

PHOTO/DESIGN

FOR THE CREATIVE TEAM



CHANGING COLORS

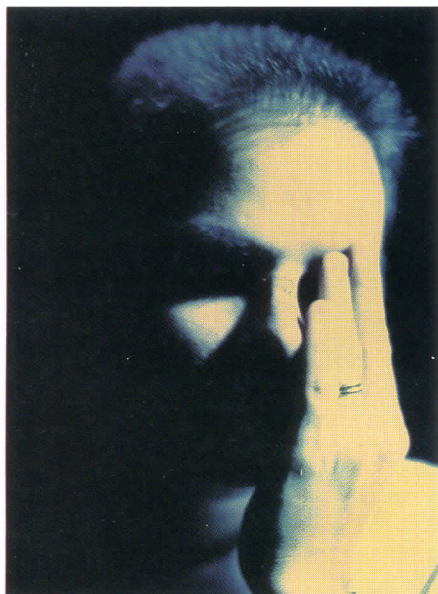
On set with José Picayo, words are few and far between. He communicates almost subliminally with the model, the art director, and the stylist, as if by frequencies beyond the range of an observer's hearing. One art director who's been a part of this process characterizes Picayo's working style as "a whisper."

José Picayo may be the silent type, but his powerful, distinctive style speaks for him. "José really has a singular vision," says *L.A. Style* Photo Fashion Editor Jodi Nakatsuka, "but he's not a prima donna." Perhaps that's why it's hard to pick up a fashionable magazine these days—*Harper's Bazaar*, *Mirabella*, *L.A. Style*—without seeing a sample of Picayo's work, which is readily identified by its unusual color and formal elegance. That editorial visibility has piqued the interest of the fashion world, from Bloomingdale's in New York to designer Leon Max in Los Angeles.

The sheer volume of Picayo's work is all the more remarkable considering that he has been on his own for less than four years. It was in early 1987 that Picayo, now 30, concluded a five-year period as an assistant, the last two years of it with fashion photographer Torkil Gudnason. His early jobs were a mixture of press kits and small catalogs—"the little things you do when you start out," he says. Later that year Picayo decided to kick his career into gear with a trip to Europe, where, he had heard, editors and art directors were "more open to new people." Most picture pilgrims have to spend at least six months there, if not a year, to get the experience that America's

*José Picayo's
rare vision and
zeal for exploring
novel techniques
help him create
striking images
with a uniquely
personal palette.*

By Russell Hart



Left: Image from a story on accessories (in this case, a Napoleon hat) for the September 1988 issue of *Sassy*. Picayo achieved this piquant effect by having color-negative film processed in E-6 slide chemicals. Above: Self-portrait of the artist, done with the same technique.



Catch-22 commercial world requires. Picayo, however, got work the day after his arrival in Milan, and left a month later having completed several projects that would yield marketable tear sheets.

These credentials got him his first editorial assignment, a story about hats for the late *In Fashion* magazine. The job also marked an aesthetic turning point for Picayo: It was the first time anyone had asked him to shoot Polaroid film as final art.

He had started to shoot 8x10 color Polaroids as a way of producing finished prints for his portfolio without relinquishing control to a processing lab. But the film's distinctive color palette and artistic potential came as a revelation to him. While Polaroid film is always touted for its instant feedback, Picayo discovered that it can also be used to create a look quite different from that of conventional film.

