CREATIVE52

WEEKLY PROJECTS TO INVIGORATE YOUR PHOTOGRAPHY PORTFOLIO

LINDSAY ADLER

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PEACHPIT PRESS

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Lindsay Adler

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ISBN-13: 978-0-321-93491-8
ISBN-10: 0-321-93491-1

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
Printed and bound in the United States of America

DEDICATION

To everyone that knows the only way to live is for your passion. And for all our friends and family who support us in our pursuits.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, thank you to the lovely women who made this book possible: Valerie Witte and Scout Festa. I know that at times my words were jumbled and I was sometimes lax with deadlines, but I truly feel that the book was worth it and that we produced something beautiful together!

I never get to thank you two enough, Mom and Dad. You have always been my safety net in case I should ever fail in my pursuits and grand schemes. And even now, you help me secure my success and grow in it. You help me grow, even though I'm already grown. Thank you for being the most stable and supportive forces in my life.

The very idea for this book would not have existed without Lila Purdy. Thank you for inspiring me to work on this project, and for being a great person to bounce ideas off of. You deserve all the health and wealth in the world. You've inspired me to inspire others.

Jeff Rojas, you've been a great partner over the last year. Thanks for having my back no matter what crazy adventures I go on or outrageous pursuits I have. It eases my mind to know I've got a reliable partner who wants to see me grow, and grow with me.

Thank you to my creative team. My work has grown exponentially since I've been able to team up with such incredibly talented individuals. Much of the work in this book would not exist if you had not inspired me, guided me, or aided me in making images that aren't just photos—they are art. In particular, Griselle and LSC, you women are incredible role models—talented and driven and able to conquer any barriers that come your way. Thanks for being a great team!

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INTRODUCTION

MY STORY: GETTING STARTED

I was lucky enough to find my passion in life at an early age. I discovered photography around age 12, and I've been hooked ever since. Photography is not just a hobby or job to me. Photography has always been an integral part of who I am.

When I was young, my mother instilled in me a very important lesson she had learned. She explained that you never want to spend every day of your life working simply to earn money to afford to do what you love. Instead, do what you love in life every day. If you are passionate about something and lucky enough to find that passion, make it your life and job. If you are passionate enough and work hard enough, you can make a life out of that passion. My mother had not found this passion early in life, and her greatest wish for me was that I have the fulfillment of doing something I love.

With my parents' support, I devoured education in my teens by attending conferences and seminars and taking workshops. I started my portrait and wedding business when I was 15, and it grew into a real studio. Very quickly, however, I fell into a routine. I knew what my clients wanted and expected, so many shoots were formulaic. Everybody got the same poses and the same light, and I began to get too comfortable. I was only shooting paid work, and my portfolio remained stagnant. I found what was safe and stuck with it.

In college I discovered a more creative realm of photography: fashion. I fell in love with the elegance and creative freedom I saw in the works of masters like Irving Penn, Albert Watson, Herb Ritts, Helmut Newton, and dozens of others. It was the first time I had ever really exposed myself to the work of other photographers, let alone photographers considered masters of their craft. Their work inspired me endlessly—their poses, their light, their styling, the emotion they conveyed, and the timeless beauty they shared in their images. I began spending hours in the studio each week just experimenting and trying to re-create their light or emulate their style. These trials and errors were the greatest lessons I could have offered myself.

WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

After college I moved to London to pursue a career in fashion photography. While working at a studio, I built a portfolio of beautiful women wearing beautiful clothing in beautiful locations. The shots were technically strong, well composed, and well executed by most standards. I remembered all that I had learned in photography classes, books, PPA meetings, and established professionals.

I'd been living there less than a year when I got a meeting with an editor of a magazine I'd admired for some time. I excitedly gathered my print portfolio and traveled across London that winter day, eager for an opportunity to work with this publication. To me, this had to mean my big break, the real start of my career and success.

I remember sitting in his office as he quietly flipped through the pages of the portfolio I had poured my heart and soul into. When he finished, he quietly shut the book, turned it over, and pushed it across the table toward me.

"I would start again," he said with a blank look on his face. I stared at him, searching for meaning in his words. He wanted to look at the portfolio again? He wanted to start the meeting again? Then it hit me: I should start my portfolio again. Start from scratch. My love and passion in life wasn't good enough.

"When I look your portfolio, I see a lot of beautiful images," he said. "Everything is 'correct.' Good posing, good lighting, nice retouching. Yet nothing is exciting or original." I looked at him and blinked a few times, nothing profound to add, just deep confusion and emptiness.

