

In rarefied

Each year, *Professional Photographer* shares a feature story about the Diamond Photographers of the Year. These esteemed image creators have earned the highest level of success in the PPA International Photographic Competition (IPC) by landing four images in the prestigious PPA Loan Collection. To appreciate the scope of this achievement fully, it helps to look at the numbers.

During the 2012 competition judged

this summer, more than 1,200 professional photographers submitted nearly 5,000 images for consideration. This represents about a 20 percent increase in participation over the previous year. Approximately 1,800 of those images earned a merit based on 12 elements defined as necessary for the success of an art piece or image (see ppa.com/competitions/international/12elements.php). Of those, only 476 were selected for the PPA Loan

Collection. That's less than 10 percent of the total submission pool. And this isn't your typical collection of photo submissions. This is the PPA International Photographic Competition, the contest for professionals who have worked diligently to excel at their craft, studying, composing, and capturing thousands of images in the process. So the submitted photographs already reflect a high standard of expectation.



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The 2012 Diamond Photographers of the Year claim the summit

BY JEFF KENT

To land an image within the top 10 percent is impressive.

To land *four* images in this elite category is amazing. Only eight photographers reached that level of accomplishment this year. These Diamond Photographers of the Year are breathing rarified air, to be sure, representing about 0.006 percent of the total contenders.

"The Diamond photographers are setting the bar for everyone else," says

Dennis Craft, M.Photog.Hon.M.Photog.Cr., CPP, API, chairman of the PPA Print Exhibition Committee. "We've seen a progressive improvement in the quality of images submitted to the competition over the past few years, and those who have competed over a period of time are really raising the standard. But what these photographers understand better than anyone is that the IPC isn't just about winning awards. It's also a way to

determine how your images measure against good, quality photography. It's a way to make yourself better."

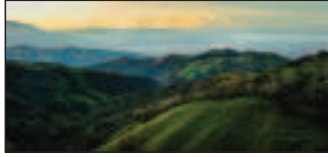
It's also a vital component in earning the PPA Master of Photography degree, which has become a credible differentiator in an increasingly competitive field. For now, though, the Diamond Photographers of the Year have no competition. They are on a level by themselves. And these are their award-winning images.

TIFFANY REED (PP. 92-93)

Tiffany Reed Photography, La Grange, Ky.,
tiffanyreed.com

"SAFELY GRAZING"

©Tiffany Reed



Landscape and fine-art photographer Tiffany Reed captured "Safely Grazing" in Costa Rica during her second visit to this vista. Arriving at dawn, she waited for the right moment when she would be able to pick up the

details in the shadows of the coffee plantations and balance them with the contrast of the sun rising over the ocean. "As I was standing there watching the animals grazing, I recalled the old hymn 'Sheep May Safely Graze,'" says Reed. "I love this image because it shows the vast diversity of this remarkable country." In postproduction, Reed used the tonal contrast filter in Nik Color Efex Pro 2 and highlighted some of the darker places near the base of the image to bring out detail.

CAMERA: Nikon D700

LENS: 50mm f/1.4

LIGHT: Available

SOFTWARE: Adobe Photoshop and Nik Color Efex Pro, Viveza, and Dfine

APERTURE PRIORITY SETTING: f/16

ISO: 200

BEN SHIRK (BELOW)

Shirk Photograph, Wilton, Iowa,
shirkphotography.com

"WASH AWAY MY FEARS"

A senior portrait photographer by trade, Ben Shirk has become increasingly well known for his photographic composites. "Wash Away My Fears" evolved out of an engagement session with a couple who both sported prominent tattoos. Shirk captured the image using a 16-35mm f/2.8 lens, hand held at 1/30 second to smooth out the moving water. "The painterly effect in the image is the result of a slow shutter speed and a custom Lightroom preset that I created," explains Shirk. "I removed a few distracting details in Photoshop and created the edges with a Photoshop paintbrush."

