



Visual Arts

Blurred lines, indeed.

The Vision of Jeremy Cowart

by Jaylyn Carlyle

Jeremy Cowart hated photography, nearly failing his required college course. Or rather, he says, he found it intimidating . . . scary, even. Technicalities like the f-stop and gallium photodiode seemed daunting, if not out of reach.

Since then, Cowart has not only made peace with the medium, he's developed a uniquely idiosyncratic signature and built a globally recognized brand around it. He boasts an overwhelming portfolio, replete with marquee celebrities (Ryan Seacrest, Emma Stone, Pastor Joel Osteen), iconic companies (Sony Records, *Rolling Stone*), and giant media outlets (ABC, FOX, *The New York Times* and *USA Today*). Dubbed "The Most Influential Photographer on the Web," he holds the attention of more than 45,000 Instagram followers, 157,000 Twitter followers, and over 1.5 million Google+ followers. Other accolades include winning the Celebrity TwitChange campaign in 2011 and mentions in *Forbes*, *TechCrunch* and *Mashable*, to name a few.

Celebrating his 10-year anniversary in April 2015, Cowart paused to meditate on those early years and just how far he's come. Looking around, it's a place he never expected.

Cowart's relationship with photography changed while he was running his graphic design company, Pixelgrazer. It was during this time that he received the best advice of his life: "Buy a digital camera." From that moment, everything changed.

Initially, he sought to capture texture images for work: floors, brick walls and the like. "It got me out into the world, instead of behind a computer all day—made me use my eye in a different way than design did." **With every snap, Cowart fell deeper in love. He had no idea what he was doing or where it would take him, but he says, "I knew it was what I had to do."**

Eventually, people came into the picture—literally. Cowart gained a confidence behind the lens and expanded his talent by shooting his friends, who happened to be musicians. When they got signed and went to record labels, he went with them, doing everything from website design to photography. "It took off from there. It was a very organic, natural process. One thing led to another," he says.

His journey reads like a mythical artist's success story, with doors opening magically at every turn. Case in point: Cowart found his former agent, Caryn Weiss, after beating her out for a high-profile assignment. One signed deal later, she immediately had him in Hollywood shooting celebrities. He went from "zero to 60" within his first year.

Reality set in during a \$12,000, three-day shoot in New York City for Steven Delopoulos and Universal Records. "It was the first time I felt like, 'OK, this is real,'" he laughs, remembering that he shot the whole session with a 3-megapixel camera.

"Now, I know how to appreciate it. At the time, I didn't know how lucky I was," Cowart says. "But now, in hindsight, I realize I was very, very lucky . . . the 'right place at the right time' kind of thing. Because it's hard to get agents, it's hard to get into those positions, but I fumbled my way into it."

"Nice pictures don't build a career . . ."

However, the ease of Cowart's nonchalant success doesn't discount deservedness. His style, intoxicating at the very least, conjures a quality of ethereal luminosity that seems as tangible as the subject(s) photographed. "It's easier than ever to take a nice picture, but nice pictures don't build a career. It's about your expression and your voice within that creativity," he says. Cowart's



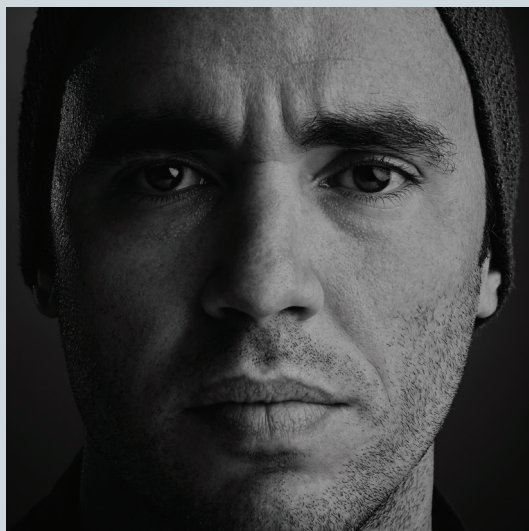
technique developed effortlessly, a byproduct of mixing what he's drawn to and his passions. "You do your thing," he says, "and it is what it is."

Photographing people presents numerous challenges, which Cowart enjoys. Insecurities, egos, age, celebrity teams all require considerations that ensure no two shoots are the same. Out of the many individuals with whom he's worked, Cowart's favorites to date include Sting, Kelly Clarkson (who's "a dream to work with"), and British recording artist Imogen Heap. "She and I can just work together without even communicating," he says. "We're just on the same page and don't even have to talk. We just do our thing."

According to Cowart, the only time he's disappointed is when he's hired to exercise creativity, then stifled during the process. "I've done shoots where we've done the most creative thing ever and at the end they have us shoot on a blank wall. And those are the images that are released to the world. Meanwhile, the world doesn't know the shoot was way, way cooler than that." He admits it's frustrating. "At times, I want my name to be pulled off the project."

Pinning down Cowart's initiatives outside the studio requires significant stamina and attention. The man has his hands in a constant rotation of humanitarian and business projects—none of which takes place on a small scale. "It's always nerve-racking to do something new and start over. But I kinda love that . . . career-wise and literally, **I love that moment of jumping off a cliff and hoping for the best. Thankfully, I have a wife who's been willing to jump off with me.**"

On the humanitarian front, he founded Help-Portrait, which affords photographers the opportunity to give back. To date, nearly 170,000 photos have been given by volunteers



in over 56 countries. In 2010, the Haitian earthquake compelled Cowart to raise awareness by traveling to the devastated country and documenting the stories of the displaced for his photo essay “Voices of Haiti.” Then, working with the As We Forgive Rwanda Initiative, he captured the genocide killers and survivors side by side—an emotional testament to humanity’s limitless capacity for forgiveness. “I like to use my work to try to help people and inspire people. I see it all as a way to give back.”

Turning Art Into Business

Businesswise, Cowart covers a lot of ground, a motivation that he says is fear-driven. “Photography is very unreliable. There’s no promise of work tomorrow,” he says. For this reason, Cowart believes creatives need to

diversify their income streams, and he suggests business school. “You’ll learn the creative stuff out of the passion for it, but you’ll never learn the business stuff unless you force yourself.” He estimates that out of his time, only 5 percent is actually creative. Cowart says, “I feel very much like a CEO that gets to create sometimes.”

Two of his main efforts are OKDOTHIS and See University. The social network community OKDOTHIS, featured in *Fast Company*, came about when Cowart thought there should be an idea pool that interrupted a photographer’s creative block. He has used the site himself and says, “The creativity in there is mind-blowing, for sure.”

See University, Cowart’s current main focus, is his newly launched membership-based online platform comprising 80 tutorial videos, including everything from posing to the light

room. “It’s basically a video brain dump of everything I know.” After losing his brother to a heart attack, Cowart became fascinated with the idea of documenting his knowledge for the benefit of friends, family and especially his children. “Now, it’s a business that actually takes care of my family,” he says.

Cowart doesn’t go it on his own. He recognizes the many individuals each project requires, stating he couldn’t do it by himself. See University alone employs upwards of 15 people. “I’m just the idea guy,” he says.

Still, Cowart continues to inspire onlookers and expand his influential reach with equal parts authenticity and innovation. As a prolific producer of both content and projects, he has his finger on the pulse of creativity. “I would define it with one other word, which is ‘freedom.’”