

envision



PICS THAT POP!

AN INTERVIEW WITH
PHOTOG LAUREN LYONS

PLUS

FATHER LEONARD
SCULPTING WITH HOPE

FOR LOVE OR MONEY
THE ART OF COLLECTING

GALLERIES & EVENTS
SEE AND BE SEEN



Lyons' Eye

PHILADELPHIA PHOTOGRAPHER LAUREN LYONS CREATES IMAGES THAT MAKE YOU LOOK TWICE.



Interview by Sal Emma
Photographs by Lauren Lyons

STRAIGHT LACED. QUIET. BORING.
THESE ARE THE KINDS OF WORDS LAUREN LYONS USES TO DESCRIBE HERSELF.

It never fails to get a reaction. She knows what she's doing.

Five minutes with her is all you need to appreciate the woeful injustice of the description. She's anything but.

In the decade since she was first unleashed on the City of Brotherly Love, she's found her voice. And there's nothing quiet or boring about it. The work defies pigeonholing. Often unconventional, sometimes in your face—always compelling.

She has crafted a portfolio that channels the raw energy of her creativity without boundary. For Lyons, it's not about pretty pictures. It's about images that go straight to your gut before wrapping themselves around your brain. Like their creator, they never fail to get a reaction.

She knows what she's doing.

Left: Portrait of Lauren Lyons by Bill Horin

Your photos are pretty edgy. Where does that come from?

I think everybody's interested in what they aren't. I am definitely curious about things that are not me at all.

How are your photos not you?

I'm very straight laced. Boring. Don't smoke, only drink wine. After seeing my photos, I think some of my clients and prospects expect me to be weird, or at least pierced and tattooed. I'm not and sometimes they are disappointed. It's exciting in a way—I am boring.

Never smoked?

Never. I hate cigarettes.

You know where I am going with this, right?

Yeah, I knew you would. Everybody asks me about it. Is it that noticeable, that there are so many? The cigarettes were mostly my idea. I know what people like. People like tawdry, dirty, gritty photos. Smoking is bad now—politically incorrect. My photos are borderline seedy and people like that. People tend to be drawn to that

kind of movie, that kind of image. To me it just makes a great photo. The funny thing is that I hate cigarettes with a passion.

If I were your analyst, I might wonder if there was more to the story.

Maybe it has something to do with my roots. Everybody in my family smokes, except my grandmother and me.

Your images look spontaneous, but I suspect they aren't.

Definitely not, with a few exceptions in the early work. Lately it's been a lot more controlled, especially with the cinematic, unconventional lighting I've been into. But it succeeds if it looks like a happy accident.

But the shoot has to have a certain level of spontaneity, no?

Absolutely. It gives the work a life of its own. I spent years where everything had to be exact. If there was a mistake I wouldn't use the image. Now I am trying to have fun with it, be unconventional, take it wherever it might lead. I'm trying not to take it too seriously, and what I am discovering is that what should not work in theory is often pretty incredible in practice.

Tell me about the woman in body paint.

That was so much fun. Todd Marrone is a friend of mine, a painter. He does traditional work but he also paints with glue bottles. I asked him if he could do that on a person and he said he probably could. I had the musician Amy Jarone in mind. She has this kind of heroine-chic, Joan Jett sort of vibe and I thought would be a good subject.

She was willing to work nude and shave her body, the whole thing. We all got together at Todd's and laid poor Amy out and started painting. And I had decided I wanted to photograph her on a toilet. She was such a great sport.

Why a toilet?

Because it's weird. I wanted to shoot in Manayunk. But she couldn't put her clothes back on without smudging the makeup. So we waited for her to dry and just wrapped her up in this big black cloak. So here she is, in February, in nothing but this cloak and flip-flops, heading to Manayunk. I love that photograph. We had a blast. My shoots are fun—they have to be fun.



“Because it's weird. I wanted to shoot in Manayunk. But she couldn't put her clothes back on without smudging the makeup.”



What other images have become your favorites?

The cover photo for this story. I love the photo, though I don't love the fact that it's me. The woman in the Christmas tree skirt was memorable because we had a lot of challenges on the shoot—no electricity, no heat—but in the end the images really worked. And I love the photos of the musician from Brooklyn, Brian Carr—with the top hat, walking out of the fog. That's real fog, in southern Delaware.

Where did you grow up?

Seaford, in southern Delaware.

Have you been back?

Philly's my home, but I adore my hometown. I can't imagine living there 24/7 but I am nostalgic for it. I love going back.

How did you end up in Philadelphia?

I was the only one in my family who flew the coop, left to work in the city. I had figured out I wanted something different than my little hometown could offer, but I didn't know what. I knew the people I was hanging around were going to marry one another and stay in Delaware and I just wanted more, you know? I was kind of artsy and was attracted to the idea of studying art in college, so I decided to go to the Art Institute to study advertising.

How was leaving your hometown?