CAMERA: Canon EOS-1Ds Mark III

LENS: 16-35mm f/2.8

LIGHT: Available

SOFTWARE: Adobe Lightroom and Photoshop

SHUTTER SPEED: 1/30 second

APERTURE: f/3.5

ISO: 100

©Ben Shirk





©Adrian Henson

ADRIAN HENSON (ABOVE)

Adrian Henson Photography, New Bern, N.C.,
adrianhenson.com

"REACHING"

Specializing in seniors, commercial projects, and dance school photography, Adrian Henson, M.Photog.ME1., CPP, found the inspiration for "Reaching" after seeing the album of flower images created by fellow Diamond photographer Michael Barton. "It got me thinking about how there is amazing subject matter all around us, and with great lighting many otherwise mundane things could become extraordinary," says Henson. To prevent the excessively shallow depth of field that plagues many flower images, Henson photographed at $f/22$ and set his focal length to 70mm. He engulfed the whole flower with light from a strobe modified by a 16-inch parabolic reflector. Dragging the shutter to $1/40$ second gave him subtle detail beyond the flower. In postproduction, Henson used Alien Skin Exposure 3 for the black-and-white conversion, and then spent several hours subtly dodging and burning in Photoshop using a dark layer/light layer masking technique. Finally, he added some sharpening using Nik Sharpener Pro.

CAMERA: Canon EOS 5D

LENS: 24-70mm $f/2.8$

LIGHT: Photogenic StudioMax AKC320B with 16-inch parabolic reflector

SOFTWARE: Adobe Photoshop, Nik Sharpener Pro, and Alien Skin Exposure

SHUTTER SPEED: $1/40$ second

APERTURE: $f/22$

ISO: 100

THOM ROUSE (RIGHT)

Rouse Imaging, DeKalb, Ill.,
thomrouse.com

"SNAPSHOT FROM A DREAM IN PROGRESS"

Thom Rouse, M.Photog.ME1.Cr, CPP, divides his time between commercial, fine-art, and commissioned fine-art portraits. "Snapshot from a Dream in Progress" was inspired by a friend's bout with cancer and the deep thoughts about the fragile nature of life that her struggle evoked. He captured the principal images in studio, illuminating the subject and background with strip lights placed on either side of and parallel to the subject. For a fill light, he positioned a White Lightning studio light in a 4x6 soft box over the camera. Later, he composited the different parts of the image in Photoshop, primarily using selection and blending modes. "I'm not so much inspired by the image as I am by my friend and her experience," says Rouse. "The image is a tribute to its subject and her truthful and insightful sharing of the experience."

CAMERA: Canon EOS 5D Mark II

LENS: 24-105mm $f/4$ and 70-200mm $f/2.8$

LIGHTS: White Lightning studio lights modified by Larson strip lights and a 4x6 soft box

SOFTWARE: Adobe Photoshop

SHUTTER SPEED: $1/125$ second

APERTURE: $f/8$

ISO: 200





MARK BRYANT

Bryant Photographics, Missoula, Mont.,
bryantphotographics.com

"I SHOT THE SHERIFF"

A portrait, commercial, and architectural photographer, Mark Bryant was one of two "Double Diamonds" this year, an extremely rare breed of image maker who lands two four-image sets in the Loan Collection for two different categories (Master Artist and Photographic Open). This feat has only been accomplished by three people in the history of the competition: Bryant, Thom Rouse (during a previous competition), and Richard Sturdevant. To create "I Shot the Sheriff," Bryant photographed Missoula County Sheriff Carl Ibson in front of an old police car in an alleyway in downtown Missoula. He augmented the available light with a Photogenic monolight modified by an octabox, as well as a small strip light. Later, in Photoshop, he did some dodging and burning and made a few color adjustments. "The image captures Sheriff Ibson's personality and the environment and history of the position in our town," says Bryant. "Also his strength of character after losing his wife to a drunk driver."

