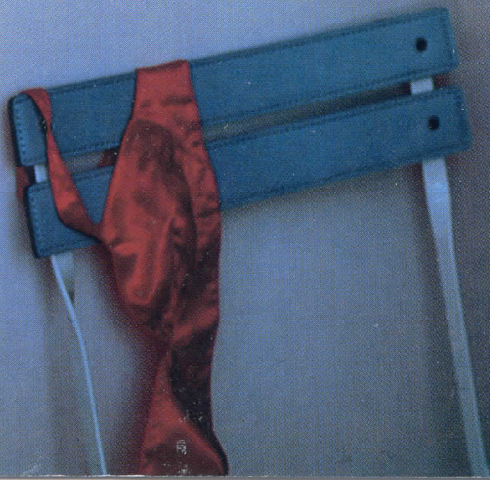


PHOTO|DESIGN

FOR THE CREATIVE TEAM



LIQUID LIGHT & CRYSTAL MAGIC

*Grant Peterson's luminous
still-life images reveal the poetry
in ordinary objects*



*Above: Self-portrait
by Grant Peterson.*

*Opposite: Image for
Bride's magazine
story about water,
April/May 1989.*

Grant Peterson's studio is large and spare, as if he were trying to leave room for light itself. The photographer chose the downtown Manhattan space for its unblocked southern exposure—four colossal windows' worth—which ensures that he has hours of strong sun to light his subjects with on clear days. Peterson loves to bend and scatter the direct rays, creating the luminous visual effects that have become his hallmark.

On cloudy days or in the evening, Peterson switches to tungsten light. And the remarkable thing is that it's virtually impossible to tell the difference in his pictures. "It doesn't matter to me," says Peterson. "We can start the day shooting with one and finish it with the other."

One person initially fooled was Sam Gulisano, creative director at the FCB Leber/Katz advertising agency, who has used the 36-year-old Peterson's talents in an ongoing Life Savers campaign. "When I first saw Grant's work," Gulisano says, "I thought, here's a guy who's waiting for the sun to move around his studio—waiting for the right time of day to make the shot. But it's not that simple." "Grant's light never seems unnatural," says Roberta Chiarella, an art director for whom Peterson shot several Ralph Lauren fragrance campaigns. "He records what your eyes really see, and that's a very difficult thing to do." Indeed, Peterson says he takes his cues from observations of

