



# FASHIONING *a successful* BUSINESS:

natasha lee

By Alice B. Miller

IN A RELATIVELY SHORT TIME, LOS ANGELES FASHION SHOOTER NATASHA LEE HAS BUILT QUITE AN IMPRESSIVE PORTFOLIO. Only three years ago, while a sophomore at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles, she earned an internship with a big commercial production company. That internship proved most fortuitous.

“I thought to myself, “This is it. Filmmaking is what I want to do,” recalls Natasha. “But as I started researching commercial and film directors, I found that most whose work I liked had been professional photographers at one time. I started shooting stills and loved it, especially the immediacy. I visualize a style and shoot it right away, whereas movies are more of a process, never as quick.”

Pursuing her interest in still photography, Natasha was drawn to fashion because for her, it’s much like filmmaking—telling a story with high-impact images. “I love fashion. It’s what inspires me. I like to create imagery rather than documenting events or places, so that’s why I am drawn to fashion rather than photojournalism,” she explains. Today, she focuses on growing her still photography business. Her top 10 clients keep her busy, with seasonal fashion work and year-round editorial assignments.

## Developing Her Style

Borrowing elements from film, Natasha has developed a style she describes as “moody and a bit staged, but certainly not over the top.” She likes each image to be expressive. “I look for a story in each frame. I want someone to look at each one of my images and uncover something new—layers of different things going on,” she says.

An ongoing relationship with *Audrey*, a monthly Asian women’s magazine based in California, has been instrumental in building both her portfolio and professional profile. Fresh from an all-day shoot for the magazine’s February cover story with Lindsay Price, who plays a fashion designer on NBC’s new TV series *Lipstick Jungle*, Natasha shared valuable insight into her shoot-day strategy.

“*Audrey* gives me a lot of creative freedom,” she says. “For the Lindsay Price assignment, we styled the shoot around the fashion designer character she plays on *Lipstick Jungle*. I was free to choose the location, the lighting and the mood. I’m involved in every detail of the shoot, especially hair, makeup and wardrobe. I do research and prepare reference sheets to be clear on the direction I am giving my team. I feel like I am a huge part of the look; I want to bring all of those elements together.”

In addition to all of the planning that Natasha puts into a shoot, she credits working with the same team most of the time for her production success. “We’re really comfortable with each other, which helps the celebrities feel comfortable too, so it generally ends up being a fun collaboration,” she says. “I have breakfast with the models in our little breakfast area and I talk to everyone; it is very casual. I’ll explain what we’re doing, what the goal of the shoot is and what it will look like. Because I am enthusiastic, everybody seems to catch on and is inspired. Often they’re from the same agency or know the same people. The business is small and we are all friendly with each other.”

### Shoot-Day Strategy

Most shoots are all-day events, some running eight hours from start to finish. It’s rare that Natasha gets her first shot off before two hours into production. “I always aim for less, but hair and makeup always take a while,” she says. To create the moody, soft lighting that’s essential to her signature look, she blends ambient and strobe light.

“I like the lights to look as if they are coming from a single source, say, from a window, to really enhance the subject,” she says. “For example, for a shoot we did with Lindsay in a loft, I wanted the cover image to be in front of the window, so I had an Octabank [an eight-sided, seven-foot softbox], in front of her. I wanted it to appear as if the sun was coming through the window, so we rigged a backlight—a Hensel head with a reflector and a grid—so



you could see the edge hitting her hair.”

Typically, Natasha selects the models and the shoot locations. “I have an idea of the look that I want so I tell my agent what I am looking for, and he sends me the model profiles online,” she says. “I weed them out from there, then meet with the final three candidates to finish the weeding-out process. So by the time the shoot starts, I’ve already met the models, and the newness has worn off.”

Natasha avoids repeating locations, even those she likes, to prevent the final images from looking similar. “I often drive around looking for the right site,” she says. “For the February *Audrey* shoot, for example, I drove

downtown to find urban influences. I also find locations through friends and referrals.”

