

# JILL GREENBERG

AS CONTROVERSIAL AND OUTSPOKEN AS SHE IS  
IMAGINATIVE AND TALENTED, JILL GREENBERG HAS  
LEFT AN INDELIBLE MARK ON THE WORLD OF  
PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY. HOWEVER, BEHIND THE  
PERFECTED PICTURES LIE STORIES THAT HAVE  
SPARKED DEBATE ACROSS THE GLOBE...

WORDS MATT HENRY / IMAGES JILL GREENBERG







AS THE RICH, CALIFORNIAN SUNLIGHT starts to drain from the palm-pricked boulevards of Beverly Hills, sports cars roar and scurry back to the safety of their gated nests. The stinging heat of the day is quickly replaced by a thick, cradling warmth that licks the bustle into a slurring idle. But listen hard between the lazy, kerb-side clinks of coffee cups and you might just hear the irregular pop of photographic flash. Jill Greenberg is still hard at work photographing the brightest lights of Tinseltown; the megastars of Hollywood.

You don't get to photograph giants of the silver screen like Cameron Diaz, Clint Eastwood, Drew Barrymore, Kiefer Sutherland, Tom Cruise, Whoopi Goldberg and Will Smith by packing up at 3pm for a ranch salad and a dip in the pool. And we bring you just a fraction of Greenberg's line-up. Take a look at her website. Thumbnail after thumbnail hints at countless other celebrity shots, all taken in her hyper-real style. This is a woman on a mission.

But you need more than just hard work to stand out in Los Angeles, for there are myriad others with celebrity scalps on their photographic belts. What sets Greenberg apart, other than the sheer volume of her work, is post-production – the Photoshop polish she applies to each and every face. And it's not just about removing wrinkles and perfecting skin. It's a painterly finish that's growing in popularity in portraiture, seen elsewhere with the likes of Mitch Jenkins, Dave Hill and Andrzej Dragan, albeit in their own distinctive styles.

After a short time on the phone, it becomes clear that Jill is not likely to give up too many of her signature Photoshop secrets. "My husband has a Google marker on my name and tells me about people on the forums trying to recreate the 'Jill Greenberg' effect. The truth is that there is no Jill Greenberg effect. There's no magic formula or filter to apply. It's just about painting over what you've got, dodging and burning here and there. I've been drawing and painting since I was little and went to illustration school after my fine art degree. I think you need to know about colour theory, figure drawing and a little about graphic design.



**BIOGRAPHY** Jill Greenberg is 42 years old and lives in Beverly Hills, California with her husband and two children. She studied Fine Art at university before majoring in illustration and claims it took seven years to go fully pro. "I moved to New York in 1989, aged 22. It's a great place to get started as the city is full of magazines and creative outlets. Things are probably a bit different now; there are no commissions from record companies for a start. I left for L.A. aged 33 and have been here ever since."

Knowledge of make-up and hair styling is beneficial too. But it's mainly about the lighting. You can't do much with an image if the lighting isn't good."

