

At 13, Hugh Kretschmer was given a Pentax SLR, and a lifelong passion was born. Describing himself as a Photo-Illustrator, this L.A.-based artist's work is at times surreal, occasionally shocking, and always clever, often bridging the gap between fine art and commercial work. Kretschmer says that pursuing his passion was not always easy, and there were times he struggled even to find enough change for food. Below, Kretschmer reveals what sustained him, the moment when he first felt like a whole artist, and what he loves most about Photography.



*I understand your father introduced you to Photography. He was an engineer for McDonnell-Douglas, photographing and filming rocket launches for NASA. Can you describe what it was like growing up with this access? When did you take your first photograph?*

*What was the first camera you ever used?*

When I was thirteen my father gave me a Pentax SLR and a few lenses and invited me into his darkroom, which was a converted, cinder block bomb shelter outside our house. There he took one of my negatives and showed me how to make a black and white print from it. The magic started the very moment that image began to appear in the developer and has not waned since.

As far as Dad's work is concerned, I thought it pretty geeky until about my late teens, when I realized how important his contribution to space travel really was. At that point I couldn't get enough, and we would get together in his office to rehash the glory days of the Apollo missions, chasing solar eclipses in air force jets or slowing movement in rocket engines with ultra high-speed cameras. I mean, this guy supervised work on the very first retrievable capsule that was sent into space and safely brought its payload back to Earth — a motion picture camera. It photographed a weather balloon reaching the outer Earth's atmosphere and bursting. The next day, *The New York Times* published a three-image sequence of the event on the cover with his name underneath it. The accompanying article heralded the event as a success and the crucial first step in sending a man into space. Eleven years later he sat us all down in the living room to watch Neil Armstrong take his first step on the moon. My dad did his best to hide his tears, but I knew what they were about.

*Who were your other creative influences growing up?*

I had one book by Jerry Uelsmann that my dad gave me as a gift. I remember being mesmerized by the Photography and wondered how he assembled his montages so seamlessly. His work proved to me there was no limit to realizing my imagination, and set the bar as far as I was concerned. I still have that book, and while living in New York I had the opportunity to hear him speak at a convention. He was quite a bit grayer than his picture on the back cover, but he was still holding true to his technique, despite the advances of digital imaging. Afterward, I sent him some prints of my work and a letter telling him what an impression his work had made on my career. I included his book, which I asked him to sign. He not only replied with kind words and a signature, but with a copy of his most recent book. I store that first book in archival plastic.

*After graduating from Art Center College of Design, you did commercial and reportage work and became a finalist for an elite National Geographic internship. How did you make the transition to your current photographic style? Did the earlier work benefit your current projects?*

When I graduated from Art Center I wanted to do illustrative still-life, but found myself only landing very straight-forward assignments. It seemed there wasn't really a market for what I wanted to do. The way I was shooting things wasn't creatively satisfying. I quickly realized I was shooting what I thought everyone else wanted me to shoot, and that wasn't working personally or professionally. This was the first juncture of my career, requiring me to re-evaluate what I really wanted to do. Having some success in school with Photojournalism, I decided to give it a try by traveling to Asia for three months. It was a very fulfilling experience on many different levels, and I liked what I did there. I put a boundary on my decision when trying for the internship — if I didn't make it, I would go back to what I was really trained to do, commercial still-life — this time, however, with a different philosophy: shoot what you love.

I did a little soul searching, realized I had a passion for early 20th century art and began experimenting with assemblage and collage coupled with graphite and airbrush on a large light table. The technique evolved into a portfolio of images like no one had ever seen before. The pictures were derivatives of the Cubist, Dadaist, Constructivist, and Bauhaus movements, but with modern themes and related iconography. This was the launching point of my career and the first time I felt like a whole artist. *But you continued to face challenges?*

On the flip side, I had a lot of questions and fears about the work and its applicability in the marketplace. Yes, it was freeing creatively, but could

I earn a living shooting this way? I was taking a huge gamble, spending a lot of money and time with no guarantees. Although there was a lot of positive interest from Art Directors from the outset, no one quite knew how to apply the work to a project, and for quite a while there were no jobs, eventually forcing me to use the spare change I had stored in a novelty liquor bottle just to eat.

