

Frank Meyl

Written by Zack Seckler

Edited by Greg Faherty

Photographer Frank Meyl uses sleek lines and negative space to create images that have won over countless creatives and earned him dozens of clients around the globe. This architect turned photographer came to photography late but quickly created his blueprint of commercial success and is now beginning to make an imprint on the fine art world. He incorporates the complex lighting techniques of high-end car photography into a series of personal landscape images that have been winning attention from the press and public alike.

Meyl's architecture background becomes quite clear when browsing through his portfolio. His images are so clean and well composed they resemble the hyper-real perfection of architectural renderings. His technique reveals the same. Each image, like the construction of a faultless building, is put together piece by piece; and nothing is out of place.

In our recent telephone interview Meyl and I explore the intricacies involved in spending three days to create a single image of a vacant desert driveway. We later talk about the evolution of style, working with foreign clients, and weathering the recession.

Seckler: Let's start by talking about our featured image, one from a personal series of work you've been shooting in the California desert.

Meyl: In the last few years I've been working like crazy so I figured I needed to go out and do my own stuff again. This is one project which evolved out of my background as an architect. It started off as personal work and it's now turning into a gallery project. I really fell in love with the mid-century architecture in the California desert. I stayed there for one or two months at a time and lived in Palm Springs and other interesting places [to photograph this series]. We started shooting during the day, and it was in the summertime, where it got up to 117 degrees. We could only shoot one image during the heat of the day and had to recover before being able to shoot a second situation when it was a little bit cooler...like 110 degrees.



We tried to figure out how to make this look more interesting or heightened and that's when we came up with this lighting technique. It's one we usually use in car photography, where you (can) light every single detail of the car separately and you put it all together in Photoshop. That's what we did with the tree. We set out at night and used different light sources, lit every single ball of the tree, and every single detail of the house, and then put it all together in Photoshop to create this special look.

Seckler: Tell me more about how you created this image.

Meyl: I decided to shoot at night because it's easier to enhance the form and texture of the tree and separate it from the background. First we set up a sturdy Gitzo tripod at a low angle and added sandbags to maintain camera position. We then mounted my Contax 645 with Phase One P45+ digital back and a 45mm lens. I shot approximately sixty images as my first assistant walked through the location to light all the details separately. We used a large flashlight for a softer lighting effect on larger surfaces like the ground. We used a handheld Quantum flash and Pocket Wizards to freeze motion in the tree. To bring out the most interesting textures of the different surfaces we varied the angle of the light source from frontal to sidelight. The exposure for all images was f/16 at 8 seconds and 100 ISO. It took almost 3 hours on a 110 degrees summer night in Palm Springs to shoot all sixty shots. My first assistant and I later stripped the images together in a two day masking marathon and enhanced the colors with Photoshop.



What's special about this image is that there's nothing added or subtracted. It's the real thing. Everything you see in the image is originally there, we just gave it a special look. And back to the Photoshop thing, we didn't add any effects to it. We just heightened what's already there.

Seckler: You touched on your architecture background. Tell me a little bit about your history in architecture, and how you made the transition into photography.

Meyl: When I was fifteen, I convinced my parents they would need an SLR camera for their travel photography. So they bought this Minolta X-700, which ended up being my first camera. That's where my photography love started. I never wanted to make a career of it; I never saw it as a job. My second big love is architecture, and it started when we were traveling in California years ago. I came across this freestyle architecture made by Morphosis architects and Frank Gehry and Eric Owen Moss and it was the most creative and interesting thing I ever saw. I started studying architecture on scholarship and I ended up working for Eric Owen Moss in Los Angeles. During my studies I also took photography classes, but always with the intent to make better pictures of architecture. While I was working in architecture I shot a lot of architecture and that's when I shifted towards photography. I just fell in love with the professional side of shooting. While I was studying architecture, I also worked as a photography assistant for quite a while, so I made my living as an assistant and that was kind of a natural transition into the real world of photography.



Seckler: Do you still do any architecture work?

Meyl: No, I'm just working on my own places.

Seckler: How has your background as an architect helped you as a photographer?

Meyl: Eric Owen Moss was an inspiration for me in terms of the philosophy of how you approach the job. I learned from him not to repeat one technique which is successful, but to approach every project with a new, fresh set of techniques and completely new philosophy.

Seckler: You definitely have a very unique style, how has it evolved?



