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CORPORATE PHOTOGRAPHY: TWO VIEWS

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Nowhere were signs of the current recession and corporate retrenchment easier to find than in this year's crop of annual reports. While plenty of elegant and interesting photography could still be found, when PDN's editors pored over most of the award winning annuals published this year, we generally found that the publications used fewer photographs, and there seemed to be far less color photography—replaced by gritty black-and-white (the better to suggest the spirit of these tough, budget-cutting times). Almost completely absent were of the lavishly produced productions that stood out in years past. The best reports were those that met the challenge of both simplicity and message.

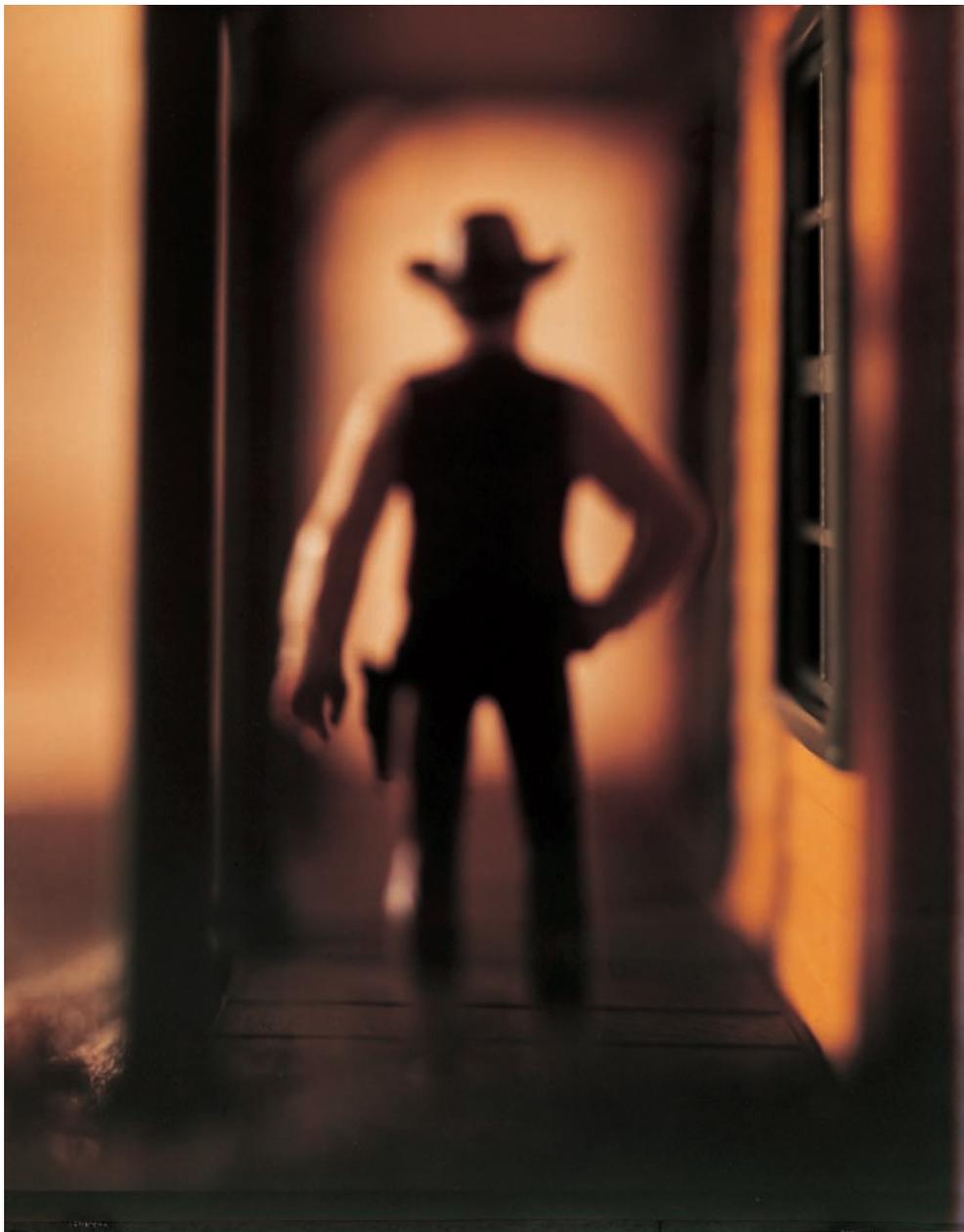
To further examine design trends, we decided to take a look at two very different award-winning design firms. One, Runyan Hinsch Associates, has been at the top of the field for more than 30 years, and its principals have become renowned for the photographers they have brought to national attention. The other, Nesnadny & Schwartz, is a ten-year old agency that began by providing its own photography services, and has grown both in reputation and in billings. The work of both reveal that the market may have changed, but the days of creative innovation are not over yet.

The Cleveland-based design and photography firm Nesnadny & Schwartz occupies an unassuming, renovated house, which looks just like its neighbors on quiet Magnolia Drive. No name, no sign, not even a business card above the doorbell announces the home of a firm that billed \$1.6 million last year and won nearly 70 design and advertising awards in the last two.