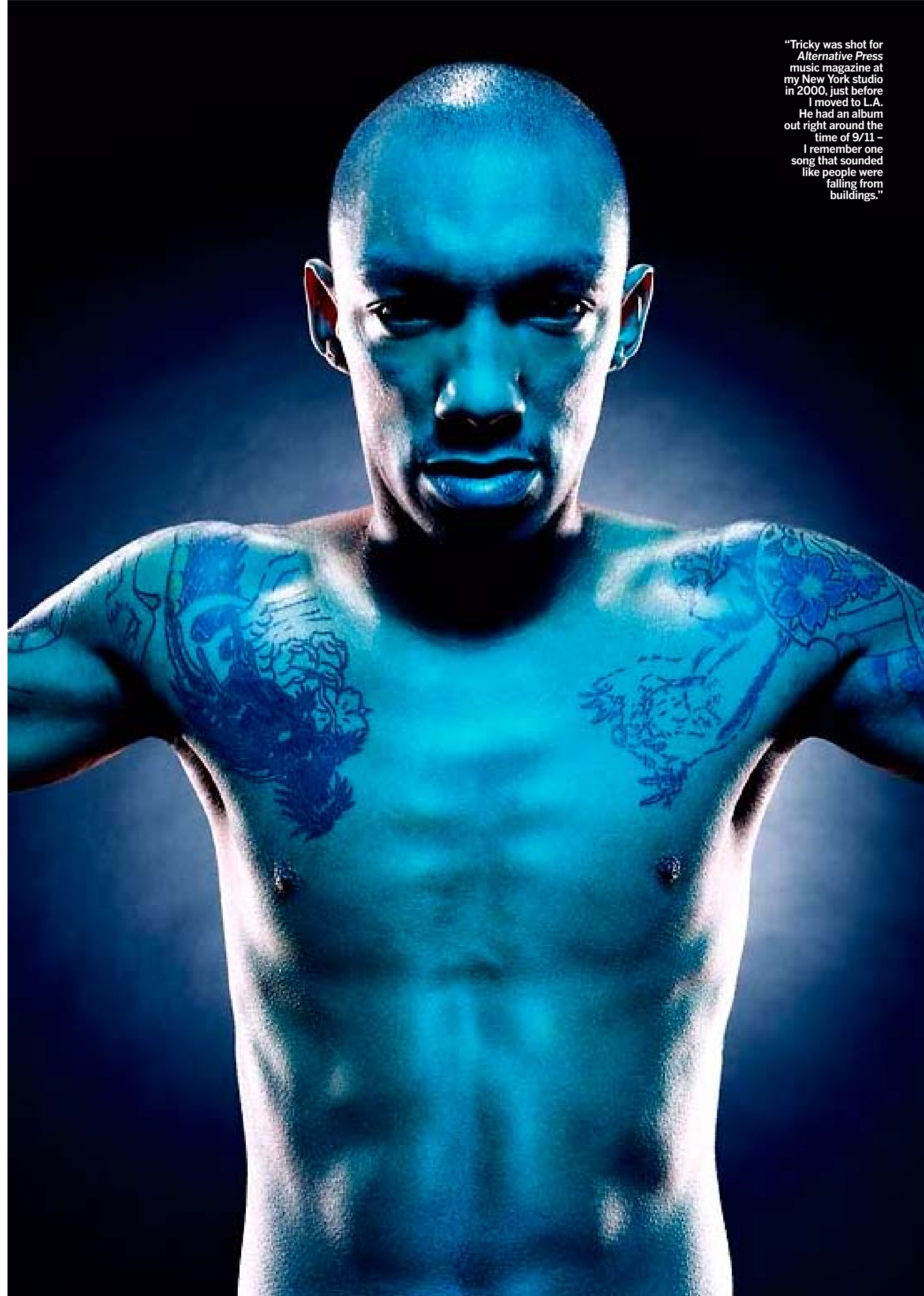
Fortunately enough, Jill's lighting is good, very good. She's perfected a lighting style that separates her subjects from their backdrops, accentuates texture, and gives facial features a wonderfully three-dimensional feel. It's a technique she refers to at her busy studio as 'monkey lighting'. If you look closely at most of her portraits, you'll notice that bright highlight areas commonly appear on the top of the head and at both sides of the face. It's a type of rim lighting that first found popularity in the film industry, where it's still in widespread use. Note too that, despite the lighting on the face being even, it's anything but soft. It still has punch with highlights and shadows enough to rake up all that glorious facial texture.

At the suggestion that the set-up comprises one hairlight from above, two rim lights from each side to the rear, a key light and a ringflash fill-light from the front, Jill is sensibly ►

**OPENING SPREAD:** "My sketch of the Will Smith portrait ended up looking exactly like the shot. I do sketches for all of my shoots but they don't always work out as planned, so it's nice when they do. It was for the movie *I-Robot*."

**ABOVE LEFT:** "Christina Aguilera was shot for gay and lesbian magazine *The Advocate*. We did a whole bunch of shots of her – two different set-ups. This was the complicated one. There were paparazzi helicopters circling the studio!"

**ABOVE:** "David Bowie was shot in New York back in 1989. It was the second time I'd photographed him. He's super nice. It was shot for *Yahoo! Internet Life* magazine. The lines were an allusion to the internet."



