



Hernan Rodriguez

# dream weaver

By Cathleen Burnham

When Hernan Rodriguez trains his lens on a subject, he's aiming, like all photographers, for more than just a one-dimensional visage. He's looking for a fleeting glimpse of the soul. And Rodriguez usually gets it. "I pay special attention and study people as much as possible," he says. "I look for a movement they naturally fall into, instead of a pose. People have certain forms of expressions and characteristics that formulate them. It's up to us to first identify them and then portray them in a capture. If I spend too much time posing and staging the shot, I lose the freshness and the organic feel of my subjects. Even for a simple corporate headshot, my clients trust me to translate their perception of themselves into reality."



Based in Sherman Oaks, California—one of the capitals for commercial photography and hugely influenced by the Hollywood studios—Rodriguez has shot everything from known actors and network personalities, to Super Bowl rings and trophies, to corporate clients and food.

And of course, young people and families are a constant in his schedule. Rodriguez is an expert at tapping into that primal understanding that adults have of children: The world is big, children are small.

Just feel your protective urges surface as you look at the shy girl pressed against that out-of-scale wall, or the innocent bravado of the small boy waving a stick. Those glimpses into the world of

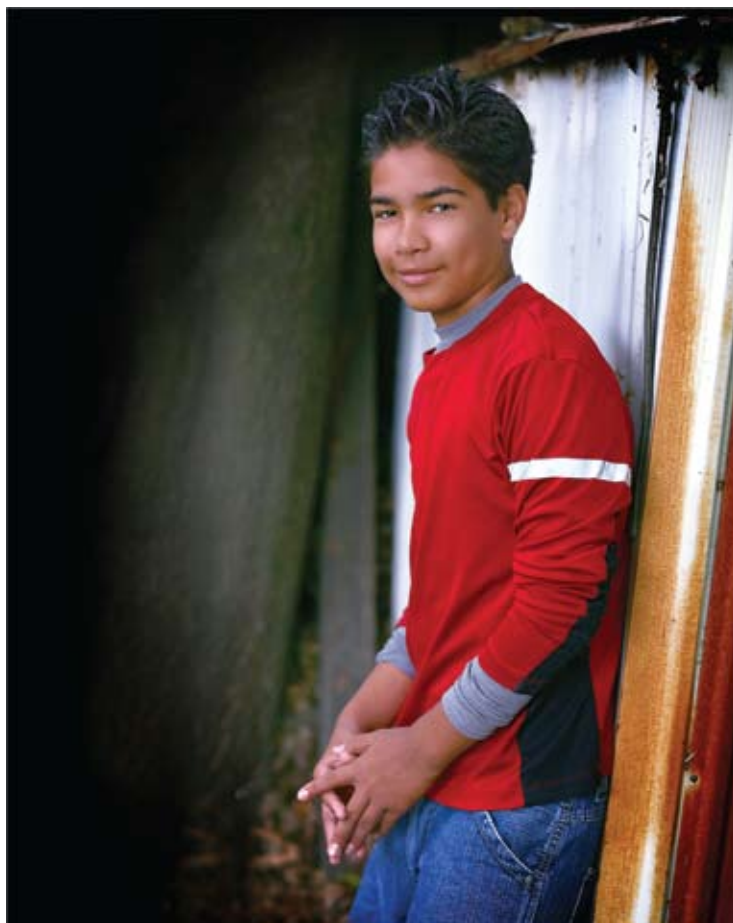


an unknown child don't just walk up to Rodriguez's lens. "I recently photographed a 4-year-old in my studio," he says. "She was petrified of my zoom lens. Her parents were really concerned about getting any worthwhile shots. I left the camera on the tripod and got down on my hands and knees with her—at her level, eye to eye. I became her friend, and we started talking about her toys and games. The rest of the photo shoot was just a formality. That's the key ingredient I pay attention to—the human factor."

Rodriguez sees art everywhere. In a mesmerizing portrait entitled "Hands," a circle of old and young hands interlock, and it's difficult to tell whether it was taken 50 years ago or yesterday. One would never guess from the prayer-like imagery that it documents an everyday scene—a modern-day grandma helping to clean up after a little boy's birthday.

While many people stumble into photography after training in vastly different areas, Rodriguez believes that many of his life experiences prepared him for and led him to a life in the practice. "One of my early recollections is sitting in the den with my dad," he explains. "I was 5 years old, and instead of handing me a coloring book, he gave me a how-to book on drawing the human face. Being a child of an aerospace illustrator and photographer, my two sisters and I would serve as little models for my dad to test his lighting and equipment. I knew all my life that this is where I wanted to be."

His path wasn't smooth, though. "One of the hardest lessons came at 16," Rodriguez says. "My art instructor thought I was the most talented in the class, so I was given one project to turn in



at the end of the term to determine my grade. I had four whole months. I worked on it one week before the due date. The teacher failed me. Worse than that, Bank of America, along with Ford Corporation, was offering a scholarship to art school. The teacher denied that also, or rather, I denied that opportunity. This was a huge lesson. Through failure, we reassess the direction we are heading. Photographers constantly need to experiment with new techniques in regards to lighting or maybe style. We are in an industry that is in a constant state of evolution, especially in this digital era. Sometimes what we try just doesn't work. If I fail, I correct and reassess. I've grown through failure, and I believe if we never fail, we never grow."