Natasha shoots mostly with the Canon EOS-1D Mark II because clients prefer it, but most of her portfolio images were captured with a Mamiya RZ67 AFD. “Five of the six images *Audrey* selected for the February issue were shot with my RZ,” she says.

The February feature was shot about 90 percent in film, a judgment call by Natasha, who felt that Lindsay’s personality fit better with film. After the shoot, she gave her client the proofs to choose selects, then prepared a digital file after completing all of the retouching. For those jobs captured digitally and on film, she sends the proofs out for scanning, and when she thinks the client is about to receive them, she puts the digital files online so they can be



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viewed simultaneously.

In addition to the variety that comes from shooting digitally and on film, Natasha likes shooting indoors and out. “For the Lindsay shoot, I did inside shots with the wood and brick, then we went outside to get the valley skyline. I have a lot of window shots to get both indoor and outdoor scenes in the picture. I love sky,” she says.

It would seem that having film and digital capture indoor and outdoor lighting would make harmonizing the different lighting daunting. Not for Natasha, whose strategy is to balance everything with day-

light. “I set the temperature. I rarely use CTO balancing gels, but if I need to, I’ll put in a half or a quarter of blue or orange, depending on what I need to balance out. I’ll set the white balance on my Canon EOS, which has extensive white-balance settings. With our Mamiya RZ67 AFD, we use Polaroid film.”

#### Winning Business Strategy

Listening to Natasha, you sense an underlying easygoing approach to photo shoots and everyone involved—staff, clients and talent. How does she build this

comfortable rapport? For the models, she always has food around (one of the most important things to have on a shoot, she says) and watches for signs of discomfort. “If a model’s or celebrity’s facial expression tells me she is getting tired, cold or overheated, I’ll ask if she wants to sit, would like a sweater or needs some cool air,” she says.

How does she earn clients’ confidence? By being organized, prepared and accomplishing whatever she promises.

“We have preproduction meetings and I have a schedule of what is going to happen and when. I arrive early, and we have good dialogue. I make sure I know exactly what the client is looking for, and I always follow up after the shoot,” she says. “For the shoot day, I prepare for the details, like good food and parking. I interpret the client’s direction and communicate it to my team. Also, I try never to go over the time allotted for a specific shoot.”

With her 10 top clients, editorial work is steady and fashion work is seasonal. “When




there is down time, I update my book and my website, and do some personal work," she says "I have good relationships with the modeling agencies, so if I find a model I really like, I'll ask to do a promo piece for her. Right now I'm reprinting my book, updating my website, coming up with a new promo concept and thinking of who I want

to pursue next."

Natasha says she's been fortunate getting celebrity clients for editorial assignments, either through the magazine or the publisher. "I did pursue Camille Mana, who's done a number of indie films and has two studio movies coming out this April. I found her website, sent her an email and wound up

doing some PR photographs for her," she says. "I was shooting for a different magazine at the time, and I pitched her to them, making it easier for both of them to say 'yes.'"

Not surprisingly, Natasha has a clear picture of where she wants to be in five years: "My goal is to shoot high-fashion campaigns for trendy companies, such as Absolut. I would like a dual career with commercials and still photography—some of my favorite shooters do both—shooting print ad campaigns, as well as 30-second spots." 

## The Secrets of Her Success

In three short years, photographer Natasha Lee has developed a strong, effective business strategy that can serve as a helpful guide for new photographers:

- ✓ Anticipate and be prepared for anything that could possibly happen.
- ✓ Arrive with extra gear. "Half the things I bring I don't actually use, but I bring them just in case," she says.
- ✓ Know what look you want for the shoot.
- ✓ Think of all logistical details. Things like hot food and ample parking spaces make a huge difference for a shoot's overall comfort level.
- ✓ When possible, hire the same working staff—familiarity is key.
- ✓ Make your own business and marketing decisions, such as who you want to shoot for, what kind of promos you send, how to use emails to target clients and how to design and update your website.

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