Around that time, three jobs came in from Designers who wanted to work with me. They had no idea how to art direct me, so instead, they gave me a few descriptive words and a lot of faith. The resulting images were very successful and are some of my favorites. Those projects led to others and things took off for me professionally, eventually getting to the point where I could not keep up with the demand, and I found myself being asked to repeat things I'd done before, simply because of the nature of the market and types of clients who could use conceptual, cubistic still life. That led to another re-invention, as I transitioned from solely shooting objects to incorporating people and environments into my images. This required a pretty drastic shift from the cubistic influences of my past. I created a large personal series called *Gastronopolis*, about a beautiful alien woman who, after trying various ways of assimilating upon her arrival to Manhattan, realizes what she really wants is to eat the city to sate her needs. This series formed the new basis for my portfolio direction and allowed me to start working with a much more diverse range of clients than I had before. Even though I moved away from cubistic-styled work, I think my photographs still carry an undercurrent of my early influences.

*Where do you think your best ideas come from? And how long do you generally mull an idea over before execution? Days, weeks, months?*

I cannot possibly pinpoint a particular event or sighting that stemmed a successful idea, but when I am feeling stuck, the best place for me to go to is a museum. I experience a recharging there and am often very quiet afterward and in my head. I don't usually carry a sketch book when I go, but do have one close at hand at any given time, generally. It is filled with ideas for future photographs, and the best ones eventually get on film, time and money permitting. At this point there is a backlog, and many have only been in the sketch phase for years now.

*How would you describe your style as a Photographer?*

I think Photo-Illustrator better describes the genre of Photography I do. I have a hard time describing my style because I am perhaps too close to it and cannot see it for what it is. So, I will talk about what I do, if you don't mind. I love my job because for the most part my clients come to me to solve their visual problems. It is challenging and satisfying at the same time because the onus is on me to find the right solution, but so rewarding when it is successful. My work is concept driven, and the finished photo has to say something beyond its surface of composition and light and tell a story. I like to describe it as an additional layer that invites participation from my audience.

*Your photographs are not limited to any one look or feel. They're sometimes playful, sometimes dark, and very often dreamlike. How do you maintain this range?*

I was fortunate enough to learn early in my career that sticking to one particular style or look was a slow death, creatively as well as financially. It was not how I envisioned my career path, and of all the things I changed, the most profound was my philosophy — not to be married to a particular style, but to find the appropriate solution to the visual problem. It felt like I was treating my subject with more respect instead of forcing it into a place where it doesn't necessarily fit.

My sensibilities connect the images together. I like humor, I appreciate surrealism and I'm attracted to ugly. It's also all the little subtleties — lighting, color choices, and mood — that seem to be consistent and are the common threads. I also see my work going through phases or periods. Right now I am experiencing a desire to shoot images with human body parts in them. It sounds a little Jeffrey Dahmer, but I think I have been treating the images lightly, and as a result, they are more palpable than gross. It feels like I just have to get it out of my head, into my sketch book and on to film. The sooner the better.

*What drives your work — the joy of experimentation or creation, the story you're trying to tell, etc.? What is your creative philosophy?*

What drives me is the next project. I notice I get very excited — a





little gleam in my eye — when the call comes in. I think it is because the project offers hope for new possibilities. *Please describe how you create images. What's your process?* Most of my work is editorial based, and I illustrate fiction and nonfiction stories. The way the assignment unfolds is I am first presented with a manuscript of the article and asked to come up with an opening image. Sometimes the Art Directors have an idea or two of what they want, but mostly they are looking for my take on it. I will present a written or verbal description of my idea first and see how they respond to it. This gives the Art Director an opportunity to add his comments or suggestions before I go to a drawing. The sketch is the most important element of my process because it becomes my blueprint for executing the photograph. I labor over the sketch phase because I'm doing much more than just conceptualizing. Most importantly, I am planning the elements and their relationship to each other, but also designing the set and plotting my lighting. I especially like building the props and sets and creating the mood and feeling. If I am in the midst of building a prop, let's say, I can't rest until that last detail is addressed and what I envisioned is complete. There is a lot of satisfaction seeing the outcome when the photograph works well. *What elements determine a successful photograph?*

I like to put it this way: if I am looking at a particular illustration and find myself staring, it is successful to me. That said, there is no one element that determines a successful photograph, but a combination of elements. Beyond the choice of light, balanced composition, enhancing set and propping is the idea itself. It is best for me to tell a story with a photograph and add something more. It becomes that much more engaging for my audience. At least that is what I strive for.