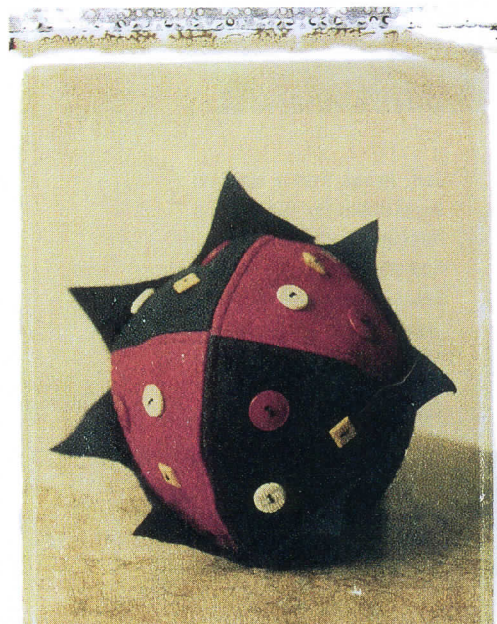
"I never liked ordinary color film that much," says Picayo. "All my early stuff was in black-and-white for that reason." But the photographer thinks that at some level his Caribbean youth may have programmed him for color. He was born in Cuba and moved to Puerto Rico in 1966 (before ending up with an uncle in Ohio, where he met his wife at Kent State). "Maybe in the back of my mind I was always sensitive to color. I just had to find the right medium."

Picayo is fond of using a hard light that bleaches highlights. The effect is always handled with discretion: "What he chooses to blow out and what he chooses to emphasize," says Jodi Nakatsuka, "is right on target." Although he sometimes employs that kind of lighting with other materials, Polaroid film lends an interesting abruptness to the edges between blank highlights and areas of tone. Polaroid film also reacts in an interesting way to the relatively long exposures—often 1/2 or one second—that Picayo requires for his favorite type of illumination, daylight-balanced movie lights. The reciprocity failure those exposures cause shifts the print's color toward an especially vibrant cyan.

But Picayo's Polaroid manipulations don't stop there. Many of his recent



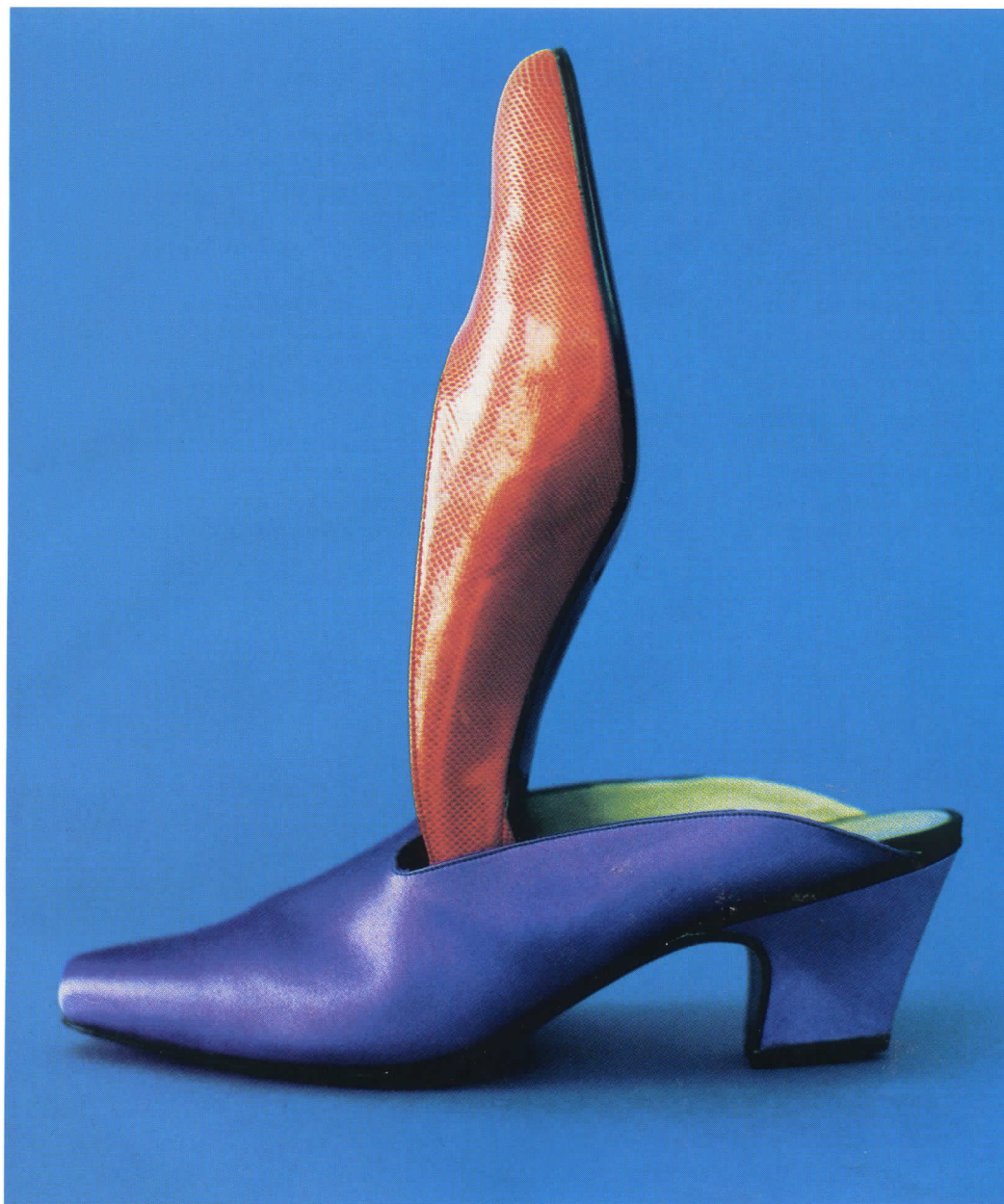
Above: The April 1990 cover of *L.A. Style*. Intended for a story on floral patterns, the image proved strong enough to displace the editors' original cover choice. "It's very L.A.," says Picayo, who definitely is not. **Right:** A Polacolor transfer of an antique beanie, for a Bloomingdale's promotion. **Opposite:** Picayo stacked these straw hats for a story on headwear in the January 1988 issue of *In Fashion*. Page is shown complete with original caption.