"Tricky was shot for *Alternative Press* music magazine at my New York studio in 2000, just before I moved to L.A. He had an album out right around the time of 9/11 – I remember one song that sounded like people were falling from buildings."



"Jada Pinkett Smith is Will Smith's wife and was photographed for *Wired* magazine in 2003. She was in the second *Matrix* film at the time. There was another shot that made the cover with her on a motorcycle. She was in a kind of destroyed environment and we also did multiple images of her on a wrecking ball."



**ABOVE:** "Jeff Bridges was shot in New York for the movie *Sea Biscuit*. I photographed him, the director and another actor with about 15 minutes for each person. The location was a theatre on the Upper West Side."

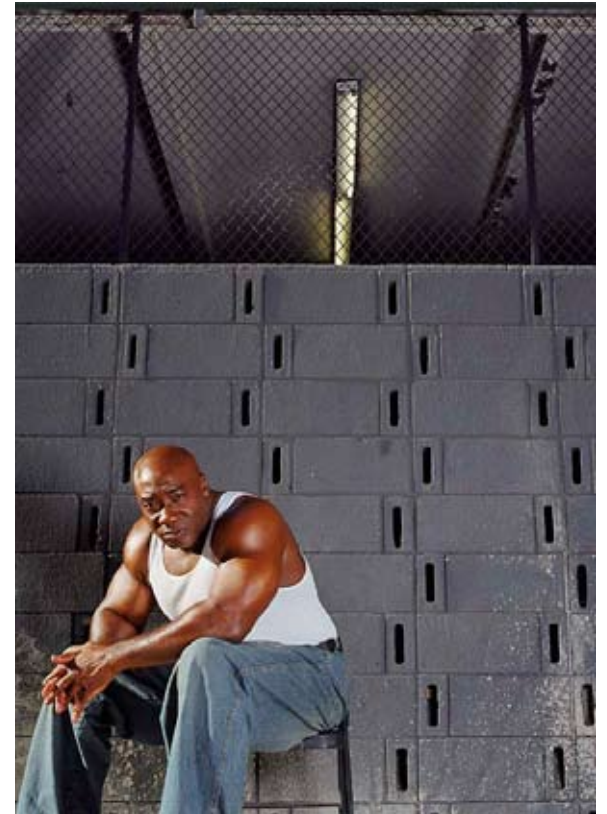
**ABOVE RIGHT:** "Michael Clarke Duncan was shot for *FHM* in Los Angeles. I saw him sitting between takes and it looked really good. He's a super-nice guy. Most people I photograph are very nice actually."

**RIGHT:** "This image of Chris Brown was taken a long time ago – right when he became famous – when his first single was breaking. We were just shooting in the street. Then the cars would come and we'd dive back to the side of the road, and then come back out when the coast was clear!"

coy, admitting only that there are two more lights involved. And she's not afraid to play with that set-up either, sometimes weaving in a beauty dish or an Octabank to soften things up a little. Nor is she afraid to move away from her favoured lighting set-up entirely – she's fond of the giant parabolic Broncolor umbrella, the Para 330, which she uses as a single light source. "People ask me why the lighting budget for a shoot is \$1,700" [£1,000], Jill laughs. "I say: 'Look at all the lights I've got in here; That's why!'"

Despite being a firm favourite with the Hollywood stars, Jill claims not to be a huge fan of celebrity culture. "It's so rampant here in L.A.," she insists. "You go into a store and buy a T-shirt and the clerk will be like, 'Oh Jessica Alba just bought that!' I feel like shouting 'I don't care, I just like the T-shirt!' It's crazy, really, that I live in L.A. I've always had a love of portraits. It's an obsession I've had since childhood. I'd be filling sketchbooks with doodles of faces. Shooting celebrities is a necessary part of what I do. They give any image a kind of automatic gravitas by nature of the fact that the face is recognisable, but it's much more impressive to be able to take amazing pictures of non-celebrities. I do love photographing real people. It's nice not to have to worry about the ego involved, or getting something past a publicist. I've even had celebrities and publicists telling me which lens to use!"