By Russell Hart

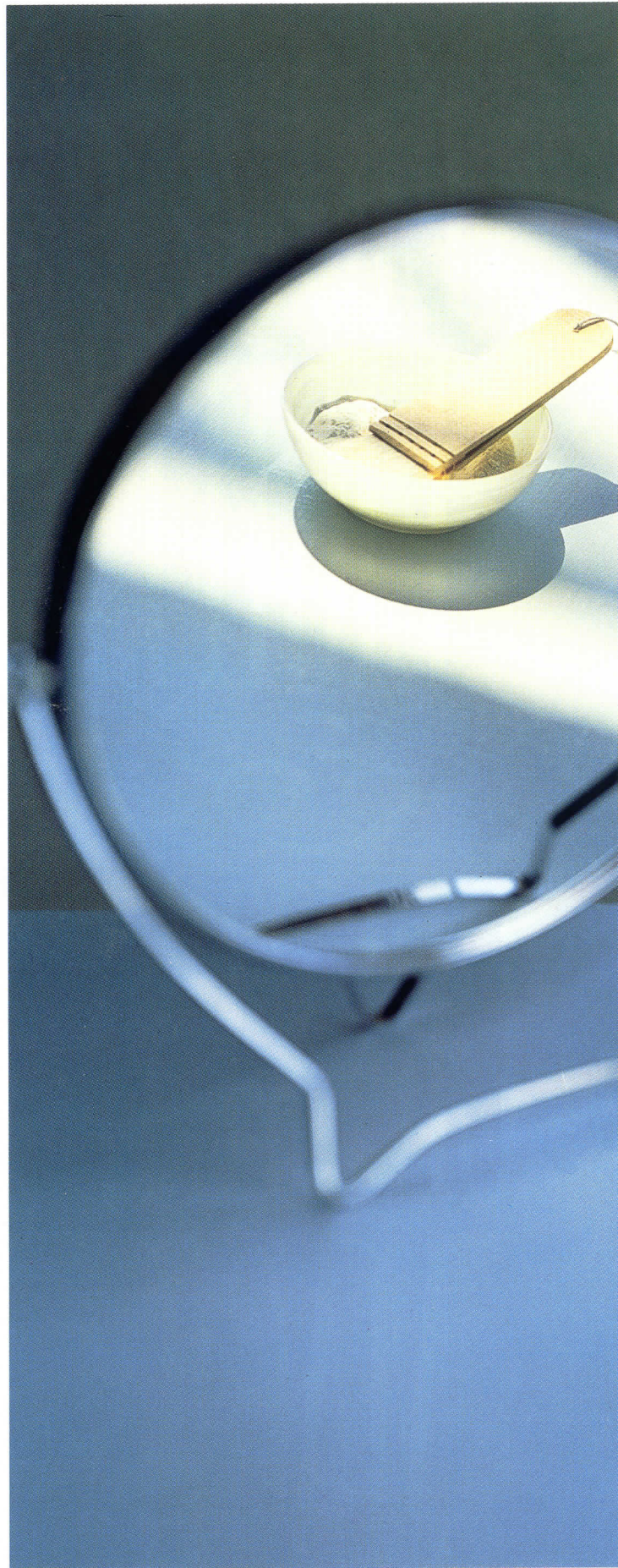


Above: Right-hand page of a spread ad for the American Express Optima credit card, 1989. (Ad copy was on facing page.) **Opposite:** Personal piece, 1986, to be used in a 1991 promotional brochure for Monadnock Paper Mills. Image was styled by longtime Peterson collaborator Amelia Battaglio, who also styled our cover image. Peterson describes Battaglio as “an artist whose judgment of images is always right on the money.”

everyday light: “If I’m walking down the street,” he says, “and I see a certain kind of light I like—a pattern or a color or a quality—I’ll make a note of it.”

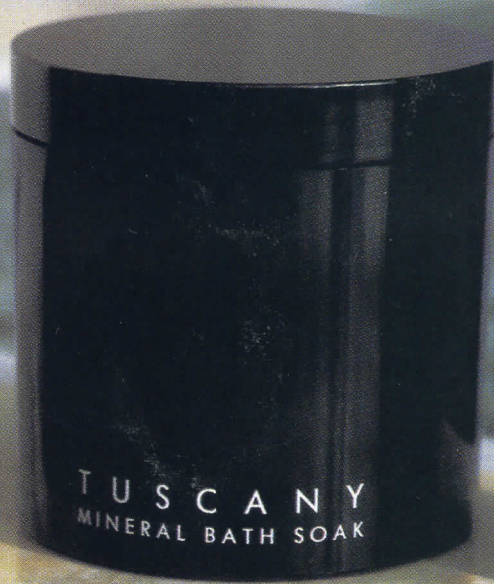
Peterson’s natural way with light has created a huge demand for his services among art directors who want something more than the customary overhead-softbox shot for a variety of products. “The look of Grant’s light is perfectly suited to the cosmetic work I do,” says Roberta Chiarella. “His style of photography is unique.”

“A Life Saver is a great subject for him,” says Sam Gulisano. “It’s like a piece of glass. It’s got that beautiful translucency that his work is all about.” And then there’s Linda Green of Geer DuBois, who had Peterson shoot a campaign for Capri, a brand of women’s cigarette. “The product is meant to be elegant and feminine,” she says, “and Grant’s stuff has that kind of delicacy about it. It’s sort of funny when you











look at him, because he's a big guy."

Today Peterson is trying to duplicate the effect that he originally created for Sam Gulisano's Life Saver ads, photographs in which a large model Life Saver is substituted for the letter O in the tag line. It's a reshoot; legal eagles rejected one of the original copy lines.

A tent-like structure, cubic in shape, stands in the middle of the studio. Peterson does most of his shooting, daylight or tungsten, inside its black fabric walls. On a tungsten day like today, the open side of the tent gets turned away from the windows to cut out the daylight. On a natural-light day, its open side is usually turned toward the light, and its black walls keep the studio's white walls from filling in the shadows too much—the better to give them the richness and feel of outdoor shadows.