**This page: A
stack of striped
straw hats, all
by Michelle
Jaffe. Glove,
La Crasia.
Opposite: The
“quad-corner”
hat, by Manolo
at Dennis Perry
Accessories.**







Left: Still life from a May 1989 Harper's Bazaar story on slip-on footwear. "Jose has a great sense of color and design," says Bazaar Art Director Jerold Smokler. Opposite: Polacolor transfer of a sock-stuffed shoe, for a story on men's accessories in Sportswear International, June 1989.

photographs have been produced with a transfer process originally discovered by art photographers looking for ways to make Polaroid suit their more poetic purposes. It involves the removal of the image to artist's paper, which allows the dyes to soak into the paper's fibers. The look of these transfer prints is much softer than that of a normal Polaroid print—an image in which color is as much in the paper as on it. It's a quiet, richly subtle quality that befits this very low-key photographer.

Picayo usually creates transfer prints in addition to the normal Polaroid positives that his clients frequently request. When they see the transfers, however, they often opt to use them instead. On a recent assignment, fashion designer Leon Max specifically asked Picayo to create transfers, the

results of which will be used in a national campaign for the clothier's elegant wares. "The transfer has the patina of an old oil painting," says Max. "It creates a sense of the elegance of a bygone era, and that's what I want."

The model for this shoot fits that description perfectly—she's tall and exotic, with a dark, close-cropped Cleopatra haircut and an aquiline profile to match. Picayo has placed her against a black backdrop pinned to the wall of the Tribeca studio he regularly rents. Three enormous 1,200-watt movie lights, each draped in fireproof gauze, throw her into high relief. Picayo pushes the lights around, then returns to his 8x10 Deardorff, rolling it forward for a tighter shot. He extends the camera's long bellows to refocus his 14-inch Schneider lens on the dim

groundglass, then tilts the lens board to throw the model's lower half out of focus.

Picayo's assistant hands him an 8x10 sheet-film holder loaded with Polaroid film, and he slides it into the camera back and pulls the dark slide. He presses the plunger of the cable release to make an exposure that seems much longer than the model, Sphinx-like though she is, can possibly hold still for. Then Picayo replaces the dark slide and retreats to the far end of the studio, where another assistant has loaded a positive receiving sheet into a motorized 8x10 instant film processor.