Picture that. You've spent four to five hours setting up all your studio lights, taking readings and tweaking your set-up to perfection, ready for your star to walk in and do their ►



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stuff, straight out. It’s hot, it’s stressful and you’re not only thinking about your focusing and composition, but also how best to get the most out of your subject in the 20 minutes you have before they’ve got to rush to catch a plane. Then their publicist, on hand to ensure their star isn’t talked into anything silly, suggests that you might be better switching to a longer lens. And that the idea you’ve spent hours planning isn’t really what they want for their actor. Jill’s had publicists pulling an idea on the basis of the first shot seen on screen before she’s even got going!

“And that’s the one major drawback of digital,” says Jill. “Shoot tethered and everyone can see what you’re doing. You can get a whole set-up killed before you can even show anything like you had planned. Sometimes, if I know there’s going to be an issue, I’ll use film. Or if the budget’s small I’ll use film to save on camera, computer and assistant hire. I do love film. I’ve got a drum scanner at home to digitise everything, but it’s a lot more labour-intensive. You spend a long time getting rid of dust and other issues. Sometimes I don’t care about the whole tethered thing though. Sometimes it’s fun to turn the monitor to the subject so they can see themselves as you shoot. I want people to feel comfortable when I’m taking their photograph. I don’t want them to think that I’m trying to hide anything.

“You do find that publicists can nick a lot of your ideas if you give them information beforehand about what you’re going to try on shoot. Plus, people tend to over-think things in advance and end up saying ‘no’. I find the best method is not to give people too much information and then have a

**FACING PAGE:**  
“Tom Cruise was photographed for the movie *Minority Report*. I’d got him inside this foamcore box but he never approved the images for syndication, which was a shame. I did another set-up when he was doing flips and acrobatics but I didn’t freeze the motion well enough – I was gutted.”

**ABOVE LEFT:**  
“Arnold was shot in his office in Santa Monica – it was his chair and cigar that were used. He said ‘Oh I didn’t realise there were female photographers. Next time I’ll request one!’ He likes the ladies.”

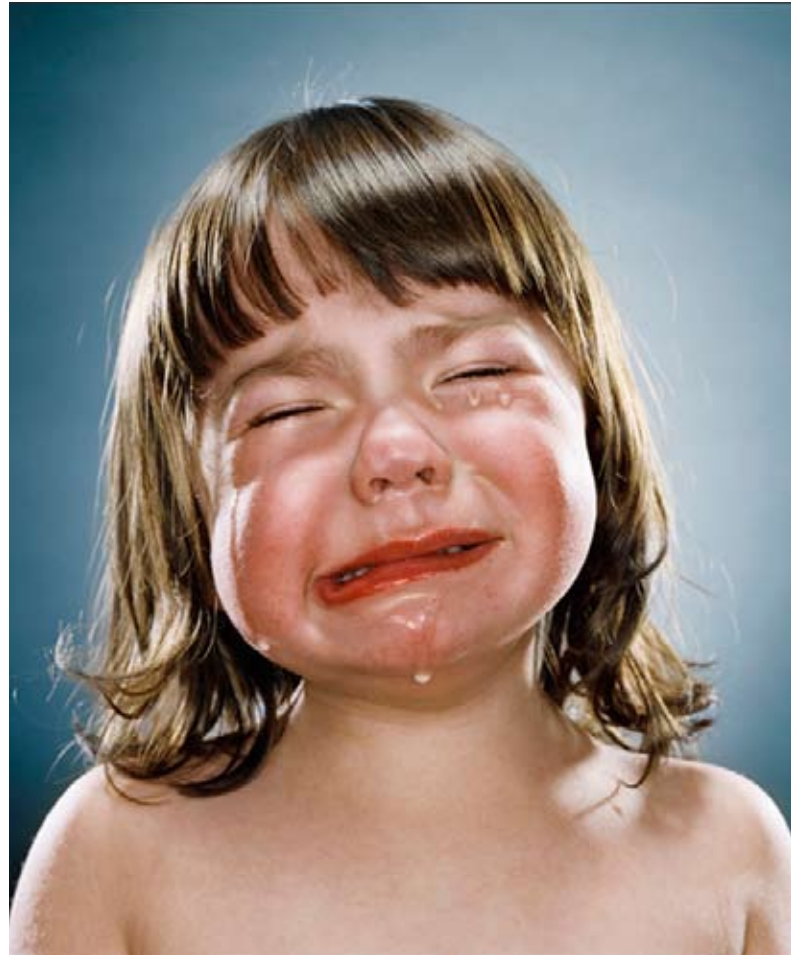
**ABOVE RIGHT:**  
“This shot was all about Lindsay Lohan versus the paparazzi. It was for culture and politics magazine *Radar*. She did her own hair and make-up and was really nice. She was up for working with the ideas we had.”