"I look at dozens of portfolios a week," he continued. "None of your images are memorable. If you leave this office, I'll soon forget your images. They don't have impact. Focus your efforts on stopping me in my tracks. Create images that are exciting, memorable, and different."

I don't believe I said very much the rest of that meeting. I took my portfolio and left the office to enter the brisk London air. A thick fog clung in the air, and each breath stung just a bit as the cold air hit me. As I made my way down the cobblestone streets in the fog, I felt as if I were in a movie. I held my portfolio tightly to my chest. Tears were streaming down my face, and I knew that this would be a turning point. Would I listen to this editor and change my work? Would I give up on photography? Would I ignore him and continue work as before? I found myself beside a garbage can, holding my portfolio away from me and contemplating whether I should give up and move on. Maybe I wasn't good enough. Maybe I could never have the dreams I wanted. Maybe what I had to offer just wasn't sufficient.

Eventually I shook off those doubts. I could still have doubts, but they wouldn't control my life or my passion. I decided to take what I wanted from that meeting. I would step up my game—get more creative and stand out from the crowd—but still follow my passion. That cold London day, I made a pact with myself: I would create a completely new and exciting portfolio in just one year. I wanted to replace every single image in my book with something new, something eye-catching, something that would make me memorable.

To achieve this goal, I scheduled a personal shoot for myself every Sunday. At least one day a week, I could guarantee that I would shoot something not for a client but for me and my portfolio. This could be a creative portrait shoot, a fashion editorial, a beauty image, a fine art nude—it didn't matter what the shoot was as long as it was something that pushed my creativity. The other six days of the week I could shoot for clients, organize shoots, and find ways to pay my bills. But one day a week was all mine.

I began looking more closely at the work of the photographers and artists I admired. What exactly was it about their work that drew me in? Was it their lighting? Their composition? Their storytelling? As I began to determine what elements drew me to the work of other artists, I gave myself assignments to incorporate these elements into my work. I sought not to exactly re-create something that had been done before but instead to borrow elements and ideas that had inspired me. I took elements that inspired me and left those that didn't fit my style or vision.

I also began collecting images. I gathered thousands of images from the Internet, magazines, and books to use as reference points for inspiration. Every week I made my way to the fashion magazine shop, where I could absorb the pages of those stunning magazines I longed to be in. I took inspiration from dozens of photos and combined them into shoots that reflected my own take on an idea.

Within a year, I had more than completely replaced my portfolio. I had become an entirely different, and better, photographer. By experimenting and pushing my comfort level, I had learned new techniques and even changed the way I envisioned an image. By shooting to challenge myself, I had created images that differentiated me and fulfilled me as an artist.

My career as a photographer really began after this year of reinvention. I now live and work in New York City as a fashion photographer and director. Had I not pushed myself to step out of my comfort zone and explore different approaches to my photography, I would have stayed safe, but in staying safe I would have stayed mundane. That year of shooting changed my life.

So I have created this book for you. If you want to push yourself to think and see in a new way, this book is for you. If you want to learn new techniques and create images that make you memorable, this book is for you. If you want to reinvigorate your passion for photography, this book is for you. I'm sharing some of the ways I challenged myself to grow, and I hope I can help you do the same.

HOW THIS BOOK WORKS

This book is your remedy for the average portfolio. It's your guide to stepping it up a notch and pushing yourself out of your comfort zone.

How-to books often use bland imagery to prove a technical point, and many fine art books are filled with beautiful imagery but contain minimal educational insights to help working photographers, but this book blends both: inspiration *and* knowledge that you can take to the bank to create images that attract potential clients. This book is about the confluence of ideas, inspiration, equipment, technique, and style.

SHOOT THE TYPE OF WORK YOU'D LIKE TO BE HIRED FOR

If you'd love to do shoots of children for a living, then shoot that type of work! If your portfolio is filled with images of food and sports, then no one is going to ask you to photograph their children. Take a moment to envision the image you've always wished you'd be paid to shoot. What does it look like? What is the subject matter? Then, be sure to use these criteria when photographing the challenges in this book. The shoots don't have to be for a client; simply use them to express your abilities as a photographer. In fashion photography, we do this all the time. We shoot editorials and spec shoots to demonstrate our vision and ability, even if it's not a paid shoot or for a client. These shoots allow you to express your creativity and attract clients, or you can simply use the pieces for marketing. You'd be surprised—sometimes the shoots that make you the most money never actually made you any money at all!

Creative 52 is divided into three sections—Concepts, Techniques, and Post-Production—to address three major ways to challenge yourself, your knowledge, and your creativity.

