

More of Tate Tullier

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Coffee Shop Notes

Sara Stallard

CSN: According to yourself & several of your clients, you photograph a lot in places that, to the untrained eye, have no apparent beauty or interest, bushes and parking garages, yet the light in your photographs is full of depth and mystery. What techniques do you employ in finding the right light for your subjects and backgrounds? Any particular approach you use?

TATE: I try not to stress on backgrounds because it is the person that's the focus of the picture, so what better way to capture them? By using urban settings or bushes/dead trees, it adds the intrigue to the composition itself and the subject pops up more. For the lighting, I only shoot on natural light in most cases, because I find that, through experience, it captures the right shadows and feel for the shot. I'm always careful because if I don't do it right, then it could be a disaster! I usually go with my gut instinct and after many years, I can tell when it's "right." No light meters or anything! On my camera, I do have a small meter letting me know the light is "assumed to be right" but it's not always the best way to go—I just go with my gut instinct. Sometimes, I want one shot darker than the other, one more "overexposed," so I just play around with it.

CSN: In understanding that you shoot on commission and that you like to bring out people's personalities, do your models or subjects ever express wishes as to how they would like to be portrayed? How candid is this dialogue?

TATE: Yes, I shoot on commission if people request to be photographed. I do like to bring out people's personalities—it all depends on what the pictures are for. Some people want simple portraits to give to their parents or someone in their life. I try to apply my twist to it yet staying true to what they want. I rarely get someone who tells me shot by shot, what they want. But I am always open to their ideas and combining them with mine. Two heads can be better than one sometimes.

CSN: Do people ever tell you to hide their fat or that big mole or something?

TATE: Yes, some people can be insecure about their weight but I always assure them that I do my best to give them photographs they are pleased with. I prefer being candid with my clients because it gives the shooting that comfortable feel to it.

CSN: Your clients—are they ever surprised by the results?

TATE: Yes, many people are—especially those who do a "shoot" for the first time. I've been surprised by people who request them because they don't seem the type to want pictures done of themselves—so that's the most fun sometimes. Just seeing their faces brighten up when they see that they can actually look good in pictures!

CSN: Do you ever find yourself submitting photographs to your client which, by your standards, may be unsatisfactory to yourself, but acceptable to the client? How do you think this might reflect upon you as a photographer who is committed to high aesthetic standards, and what do you do in order to maintain the quality of your work in the public sphere?

TATE: Yes, there have been times when I'm not pleased with my work—I can be hard on myself. I do give them to the client anyway because for THEM, they'd be satisfied. If there is a set that I absolutely don't like or due to camera malfunctions, I do a re-shoot. That has only happened 5 times in 10 years maybe. I had a weekend where I did 10 shoots, and my camera was broken at the time. So I had to re-shoot all, but that was fine—they were pretty understanding. Thank god!

CSN: In working with your subjects, such as for the Spring 2003 YOU edition of the Buff and Blue news magazine at Gallaudet University, or for other projects, what unforgettable experiences have you had?

TATE: Oh boy, so many to think of! Really every shoot has its certain memory that I keep on it. Every person is so different, so many different kinds of memories I will cherish. Let me think...
...Yes, one funny story. I was shooting one girl in front of Chapel Hall on the stairs, and we used a head bandana as a "tube top" and when she was posing for the shot, she put her arms up on a railing and one millisecond later, the bandana got undone and she flashed me! This certain girl is considered very conservative so she was a bit bashful but we had a good laugh out of it. I get many people who tell me they feel really comfortable around me so they don't feel embarrassed about certain things that they would around other photographers. People tell me, "I normally wouldn't do nude sessions, but for you I will!" So that's definitely a compliment because photography for me is FUN and I want my subjects to have fun! I love it when they want to be "another person." That's a thrill for me as a portrait photographer because I can apply emotion and fashion into those kinds of shoots.

CSN: Is there anything else you'd like to add or share about yourself?

TATE: I am currently trying to find my niche in the photography world, and sometimes question what I should be focusing on. But, the more I shoot—the more I find that I'm the kind of photographer that feels best when I shoot whatever I am in the mood in general. So I am probably going to be one of those who aren't known for only portraits, but also a mix of erotica, fashion, emotion, documentary, scenery, and among many other things in life. I hope at least!

CSN: How do you balance that with fulfilling obligations toward your clients—whim versus expectation?

TATE: I usually get lucky with clients, they place all their trust in me - and that means a lot.

CSN: Oh yes, definitely. Thank you very much for sharing!

TATE: OK, no problem! Of course I enjoyed it. My 15 minutes of fame!

CSN: One of many 15 minutes!

TATE: Haha—thanks!

This interview was conducted over AIM, and presented with minimal editing for clarity. For more of Tate Tullier, please visit www.tatetullier.com and enjoy his autobiographical introduction as well as a fine selection of his portraiture and other work.