

COLORS 58: Photo Studio

Getting married, attending a party that costs US\$25,000, military school, being pregnant, becoming a Chinese opera character or sitting under the bright lights of a famous Hollywood photographer; these are all reasons that people splurge and get their photographs taken professionally or at a photo studio. COLORS 58 celebrates the hard labor of unknown studio photographers around the world, takes you inside the milieu of their studios, and exposes the subjects of their photos. Portraits, exotic histories, and clues to master the trade.

First, Photographers need a studio. Rashid Sheikh, and his sons Arif and Ashgar in India, give the breakdown for getting started. With 22,000 rupees (US\$500) you can erect your own mobile photo studio. You will need: 10 vertical wooden supports, 50 bamboo sticks, several meters of cloth to stretch over the structure, 3 decorative panels, 24 bulbs, 3 tables with a glass top (to display the photographs under) and a banner for your studio. To ensure success, it is best to invest in seven hand-painted backdrops, six full-size and nine half-size cutouts of Bollywood stars, one motorcycle and a Disney character for children to ride on.

A photographer must know how to work with the model. Natasha, a Ukrainian photographer who worked in a studio in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, teaches us how. She used to wear bras like Madonna's—the "sharp ones" made to order. To get the client to pose as she wanted, it went like this: The client sits on a stool flurried by the lights; then Natasha comes over (she's very petite) and stands in front of him; she puts her knee between his legs and shakes the stool; then grabs his head and puts it between her tits. After this he is frozen and forever hers.

A photographer must be prepared to change people's realities. Dumile mBebe has a studio in the shantytown of Nyanga East, near Cape Town, South Africa. He is also a release valve for his clients who need an escape from the violence and poverty of their daily lives. "It's not very safe here," says Dumile. "Three people have come with a gun. I gave them the money and they went. I have a gun now." Life might be uncontrollable outside the studio, but inside, with some trees and water and perhaps a mended red chair, there is an instant sense of order, a constructed image. Life is as it should be, not as it is.

A photographer must know how to satisfy his customer's needs. Francisco Vazquez, otherwise known as "Jymmy," opened a studio in the Barcelona suburb of L'Hospitalet, and has done over 90 photo sessions with pregnant women. Including one who rushed into his studio on her way to the hospital with contractions. "I don't do nudes," says Jymmy. "I cover the woman up minimally with their hands, a piece of string or a piece of fabric. I think it's like the difference between an erotic film and a pornographic one. With a pornographic film you get bored after a short time, but with an erotic film you can watch it for hours."

For other photographers, their trade is endangered, and they must endure. Artin Safarian is 78 years old and has his studio in downtown Cairo. Despite the arrival of digital touch-up photography, he still hand colors his photos with pencils and paints, a skill he learned photographing British troops in the 1940s. "Studios are over," he says. "Computers are the future. It's not good. Computers are wrong. They aren't artists." But he will keep going while he is alive. "People have their portraits taken because they want to look beautiful. We all want to be protected, to be preserved."

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