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photography & design

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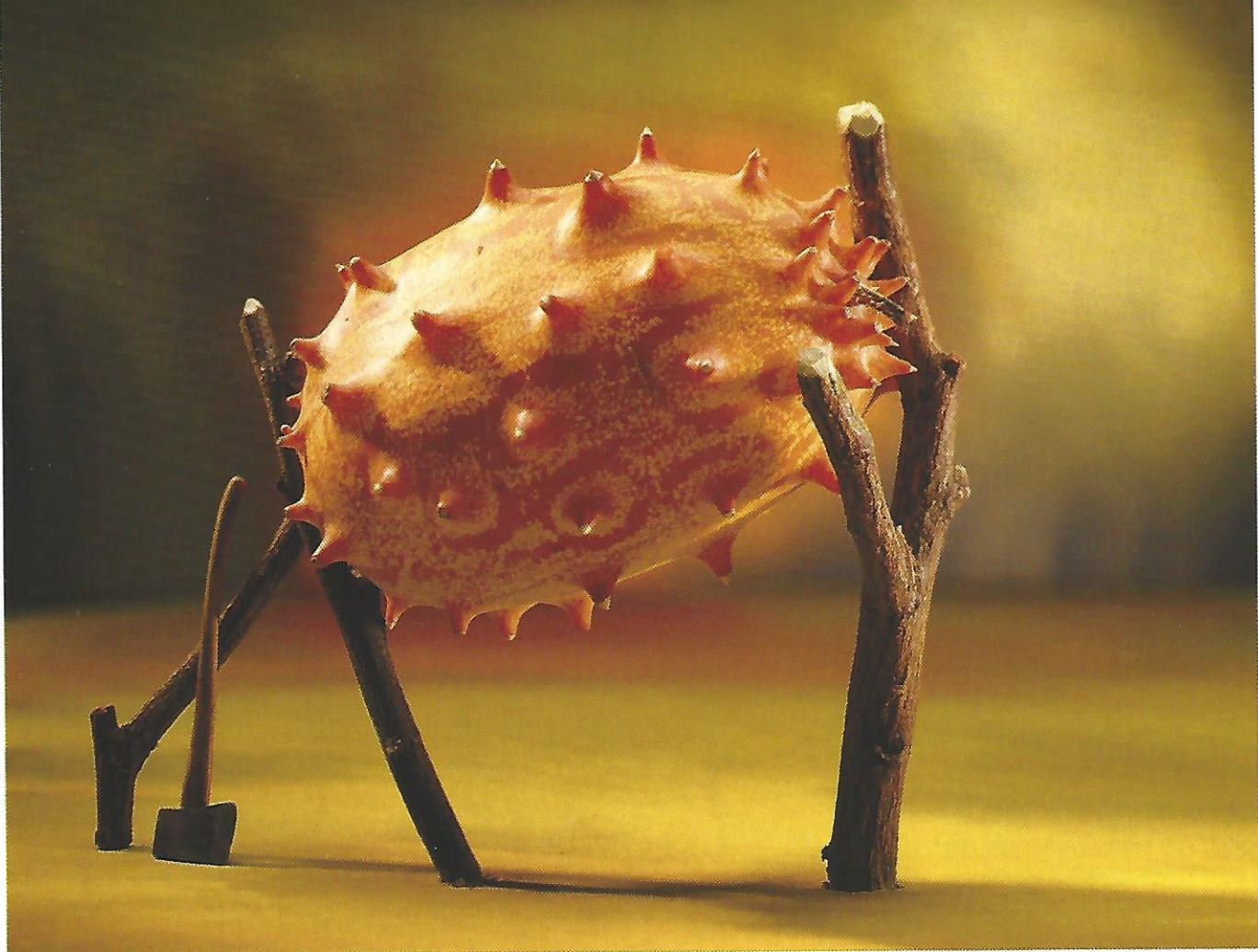
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Special Collectors' Edition

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IMAGE/CANON EOS D30



jeff sarpa

His Amazingly Animated Inanimate Objects

It's ironic, but an advertisement for Brooks Institute actually steered Los Angeles-based advertising shooter Jeff Sarpa to photography.