Inside the tent, which Peterson refers to as an "ecosystem," is as odd a setup as you're likely to see in a photographer's studio. It's not even clear, on first impression, what—or where—the subject is. A bare quartz lamp is clipped to a small boom just outside the tent's opening. Further into the tent is a wooden stool; taped securely to its seat is a clear glass ornamental bowl that Peterson's assistant says cost



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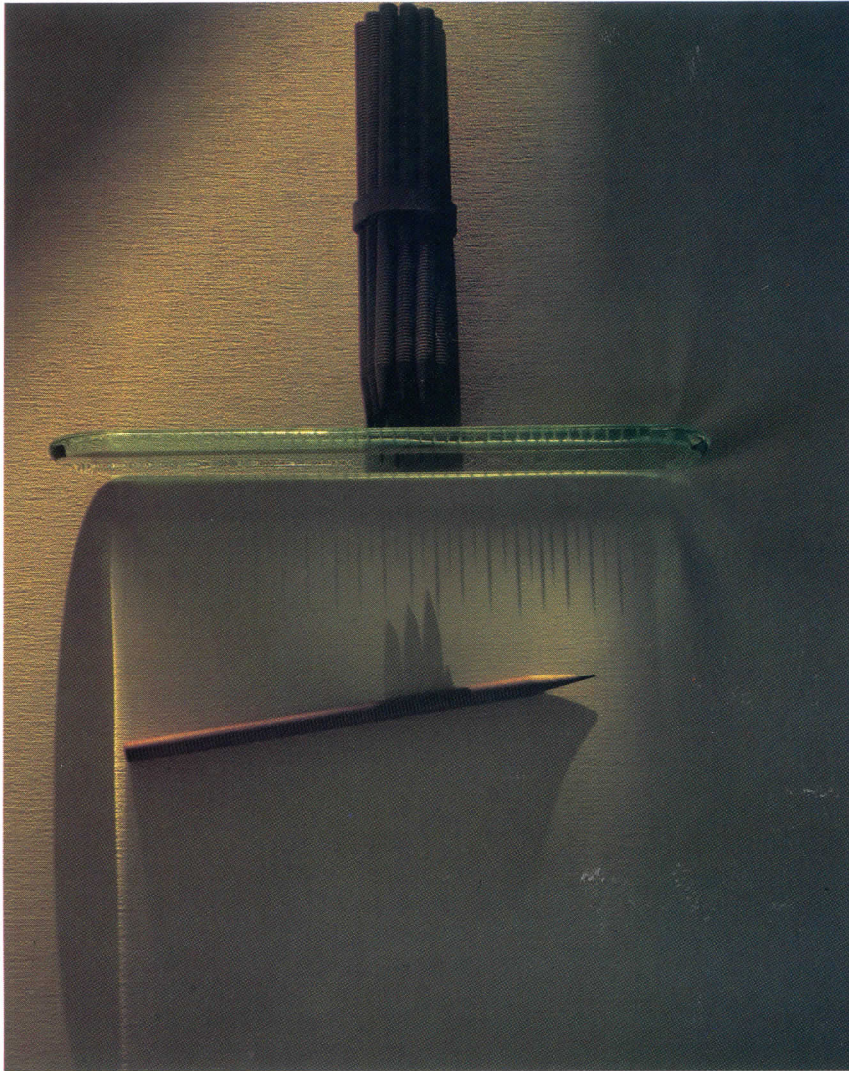
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Opposite: Subtle image of Tuscany products, 1990, was done for an ad and an in-store poster featuring this Estée Lauder line. **Above left:** Photo shot (but not used) for *New York* magazine article about interiors, 1989. It was later used by Peterson as a promo. **Left:** Ad for Domtar decorative paneling, 1990. Similar images were printed in a promotional booklet for the client.



Above: Personal piece, 1986, was later used as a promo. Peterson regards this image, taken by window light, as a vital step in the evolution of his style. **Right:** Ad for Reynolds Crystal Color Plastic Wrap, 1989, creates a remarkably elegant look for an everyday product.



\$600. Deeper still is a curved white reflector card angling down to the floor, where the subject—a beautifully hand-molded, three-inch-diameter winter-green Life Saver—sits on a large sheet of white paper imprinted with a line of oversize type. Directly above the paper is perched Peterson's 8x10 Deardorff, aimed straight down on a tripod that looks a little too spindly for the task.

When the lone light is switched on, this strange arrangement suddenly



makes sense. The glass bowl's decorative pattern of cracks and crazing scatters the light across the paper and the Life Saver, while the curved card fills in the shadows. The effect looks every bit as natural as the streaky, dappled pattern that the leaves and branches of a tree might throw across a sidewalk.

Using all manner of glass as a means of light control has become a customary technique for Peterson. In his setups you'll find glass adding color, creating mysterious shadows, refracting, and re-

flecting. "It's the perfect medium for photography," he says. "Everything I shoot involves glass." Not surprisingly, the cupboards in Peterson's studio kitchen contain a considerable collection of glassware, complete with strongly worded interdictions stating which items are for photographic purposes only.