few ideas on the day to run past them. Lately things have got much simpler anyway. There just aren’t the budgets for big location shoots anymore, so it’s now all pretty standard studio portraiture.”

Despite being known as the ‘manipulator’, the current title of her website, Jill insists that much of her work is actually fairly straight. The title is there to pay homage to an old German magazine of that name. “I guess some of my work is more extreme, and some much more natural. I like different kinds of images. How far I push it depends on the mood I’m in while I’m retouching or, for a paid job, it depends on the requirements of the client. I just don’t want the images to look boring to me or too straight. In the early ‘90s, I spent a lot of time compositing people into locations I could never afford – really graphic locations. I don’t do that too much anymore. I did all sorts of crazy stuff really: projecting images onto people, using reflections from mirrors, layering collages. Lately I’ve been experimenting with underwater photography and would love to have a go at that again. I’m trying to get an underwater assignment so I don’t have to cover the costs myself.”

“I have the same drive to produce something interesting when photographing a subject as when I’m retouching,” claims Jill. “I’m never looking to shoot straightforward portraits. There are always ideas that I’m trying to explore. My childhood sketchbooks were always full of people pulling interesting faces. I’m still always thinking about characters and their expressions. If you meet me you’ll see that I make a lot of faces myself. People say I’m not very ►





good at disguising my emotions. My kids have just started to make all those expressions too! I just love human expression and faces and the lines on faces. To me, that is what's consistent about the work."

And this is what separates good portrait photographers from the bad – the ability to draw out these expressions. A good portrait photographer doesn't just have the technical abilities, be it with Photoshop or lighting, but also the capacity to direct all manner of different personalities to get the required result. "I don't crack jokes on set," says Jill. "I'm not the Austin Powers kind of 'Fabulous, Baby!' photographer. I've given it a go, but it's just not my personality. I tend to be quite quiet on set. I find the best way is just to show people my work on the screen quickly so they know they can relax and leave things in my hands. In some cases, they've already seen my website and are enthused about the shoot. You just have to let their energy take over and try to make them feel comfortable."

But Jill doesn't fall into the old school category of portrait photographers such as the likes of David Bailey, who prize their abilities on capturing someone's essence, a flicker of reality, a window into their soul. "I'm not sure how much a portrait really is a real reflection of a person anyway," insists Jill. "In lots of ways it's more like the reflection of the photographer onto that person – their perception of how someone should look. Sure if you have two or three hours you could build a rapport and really try to delve deeper, but you rarely have that luxury. And if someone's in a bad mood or has been up all night with a three-month old baby, or is on set in the middle of a TV show, there's only so much you can do. It really depends on what that person is going to give you. You've got to hope that you get at least a few great

**ABOVE LEFT:**  
"This image is part of the End Times project that caused so much controversy. It was labelled 'Torture' and was about all the things going on in Iraq. And about the fact that people were saying I was torturing these children by using the lollipops!"

**ABOVE RIGHT:**  
"This is my son Zed. I photographed him as an additional character for End Times as I was pregnant with him during the initial photography. This one was called 'Oil'; again because it's a politically-charged subject but also because he used to call his maple syrup 'oil' when he had it on his pancakes!"

**FACING PAGE:**  
"Simon Cowell was shot for GQ around the time that he was doing American Idol a couple of years ago. I did a few close-ups of him making the funny expressions that he does when he's being judgemental."