Scary. I had never been anywhere. My parents are major homebodies, still are. My mom has this incredible phobia about I-95. Our vacations were to Rehoboth Beach. I was excited but scared to death, loading all my stuff into my boyfriend's pickup truck and heading to Philly on the dreaded Interstate. Neither of us had ever been to the city.

When did you first get excited about photography?

Not until a photography class I took at the Art Institute.

What pushed you to pursue it seriously?

I quit school. I loved it but I was exhausted. It was insanely expensive and I was working full time to pay for it. I burned out pretty fast. It was never my intent to leave for good. I just couldn't face going into my senior year completely wiped out, and needed a break. It was crazy.

So here I was out of school with no place to live. I got all scared and worried all over again, but I knew I wanted to stay in the city. I rented a one-bedroom in Rittenhouse Square and called my parents to say I wasn't coming home.

So I am thinking: what am I going to do with the rest of my life? Then I thought: I really did like that photography class, even more than the advertising classes. So I bought an inexpensive 35mm. I think it was a Nikon 6006.

This is kind of embarrassing, but I will tell you anyway. I really liked the gear. The camera, the lenses, all this stuff—it made me feel important. I was pretty shy in those days. Having a camera changed me somehow, made me more confident.

Everybody loves the gear at that age, don't you think?

Yeah, I sure did. It was thrilling. And I got excited about it, walking around with my new camera, just taking pictures of random stuff—trash cans, fire hydrants, really cheesy art photography stuff and I thought it was fantastic. So of course I start obsessing over it.



I was waiting tables, tending bar, managing a restaurant—anything I could think of to support the photography.

How did you start shooting professionally?

I was dating a guy in the music industry, Doron Segal. He managed local bands. One of the musicians he managed, Matt Sevier, needed new photos but there was no money to hire a pro. He wanted me to do it. I didn't want to. I had only taken artsy photos of inanimate objects. I knew nothing about lighting or shooting people, or anything else for that matter. But he convinced me. He is one of those people who made you feel like you could do anything.

So it's June 5, 1997—I still remember that—we went to Matt's house in Fishtown. We started doing pictures and I was completely having a great time, like I was in my element.

When the proofs came back I was excited because it looked really good. And it was the first time I ever took a serious photo of a human being. The picture of him sitting on the old truck even won an award. That shoot gave me the confidence to keep going.

So Doron says, you can't keep waiting tables. He took an ad out for me in the back of *City Paper*. Pretty soon we started getting seven, 10 calls a day and I quit my job at the restaurant. I was shooting mostly local bands and started building the portfolio.

So you learned by doing?

Yeah, but I really had no idea what I was doing. I liked my stuff but when I looked at *Rolling Stone*, I knew it could be better. So I started calling these big famous rock 'n' roll photographers in New York, hoping I could get one of them to look at my book—Mark Seliger, Chris Buck. I called and said: I am from Philly, I want to show you my work, just give me five minutes. They were like, come on up.

Why did they agree to see you?

I think they were intrigued. It was the middle of a winter storm warning. I guess they figured if I was willing to go up there in a snowstorm . . .

What did they tell you?

They were like, this book's crap. That's what they said, honestly. So I asked how I could make it not crap. They wanted to see color and lighting. Like most young photographers, my



portfolio was all black and white and all ambient light. The reason was that I knew nothing about color and lighting. They taught me a lot—it was exciting. And they were really encouraging, made me feel good even though they said my book was crap.

You had your work cut out for you.

And it was really hard for me—making a color photo not look like a snapshot, you know? Of course, the key is lighting.

So I learned lighting. It's not exactly a pretty story. I bought some cheap photo lights. I was so naïve, I even bought clip lights at Home Depot. It was awful. Everything was fluorescent-looking and green, before the cheap lights burned out. Very frustrating.

Then I got an idea—I started hiring really, really good assistants. I would call and say, can you light? You're hired.

You are very resourceful.

I like to know everything. Or as my husband says, I hate not knowing everything.

Do you shoot digital, film or both?

Totally digital. Stuck with film for a long time, I still love the brilliant, rich colors and old-schoolness of film, especially Kodachrome, but I am all digital now.

Digital's faster—no waiting for the lab—but the real power is in how we can control the image.



Lauren Lyons lives and works in Philadelphia with her husband, Doug, a musician and tennis pro – and Fred, their adopted racetrack greyhound.



Creatively, it's so much more versatile. We can do so much more, both in the camera and in editing. It's blowing me away, especially in medium format.

Has photography opened new experiences for you?

So many. I've met some really interesting people, especially in the music industry. It was exciting especially in the beginning, going to CD release parties, covering rock festivals, radio station promotional events, that sort of thing. But the one I am most proud of was getting involved with the GRAMMY Awards. Being a professional music photographer qualified me as a member and last year I became a voting member. Now I vote for nominees, which is really cool.

What's next

I've shot a lot of musicians for smaller, independent labels. Now I am shooting for some major label work.

Then what?

Rolling Stone. I have not really tried yet—still a little scared, I guess. But it's going to happen. And I am working on a novel . . .



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