CAMERA: Canon-1Ds Mark III

LENS: 24-70mm f/2.8

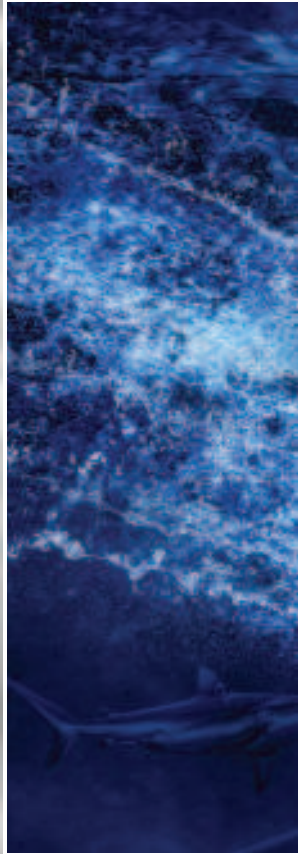
LIGHT: Photogenic monolights

SOFTWARE: Adobe Creative Suite 5

SHUTTER SPEED: 1/15 second

APERTURE: f/8

ISO: 100





JOSE LUIS GUARDIA VÁZQUEZ (LEFT)

Xpression International, Granada, Spain,
xpressionworkshops.com

"WARPED SHAPES"

An internationally recognized wedding photographer based in Spain, Jose Luis Guardia Vázquez created "Warped Shapes" as a creative study in shapes and lines, with an emphasis on composition, elegance, and visual impact. "The important thing is that the lines are well placed, so we seek a point of view that allows a strong composition," he says. In postproduction, Guardia Vázquez made minor enhancements in Lightroom and Photoshop.

CAMERA: Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II

LENS: 70-200mm f/2.8

LIGHT: Available

SOFTWARE: Adobe Lightroom and CS6

SHUTTER SPEED: 1/125 second

APERTURE: f/8

ISO: 200

RICHARD STURDEVANT (ABOVE)

Sturdevant Studio, Garland, Texas,
sturdevantstudio.com

"SHARK ATTACK"

Like Mark Bryant, Richard Sturdevant, M.PhotoG.M.Artist.Cr., went Double Diamond this year, earning eight merits for eight images submitted in two different categories (Master Artist and Photographic Open). This is Sturdevant's second Double Diamond distinction, making him the only person ever to earn that impressive honor twice. Sturdevant created "Shark Attack" as a demo to show action in the studio. The athlete dove onto a mattress at full speed so Sturdevant could capture a sense of motion for the composite. Later, using Photoshop and Painter, he made a composite in which the athlete was diving into the ocean with sharks swimming around him.

CAMERA: Canon EOS 5D Mark II

LENS: 70-200mm f/2.8

LIGHT: Profoto D1 Air monolights modified by Larson soft boxes

SOFTWARE: Adobe Photoshop and Corel Painter

SHUTTER SPEED: 1/200 second

APERTURE: f/11

ISO: 400



MICHAEL BARTON

Indigo Photographi, Batavia, Ill.,
indigophotographic.com

"TO MY WIFE"

As a fine-art portrait photographer, Michael Barton, M.Photos.ME.I.Cr., CPP, is accustomed to finding beauty and portraying it in new and creative ways. Inspired by a poem, he created the album "To My Wife" as a creative approach to photographing a popular floral subject. "Everyone photographs roses," he says. "There's such a challenge in trying to make something new from something so old. People say, 'They are just flowers,' but each is as unique as each person walking around." To create the images in the album, Barton used a range of Profoto studio flashes, flashlights, Fresnels, even an iPhone camera light to blend together appealing lighting arrangements and make the petals pop on his floral subjects.

CAMERA: Canon EOS 5D Mark II

LENS: 100mm f/2.8 and 180mm f/3.5

LIGHTS: Profoto studio light, flashlights, iPhone camera light, Fresnels, and "anything within arm's reach"

SOFTWARE: Adobe Photoshop

OTHER GEAR: Kitchen chairs, hotel room furniture, Play-Doh (for keeping the flowers upright), a Leatherman multi-tool, and a good florist with a full trash can

SHUTTER SPEED: 1/125 second

APERTURE: f/32

ISO: 100