



Over the Top

STORY BY
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PHOTOS BY
NICK VEDROS

A TOP COMMERCIAL PHOTOGRAPHER REVEALS HOW HE MAKES HIS

AMAZING IMAGES AND WHY HE GOT OUT OF JOURNALISM.

YOU'VE PROBABLY SEEN NICK Vedros' work without realizing that those incredible photographs may have taken days for him to create in his studio, a century-old converted firehouse near downtown Kansas City, Mo.

Vedros' hallmark is a photograph that smacks you right between the eyes. His photos make you laugh out loud. They leave you scratching your head and wondering how in the world he ever did it. His stuff, in the lingo of Madison Avenue, is over the top.

Vedros, BJ '76, is a commercial photographer whose pictures are featured in ads for everything from pet food to computers. His clients include Sony, IBM, Apple Computers, MasterCard, Nissan and Kodak, to name a few.

His offbeat style often captures an ironic absurdity that makes him stand out in the sometimes staid world of big-time advertising. Art directors around the country count on him to add "the Vedros look" to their ads. He's an artist, craftsman, technician and creative oddball all rolled into one. Vedros' inspiration is as likely to come from a Far Side cartoon as

Ansel Adams. "If people are entertained, they don't resent being invaded by commercials as much," he says. "Humor can get you past the advertising experience and still leave a message."

Take the ad campaign for Dentyne chewing gum that he did a few years ago. The message: Dentyne gum is refreshing. Vedros created a photo of a young couple

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embracing in a frozen shower that was lined with icicles, rimed with frost and had streams of ice cascading from the shower head.

He explains how he pulled it off: "We made fake ice with Lexan plastic and used sprays that look like frost. We even iced up bits of string in a freezer and had them coming out of the shower head to make it look like ice."

Humor might be Vedros' trademark, but each shot is planned down to the tiniest detail. In the photo *Soldiers in Cereal*, a patrol of toy soldiers, with their rifles over their heads, wades through a bowl of breakfast cereal. The soldiers were com-

puter generated. Vedros made an oversized bowl and filled it with milk, then he had half-dollar sized cereal pieces made out of wood so they would float.

For another photo, *Cubist Poodle*, the canine model was a grand champion show dog whose elaborate coif couldn't be touched. So Vedros and his staff collected bags of white poodle fur from doggie salons all over town. They glued the fur to plastic foam blocks, then digitally composed the blocks of fur over a photo of the proud pooch.

But that wasn't enough to round out this cubist theme. Vedros then sent set designers all over Kansas City, looking for square furnishings to complete the picture: a square lamp, a rug with square patterns, a square bonsai plant. Even the beam of light that crossed the room was perfectly square.

"It's daunting sometimes how much work is involved in some of these projects," he says. But then, it's not just one man and his camera. Some of his shoots require a small army of stylists, art directors, prop people and even animal trainers.

It's a competitive business, and Vedros has to pay almost as much attention to the bottom line as he does to f-stop settings or composition. That means giving his clients what they want. "A lot of these

The relationship isn't as frosty as it seems. Vedros posed professional models in a shower with plastic ice and fake frost to make this ad for Dentyne chewing gum.



Left, which came first, the chicken or the egg? That can be hard to tell in some Vedros photos. The explosion in digital technology has had a tremendous impact on commercial photography, he says. "Absolutely anything people can think of now, you can do with a computer."

Vedros' wry sense of the absurd is one hallmark of what ad agencies know as "the Vedros look." His Cubist Poodle, right, for the Do It Yourself Network takes canine grooming to the extreme.

Computer-generated toy soldiers, bottom right, wade through a bowl of breakfast cereal in this ad for Army Man Video Games. Vedros designed the lighting to look like a shaft of light at sunrise.

A set designer pruned for four days to fashion a backyard replica of this tourist icon for a shot Vedros calls Mount Hedgemore, below, part of an ad campaign for the Do It Yourself Network.





ideas come from the art directors, but what they give me is a piece of paper," he says. "That doesn't have much life to it; my job is to give those ideas life.

