



Peter Rossi

*Australia's Five-time Portrait
Photographer of the Year*

By Peter Skinner

Highlights Photography—a thriving studio owned and operated by two of Australia's leading photographers, Peter Rossi and Charmaine Heyer—serves as an inspiration for portrait photographers who are searching for the ideal portfolio. In their extensive portrait imagery Peter and Charmaine not only showcase their capabilities, they also create stars of clients and generate funds for charity.

Their studio, located in Cairns in Far North Queensland, has gained a reputation for distinctive portrait, wedding and fine art photography. And even though it is geographically far from the mainstream centers of

industry (Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane) its two principals are prominent on the Australian Institute of Professional Photography's (AIPP) awards rolls.

Peter has been the AIPP Portrait Photographer of the Year five times, including three consecutive years from 2001–2003 and again in both 2005 and 2007, while Charmaine was AIPP's Australian Illustrative Photographer of the Year in 2005. And in addition to the AIPP portrait awards, Peter has claimed numerous other national and international accolades including AIPP Photographer of the Year in 2001 and WPPi's Photojournalism Grand Award



in 2006 and 2007. (There are too many to list here but details can be seen at www.highlights.com.au.)

Both Peter and Charmaine enjoy the challenge of entering and judging photography contests. “Competitions keep you on your toes and allow you to experiment with new techniques, styles and subjects,” says Peter. “It’s the ultimate in critiquing—there is no more critical an audience than your own peers. I am sure certain styles we now employ in our mainstream work originated as experimental award prints.

Peter continues, “Doing well in competitions may not equate directly to more sittings or weddings, but it plays a very important role in gaining respect from your clients when it comes to trust during the sitting and later in the salesroom.”

Peter, from a sugar cane-growing family, grew up in the Cairns area and opened Highlights Photography in 1985. Charmaine’s family raised cattle in the south of Queensland, near Kingaroy, and while not exactly the same as the tropical north, the two share a mutual agricultural/rural background. As both were passionate about photography and making it their profession, they joined forces in 1992 and remain as excited about the craft as they

were from the beginning. Peter and Charmaine have grown as photographers and businesspeople through trial and error and constant education; being open to critique; striving for self-improvement; keeping abreast of technology and trends while not being a slave to either; developing a distinctive style; and ensuring profitability through good business practices and delivery of first-class service and product. The adage “do what you love and the money will follow” comes to mind.

When approached by Sheree Roberts of Tempo Imaging & Design—who suggested a charity fundraiser through a family portrait project culminating in a high quality coffee-table book—Peter and Charmaine didn’t hesitate. A significant amount of their studio’s portraiture is of children and families. And so a comprehensive project that harnessed both of their considerable talents and featured children seemed a natural fit.

That, in brief, was the genesis of *Kids up North*, a stunning compilation of portraits of children showcased in a beautifully designed, 118-page hardcover book that has raised thousands of dollars for the non-profit Make-A-Wish Australia. In addition to its holding pride of place in the personal

libraries of the featured families, the book is a brilliant portfolio piece for Highlights Photography. It also has the potential to inspire other photographers and designers to undertake similar projects, not necessarily with portraits of children but with the same essence and feel.

From the outset Peter and Charmaine had definite ideas about the book’s design and wanted it to rise above being merely a collection of kids’ portraits. “We wanted our book to be more than just a catalogue of kids’ names and faces and thought it should be a flow on the portraiture our clients decorate their homes with,” says Peter. “We have incorporated varied styles of capture, lighting, presentation and design to reflect our approach to children’s portraiture.”

Extensive promoting and advertising through local media—significantly, most calls followed ads that ran when *Oprah* was on local TV—and distribution of flyers to current clients generated great interest in the book project. At that point, Peter and Charmaine screened potential customers. Peter says, “We emphasized that they would be working with us on an artistic venture that would involve some effort by them. While we encouraged family

portraits we pointed out that only children under 13 would be in the book.” He continues, “We were not just interested in numbers and wanted to work with clients who were on our wavelength. We also stressed that the sitting fee was going towards helping Make-A-Wish Australia and not toward a print order,” says Peter. Ultimately, 72 families participated and the project took about nine months

Highlights Photography. For more information go to www.highlights.com.au.)