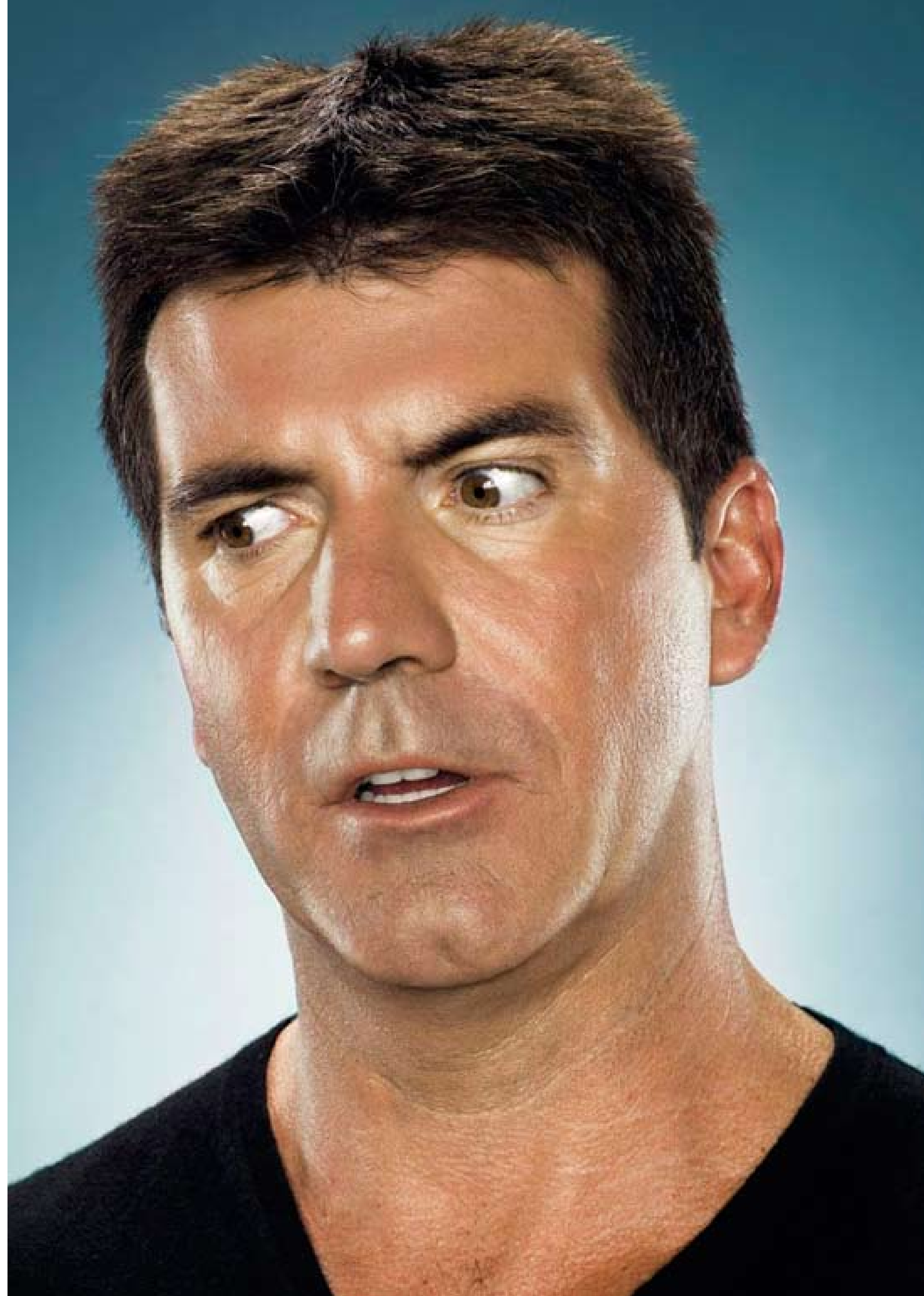
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frames. If someone's going to work with you and really give you their personality, then the picture will be great."

Aside from her magazine and advertising work, Jill also dedicates time to shooting personal projects. She has firmly established herself as a player in the market for fine-art prints with portraiture studies of bears, monkeys, apes, dogs and other assorted animals. Her work on bears and monkeys has been widely exhibited across the USA and both studies have been published in book form. "The monkeys were shot over four or five years," says Jill. "It was the first fine-art series I did. It started as an outtake shoot for a job. Then, I rented monkeys from animal agencies and it grew from there. It's an expensive business; bears even more so. I had to go twice to Canada to shoot the bears and set up stages on location. They were pretty big productions. I shot nearly 100 rolls of film on the first shoot. The bears took two years in total. I did make the money back selling prints and I got an advance for the books that helped to fund the work."