"One of the keys is that I have surrounded myself with good people," he says. "Some of them are smarter than I am, but I was smart enough to hire them."

One project — a photo of a huge backyard bush sculpted to look like Mount Rushmore — took a set designer four days to complete. Then his team took another seven hours to set up and wait for the sun to give them just the right light before he captured the shot.

"A photo shoot is an event. You take along music, lawn chairs, coolers, and you make the photo when it's time," he explains. "The thing I like about commercial photography is that I can spend a whole day crafting a single photograph. A photojournalist is like a hunter out there hunting."

But journalism is what brought Vedros to MU. He remembers as a kid seeing his uncle's black-and-white photographs spread out on his kitchen table. "They were incredible," he recalls. "I thought, what an awesome thing to do — to be a photographer."

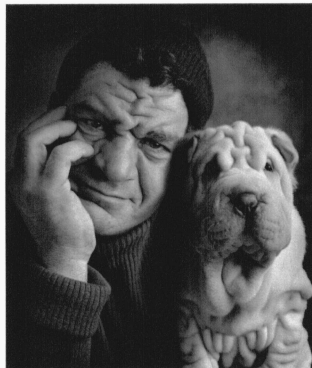
That same uncle steered him to the photojournalism program at Mizzou. He studied under Angus McDougall, the legendary professor who preached that pictures had to have impact to be successful. During his senior year, Vedros was photo editor of the *Savitar* yearbook.

His photojournalism career lasted exactly one month. Fresh out of school, he took a job at *The Kansas City Star*. Vedros' first assignment was to cover the 1976 Republican national convention being held that summer in Kansas City. He still remembers following Ronald Reagan around and shooting portraits of Henry Kissinger and Harry Reasoner. But his photo editor complained that he wasn't getting any good front-page shots.

"So I thought I'd better get one of

President Ford that night," he says. "I talked my way into the press car in the presidential motorcade. I was 24 years old, and I was scared to death. I remember that I shot a quick picture of Ford; I don't know if I even focused the camera."

Then he had to hightail it back to the motorcade. On a dead run, Vedros grabbed the door of what he thought was the press car and tumbled aboard. "Little



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did I know that I was fighting my way into the Secret Service car," he says.

"Later, two Secret Service guys scolded me. They said I had broken security. I'm probably the only living photojournalist who fought his way into a Secret Service car and lived to tell about it."

Experiences like that, and the after-hours work that's a fact of life at newspapers, convinced Vedros that journalism was not for him. "I wanted to design a career around a lifestyle that I wanted to live," he says.

"Kansas City is not necessarily a mecca of advertising. I had to come up with a style and a look that would get clients to come from New York."

Back then, the photo styles used in advertisements were stiff, Vedros says. They had tremendous technique, but didn't capture action or excitement. He began applying the style of shooting he had learned at Mizzou to advertising work.

Vedros started showing his work to advertisers, building up his inventory of photo equipment and making contacts. National advertisers found their way to Kansas City.

Studio Photography magazine called his work "a virtual icon of modern American commercial photography" when it named Vedros and Associates as the Studio of the Year in 1995. Even earlier, he was one of three American photographers that Eastman Kodak sent on a round of lectures and workshops for professional photographers in the United States, Asia and Australia. Camera-makers Hasselblad and Canon have included him among the elite groups of photographers that they assemble for special projects. Between his commercial assignments, Vedros is active on the lecture circuit, and he's hosted groups of budding photojournalists from Mizzou at his studio.

That childhood decision he made decades ago around his family's kitchen table has paid off, Vedros says. "I feel like I've had a silver cloud over my head for 25 years." ☼

Vedros took separate pictures of his furrowed friend Burt Morocco, above, and an equally jowly Shar-Pei dog, then combined the two images. The photo was a recent winner in American Photo's readers' contest.

Although his home base in Kansas City, Mo., is far from the advertising meccas of the East and West coasts, Vedros' shots like TubaBoy, right, for Avanti Cards in New York help ensure that his work plays on a national stage.