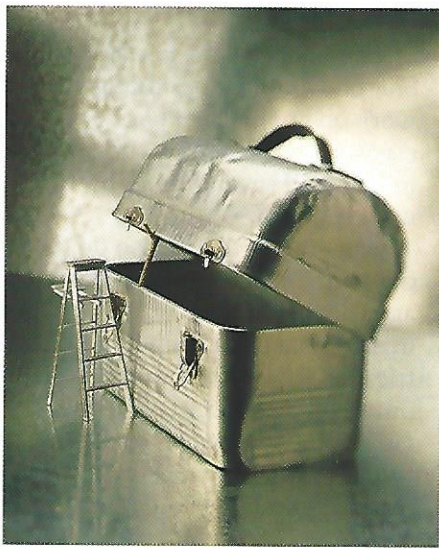
"Photography was a hobby for me through high school," he says, "although I wasn't very serious about it. I was kind of sucked in by the Brooks ad—it was very compelling—and decided to go there, even though I'd never processed a roll of B&W film in my life."

After Brooks, Sarpa served as an assistant to commercial photographer Harv Bergman before venturing out on his own and focusing on catalog work. "It was a great way to get a lot of experience shooting different types of products quickly and efficiently," he says. "I shot anything inanimate—housewares, room scenes, linens, china, shoes. I made a lot of money right away—between \$800 and

\$1,000 a day—and was able to buy equipment and make the transition from assistant to photographer easily."

Working for several agencies that handled department store catalogs, he shot for Robinson's, the Broadway, and Weinstock's, gradually moving more toward advertising work. "I worked a lot for design firms initially. They can be a little easier than ad agencies to start

TEXT BY MILDRED LEINWEBER DAWSON • IMAGES BY JEFF SARPA



out with. Often their budgets aren't quite as big and they're sometimes more willing to give a new person a chance."

Today, Sarpa's client roster includes design and advertising agencies, with national and international clients. Among them: Burger King, for which he shoots advertising images and point-of-purchase images for in-store signs, billboards, and posters. Perdue also keeps him busy, as does Jaffa Cosmetics and Acme Foods.

Hiring a rep was an important business decision for Sarpa. "Most artists reach a point where they're not very good at selling themselves. When you're shooting, you don't have time to look for work and if you're looking for work, you don't have time to shoot. It's best to have someone else take care of the



marketing."

He has worked with his current rep, Nadine Kalmes, for four years and credits her with helping him to achieve his current level of success. She earns 25 percent of his fees and, he says, "it's worth it."

Sarpa's wife, Tyler Burton, a fellow photographer he met at Brooks Institute, "comes up with ideas, works with the photographs, and helps to organize the studio and sees that shoots go smoothly."

MOTION PICTURES

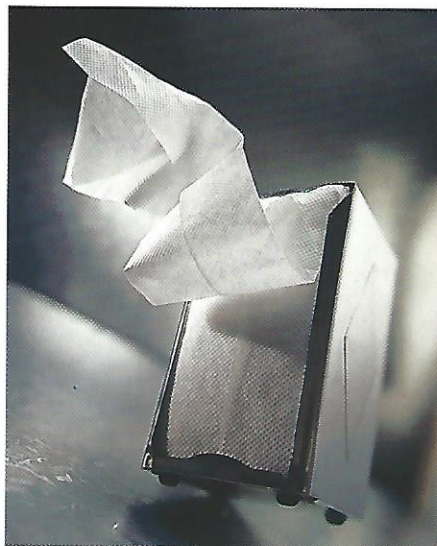
Although his work is primarily shooting inanimate objects, he strives to capture activity. "I like movement," he says, "whether it's in the object itself or in a liquid." (Such as the martini in a martini glass). "I like figuring out a way to capture the movement in the cam-



era," by actually creating and then shooting it. He prefers this approach over faking movement or splashes, using props such as lucite splashes, or using digital manipulation.

"When I started, you didn't have the digital option," he says. Although that option does exist now, Sarpa finds that creating and shooting real movement often looks better and costs clients less than the other approaches. For instance, he says, "it's very easy but expensive to have a lucite splash made.

"People are relying a lot more on the digital process and I think, in some ways, it has cheapened the craft of photography. Some people don't try to figure out how to get what they want in front of the camera because they feel they can always fix it in the computer. On the



other hand, digital technology has been a blessing for all involved in photography."