*What part of your work do you find most demanding?*

Keeping up with the ever-changing technology. I started my career at a very different time and still employ very tactile techniques that someone else can most likely pump out in a few hours using digital means. I am grateful to have developed my career when I did because I now have more options at my disposal than others who only know Photoshop.

*What technology do you use to capture your images?*

I am still going between film and digital capture, but would really like to finalize the jump. I think it has finally arrived, and I do see the advantages of shooting digitally. I told myself that when a captured file is as good as one of my scanned 4x5s, then I would embrace it. Well, now it's here and it is going to stay.

*Photography has always been a hands-on medium of expression. How does digital technology change the relationship of the Photographer to the act of image-making?*

That is a tough question because it really depends on the Photographer. I was recently shown some images done by a young, up-and-coming Photographer who basically constructed his images digitally. Very little shutter pushing was used in his work. It was hard to see where the Photography existed in his pictures, but this is how he thinks. He obviously uses the tools he knows and uses them quite well. That, to him, is hands-on. For me, however, hands-on is just that in my work. I strive for it and try to come up with a more analogue approach, even knowing a digital solution exists. There is something inherently tactile and hand-crafted to my work that still is unobtainable by digital means.

*Who is the best Art Director you've worked for and why?*

That is hard to say because there have been many with their own style and approach that match my sensibilities. A successful collaboration is based on mutual respect for each other and the assignment. I work best and the results turn out best when I have asked enough of the right questions to get the information I need to proceed, and the Art Director feels comfortable enough to let me go and do my thing. I cannot pick one Art Director, but there are some notables from very early on: Designer Larry Vigon, Lou DiLorenzo from *Travel Holiday* who I worked with in 1997, Fred Woodward from *GQ* and John Korpics when he was at *Esquire*. I also



owe a great debt of gratitude to Laura Zavets from *Bloomberg Wealth Manager Magazine*. We worked on many great assignments together, most of which I still love to show off. *Please describe your Boxing Gloves photo (see left and on page 217). What was the inspiration? How was it executed?* I have a love/hate relationship with boxing. I think it is a primal and brutal sport, yet I've done multiple series around it. On some level I am attracted to it, and this shot is my latest contribution. It began as a 'what if' question: What if hands were the gloves? After sketching it out and plotting an approach, I felt it could work. I wanted a rundown locker room setting, and built the set using antique fixtures, lots of spackle, paint and grime. I reconfigured shoe eyelets so that they could be applied to my skin. Yes, they are my hands. My make-up artist, Jane Choi, shaved my hands and forearms and applied the eyelets with spirit gum. She used 'dirty' make-up to give them an aged appearance, and my assistant photographed them in the set with a 4x5 camera and low contrast, color negative film. The light at this stage had to have a closer ratio due to increasing contrast throughout the process. I made enlarged prints on low contrast, type C paper and sized the hands to match the approximate dimensions of real boxing gloves. An extra set of prints were made of a skin texture that I used later.

Back in the studio, I mounted the hand prints to poster board and carefully cut the outer edges of the hand and the center of the eyelets out. Cutting into the print to make the glove opening was tricky because I had to cut along a two dimensional plane and make it look 3D. I had to do the same with the skin texture print, as it was going to be the interior of the glove and the upper edge of the opening. I glued this piece on the outer edge on the backside of the glove print with the skin texture facing the camera, and carefully matched the edges of the two prints together. Then I attached the other end, letting the paper's natural tendency to lie flat help shape the cavity of the inside of the glove. It took a few tries to get the edges to flow together and look believable. I finished the illusion by actually lacing each print with glove laces. I mounted the assemblages to the back wall of the set, then positioned and styled the lace ends. I followed the same lighting direction and quality as used when we originally shot my hands and finished dressing the set. Again, I shot it with low contrast, 4x5 color negative film, then had high res scans made. The final file required very little retouching.

