





## Cherie Steinberg Coté: Breaking Into Fashion

By Linda L. May

This Los Angeles, California-based imagemaker is not afraid to tackle new challenges. When she makes up her mind to do something, she goes after it with a passion. That's the approach she took recently when she decided to break into fashion photography. Cherie Steinberg Coté did not wait until she had paying clients to begin the learning process. Instead, she convinced models, make-up artists and hair stylists to work for free, and she set up her own fashion shoots, practicing and learning on the job. During this learning phase, she also established working relationships with models, who pass her name around the fashion industry, further expanding her client base.

Besides fashion, Cherie photographs a wide variety of subjects, including weddings, events, glamour, portraits, pets, fine art, nudes, commercial and corporate work. Her impressive images have appeared in many publications, including *Los Angeles* magazine, *Los Angeles Times*, *Town & Country*, the *Toronto Sun* newspaper and several others. She is also a member of WPPI.

When Cherie stepped over into the fashion world, she learned that although they both include people, there are differences between shooting portraits and doing fashion. However, she equally enjoys doing both kinds of work.

"Fashion is more about the clothes, showing the details of the garments and setting a particular mood or look. Portraiture is more about the relationship between myself and the people I'm photographing," Cherie explains. "Fashion shoots require a whole team of people working together to get it right. I work alone when doing portraiture. Even the lighting techniques are different. I make my lighting for fashion a bit more edgy and dramatic than I do for portraits."

Cherie also discovered that the team must be harmonious and able to work well together to accomplish great fashion work. Before doing an important fashion shoot, Cherie recommends that photographers pull together a team and practice to see how well everybody

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works together. “You never really know others until you work with them in a pressure situation, and watch how well they handle it. Then you know whether or not you’d pick them to work with in the future. Fashion is not a one-person show! It takes several talented people to make it happen. That’s why getting the right team is crucial to success,” Cherie explains.

Working with experienced models is also a benefit when shooting fashion, according to Cherie. “Experienced models know how to move, and I don’t need to do much coaching. I just explain the feeling or mood I’m going for, and the models take it from there. They add their own dimension to the shoot. Less-experienced models need more coaching and guidance. However, because I’m attuned to every detail, from how the little toe is placed to any loose strands of hair, I don’t mind coaching either.”

Last May, to further her fashion career, Cherie entered photographs in *Surface* magazine’s prestigious Avant Guardian contest for up-and-coming fashion photographers. This is a well respected contest that has been ongoing for eight years now. The semi-finalists are provided a team of experts and must produce a fashion spread. The winning selection is published in *Surface*, giving a boost to that fortunate photographer’s fashion career.

Nothing in her childhood prepared this Canadian-born imagemaker for a career in this industry. Cherie did not set out to be a professional photographer. In fact, she was majoring in fine art at York University in Toronto, Canada, when she first discovered photography in the late 1970s.

“A beginning photo course was offered at the university, so I borrowed a camera from a friend’s father and took it. When we got into the darkroom part of the class, I was hooked! I loved watching the pictures come up, so right then, I decided to become a photographer. Almost immediately, I quit college to pursue that dream. The only reason I was going to college in the first place was to figure out what I wanted to do as a career. Once I chose photography, there was no more reason to stay in school,” Cherie says.

Once she took the risk and quit college, Cherie had to find a way to learn her new

profession. So, she accepted a job assisting three commercial photographers in Toronto, and broke into this industry using 4x5 and 8x10 view cameras. Cherie caught on quickly and was soon shooting great



images on her own.

Photography was a man’s domain back then, but that never dissuaded Cherie. The *Toronto Sun* newspaper ran a daily feature called “The Sunshine Girls” picturing a lovely gal in a bikini on the third page. Cherie noticed there was not a similar feature

on men, so she boldly approached the paper and volunteered to shoot the guys. They hired her on the spot, calling her feature “The Sunshine Boys.” The paper still runs these features to this day, according to Cherie.

“I started photographing guys around town and became quite well known in Toronto,” Cherie explains. “Because my pictures were in the paper all the time, I was able to work into doing legitimate jobs for the paper. I got several front-page photographs and did a lot of social events and parties as well. It was a great foot-in-the-door to a newspaper at a time when there were no women photojournalists working at the paper.