"People don't like me saying it, but children are much cheaper to shoot than animals. You can get them for free or for a couple of hundred dollars from a model agency. The animals are around \$2,500 (£1,500) each. And you need a lot of lighting to freeze the motion. These personal shoots can cost a lot of money. When you're busy with commercial jobs you don't have time to do them, and then when you're not busy, you worry whether you should be spending all the money you've saved on personal projects!"

"There are issues other than the characters of animals and humans that I'm interested in too though," says Jill; "gender politics for one. I once had a fashion assignment shooting synchronised swimmers wearing heels. There was an image taken beneath the water where you could only see ►







**FACING PAGE:** "This big bear was shot outside of Calgary. We built the stage and you can see the marker on the floor that they're trained to stand on. The trainer has a stick with fish on the end that he holds up high so the bear stands to get it."

**ABOVE:** "It's difficult to shoot a fully grown orang-utan as they become very unpredictable and dangerous when three or four years old. We were lucky to get this guy who was around nine years old. He was looking at one of his handlers – apes are very inquisitive."

**ABOVE RIGHT:** "I use a similar lighting set-up for portraits of monkeys and humans."

**RIGHT:** "The Bulldog was photographed for *American GQ* as part of a story on dog collars. It's just a lucky strike really with that expression, as it is for many of the animals."

"It was a crazy and scary period for me, and it took about four months to settle down. It's ludicrous really that people made such a big deal out of it"

the bodies and heels as the heads were coming up for air, which I felt really summed up the male-orientated and fetishistic world that we live in. I called it 'Glass Ceiling' [the term used to describe that invisible barrier of discrimination that stops women advancing in the business world]. I don't know how differently I've been treated as a female photographer, but there are definitely subjects that I think should be left up to women to explore. I recently saw a photographic study of mutilated women in murder scenes, and I really didn't feel comfortable with the fact that a male photographer was objectifying these victims. Being a photographer isn't enough to let you off the hook."

But Jill Greenberg is herself no stranger to criticism, having twice provoked the wrath of journalists and bloggers across the globe with controversial images. Her first taste of infamy followed a personal project of 35 different children, naked from the waist up and crying into the camera – described as a comment on the failures of the Bush administration. The 'End Times' series sparked outrage because it was Jill herself who had made the toddlers cry, giving them a lollipop and then taking it away. Debate about the ethics of her methods raged across the globe, as far as Australia, and even making the cover of the *Sunday Times*.



"It was a crazy and scary period for me, and it took about four months to settle down. Even three years on people are discovering the story. It's ludicrous really that people made such a big deal out of it. Children cry; that's what they do. I have rolls of film where the sobbing children are beaming the next minute. Their parents were next to me the whole time. Crying is just another way they communicate; children cry like 30 times a day. I don't tend to read anything on the internet about myself anymore because of all the negative commentary this series has generated."

"The interesting thing for me is that during this time an advertising agency wanted to use the images for an anti-child abuse ad and I declined. I don't license my fine-art images for commercial use and didn't really want the images associated with child abuse anyway. In the end, they went ▶



"This is Elvis Costello and I was photographing him in New York as part of a billboard promo for his talk show on the Sundance channel. He gave me a quote for my bear book last year. It said: 'This book is smarter than the average bear!'"



#### JILL'S DSLR

When shooting film exhibition work, Jill uses a Mamiya RZ67II with Kodak 160NC film, though she says she's now tempted to switch to the new Phase One P65+ 60-megapixel digital back, which she describes as having tonal gradations as good as film. For her advertising work, she hires a Hasselblad with the Phase One back for the day. The lens she most frequently uses with this camera is the 150mm. Her lighting is also hired, and she tends to stick to either Broncolor or Profoto. She's also recently bought a Canon EOS 5D MkII, which she's using to photograph her kids. She's a Mac user and does all her retouching using a Wacom graphics tablet.