*Please tell us about the Botox series. Where did the series come from? Who was the client and what was the message? How did you achieve the Stepford Wives aesthetic so seamlessly?*

This was a story for *Health Magazine*, and it was just about when Botox was making it big here in the States. People were throwing these parties where they would invite a doctor friend or someone who knew how to administer a dose by injection, and a bunch of their friends. The Art Director wanted to play on the Tupperware Party phenomenon of the '50s and '60s by dressing up the characters and sets in period costumes and furnishings. We worked out a four-image sequence that started with the women at the party being presented the night's treats as the opener and ended with the central character looking into a hand mirror as she turns into a mannequin.

I worked closely with my wife, Christina, who styled for me. We collaborated on every detail, from the broaches to the ashtray. I wanted to make the central character stand out from the rest of the girls, so we found a pink dress for her while the others were dressed in greens and teals. I also wanted the set to be of the same overall color, and was able to find enough furniture and a wallpaper in that palate. The last prop to find was a mannequin that looked like the central character, and Christina just happened to find it. It was the only mannequin that was in good shape at this particular prop house, and it couldn't have been a better fit. I took one look at it and knew it was going to be a successful shoot.

My greatest challenge, however, was to have the five girls' make-up and hair done in four hours with one hair stylist, Mili Simon, and one make-

**“So much of Hugh's strength is in his ability to go beyond.**

**You give him a starting point and he keeps going, coming up with solutions beyond our own imaginations. I know a Hugh picture immediately on sight. He's got a signature style, and he's just a great thinker.”**

Dora Somosi, *Director of Photography, GQ*



**“What I love about Hugh’s work is its conceptual edge. He doesn’t rely on a look or style; he uses Photography to tell a story or provoke a thought. It doesn’t hurt that his execution is flawless.”**

Nancy Mazzei, Creative Director, VHI

up artist, Robert Moulton. Not easy! That morning, you could smell the hairspray down the hall, there was so much of it. The last detail was the wig that the main character wore that would eventually be transferred to the mannequin in the last shot. With everyone finally ready, I gathered them round and directed them on how they were to act — stoic, expressionless, affected. Since most of them were actors, it wasn’t much of a reach, and they clearly got into their characters.

*I think my favorites are A Walk in the Park and Curious Sight. Would you please describe these photographs as well?*

*A Walk in the Park* was one in a series of images for *Bloomberg Wealth Management Magazine* illustrating a story on current hedge funds. The Art Director, Laura Zavets, asked me to come up with five scenarios relating to fashion that involved actual hedges. My take was to create a feeling of 1940s film throughout the series by shooting it in black and white, using artificial lighting to accent, and dressing the characters in vintage clothing. A friend recommended the Ladew Topiary Gardens near Baltimore as the location, and I drove down from New York to scout it. This is one of the few times I had to depend on the location to come up with my concepts, but it was easy. There was a lot to work with there, and I was able to address several aspects of fashion and clothing in general. Back in New York, I went to work finding and creating the props. It was summer, and my wife and I spent a couple of weekends on the sun deck of our health club applying fake boxwood to a pair of trousers and a wire dress form. I had a prop maker make an oversized sewing needle, and I found a very large pair of sheers. The day of the shoot I was nervous because I had never done this type of location work before, nor shot five set-ups in one day. It was, however, one of my all-time favorite shoots. I remember it was really hot that day, and all of us were either assisting or posing in God-awful wool clothing. Models were on short supply, so I even posed as a paparazzi.

*Walk in the Park* was the second shot of the day, and was derived from a

group of topiary dogs that were part of a larger hunting scene. To camera right, out of frame, were two topiary riders on horseback jumping a fence, complete with top hat. On camera left was the fox running away from the mayhem. The clothing on my model was key because I wanted her to be primary and the dogs secondary. Christina found this amazing ensemble, complete with white fur collar and matching hat. I told the model I wanted confidence on the verge of aloofness, and to keep her face turned away from camera so we would not see her eyes. She nailed it and the results read perfectly, leading your eye to her first, then to the dogs, revealing only then that they are shrubs. I am very proud of this series and that it garnered top honors in its category at the Society of Publication Designers Awards that year.