Three years ago Rodriguez was in a motorcycle accident that resulted in severe injuries, including a shattered wrist that was eventually reconstructed with donated bone. The doctors gave him a 30% chance of regaining the use of his left hand. The accident could have meant the end of his photography career. "My faith in God and the determination to hold my two passions—my newborn and my camera—were the driving forces behind my recovery," he says. After grueling therapy, his doctor recently confirmed a 97% usage of his hand. The setback taught Rodriguez "determination, perseverance, tenacity and just plain self-motivation," he says. "This is one accident I don't regret. It's taught me to cherish every moment in life. In my photography with my clients, if I can cherish the moment, I definitely can capture the moment." And history is repeating itself in Rodriguez's family. He now uses his 3-year-old and 5-year-old as models. "They've become quite the pros!" he says.

"As small as they are, they have contributed immensely to my children's photography. Since my clients are also little people, I get to test lighting techniques and locations with my two assistants."

If it was his father's career that immersed Rodriguez in the world of lighting and the study of form, it is Rodriguez's motocross hobby that took him one step further by opening his field of vision. He shares this vision-broadening exercise: "Keep your eyes fixed in one spot in the room, or wherever you find yourself. Now in your mind, shift all your concentration to the left eye. This is still without moving your eyeballs. Peripherally your focus gets increased on your left side and diminishes on the right side. Now try it with your right eye. We can control the mental awareness in our peripheral vision at will. Pretty awesome, hey?"

While Rodriguez uses both digital and film, he has gravitated towards primarily digital capture. He says he reserves film for his "creative and art photography." Rodriguez shoots with the Canon EOS 5D and names the 70–200mm f/2.8L IS lens as his favorite. "I really favor this lens because of the clarity I can capture in the eyes of my subjects," he explains. "It also allows me to compress the background, giving focus to my subject." He also favors the EF 85mm f/1.2L II USM, among others. "I find the Canon shot in RAW produces images very close to medium format," he says. Rodriguez also uses a Canon 1VH. "This one is for my personal use and family pictures,"

he says. "It forces me to get the film developed and printed instead of letting images sit in my hard drive for years."

"As far as lighting is concerned," Rodriguez says, "because of my commercial work, I photograph a lot in the studio using Norman monolights with the Ken Cook

a similarity in the process of using studio lighting to project light onto live models or still life objects both in photography and oil painting. The end product has to feel natural with the one sense of light."

No matter what the subject is and no matter what the choice of equipment may be, the key to maintaining long-lasting relationships with clients is the same. "I actually just purchased another motorcycle to commute back and forth between cities," Rodriguez says. "I know it would be much easier to drop a packet in the mail, but I like to take time out to visit my clients face to face. They appreciate that."

This year, Rodriguez earned 12 Accolades of Excellence from WPPI. Receiving awards and garnering accompanying press can establish a photographer's strong reputation. The bottom line is that awards impress clients. "Parents really do their homework when it comes to photographing their kids," he says. "They won't just choose anybody. As a photographer, competition also helps keep your motivation strong. I received a call this past year to photograph a governor and mayor. Their publicist saw my website and told me, 'If you've won these awards, we assume you're good.' It can open many doors for you." Beyond awards,

Rodriguez's work has been published in *Details*, *Mr.*, *Triathlete*, *Men's Workout* and *Exercise & Health*. He has photographed ads for apparel companies such as Guess Clothing, Greg Parry, Tanline California, CM2, Wild Lotus and Moshika. His images were chosen to appear in several coffee-




Master's Brush softbox. It's a great invention for a natural-looking light source. I prefer the feel of natural light because of its freshness. Even when using artificial lighting, I try to mimic the feel and quality of natural light. Being an artist, I like to keep the style of my work organic. There's

table books (*The International Library of Photography* and the *WPPI Awards of Excellence Album*), and he'll be included in two gallery showings this year.

Where does Rodriguez look for inspiration? "The old masters' work such as Sargent and Rembrandt has really stayed with me," he explains. "I also constantly like to see my contemporaries' work, whether through books, seminars, video or other media. We can always learn from each other. I find it beneficial looking through fashion magazines, studying cool ads and the lighting behind some of these apparel companies or even products—from beer to watches—that pour millions of dollars into advertising. Awareness of light sources on your everyday walk is really helpful also. One day I was watching *CSI: Miami* and studied a really cool scene. The lighting source was from a low angle. It was lit with a blue gel and high contrast. The light then had a quick falloff on the background. I later used this as a source for a fashion shoot." Of course, knowing when and where to use a technique is also a key component, says Rodriguez. "I would never use the same technique on a child," he adds.

Rodriguez feels blessed in his profession. "More than cities or towns, photography has blessed me with the privilege to travel into people's personal spaces."

Rodriguez feels especially lucky to have been mentored by talented photographer Nathan York (who also now does freelance work for his studio), and he now believes the time has come for him to give back. He works with My Fellow Ship, a charitable organization based in Puebla, Mexico, that provides clean water to underprivileged areas where fatalities among children are high due to unclean water. Rodriguez will offer an exhibition in children's photography as a fund-raising venture for this organization, after which his images will be auctioned off with all proceeds donated.

Synergy, energy, flow and memory—it's the blend that runs through Rodriguez's work. And of course, every shot is infused with soul. Visit [www.hernanphotography.com](http://www.hernanphotography.com). 

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