The Concepts challenges urge you to go beyond the snapshot and push your creativity. They help you approach your imagery with a concept. Then you'll focus your inspiration, creativity, and technical knowledge on expressing that concept. These challenges push you beyond shooting what is safe or comfortable. It's about capturing an idea and creating memorable imagery.

The Techniques challenges push your creativity by teaching you new tools and techniques for creating images. If you add these techniques to your creative arsenal, they'll always be available for your next photographic assignment. In these challenges, you'll learn creative solutions that will help you stand out from the competition. Wow your viewers.

The Post-Production challenges help you explore Photoshop as the next realm of creativity, allowing you to make the impossible possible. When you know what's possible in post-processing, it changes the way you see and photograph the world. These challenges teach you a variety of Photoshop tools and concepts that will allow you to better express your vision and continue your creativity far beyond clicking the shutter.

Each challenge contains a description of the project, along with potential inspiration and other artists you can draw inspiration from. Then I tell how I conquered the challenge, including where the idea originated, the image's metadata, and technical information that will help you understand the process I took to create the photograph. I pushed myself to get creative in these challenges, and I invite you to do the same.

Each challenge was crafted to help you explore new concepts, approaches, or techniques in image-making.

HOW I GET INSPIRED

Although I've been a photographer for more than half my life, for years I never considered myself creative. Perhaps I was a craftsman, someone who executed their craft well. But I certainly didn't consider myself a true creative artist. In high school I took technology classes, not art classes, because I saw them as much more practical and utilitarian.

But as I began to shoot and create more striking images, I realized that creativity is a process. You can find a way to cultivate things that inspire and challenge you in order to practice and improve your creativity. Creativity is not a bolt of lightning or unexplainable luck. Most successful artists have a process that they return to so they can produce striking work. I just needed to find and explore my own process.

I have spent a lot of time reflecting on my process, and I'd love to share it with you here. Know, however, that your own process and source of inspiration could be very different from mine. We all seek inspiration in a different way—from without ourselves, from different artists, from movies, from music—yet most important is to discern what inspires you so you can keep coming back for more. An artist without a process is stuck with their fingers crossed, hoping that luck and inspiration strikes them. Take control of your creativity. I suggest you make a list right now. Make a list of the elements that draw you to other photographers' work. What are the things that attract you most? Keep that list beside you as you go through these 52 challenges, and consider how you might integrate them into your solution for each challenge.

LOOKING AT OTHERS' WORK

I usually begin by looking at a lot of other people's work—photographers, artists, sculptors, directors, or any other visuals that pass my way. When seeing work that I love, I used to just drool and think that I could never be that talented. I put my heroes of art on a pedestal, out of reach. But why? Nothing makes one artist better than another; they just have different strengths and styles. Now, I approach looking at others' work in a different way: I dissect.

What inspires me about a particular image or photographer? What strikes me about their work? Is it their lighting, their set, their model, their styling, their composition? When you know what you love, give yourself the assignment of shooting and incorporating those elements. Or maybe you save the images in a category based on what you love, and come back to it for inspiration in the future.

SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

Anything you encounter can inspire you. I frequently take snapshots of photos in magazines, or out the window of a taxi, or even of a frame in a movie. I save them and refer back to them. It's good, however, to have certain places you can return to for fresh images and inspiration. Here are some of the sites that I use as continued sources of inspiration.

- fashiontography.net
- fashiongonerogue.com
- pinterest.com
- vi.sualize.us
- 500px.com
- deviantart.com

In each challenge in this book, the "Artists to Check Out" section lists some of the artists I've used for inspiration. To see the complete list, with links to portfolios, visit blog.lindsayadlerphotography.com/creative52.

Surround yourself with the work of other artists. Go to the movies. Watch advertisements on YouTube. See an installation. Browse art books. The more you look at, the more you have to draw from. Keep a notebook on you, or even just your phone. Snap images of what inspires you, or jot down a note. You never know when an idea will come, and you never know when it will go.

MY CREATIVE PROCESS

Every shoot is made up of a variety of elements. The shoot can have one of these elements as its central focus, or it can use any combination of them. For every shoot I do, I pick one element as the starting point upon which to build:

- Location
- Hair
- Makeup
- Wardrobe
- Model
- Photoshop
- Lighting
- Concept or theme
- Composition

For example, I may start with a location that I have in mind. Or perhaps with the lighting in a photograph I love. Or perhaps a Photoshop technique I learned recently. Or maybe a dress that my wardrobe stylist has shown me.