Before Picayo sends his film through the machine, he dips a sheet of artist's paper into a tray of water, letting the paper soak briefly. He next removes the sheet and blots it thoroughly with a paper towel. Then he pushes the processor's actuator button and

the film goes flying through, leaving the chemical-pod-popping rollers spinning.

That's where Picayo's technique diverges from Polaroid protocol. Instead of waiting for the processor to beep the passage of 60 seconds, Picayo peels the sandwich apart immediately, before the dyes in the negative have a chance to diffuse into the positive receiving sheet. He throws the positive away and places the negative face down against the blotted paper. Then he uses a small hand roller to press the negative onto the paper, and sets the new sandwich aside while he sends the next exposed sheet through the processor.

After a certain interval (undoubtedly determined by intuition, because no timer has been set) Picayo peels the negative away from the paper, ever so slowly, scrutinizing each inch of the emerging image



Above: Gold bracelets, Picayo style, for *Mirabella*, January 1990. **Right:** Poster for a 1989 Bloomingdale's Mother's Day promotion, all Polacolor transfers. **Opposite:** Image from *Taxi* story about Fall clothes, September 1989. The vibrant, contrasty color comes from processing slide film in the C-41 chemistry intended for color negatives, helped along by Picayo's hard light. "That burned-out quality gives his work more of a modern edge," says one client.

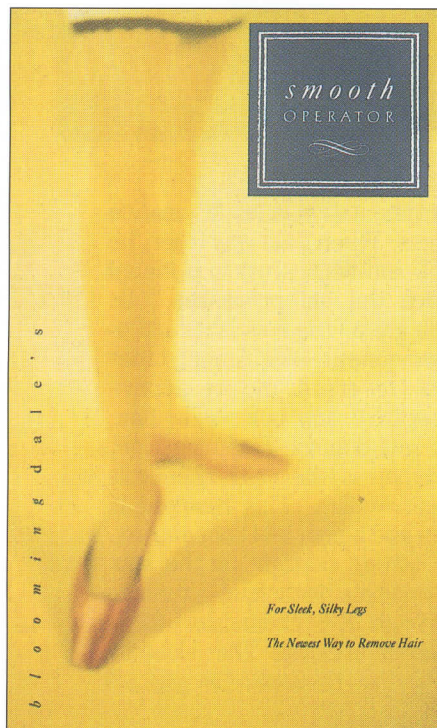








Above: Cover for *Taxi*, September 1989. (See previous spread.) **Left:** Silky-soft approach for brochure about depilatory device sold by Bloomingdale's. "They wanted an editorial look," says Picayo. **Opposite:** Shallow focus makes the point for a story on lips, also from *Taxi*, November 1988.



as it's revealed to the light.

Muted is almost too strong a word for the transfer's color: it's just about monochromatic. That's partly because such deep tones predominate in this particular image. In fact, the model's powdered face is the only light value. Leon Max isn't worried that his rarefied apparel isn't fully visible. "The clothing isn't the most important thing," he says—a remarkable statement from a clothing designer, and one that says a lot about the changes in advertisers' attitudes about photography.

Leon Max was tipped off to Picayo's talents by the three covers the photographer has shot for *L.A. Style*—the February, April, and May issues of this year. "They're the magazine's strongest covers," he says, quite a judgment when you consider that until December Herb Ritts was the magazine's main man. Jodi Nakatsuka explains why she uses Picayo so often. "His pictures have a kind of mythical quality," she says. "They're so clean. Not many props, just composition: the arrangement of the body and face, not just their interaction with jewelry or clothing. José's ability to reduce a subject to pure beauty is a rare thing."

In fashion photography, it may also be the definition of an editorial sensibility—the kind advertisers seem to be looking for these days. "We use José when we want a more editorial look," says Sandy Grover, an art buyer at Minneapolis' Dayton's department store, the Midwestern equivalent of Bloomingdale's. "We use him for image pieces rather than hard-edged advertising. His work is perfect when we need to photograph something that can be romanced a little, like for magazine ads or a special mailing piece. We call José when we don't have to show each button." Picayo appreciates that freedom. "Advertising's pretty loose now," he says. "If you get a good account, it can be as loose as editorial. And in some respects, editorial's not that loose."

