

A LIGHThearted *approach*

By Alice B. Miller



With equal portions of humor, creativity, lighting and technical mastery, Nick Thomas creates simply beautiful product images for high-end clientele.

An artistic spirit with a passion for music and all things creative, New Hampshire-based Thomas went pro 20 years ago. Since then, he has developed a broad mix of consumer and industrial clients by maximizing the beauty of their products, striving for excellence in every job and making customer service a high priority. From towels to paint cans, high-tech to low-tech medical devices, brass lanterns to hockey helmets, he beautifies every product, gracing it with his signature lighting.

“There have been times when a product just sits there, lacking energy,” says Thomas. “Unlike photographing people, where you’re playing off their energy or location, with products you’re playing off the energy of the object itself. People come to me and say, ‘Make this stapler/shoe/coffeemaker look beautiful! I have a knack for that.’”

Beyond technical virtuosity, Thomas is also adept at developing campaign concepts with clients prior to a shoot. “In the 90s there was more time for these sessions,” he says. “Today, it seems, one person is doing the work of 10, so there isn’t much time for ‘Come on in and let’s talk about this.’ With the assignments I’ve done thus far, the concept has already been nailed down by someone else. I look forward to having the opportunity to create a concept and work it through a campaign.”

Creating Luminosity

Visit Thomas’ website, www.ntphoto.com, or page through his portfolio, and you’ll be treated to a collection of clean, crisp, primary-colored images with his trademark luminosity. While he lights each object differently, edge lighting is essential to the look.

“Generally speaking, glowing edges require hard lighting, which means bare-bulb Unilites—no softboxes or umbrellas; maybe a Fresnel, maybe just an open tube,” says Thomas. “An object that’s shiny, such as the Thunderbird clock with the blue face and shiny black exterior, does not require a hard light because it is already shiny. Instead, I used an unusual technique, where I bounced hard light off white cards in a criss-cross pattern, so the image left was lit from the right, and vice versa. If I had shot directly from behind with open lights, the edge wouldn’t have looked right. If I had used a softbox, the edge would have been too big. For a mat surface or soft object, such

as shirts, jackets or other garments, you need harder light.”

Thomas uses Broncolor Grafit packs and Unilites and a lot of small Chimera softboxes, Fresnel and reflectors. He prefers 1x2-foot Chimera softboxes because he can sneak them in precisely. “My lighting is carefully crafted, which means small tools. A big bank doesn’t get the light to wrap around, do the edges or bring out the shape. It just kind of blasts it,” he explains.

After testing a lot of power packs in his studio, he decided the Broncolor was best, by far. He shoots primarily large-format with an Arca Swiss with a Phase One P45 back. He started with a Konica Auto Reflex-t, moved to a Nikon FM3, FM4, Bronica, Hasselblad, stayed with Sinar 4x5 and 8x10 for some time, and went completely digital in 1999, with a Phase One LightPhase back on the 4x5 Sinar.

“When Arca Swiss introduced the wonderful shrunken 4x5, sized and scaled for the new digital backs, I loved it,” says Thomas. “Then I went to a Phase One H20 and a P45, which was state-of-the-art in resolution, clarity and color, until recently. I haven’t used the Hasselblad H3DII-39 or -50, but this all-in-one solution, with the back and camera together, is fabulous. The quality and the speed with which you can work make the Hasselblad the best of large- and small-format cameras.”

By the Book

In 2008, Thomas undertook the daunting task of reworking his portfolio with two objectives: to reach bigger, more image-conscious clients and to show what he could do instead of what he’d been asked to do. “My old book and website were about what I’ve done for clients, pictures of all the products I’ve shot over the years. The new book contains images that reflect what I can do if left to my own devices,” he explains.

Planning the pages of his new book, Thomas focused on products that today’s manufacturers would want photographed. He came up with home accessories, personal electronics, personal accessories, then did some visual research to find objects that appealed to him. “When I gathered about 10 of those objects, I brought them into the studio. Trying to be as open-minded as possible, I started playing with them. This book is the result of that play time,” he says.

Here, he gives us a behind-the-scenes peek into how he set up his 2008 portfolio:

From the top of pg. 30 to middle right of pg. 31:

Sony Carabiner—The real work in this image was arranging the headphones to make them look like a little creature caught snooping around at night. “We called it Gary, in honor of the pet snail of the same name on the *SpongeBob SquarePants* cartoon,” he says.

Sony Headphones—This unusual image came together quickly and the lighting took a few hours to accomplish. “I like the vibe for a fashion-forward headphone. I was thinking of something futuristic, such as some of the lighting and objects in the *Batman* movie,” says Thomas.

Tie—“This concept was simple, but I had a lot of trouble getting the stitching to line up and then lighting the tie,” Thomas says. Wanting something a bit mysterious, Thomas and his staff fussed and worked for over 30 hours on what looks like a very simple image.

Bangles—Thomas loves shooting jewelry. When he saw these colorful bangles he knew he had to do something with them. “With each of the bangles suspended with monofilament line from a boom stand, I would give one a poke with my finger, then move back behind the camera and catch them swinging and moving. With such wonderful colors and shapes, I kept the lighting simple, using open Broncolor reflectors,” he explains. The only retouching he did was removing the monofilament from around each bangle.