“Years later, on my visits back to Toronto to see my family, who still lives there, people remembered me taking pictures for the paper. I’ve even had women tell me I influenced them to take risks in their own lives because I was the first women photographer to break into this profession. I accomplished something that was not the norm at the time, which opened doors for other women to think about photography and newspaper work, or just do something they would never think to do because they were women. At the time, it never

bothered me that I was the first and only women working there. I just did my job and pleased my editors, and took it in stride.”

Later, Cherie received a grant from the Canadian Council for the Arts (similar to the National Endowment for the Arts

in the United States) to travel the globe and shoot pictures. For seven years, she trekked around Europe, Iran, Turkey, Japan, Hong Kong, India and Pakistan, practicing photography. When her journey was done, she moved to New York City and stopped doing photography for a time. From the Big Apple, Cherie relocated to Denver, Colorado, and began shooting again. For 10 years, she operated a lucrative studio on the third floor of the former Governor's mansion, a historic building in Denver. However, after years of enduring the harsh Colorado winters, Cherie decided to move to sunny California, where the climate is warmer. She packed up her business and relocated to West Los Angeles, where she has once again established a thriving studio after only two and a half years in business.

A major concern for Cherie when moving to Los Angeles was not being able to find another perfect studio location like she had in Denver. However, as it turned out, she had no cause for worry.

"When I arrived in L.A., I found a wonderful location in a great neighborhood. In fact, I didn't realize how perfect the location was until I lived and worked here awhile. It's in the heart of the city, close to Beverly Hills and Westwood, and only a few minutes from Santa Monica. Ten feet from my front door is a small studio that came with the property. I couldn't ask for a better location. It was serendipitous!" Cherie says.

The reception, office and production areas are housed on the second floor of a wooden structure, with stairs leading up to French doors. Cool stone tiles on the floor and tasteful décor make clients feel right at home. Cherie also has a bathroom with a shower and a special area for a make-up artist in this 550-square-foot rectangular space. The separate shooting space across the yard is about 100-square-feet. She operates the studio with one associate. Together, they do all the everyday photography and weddings, and two talented freelancers help in the studio when necessary. Cherie's studio often holds mini seminars on lighting, equipment and other aspects of studio operation.

"I have always shot weddings with another photographer because it's more fun and it mixes the work, which is good for clients," Cherie says.

Ninety percent of her work is now shot

digitally, using Nikon D2X, D70 and D100 cameras. However, Cherie still uses a Canon AE-1 and a Nikon N90S for film capture. Robert Cavali does all her custom printing. For illumination, she uses Dynalites, Photoflex softboxes and Mole Richardson tungsten lighting equipment for studio work, and Nikon SB-80 flash units on-camera. Cherie says she is a die-hard



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Macintosh fan.

This free thinker also has her own approach to marketing and getting the word out about her studio. "I think the best way to spread the news about yourself is to first produce great work! People will tell others about you, and your business will naturally evolve and grow," Cherie says with a smile.

When Cherie first came to Los Angeles, she did not use conventional advertising to get established. Instead, she placed her web site with as many search engines as possible and handed out thousands of business cards listing her web site address. This approach has apparently paid off because the business continues increasing. In 2003, she photographed 25 weddings, and in 2004 that number grew to 40. This year, she plans to limit her bookings to 35-40.

"I also networked with great photographers, like Joe Buissink, who was kind enough to introduce me to others in the industry, such as Ira Gershoff at Leather Craftsmen Albums," Cherie explains.

The future looks bright and prosperous for Cherie, both in fashion and in her

business life in general. In the more distant future, Cherie would like to design and build her perfect studio space, but for now, she is content with what she has. In the nearer future, she hopes to do more traveling assignments and shoot more fashion photography. "I love fashion work because I love fabulous clothes and photographing beautiful models wearing them. I enjoy the

whole team approach to fashion. I also like the edgy stuff, experimenting with special effects and dramatic lighting techniques," Cherie says.

Currently, Cherie is photographing flower arrangements for a book project with Eric Buterbaugh, a well known Los Angeles florist. She is also working with Wire Image, a leading stock agency, to sell her prints through that avenue. Otherwise, Cherie plans to continue building her business and taking whatever risks necessary to accomplish her dreams and goals.

Cherie concludes with some photographic advice: "Play with light. No matter where you are, take a few moments to experiment and play. Go outside the box for those few shots. You never know, sometimes you'll capture your best shots during this period."

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