Peter’s status as a master portraitist might seem incongruous given his farming background, but it was around the family farm that he created his first professional images. A former primary school teacher, Peter’s interest in photography was ignited by a nature slide show presented by a national park ranger—from that moment he

viewer’s experience. To create such images, as Peter Rossi does so brilliantly and consistently, requires a genuine connection—*simpatico*—with the subject that, in itself, is an art.

As Peter says: “Unless you get involved, people will only let you photograph their physical state, and the best pictures are when you have tapped into their emotions.”

He explains his *modus operandi* thus:



to complete.

As with all their portraiture, considerable research was undertaken with each family to determine preferred locations—environmental or studio; favorite activities, hobbies, toys and clothes; the interaction of siblings; and portraying each subject’s personality. “We strive to tell stories through our portraiture and we wanted these images to do that too, and also to suit the décor of our clients’ homes. As can be seen in the book, some pages feature a single image while others are a collage of up to a dozen images to complete the story,” says Peter. “Most of the pages are sized-down versions of 30-inch prints hanging in the families’ homes.”

Kids up North achieved its initial goals and much more. It continues to be a great marketing and idea resource for Highlights Photography, and has become a wonderful tool for educating clients. When potential customers thumb through its pages, they immediately get a fresh perspective on what’s possible for their own portraits. (Note: *Kids up North* is available from

knew he wanted to make photographs that portrayed beauty as he saw it, whether in nature or of people.

Giving up teaching, he juggled working on his father’s farm with his photography business. “I carried a camera with me on the tractor and photographed subjects such as backlit cane leaves, cloud formations and farmers at work,” he says. “Some of these images were sold to a farming magazine that later started giving me specific assignments. I then began shooting weddings and portraits to justify buying quality equipment.”

One does not achieve international peer recognition without that something extra; that special quality that makes images stand out and invite greater scrutiny. A successful portrait should be more than just technically perfect; it can portray more than simply the subject’s physical features. It should tell the viewer something about the inner person. It might not answer all the questions about the subject’s personality and character, but it should convey the essence of that person and extend the

“First, people have to feel safe to open up and let you into their world. You have to genuinely relate to their story, fantasy or predicament. Build up their trust and respect. Listen. Be compassionate and curious. During our initial contact we usually show them a brief slide show of images to illustrate how we have sensitively handled other similar situations. Award certificates hanging in the gallery and displayed clippings of articles about some of our projects help build their confidence in our ability to document their story in an artistic, thought-provoking way,” he says.

And as committed as he is to creating the perfect portrait, Peter is only too cognizant of the fact that he and Charmaine are in business—theirs is not a creative hobby where time is inconsequential. “Sometimes there is a real conflict of art versus business,” says Peter. “To follow this style of story, you need to have time and mental space to dedicate to producing a meaningful treatment. To do that, you have to be charging enough. Even though we have worked on some stories way past their



dollar value, we felt it was a community service to do so. It can be a real balancing act, but the feedback and involvement of the subject usually tells you if you are on the right track.”

A visit to the Profiles section of Highlights Photography website reveals the diversity of Peter’s and Charmaine’s portrait skills. They portray the character and personalities of subjects young and old, and there are wonderful photographs of people whose faces we don’t see, but whose situation tells all—an old man alone, in the company of only empty chairs, is a powerful and evocative image. Another memorable picture—one of which Peter is especially proud—is of his late friend, Clarence, who at 84 posed nude

for an image that scored a perfect 100 in the 2007 WPPI 16x20 print competition (page 76). “Making this photograph was a good chance to make a statement about life, and it is even more important to me now as Clarence was a good friend who has recently passed away,” says Peter.

Brainstorming with clients—research, if you prefer—and determining their personalities and needs is essential, and unless a situation demands a straightforward record style of portrait, Peter always discusses the possibilities with the client. “At times we will exaggerate some aspect of the story to grab the audience’s attention and demand some response.” Peter continues, “We do whatever it takes to hit a message home. And while we will do what we can

to capture the moment on the shoot, quite often we will dramatize the mood or accentuate some details on the computer.