The famous glass industry may have been part of the attraction of Venice for Peterson, who lingered there during an extended trip to Italy in 1983. His intention was to lift himself out of a stylistic rut.

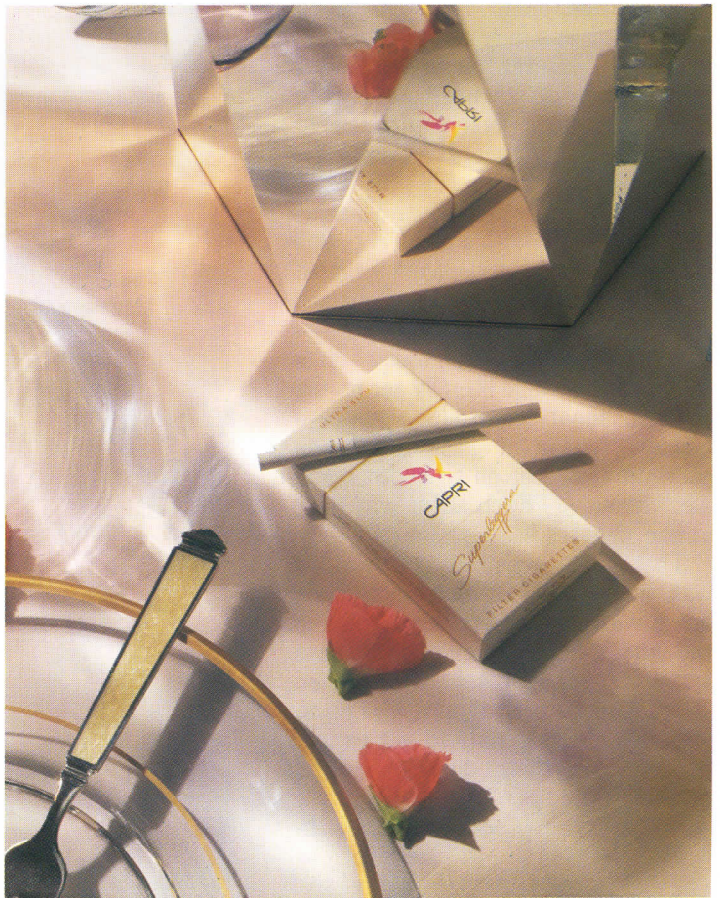
Above: Image for Life Savers ad, 1989. Other versions use the candy (actually a large model) as the "O" in a line of copy.



All photos on this spread were shot in 1990 for an upcoming ad campaign. The

cigarette, made by Brown and Williamson, is aimed at women smokers

worldwide. It is called either Finesse or Capri, depending on the market.



Peterson made these images for a story entitled "Simply Beautiful," which ran in the March 1990 *Lear's* magazine. The subject is makeup, including eyeliner, lipstick, and powder. Note that the visual treatment of the models is anything but simple. Peterson uses a beautiful face as one more striking element in his complex scheme of reflection, refraction, and lush color rendition.



"I'd been on my own for two years," he says, "and I felt as if I was just shooting the same way everybody else was. I was making these stilted, controlled, overlit pictures. And I thought, why do you need six lights to make something look natural? That approach didn't fit who I am, and I disliked myself for doing it."

Peterson's way of loosening up was radical: "I decided to try to shoot still life on the streets of Venice," he says. For two intense weeks Peterson roamed the city with his Deardorff—the same one he uses today—in a backpack. "I would literally set up the camera, shoot something—maybe a window display of glassware—then pack up and walk on to another still life," he says. "Each shoot was over in five minutes."

That bare-bones way of working was a lesson Peterson took back home with him. These days, even in the studio, his shooting style is loose and quick, his approach spontaneous. "I work extremely simply," he says. "It's taken a long time to get to that point, to pare things down to just the essentials."

(Continued on page 72)





LIQUID LIGHT/CRYSTAL MAGIC

(Continued from page 60)

Part of that looseness, and part and parcel of Peterson's talent, is that he sees photography as a fluid medium, one in which light and its recipient objects aren't fixed: A given setup may be rearranged dozens of times in the course of a single session. "We'll shoot up to 50 sheets of film, all different—no brackets," Peterson says. "The first arrangement is usually way too formal; sometimes I'll start the process by shifting the camera to the right or left, which usually makes a much more interesting picture."