**ABOVE:** "This was the second attempt to get Jonny Rotten for *Rolling Stone*. He didn't show up to the shoot in San Francisco because he was apparently ill. They didn't run the pictures for two years, which is so frustrating as you can't show them or use them until they're published."

**ABOVE RIGHT:** "Jason Lee of *My Name is Earl* fame was shot for *Stuff* magazine in L.A. He was pretty cool. A lot of actors grow beards when they're between jobs to be a little inconspicuous. It's annoying for the photographer as you're like, 'so you don't look like you normally do.'"

**RIGHT:** "This is Sacha Baron Cohen shot around the time of the release of *Borat*. It was for *American Maxim*. The art director had loads of ideas but Sacha wasn't too keen on any of them so we stuck with something simple."

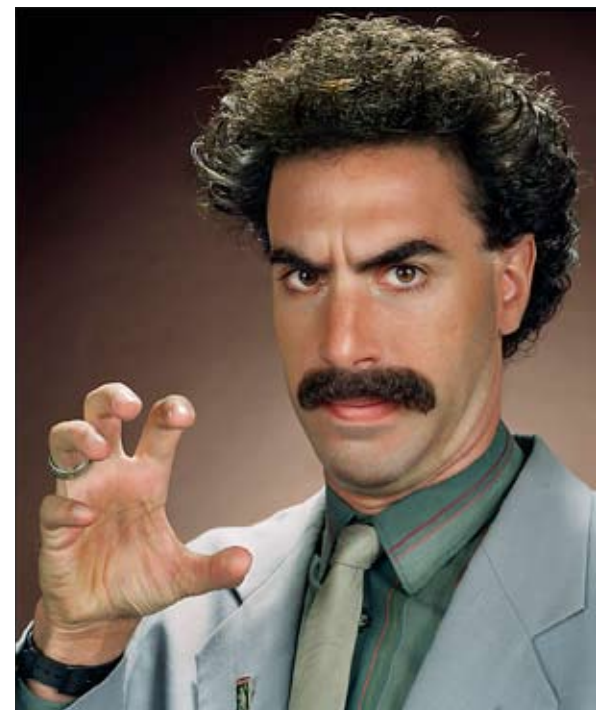


"It's not unusual for these agencies to come to you and say: 'We want to hire you to reproduce your idea, but if you don't come back to us with a lower price, we'll just get someone else to copy it'"

ahead and copied the work in a print campaign. The agency is part of a huge multi-national conglomerate and if I pursued any action I'd probably be blackballed by a whole section of agencies. As an artist you really don't have the power to defend your copyright. You can do it, but you might never work for the guys again. I have children to support. They have staff lawyers and I don't. I still have anger about it. It's not unusual for these agencies to come to you and say: 'We want to hire you to reproduce your idea, but if you don't come back to us with a lower price, we'll just get someone else to copy it.' There really are no scruples whatsoever."

The second Greenberg controversy surrounds the doctored pictures of John McCain that Jill temporarily posted on her website, following a legitimate photoshoot of the Republican Senator who, at the time, was challenging Barack Obama in the US presidential election. As a photographer who works regularly for large, multi-national companies, she claims to be far from radically political, but admits that she felt it necessary at the time to stir things up. "Sure I shoot for these companies. I'll take their money. I'll photograph kids smoking cigarettes if they pay me enough," she laughs, and not without a hint of irony following the scandal of the End Times project. "I'm not anti-fur. I don't pretend to be a radical, but we'd had eight years of the Bush administration that had done serious damage to our country. I think Obama really has a lot of work to do."

Again the scandal raised interesting questions about the role of art and photography and Greenberg was lauded for her refusal to shy away from controversy as much as she



was berated for a supposed lack of professionalism. It's interesting that the public at large is willing to absorb imagery when it's doctored in a positive light (which the whole advertising industry relies upon) but doesn't show the same stomach for the negative. And all of this despite a long tradition of political cartoons lampooning politicians in the most cruel and unimaginable ways. Whether or not you agree with her methods, you can't deny that her work has stimulated debate in an era of relative moral and political apathy. And it's difficult to imagine that the critics have done too much to dampen Greenberg's bellicose spirit. Fingers crossed that there's as much photographic hell-raising to follow as there is glorious portraiture. ■