Sarpa devotes a lot of prep time to figuring out how to create a look he wants—for instance, droplets spraying in mid-air from a watering can's spout. In this case, he hooked up a high-pressure pump to the back of the can and let the spray fly for just an instant. He had his assistant control both the spray and a strobe that served as his light source.

"You have to time all these things very sensitively," he says. Then he may shoot dozens of sheets of 4x5 images. According to Sarpa, getting the watering can right took about 50 images; capturing the martini, about 75.



THE LIGHT TOUCH

"I tend toward moodier lighting and I like hard light sources," he says. Sarpa often lights up the prominent area of an object and lets others fall into shadow. For instance, he shot a ticket machine (the sort from which you take a number at a deli) for Toyota. "It was a forced perspective shot, with the ticket coming out of the machine lit up and the other parts falling out" of view, he says.

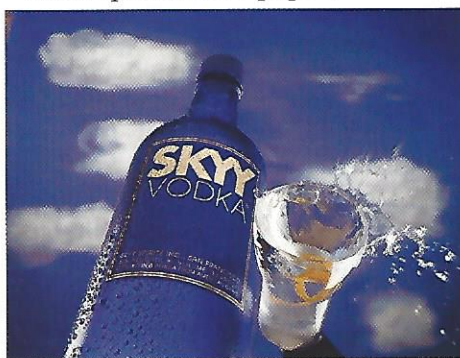
Meeting clients' needs is key for Sarpa. "In commercial work, it's their money so you give them what they pay for. I give my input, but I don't pontificate. If they want to go

in another direction, that's fine."

Operating out of a rented studio for 20 years, just three months ago he bought a 4,000-square-foot building in L.A.—a former Baptist church—which he's currently focused on renovating.

"We strive to make anyone who comes to the studio comfortable. The space is fully functional now, but we're working on the outdoor areas, putting in a garden with a deck and a pond—for a pleasant meeting area—and a relaxation space."

Equipment doesn't concern him much. "I buy the best stuff I can. Some specialized equipment can



make jobs easier, but it's who's behind the camera that really matters. The best hammer in the world won't help if you can't drive a nail straight."

Sarpa uses neither digital cam-

JEFF SARPA'S GEAR BOX

35MM CAMERA

Nikon F3 with Nikkor lenses

MEDIUM-FORMAT CAMERA

Hasselblad 504

LARGE-FORMAT CAMERAS

Sinar p1 4x5 and 8x10 with Nikkor lenses

LIGHTING

Norman strobes

Balcar grid sets

Chimera extra small, small, and medium light boxes

FILM

Kodak Ektachrome 100 Plus (EPP)

ACCESSORIES

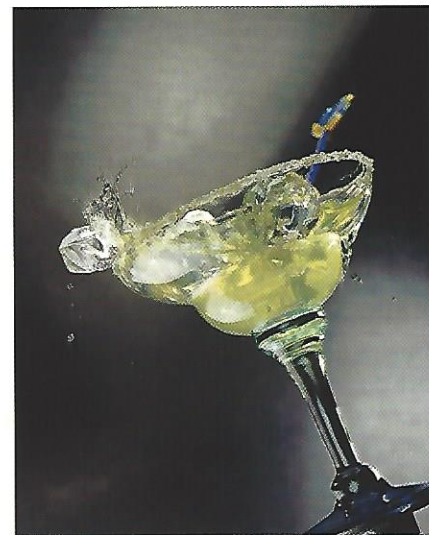
Dale beam infrared tripper

Kodak Wratten neutral density filters

eras nor computers. His assistant, Sharon Gottula, does though. She'll work on an image at her home computer and then he and she will exchange it several times by email until it's right.

Many of his clients also do their own digital work, or have their agencies do it. They will, for instance, take his images (a burger, fries, and a soda, for instance) and put them together in composites. He has transparencies or digital files sent to the agents with whom he works and they handle the printing process.

He values the Internet for its conveniences. "Agencies used to have to overnight mail or fax me detailed colored layouts of ads. Now they just email them. It's also



great for sending out estimates and invoices." He's got a website "in the works" and expects it to be up in about six months.

His chief concern: "To stay busy." These days, it's not a problem. He's got plenty of work scheduled, including some that actually takes him into the realm of the animate. He's started shooting people in certain product shots, including some for Campbell's soup and for Amgen pharmaceuticals. For the latter, he shoots real patients in their homes.

"Business should always be changing, and you should always be ready for change," says Sarpa. ♦