*Curious Sight* was, again, part of a five-image series, and was my first fashion spread. Shot for *Los Angeles Magazine’s* 2007 Spring fashion issue, it is a visual story of two mannequins that are in search of something unknown to them, that is only realized when they finally meet. The series depicts certain events in real life where two people might stand or sit next to each other, but without any idea the other exists. It is only once something clicks inside that their desire for one another rises to the surface. In this scene, the characters are walking their toy dogs and are awestruck by the racy display in the window. They may be unaware of each other, but their dogs are not.

*What are you working on now?*

I am redirecting my efforts towards doing more Advertising work by shooting personal work geared for that market and promoting it. I don’t think it is too far of a stretch to say I am going through a third transit in my career right now. I am also developing another fashion story and am in the midst of selling a book idea to a few publishers.

*What do you love most about Photography?*

That everyday it is something new — a new assignment, a new idea, a new challenge.

*What is your greatest professional achievement?*

Without a doubt, it was the *Gastronopolis* series I mentioned earlier. It was one of the most creatively satisfying and personally involved projects I have ever done. It was a total creation from start to finish, from the design of the costume to just about every prop I used. It took a year and just about every ounce of will and dollar I had to finish, but it was completely freeing.

Through the series, I was able to combine my love of sci-fi, art deco, and the incredible architecture of New York that enamored me upon my arrival there, and launch my career into a totally new direction.

*What is your greatest personal achievement?*

Being married to the same person for the last eleven years and fathering two gorgeous girls.

*Besides Photography, what are you passionate about?*

Well, my kids for one — that’s a no brainer — but I also have a love for skiing. I’m learning guitar at the moment, but haven’t gotten beyond the pain in my fingers to say I am passionate about it. And I just took my first surfing lesson last week and bruised a rib. I loved it, though, so maybe that qualifies. The deco design period is precious to me, and I get a chance to have it around me wherever I go through a deco watch collection I have. I love travel but don’t do enough of it. I love being home but also like foreign countries. And art! I like seeing a painting in person that I have seen in history books forever. That’s a turn on!

*Do you collect photographs? What do you have on your walls?*

No, actually I don’t collect photographs. Christina and I have a few vintage posters and a small collection of Victorian book plates. Other than that, our daughters’ artwork or portraits fill our walls. I have a few of my sister’s sculptures here at home and in my studio.

*Who are your favorite Photographers of all time?*

Irving Penn has always been my most favorite, all-time, wanna-be-like-him Photographer. The breadth of his work reveals the talent he is.

Lately I have been looking at Gregory Crewdson’s work and find it fascinating. He is able to describe so much in one shot. He reaches way below the surface of his characters, their interaction together and the scene around them, and forces his audience to ask the question, ‘What is really going on here?’

*Where do you think the best work is coming from today?*

I don’t know if Advertising is where the best work is coming from or more where I’m looking these days, but I have a new appreciation for it. There’s some really clever stuff out there — especially from other countries. *Any final words on Photography?*

I can’t say enough about it. I love it, but am challenged by it at the same time. I love the process and I really love the outcome, especially when the shot works. On the other hand, it’s difficult to constantly face new competitors for commercial work and daunting to keep up with the new technology I need to embrace. My word for myself lately is ‘evolve,’ and if I can keep that in mind, this next juncture in my career will be as rewarding as the last one.

*Interview by Anna Carnick*

*Biography: Born in Santa Monica and currently living in L.A. with his wife and two daughters, Photographer Hugh Kretschmer earned a BFA from Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California. His varied clients include Esquire, Health Magazine, Los Angeles Magazine, The New York Times Magazine, FX Networks, VHI, Kohler, Sony and Teknion. He is the recipient of awards from Communication Arts, HOW, Print, I.D., Photo District News and Graphis, among many others. For more information, please visit [www.sharpeonline.com](http://www.sharpeonline.com) and [www.bransch.net](http://www.bransch.net). Images: page26, Carnage Begins, page27, Kretschmer and his daughter photographed by Nico Pevy, page28, Placebo, page29, Boxer, page30, Injection, page31, Boxing Gloves, page32, Curious Sight, page33, A Walk In The Park.*