How does the unpredictable outcome of a Peterson shoot affect clients accustomed to knowing in advance exactly what they're going to get? By all available accounts it doesn't bother them, and that may be because his clients buy into a sensibility, not a concept. "Clients usually come to us for the Grant Peterson look," says Kathy Bruml, his agent of four years. "We don't sell a lot of stuff to the client before the actual shoot," says Peterson, "and I find that ultimately they're a lot happier working that way."

Kathy Bruml says that even clients who bring with them a more traditional, preconceived approach usually come around. She describes a job for Martel Cognac in which the art director, Amy Levitan of DDB Needham, took a number of layouts to the client. The client apparently wasn't thrilled with any of them, whereupon Levitan ripped them up and said, "Frankly, this is a photographer who doesn't need a layout. Just send him the bottle." Peterson was impressed with the freedom: "Four years ago, I didn't think a shoot like this could happen. It was Utopia." The photographer shot the bottle by a dying winter sun—the last rays of which hit the back wall of his studio. "The best take was when the sun was less than a minute from the horizon," he says.

Peterson's unorthodox methods can occasionally cause complications, as they did in the Life Saver reshoot. "We were worried about whether or not the light could be duplicated," says Sam Gulisano. "Grant thought we might have to do the whole series over again. So I asked him, don't you take Polaroids of setups? It's some-

thing a lot of photographers will do, so they can reproduce an effect if need be. But Grant just feels he'd rather be spontaneous, that the next job should be brand new. He eventually worked it out, of course, but he just doesn't like to refer to all to what he's done in the past. That's part of what makes him an artist."

"My commercial work is my personal work. My feeling is that the chrome always gets better when it's in print."

To produce his oversize Life Savers, Peterson went to Queens model maker George Utley, who cast them in plastic resin with molds made from hand-sculpted originals. Peterson had Utley cast the colored Life Savers in two different levels of clarity—semi-opaque ones to use as actual subjects and more translucent ones to place off-camera so that he could project colored Life Saver-shaped shadows into the image.

A minty effect was required for a shot of a lone wintergreen Life Saver, so Peterson photographed mint leaves separately. He then cut them out of the transparency, placed them off-camera, and projected light through them to cast a leafy green shadow across the subject. "He goes far beyond what anyone else would do," says Sam Gulisano, adding that part of Peterson's talent is in his choice of a support staff. "The people who do his props and set work are all artists too," Gulisano says.

One of those artists, stylist Jeffrey Miller, says that he works differently with Peterson than with any other photographer. "We talk more conceptually at first," he explains. "Grant just gives me a feeling or a sense of the shot, and sometimes relates it to a painting or a painter."

Peterson's enviable spontaneity during a shoot is actually based on rigorous preparation. "It may not look

that way," he says, "but I do a lot of testing, especially for color." That care is especially reassuring to Roberta Chiarella. "My work demands both softness and very exact color," she says. "Grant can give me both, and that's crucial when you've got a big corporate client that wants its product to look like its product. A lot of other photographers just scratch their heads and tell you that color can always be corrected with retouching. Clients don't want to hear that. They just see it as an added expense."

Yet despite his acknowledged talent, Peterson doesn't have the I'm-really-an-artist complex that afflicts some commercial shooters. "I don't have a closet full of personal work," he says. "My commercial work is my personal work. I'm a commercial shooter and happy to be there, at least for now. I can't imagine going on set and thinking, well, this is commercial—I can't do what I want to do. That attitude is bound to compromise the result."

Most photographers groan about what reproduction does to their chromes; Peterson complains that a transparency is insubstantial. "A lot of photographers see their chromes as the ultimate piece of art," he says, "and they view any other form of the image as inadequate. My feeling is that the chrome always gets better when it's in print." Part of that transformation has to do with giving the image a surface—with turning it from what Peterson describes as a "window" into an object. The photographer even prefers matt-surfaced stock for its tactile quality, and chooses it for much of his own prize-winning promotional material.

This week (in October) the printed page, as much as he loves it, is far from Grant Peterson's mind. He's getting married on Sunday, so he's keeping his workload light to leave room for the preparations. The only definite shoot is a pro bono piece for actor Ted Danson's American Oceans environmental campaign. The subject is a simple one, but it's made to order for Grant Peterson: sea water in a drinking glass. □

Russel Hart, who writes our View Finder column, is an author, photographer, and magazine editor based in New York City.