> *When I do a photo shoot, I create something called a mood board, a collection of images that express the direction of, and inspiration for, a shoot. Mood boards often contain images showing a shoot's desired hair, makeup, wardrobe, and even lighting. A mood board helps express the photographer's vision to the entire team, and it summarizes the look and feel they are trying to achieve. Consider creating a mood board so you can be sure you've considered all the elements that need to come together to make a shoot successful.*

When I've selected my single element, I make a list of everything that comes to mind. Why am I inspired by this element? What are its most striking aspects? What does it remind me of? What colors are involved? What movies does it remind me of?

This is all kind of abstract unless I give you a concrete example, so here is one from a fashion editorial I shot: My wardrobe stylist sent me a photograph of a model walking down a runway in a beautiful dress. At the end of the runway, the model had flipped up the dress, revealing its beautiful and rich texture. I wrote down all the things that inspired me about the dress:

- Purplish blue
- Movement
- Looks like a flower
- Elegant but modern

As I looked at these few key elements, I asked myself some questions. Based on these elements, what would the ideal makeup look like? I felt that the makeup should play off the color palette. Also, since there was already so much detail in the dress, I should probably keep the hair off the shoulders so it would be clean and not compete. What about location? Based on the elements I wrote down, what would the ideal location be? As I studied the list, I kept thinking of blue and purple flowers—lavender! I did some research and discovered a lavender field in the Hamptons, and I decided to plan my entire shoot and concept on this location.

Here is the resulting image. I shot it while standing on a ladder, and I didn't use reflectors, diffusers, or flash. I asked the model to stand with her back to the late afternoon sun that was streaming through the trees and illuminating the dress. I didn't need to light her face because when I had her raise her head to the sky, her eyes were able to catch the open shade. I was able to go back to my creative process to help me formulate an approach for creating this image.

Canon 5D Mark II

Sigma 24–70mm
2.8 lens at 58mm

ISO 640

1/2000 of a sec.

f/2.8

Let's take a look at one more example. I spent my childhood on a farm in upstate New York. It was fantastic to have hundreds of acres to explore and enjoy: ponds, hay fields, creeks, forests, and more. My environment always inspired me, and when I began photography, I photographed our land—from birds to mushrooms to sunsets behind the cornfields. When I was older, I decided that my old home would be a great environment for a fashion shoot that would draw on my early explorations.

One area in particular inspired me. My grandfather had planted a small forest of Christmas trees but had never harvested them. All the trees were lined up in long rows, matching one another perfectly. I used this location as my starting point for inspiration. I wrote down what drew me to it:

- Repetition
- Leading lines
- Symmetry
- Nature
- Graphic

I noticed that many of the things that drew me to the scene were based on composition. To play up what I liked best, I would emphasize symmetry and repetition. I centered the model in a row of trees and then used a symmetrical pose and clothing to emphasize this element. When I looked at the scene in camera, however, it really wasn't as perfect and symmetrical as I wanted. So I mirrored the background so that the scene on the right was the same as the scene on the left. That was what it took to make my vision a reality to my viewers.

To summarize, figure out what one thing you will be basing your shoot on. Maybe it's a single word, or maybe it's a style of makeup. Write down everything that comes to mind when you study this starting point—what strikes you about this element—and build from there. As you write your words, look them up on Pinterest or in a search engine. Piece together multiple images. Take the strengths from multiple images, and thread them together using your style and vision.

> *You may be surprised to learn that none of my shoots cost me any money. That's right! My shoots cost almost nothing because I focus on barter and trade. The hair and makeup stylists work in exchange for images. The designers work in exchange for photos of their clothing. The models work to build their portfolios. Get creative, and remember that your photographs have value. People need images to promote themselves or their businesses, or simply to showcase their specialty. Remember that you can trade your services in exchange for theirs, and take your work up a notch through creative collaboration!*

Canon 5D

Sigma 85mm
1.4 lens

ISO 500

1/30 of a sec.

f/1.8

INSPIRATION VS. IMITATION VS. COPYING

As the saying goes, "It's not where you take it from, but where you take it to." Nothing is completely original, nor does it need to be. You will take inspiration from everything from advertisements to songs to nursery rhymes. In fact, you'll never quite know where all your inspiration comes from. But you'll take an idea and filter it through your mind, and it will come out the other end your own.

Can you go too far in inspiration so that it becomes imitation or, in fact, copying? In my opinion, yes. If you are trying to exactly replicate an image, you should do so only for educational purposes. Perhaps you want to test yourself and see if you can exactly duplicate an image—the model's look, the hair, the makeup, the pose, the lighting, the Photoshop effects, everything. It may be a great learning exercise to deconstruct and re-construct an image, but to call it your own work, you should bring your own style or approach to the table, at least for the sake of this book. These challenges are meant to help you push yourself and draw inspiration. Even if you take a concept or technique from another artist, the way you present it to the world should be your own. So draw inspiration from wherever you need; take the pieces of an artist's work that attract you, and repurpose them—they will become your own.