Meyl: First of all, my whole life is about creating and exploring. That's why photography is a perfect fit for my personal style. I'm all about the design world itself, and it's brought me all over the world. I've traveled around the world a couple of times, always looking for places and exploring different lifestyles. And that is what I bring into my photography. From architecture I developed my spatial awareness and a feeling for colors. Because I can also draw perspective well, I have a unique look on angles and lines in the image, and I'm able to envision places which do not exist.

Seckler: How did it all come about, this style of high contrast, and lighting, and multiple exposures? Was it a product of experimentation or a vision that you had?

Meyl: It was a development of my years of work in photography. It's an ongoing process that will never end. It's my personal style...I like to bring order to things. I love wide-open spaces. I hate clutter.

Seckler: Would you describe your work as being heavily Photoshopped?

Meyl: Not really. Mostly we heighten images in terms of the contrast or clean up stuff that shouldn't be in the image, like planes flying through the sky or a lighting strip you don't want to show. Very basic stuff, as opposed to drastic changes.

Seckler: Let's talk about your commercial work. In a prior conversation you mentioned you started off doing lifestyle imagery and now you've transitioned out of that. How would you describe what you're doing now?



Meyl: I do kind of everything right now. As I said I've always liked this clean, crisp look, and that's what people like. I do the same thing with landscapes, cars, and people, and I've been really lucky to get awards for transportation, for landscape, and for people. I really love to go out and just not be nailed to the one subject and being able to put my kind of style on everything I do.

Seckler: You say you've shot on five continents. When you're working in different countries, do you notice a difference in the working method?

Meyl: Yes, the markets are different, and the ways of producing things are different. What I love about the US is when you sign up for an ad job the art producer is really into producing the job and helps out in all aspects to make it happen. In America, everything is pretty much set up for you and you have freedom to do your creative stuff. This is in contrast to Germany where you are expected to bring everything to the table.

Seckler: Are you saying that you have more opportunity to be creative in the US?

Meyl: No, it's just made easier for you. Because there are huge teams just there to provide everything you need. But with the German jobs, you're always in charge of providing everything the way the client and agency has ordered it. But whether the job is more creative or not depends on the job itself or on the client. So they're not much different than the Western world in terms of anxieties or fears about doing something wrong or creating an image which might be offensive to someone.

Like everyone else in the Western world, there's testing of the images up-front in the ad industry, so they get people to look at it up-front to see if it works. And they may reduce the creativity more and more to make sure they are on the safe side. And unfortunately that's the same in Europe as in the US. And it's getting so crazy that they test and work on the image for a really long time, and when it's time to shoot it they just come up the day before and shoot it the day after. After they've discussed it for like four months.

Seckler: Speaking of business how has your photography business been affected by the recession?

Meyl: I changed my style just before the crisis hit and I was kind of lucky to make the transition to a more personal style beforehand. Work has been steady. I [used to] shoot 10 to 20 solid ad jobs a year. But it's less than before. [Before the recession] I had so many requests that I couldn't do it all and I wasn't able to. I was in the lucky position that I could choose jobs which were more to my personal taste. Today it's like you are kind of lucky to get whatever comes across.

Seckler: You've been represented before but don't currently have representation. Is it difficult to manage these assignments on your own?



Meyl: That's where my partner comes in. She's kind of like the head of the whole operation right now. And that also helps working internationally, because when there's someone who knows how the things works all over the world, it really helps a lot to adapt to all the different situations.

Seckler: So what other projects are you working on now?

Meyl: We are working on tons of stuff. What I'm really interested in right now is the contrast between globalization and individuality. I think people are the most unique thing on earth. No one experiences things exactly the same and I like to explore what it means for us to live in this world. For instance, what interests me about the desert is that people are surrounded by an almost untouched world. And that's the only way you can imagine how it all started, because when you grow up in Europe you have all this history and the whole place is packed. And when you come to a place like Dubai, there's nothing in the desert until the city rises up from the ground. And as an architect it's really interesting to see what you can do out of nothing.



Photography, I think, is all about your own personality, and that's what makes you show up in the image. And that is my suggestion to everyone who is trying to make it in the business, to just bring in his or her own personality. I'm a really big promoter of individual style and self-expression. And that's why my photography tends to go more into the direction of art. One of my personal goals in life is to always improve what I'm doing and always change and adapt to things. I could definitely continue doing my people lifestyle thing that I was well known for, but I'm more comfortable letting other people repeat the stuff I did years ago while I keep trying different styles and exploring different places in the world.