“An image is a success if it touches the viewer enough to create a story for themselves, even if it’s different [than] our story, or it transports them to a past or future similar scenario, or it raises more questions than it answers,” says Peter.

Subjects are encouraged to get involved in the planning, and their feedback, essential to ensure Peter and Charmaine are on track, is sought. “We talk about their lifestyle, décor preferences and budget before we discuss locations, times, clothing and other logistics. To tell a family’s story we may need a collage of 15 images or more. Much of our family portraiture is

capturing the personality of the family and the little relationships within. To help them visualize the potential of this imagery, we show photographs of some of our art as it decorates clients' homes. This helps people imagine their portraits hanging in their home before we have even made the shot," says Peter. "We always take people a little further than planned. This may include an extra location close by, variations to clothing, extra experiences like produc-

greenness and in summer for its harsh sunlight and monsoon weather. At that time of the year, the studio is a refuge from heat and strong light. But winter brings ideal temperatures and beautiful light, a time to make the most of a multitude of locations. Peter's portrait lighting, which he likes to keep simple, evokes a painterly quality. He stresses that he and Charmaine and their clients are influenced by the imagery they see on billboards and in media. Therefore,

tions are personalized, as has been every aspect of service up to that point. "It would not seem right to just let them choose their prints online. Mostly we are selling art, not just snapshots, so it needs to be a personal service," says Peter.

He adds that they do not share the mystery of Photoshop techniques with clients. "We do not analyze or demonstrate any Photoshop enhancing techniques with our subjects, preferring to retain the magic of the art," says Peter.

As is so often the case with successful studios, clients—who are on the same wavelength and are as excited as the photographers about the images produced—and their referrals are the main source of business for Peter and Charmaine. And community projects—every second year the pair supports a charity with a photographic event—ensure that direct links with local groups are maintained. Beyond that, both are active members of trade associations at state and national levels and more recently, through WPPI, internationally. "Through these associations we all influence each other and build on each other's strengths, and therefore we all move forward," says Peter.

While living in the Far North of Queensland might have its drawbacks, such as missing out on many workshops and exhibitions, Peter and Charmaine make a point of traveling to several photo community events each year and occasionally to shoot assignments out of the Cairns region. "It probably isn't all bad though, as coming in from the edge means we are not influenced as much by the trends or images that the majority in the cities are exposed to," concludes Peter.

To see more of Peter Rossi's and Charmaine Heyer's work and for information on their *Kids up North* book and limited edition art prints, go to www.highlights.com.au.



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ing a kite to fly, a watermelon to eat, or shooting for a different treatment, mood or angle [than] what was planned. This spontaneous experience can produce surprising results as both subjects and photographers don't know what's coming."

Peter and Charmaine operate an all-digital studio—they sold the last of their film cameras quite recently—and use Nikon cameras with lenses ranging from 10.5mm to 70–200mm. They shoot everything in RAW and work images in 16-bit and convert from RAW in Photoshop Bridge. Where practical, an Expo Disc is used to determine color balance. Tropical North Queensland is renowned for its year-round

Peter's advice on lighting images is to surround yourself with examples of quality imagery and it will rub off.

The transition from film to digital has been relatively seamless and Peter's aptitude for the technology became apparent when he won an AIPP Digital ImageMaker award in 2001 and followed up in 2002 with the AIPP Digital ImageMaker of the Year title. And while stressing that photographers need to keep up with the times, Peter is adamant that multi-layered imagery as a gimmick is not a substitute for great photography—but it can be used to present photography in a modern wrapping. All print and album sales presenta-

Freelance writer/photographer and author Peter Skinner, who relocated to his native Australia in 2003 after living for 23 years in the U.S., has more than 25 years experience in the photo industry in public relations, media liaison, corporate communications and workshop production and coordination. His magazine articles and photography have been published internationally and he has co-authored or edited numerous publications and books including the 5th and 6th editions of the authoritative ASMP Professional Business Practices in Photography (Allworth Press). His latest book is Sports Photography: How to Capture Action and Emotion (Allworth Press). He can be reached at prsskinner@bigpond.com.