GET CREATING

This book will take patience. There will be times when you don't love what you created, and that's just fine. Not every image should go into your portfolio. Careful editing of your portfolio shows the world the best you have to offer. Be OK with "failure." When you fail you learn, and when you learn you grow, and when you grow you move closer to success. Explore, mess up, and try things you're uncomfortable with. Perhaps you'll stumble across a style that becomes uniquely your own. Or perhaps you'll learn what you *don't* like to do, which can be just as important.

Take a year or take two years or however long you need to complete these challenges. Just know that you should always be growing, always trying something new, and always photographing—because it's what you are meant to do.

CHALLENGE 4

USE NEGATIVE SPACE

DESCRIPTION

Create an image in which the negative space is an essential element. Perhaps a vast expanse of sky communicates a story of loneliness or drama. Or perhaps the contrasting color of a background accentuates the shape and color of your subject. In this image, the negative space should either complement your subject or be a dominant element in your frame.

When you're creating your image, think of a way for negative space to become an important element in your frame. Graphic designers regularly use negative space in logos and other designs—now it's time to take "nothing" and turn it into something great for your composition.

INSPIRATION

Space and shape work in tandem. Positive and negative space are powerful tools for creating graphic images. Positive space is the center of focus and main subject in your image. The negative space, often the background, is an important element of shape and composition that makes up the space not occupied by your main subject.

Perhaps you have seen the two-faces-and-vase example. The famous illustration shows two profiles facing one another, and the negative space between the two of them creates a vase. The negative space defines the positive space and vice versa. If you want to learn more about how this plays out in graphic design, look up "Gestalt principles" to see some examples that you won't be able to stop staring at!

When I first saw Gregory Colbert's project "Ashes and Snow," which focuses on the relationship between humans and animals, I was brought to tears. I held the book in my hands and stared at each image, entranced by their hushed elegance. In this work, positive and negative space are essential compositional tools that communicate the close relationship of the subjects, and the negative space communicates a quiet vastness.

At the other extreme, Keith Haring's graphic artwork explodes with energy and movement because of his careful use of positive and negative space. The "empty" space in many of his pieces is extremely minimal.

Gregg Segal's series "Dreams" uses negative space and carefully selected background colors to surreal and often humorous effects. None of the images are tightly cropped or crammed in. Instead, there is intentional breathing room in the negative space. Commercial photographer Colin Anderson also utilizes negative space to create atmosphere and one-point perspective for leading lines to his subject. His compositions are often loose and purposeful.

ARTISTS TO CHECK OUT

Gregory Colbert gregorycolbert.com

Colin Anderson andersonproductions.com.au

Keith Haring haring.com

Gregg Segal greggsegal.com

Canon 5D Mark III

Sigma 70–200mm
2.8 lens at 157mm

ISO 100

1/200 of a sec.

F/13

MY SOLUTION

I was photographing a model with a large white paper flower affixed to her head. It was almost noon, and normally I would've put the model in the shade to even out the exposure, perhaps using a reflector to create catchlights. Direct sunlight is so contrasty that it's often impossible to catch the entire exposure in a single frame. Yet as the model walked through the scene, I caught a glimpse of a beautiful image as she stepped into the sunlight.

The white flower became glowing white and cast a dark shadow onto her face and chest—I could see a graphic image in the making. I spot-metered on the floral headpiece to be sure I didn't overexpose it, so when I took a frame, her face was solid black and in shadow. In fact, her profile wasn't even visible because it blended in with the shadow of the building behind her. It was an image that showcased the floral piece, but it did nothing to show the subject. The face and background became indistinguishable from one another.

I wanted to draw attention to the subject's elegant profile and long neck, so I needed to add a background that would contrast with the face. I had the model pose so that the flower stayed illuminated and her face stayed in shadow, and I asked my assistant to hold a white reflector behind the model's head. This was not meant to light the face, but instead to become a background. We held the reflector far enough behind the subject that there was no shadow on the reflector, and instead the bright midday light hit the reflector and turned it white. The subject's neck and profile were perfectly defined against the strong contrast of the background.

Because I paid careful attention to negative space and how it defined the positive space, I was able to create this image with only natural light. If I had not used manual exposure, I likely would have ended up with a mid-toned face and an extremely overexposed flower. Instead, the result is a graphic image that almost looks more like an illustration than a photograph!

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