Picayo's experimental streak is, in fact, one part art and one part commercial savvy. "I try never to do the same thing more than twice," he says, "because people are inclined to put a label on you. And then they won't call you for anything else." That's a difficult standard to maintain, especially with

Right: Polacolor transfer for a current Leon Max fashion campaign. Picayo strips the Polaroid sandwich apart before its dyes diffuse into the positive sheet, then rolls the negative into tight contact with a piece of artist's paper. The rough edges and painterly irregularities occur when Picayo peels away the negative several minutes later.

Opposite: From a *Savvy* story on American fashion houses, in this case Lee Anderson, May 1990.



the amount of work Picayo does, but so far he's apparently held to it. *Mirabella* art director Karen Grant, who was a little leery of using Picayo because he was doing so much work for *Bazaar*, had her fears quickly allayed: "He was able to give us something different enough so that I felt completely comfortable with it," she says. Picayo's pictures of accessories, which Grant says can be an especially challenging subject, had a look that was "strong, and, in a way, severe. It just separated itself from anything I'd seen before in accessories."

Bazaar's art director, Jerold Smokler, agrees that Picayo is always able to come up with something fresh. "The things he's done for my magazine have all been varied and certainly good enough so that I don't have to categorize him as a particular kind of photographer," says Smokler.

Key to Picayo's experimentation is his fascination with photographic process. When time was freer, he printed much of his black-and-white work in platinum and cyanotype. ("I love the old processes," he says.) Now his methods are a little less labor-intensive, but quite innovative nonetheless. Among other unorthodoxies, he has reversed the respective chemistries of color-negative and color-slide film. For one cover for the now-defunct *Taxi* magazine, his Fujichrome was souped in the C-41 chemicals designed for color-negative film. This resulted in brilliantly artificial colors and a high level of contrast, which accentuated the strong sidelight on the subject. Picayo used the opposite technique—running color-negative film through E-6 chemicals—for a recent accessories editorial in *Sassy*. That alchemy

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(Continued from page 73)

produced a very different effect, in which the film's orange mask colored all the highlights and made the bluish cast of the rest of the image seem all the more pronounced.

Yet in spite of such aesthetic gambles, Picayo seems to have a solid sense of just what he can get away with—of what the marketplace will tolerate. Art directors report that they give him very little art direction, trusting his instincts implicitly. "He's sensitive to what's in style," says Jerold Smokler. "He's able to stay within the limits of what will work, but still make it completely personal."

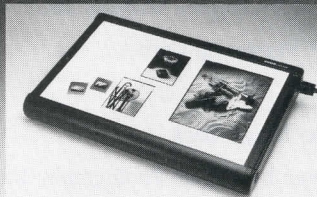
It seems as if the amount of work that Picayo has packed into the last few years has given him a wisdom beyond his tender age. He's trying to break his habit of working days and evenings, and trying not to work every day so that he can spend more time in his Greenwich Village home with his wife Kasey (who doubles as his rep) and his one-year-old son Javier. "If you become like a machine, your work will suffer for it," advises Picayo. He's learning how to say no, but he says no thoughtfully. "Sometimes a job isn't right for you," he explains. "The client may think it is, but you know you're not going to do your best work with it."

Back at the studio, Leon Max is so taken with the quality of Picayo's Polaroid transfers, now all pinned to the wall, that he asks Picayo to shoot one of him before striking the set. "It's for my old mother," he says with a sheepish grin. That done, Picayo packs up while his young assistant plays a game of tennis against the studio's seamless white walls. Picayo folds the Deardorff and places it in a tattered Museum of Modern Art Design Store bag. "I haven't found a good camera case," he says, as if suddenly self-conscious that he isn't the picture of the up-and-coming pro. Picayo's voice is barely audible over the resonant thwack of the tennis ball, but on this day, as always, his talent speaks for itself. □

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



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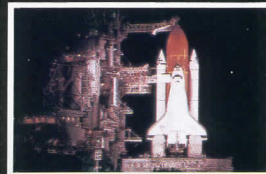
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