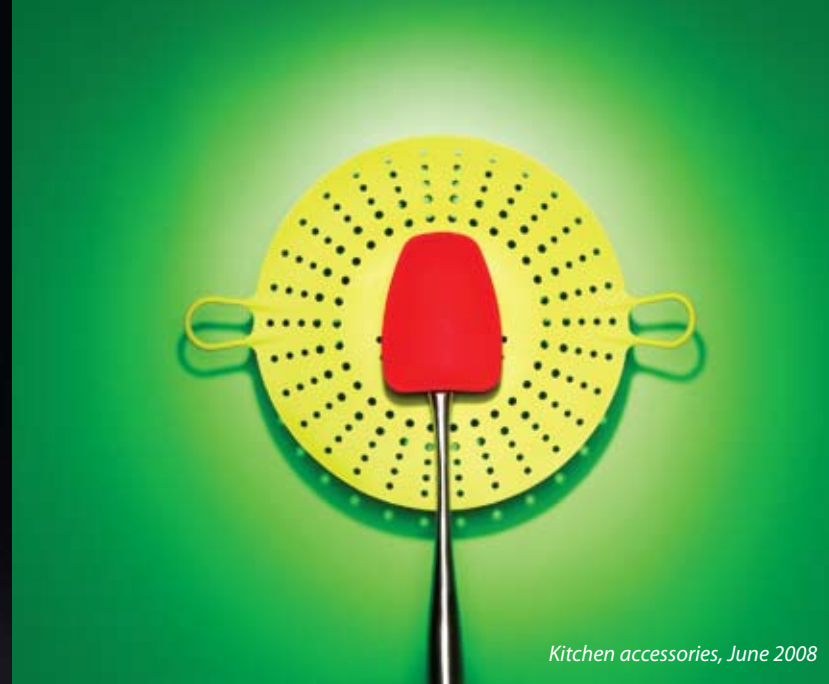
Strainer and Ladle—“I like how these two items work together in the photo, although they don’t go together in reality,” he says. This shot came together very quickly. Thomas used a Broncolor Fresnel for the main light.

Boss watch—“I loved this watch when I first saw it, but it took two days to come up with the snail concept,” says Thomas, “after we twisted and contorted the watch and band into every imaginable position.” The rubber wrist straps were held in place gently with tacky wax.

Traffic Light— (shown on the first page) “The lighting for this image was fairly straightforward once the concept became clear. Still, it took hours to position the lights just right,” says Thomas. This was shot using a Fresnel and a small Chimera softbox without a baffle.



Retractable headphones for MP3 player, July 2008



Kitchen accessories, June 2008



Sony headphones for stereo and MP3 player, July 2008



Boss jewelry watch, September 2008



Men's tie, November 2008



Suspended bangles, September 2008



Kitchen accessories, June 2008

TIPS FOR YOUNG PROS

Nick Thomas offers a few suggestions for business success to up-and-coming photographers:

- 1 Be persistent.** Don't become discouraged; keep working at your craft. It will take the rest of your life.
- 2 Be thick-skinned.** Not everyone is going to love your work. Not every campaign is going to come out the way you like it. Keep at it. Have faith in yourself.
- 3 Don't undersell yourself.** Know the photography rates in your area, as well as the licensing fees. Don't give your work away. Be proud of what you do and don't be afraid to charge for it.
- 4 Avoid bidding fray.** Go with great companies that have great products and do great work. Everybody wins there. Stay away from folks who try to cut corners and get it for as little as possible. With really good clients, doing favors once in a while is part of good customer service.
- 5 Shoot and market 50/50.** Get your portfolios out and make as many appointments as possible to show the book in person. Keep up with your marketing and outreach program so if you lose a couple of large clients to the economy you won't be caught without others to take up the slack.
- 6 Do your best.** There is no downside to spending a lot of time on your book. You could be the most personable photographer and have a swimming pool and health spa in your studio, but if your pictures aren't good, you won't hold onto your clients. It's about the image. That's where the rubber meets the road.

After Glow

“Our outreach has completely changed; we're going for much larger markets now,” says Thomas. “The good news is we're getting excellent feedback on many different levels—sometimes for the humor, sometimes for the lighting and other times for the eye-catching concepts. Almost all potential clients are asking if the images were created with Photoshop. The answer is no! They were created with lighting.”

Since May of this year, Thomas has been hard at work on a new portfolio. Building on last year's book, he has challenged himself to incorporate conceptually interesting or quirky elements into the image backgrounds. “Bringing in more elements, playing them off each other, or putting two things together that you wouldn't think belong together can be humorous or beautiful,” says Thomas. “It's easy to be down in the dumps nowadays. So I want to work into the book something that's just a little quirky to make people smile or laugh.”

One thing is certain: Nick Thomas's new portfolio will be a glowing success.

Alice B. Miller is the owner of Plum Communications Inc. (www.plumcomm.com), the Long Island, NY, editorial services and marketing communications company that supports the photo industry. Previously the editor of *Studio Photography* magazine, Alice has a growing clientele that includes photographers, manufacturers, publications and associations. She is director of public relations for the International Photographic Council and an advisory board member of NyghtFalcon wedding, commercial and fine art studios.