was even printing her own images in the darkroom at her private school in Michigan. In fourth grade, she was making animated movies. By the time she started high school, her main artistic influences were the Surrealist painters. She started college

at the Rhode Island School of Design as an illustration major, but once there decided to focus on photography instead.

For Greenberg, each of her forms of art blended with and influenced the others. “It all sort of mixed together for me,” she says.

She hesitates to identify any particular

photographic influence, saying, “I look at everyone’s work.” Being a good photographer is also about looking at real life, she says, and being observant about everything.

You could say this sensibility is what led to both the “Monkey Portraits” and “End Times” series.

“It’s funny, both the monkeys and the kids were an accident,” Greenberg explains. At the end of an advertising shoot that involved a monkey, she decided to take a few portraits. The results were so compelling — “It looked really amazing, it looked so human and interesting and angry,” she says — that she turned what began as an afterthought into full body of work.

Where did she get all the monkeys? “I basically rented them,” she says. “They’re all animal actors.” A handler accompanied each subject, who was persuaded to sit on mark and look into the camera.

“End Times” evolved by chance, as well. While Greenberg was working on a series of images of six- to eight-year-old girls “vamping for the camera,” one of the girls’ little brothers captured her attention. Hanging out on the set, the little boy started crying, and Greenberg thought, “Oh, that’s better!”

“Usually for advertising you have an exact brief that you have to follow,” Greenberg says. “But in your personal work, you can follow accidents and see where they take you.”

On hobnobbing

After RISD, Greenberg spent more than a decade in New York, mainly building her portfolio and working on personal projects. She did some little jobs for newspapers, portraits of musicians and retouching projects to make money. Many of her images were of friends, “basically what I’m doing now — doing people, stylized portraiture,” she explains. Eventually she decided to head west.

“I was sick of living in New York after about 12 years,” says Greenberg, who was born in Montreal. Los Angeles offered more space and a nicer quality of life, and by then she was already working in L.A. regularly.

Although she has photographed many well known entertainers, and her television- and movie-producer husband is “in the business,” Greenberg doesn’t socialize much with the “in crowd” that she shoots. “I don’t often make friends with the celebrities,” she says, “though it might help my career if I did!”

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This photo illustration, shot for *Yahoo Internet Life* magazine in 2000, is typical of Greenberg’s portraiture style: crisp images, shiny highlights, saturated colors and evocative background sets.

Balancing her career and family life can be a challenge. Work sometimes calls her across the country to New York, and she may get anywhere from a day’s notice for a new editorial assignment to a week’s notice for an advertising shoot. She says that with two young children, she has to evaluate each project on a case-by-case basis and sometimes feels pulled in two different directions. But mostly she can roll with it. “It’s going to be harder when my kids get a little older — like, ‘What about my school play?’” she says.

This conflict likely affects other parents,

but especially mothers, in the field, Greenberg speculates. “It’s interesting. There really aren’t that many women working in commercial photography,” she says. “I mean, there are, but there are many more men.”

As to whether there’s any bias toward men in the field, Greenberg says, “I’m sure some of that goes on; I just have no idea. It’s hard for me to know what’s being said when I’m not there.”

A day in the studio

For a typical studio shoot, Greenberg and two to three freelance assistants plan the details of the project in advance, making lists, ordering equipment and, most of the time, renting studio space. On the day of the shoot, a set person gets things arranged, and the assistants begin setting up the lights. When



Left: Greenberg’s many-layered fashion ad for *Maxim* magazine, designed to look like a jigsaw puzzle laid out on a glass coffee table, is remarkable for its subtle details, such as the cassette tape and empty glass that echo the motifs used for both of the models.



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Greenberg arrives, she tweaks things, finalizing the look and getting everything just so. Lest you think she just breezes in, does a cursory check and starts shooting, consider this: “It takes at least an hour to get the lighting where I want it to be — or more like two hours,” she adds, being a little more realistic.

Much of Greenberg’s look rests on her manipulation of light during the shoot to give subjects shimmering, supernaturally perfect skin. “I like things to look maybe *too* good,” she says.

“I have a bunch of different approaches to doing that. I do have certain lighting setups that I’ll go back to over and over again, but I’m always trying new things, too,” Greenberg explains. “Lately I go back to what I call the monkey lighting.” It turns out the setup she used for her subjects from the animal kingdom doubles as beauty lighting, she says.

Greenberg achieves some of her trademark shiny-people look through digital manipulation, but when asked how she does so, she demurs.

She started out shooting on film, and prefers it still. “I like the warmth of it. I like the grain,” she says. “I’m used to it.” After shooting, she scans the images and manipulates them with Photoshop, which she started using about a year after graduating from RISD.

If a client especially wants her to shoot digitally, she has no problem working that way as well. “It’s good when you’re going to do a ton of compositing,” Greenberg says.

Piper says that when he worked with her on the C9 by Champion project, Greenberg was adamant about using film rather than shooting digitally, in order to get the rich quality appropriate for her style. That meant he really had to trust her because he couldn’t see each shot as it was taken. Such trust is well placed: When you see the contact sheets later, he says, “it blows you away.”

Commerce and art

Greenberg encourages aspiring studio photographers to develop their own styles, figure out something new and different that sets them apart, and assemble portfolios. Also, they should think carefully about which equipment they need to buy before they take on the expense.

“To be a successful commercial photographer, you have to do a bunch of things really well,” says Greenberg — business, marketing,

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Greenberg rubs elbows with many show-business clients, such as singer Shakira, seen here in a 2002 Pepsi ad campaign. Personally, Greenberg is more of a homebody, preferring to spend time with her movie-producer husband, Robert, and two young children, Violet and Zed, rather than with celebrities.

trend-spotting (but not necessarily trend *following*, she adds). It helps, too, to lose your ego so that you can do what your clients want.

“She’s the only photographer I’ve ever worked with who has her own DJ!”

— Brent Piper

Then let your commercial work help you afford your personal fine-art projects. Ultimately, both types of work can inform and

support each other, she says.

The key to success in both realms, says Kopeikin, is to be able to compartmentalize to some extent. This includes being clear about the differences between the two types of work and having the discipline to do what needs to be done to serve each. He appreciates Greenberg’s clarity in this and other ways. She has a definite point of view about her personal projects, how big the prints should

be, the edition size, and so forth, he says.

“She has very clear ideas, which I like in an artist,” says Kopeikin. “Jill’s an incredible professional.”

Left: With help from set designer Ethan Tobman, Greenberg shot this humorous image of incendiary comedian Lewis Black at New York’s Milk Studios for a *Fast Company* magazine cover story on customer service.

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