Mark Schwartz, who founded the firm with his partner (and then wife), Joyce Nesnadny, ten years ago summarizes the firm's promotional efforts succinctly: "We enter a lot of contests," he says. They win a lot, too, from the American Institute of Graphic Arts, the Society of Publication Designers, the American Advertising Federation and the International Association of Business Communicators, among others.

The firm counts on referrals and its reputation to bring clients to the big blue house on Magnolia Drive. "We've never done direct mail, never advertised," says Schwartz. "I've made exactly three cold calls in my life. I got all three jobs and decided to quite while I was batting a thousand."

The firm's clients have included BP American, Ameritrust, the Eaton Corporation, Ohio Edison,



Booz Allen & Hamilton an Ortho Pharmaceuticals, to name just a few. That doesn't include the estimated \$100,000 worth of pro bono work Nesnadny & Schwartz performed last year for groups like the Akron Art Museum, the Western Reserve AIDS Foundation and University Circle, Inc.

For the 1990 annual report of the Progressive Corporation, a Cleveland-based insurance holding company, Nesnadny & Schwartz chose to go outside of commercial photography to illustrate two "themes" central to insurance—"protection" and "risk." After scouring art galleries, primarily in New York, he and his partner commissioned eight photographers—most

of whom had no prior commercial experience—to shoot a series of pictures based loosely on those themes.

The result was a collection of images ranging from the stark, black-and-white realism of Jo Ann Callis to the bright, surreal photo collages of Stephen Frailey. The images are linked not by subject matter or style, but thematically.

"Generally, we prefer to work with photographers with a fine arts background—as opposed to someone with a purely technical background," says Schwartz. "We prefer to work photographers who require little or not art direction. We like to take a "hands-off"

approach. Basically, when we look at photographers, we're looking for sensibility that fits with a client's needs."

Schwartz claims he looks at all the direct mail promos he receives. The quality he prizes most in photographers, he says, is personal vision—a quality he finds lacking in too many commercial photographers. "I just think that photographers should be less interested in making the client happy. I don't think that's our job. Our job is to solve communications problems."

Nesnadny & Schwartz can also take a more traditional approach and still produce something with distinctive style. "A client never comes to you and says, 'I want you to do a boring book about our machinery,'" says Schwartz. "We love clients who make stuff, who make things. There is a lot of room to deal with such products creatively."

One such client is Invacare Corporation, which manufactures wheelchairs, ambulatory aids and other home medical care products. In producing Invacare's annual report last year, Nesnadny & Schwartz worked with Cleveland-based commercial photographer Jack Van Antwerp. His photographs were shot in bright, primary colors and emphasized the blur of motion—to illustrate how the company's products bring mobility to the elderly and disabled.

A little technical innovation was required to showcase the proposed Society Center Building in a series of brochures and a portfolio created for real estate developer Richard E. Jacob. To show the new building in its future setting in downtown Cleveland, Nesnadny & Schwartz hired the architectural photography firm Hedrich Blessing of Chicago. Hedrich Blessing photographed six-foot-tall architectural models of the building, which was designed by architect Cesar Pelli. To combine the photographs—and to realistically place the models within the city skyline—Nesnadny & Schwartz hired the compositing services of R.E. May of Cleveland. Using Scitexm R.E. May blended the Foamcore models seamlessly into the streetscapes of Cleveland. "The client was awed," says Schwartz.

Before starting the firm, Schwartz was a fine arts photographer and teacher, and had exhibited nationally and internationally. Nesnadny had earned her MFA from Yale and worked as graphic designer at the Regional Transit Authority. "When my partner and I started this business, I had no professional experience, no agency experience," says Schwartz. "I consider that a big advantage, because I came to the business with no predetermined sense of how to do things."

Today, Nesnadny & Schwartz employs a staff of ten, including one photographer besides Schwartz, in three offices in Cleveland, Toronto and New York City. Schwartz serves as president and creative director in the Cleveland office; Nesnadny serves as vice president and creative director in Toronto.

Despite the firm's continuing growth and increased billings, Nesnadny & Schwartz produced only six annual reports last year (down from a high of 11 in one year not too long ago). Schwartz says that smaller projects, like corporate identity jobs, capabilities brochures and other institutional publications have taken up the slack. "We're more design-driven these days, as opposed to production driven. I've always seen annual reports as being five weeks of wonderful, creative frenzy followed by six months of compromise." If this trend continues, Schwartz believes that the need for photography will grow: Each of the brochures for Richard E. Jacob, for example, had more room for photography than an annual report ever has.

Schwartz says the firm has been largely unaffected by the recession and recent cost-cutting trends

that have made splashy corporate brochures almost a thing of the past. "I really haven't noticed a change overall," he says. "All of our clients are budget sensitive. They always have been."

"Face it—our firm is a product of the Reagan years," says Schwartz. "I left teaching the same year Ron took office. The economic growth during that time has been particularly evident in this area of the country. The importance of good visual communication in addressing and supporting corporate success has been realized here in the heartland."

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