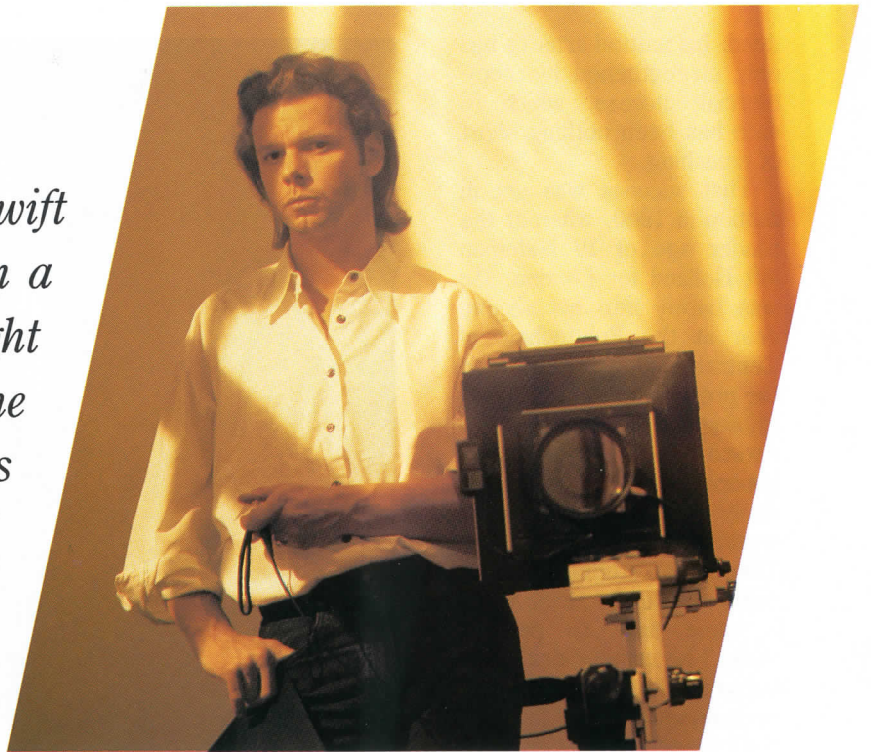


PHOTO|DESIGN

FOR THE CREATIVE TEAM



Hans Neleman's swift success is based on a powerful sense of light and form that recalls the great painters of his native Holland



DUTCH MASTER

By Russell Hart

Many photographers have used the line: I can only express myself in my personal work. They mean to suggest that assignment work can't satisfy their boundless creative needs. The complaint often rings hollow, however—a photographer who can't bring enough artistry to an assignment simply may not be enough of an artist.

Hans Neleman doesn't buy the Jekyll-and-Hyde routine. "I've always fought to diffuse the distinction between personal and commercial work," says the Dutch-born photographer, whose still-life and portrait images are sought after by clients such as American Express, Sony, and Nestlé. For Neleman, the art and business of photography are symbiotic. In-

Opposite: Study of an armillary sphere was used in a brochure for Sansabelt clothing, 1991. Above: Self-portrait, 1991.



deed, his natural artistry has only strengthened his commercial success, which to date has been nothing short of smashing.

That success was set in motion in 1980, when at the tender age of 19 Neleman left Holland for London. He was barely into his second year at the Polytechnic of Central London when he won the prestigious Kodak Young Photographer of the Year Award—the first of many honors. Neleman was suddenly inundated with real-world editorial assignments. “The other students had to comp up their pictures when it came time to present them,” he remembers. “But because a lot of my work had been done for actual jobs, I’d have it ready-made.”

From England it was on to New York, and an MA in studio art at NYU. Typically, the hard-working Neleman completed the two-year program in one. In the process, he studied with photographers he had long admired, including Duane Michals, Arnold Newman, Sherrie Levine, and William Wegman—not exactly your typical commercial shooters.

That experience encouraged the artist in Neleman, but it didn’t stop him from getting gainful editorial work with major magazines—*Esquire*, *Rolling Stone*, *Vogue*, *GQ*—straight out of school. Those assignments let Neleman build up his portfolio fast; yet he also wanted advertising work. “I was hoping to make the same kinds of statements in advertising that I was making in editorial photography,” says

Top: Model test from Neleman’s London school days, 1982. **Right:** American Express ad, 1987.

Opposite: The contents of Lauren Hutton’s pocketbook, for a celebrity-oriented Chivas Regal campaign (which never ran), 1990.







Above: Album-cover photo collage for Kid Creole & the Coconuts, 1991. The portraits were made in a funhouse mirror, then sepia-toned and collaged. **Right:** Global view for an AT&T electronic communications ad, 1991. **Opposite:** A butcher's apron provided the backdrop for a personal work Neleman calls "Still Life with Skull and Popcorn," 1989.



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Neleman. Better pay was part of the attraction, but not for creature comforts. "I saw and still see advertising work as an investment in myself," Neleman says. "If you can get more money for a job, it means you can work with better people and have more freedom in the way you shoot something. In advertising, you can make everything perfect."

If good business makes for better photography, then at the heart of Neleman's commercial success is a consummate sense of how to keep his artistry under control—of how to keep an image within the bounds

of what a client will accept. "Hans always delivers what you ask him to," says Jean Wolff, an art buyer at McCaffrey and McCall. "It's only then that he'll push it, in the hope that we can convince a client to accept something more daring." Neleman's stylist Pamela Needles has seen that balancing act up close for several years. "He knows just how far to go," she says. "He manages to please the client but still have his own vision."

Interpreting an assignment in two different ways inevitably means more work, and Neleman is famous

for working hard. "Hans always gives you much more than you're paying for," says Joel Zimmerman, an art director at Sony Music. Zimmerman cites Neleman's recent album cover for Kid Creole and the Coconuts as an example of problem solving through hard work. "There are 15 or 16 people in the band," says Neleman, "and they all had to be on the cover." Fearing that the identity of the band's members might be lost in a group shot, Neleman photographed each of them individually, in black-and-white, reflected in funhouse mirrors.



The resulting elongation of the band members' faces allowed Neleman to squeeze them all onto the cover, but the manipulation didn't stop there. Prints were made of each portrait, and toned various shades of brown and sepia. Then Neleman went to work again, collaging the prints together in a three-by-five-foot construction that incorporated pieces of ornamental picture frame attached anywhere but at the edges. Neleman's final step was to rephotograph the piece itself. "I can't begin to tell you how much work he put in," says Joel Zimmerman. "He's tireless."

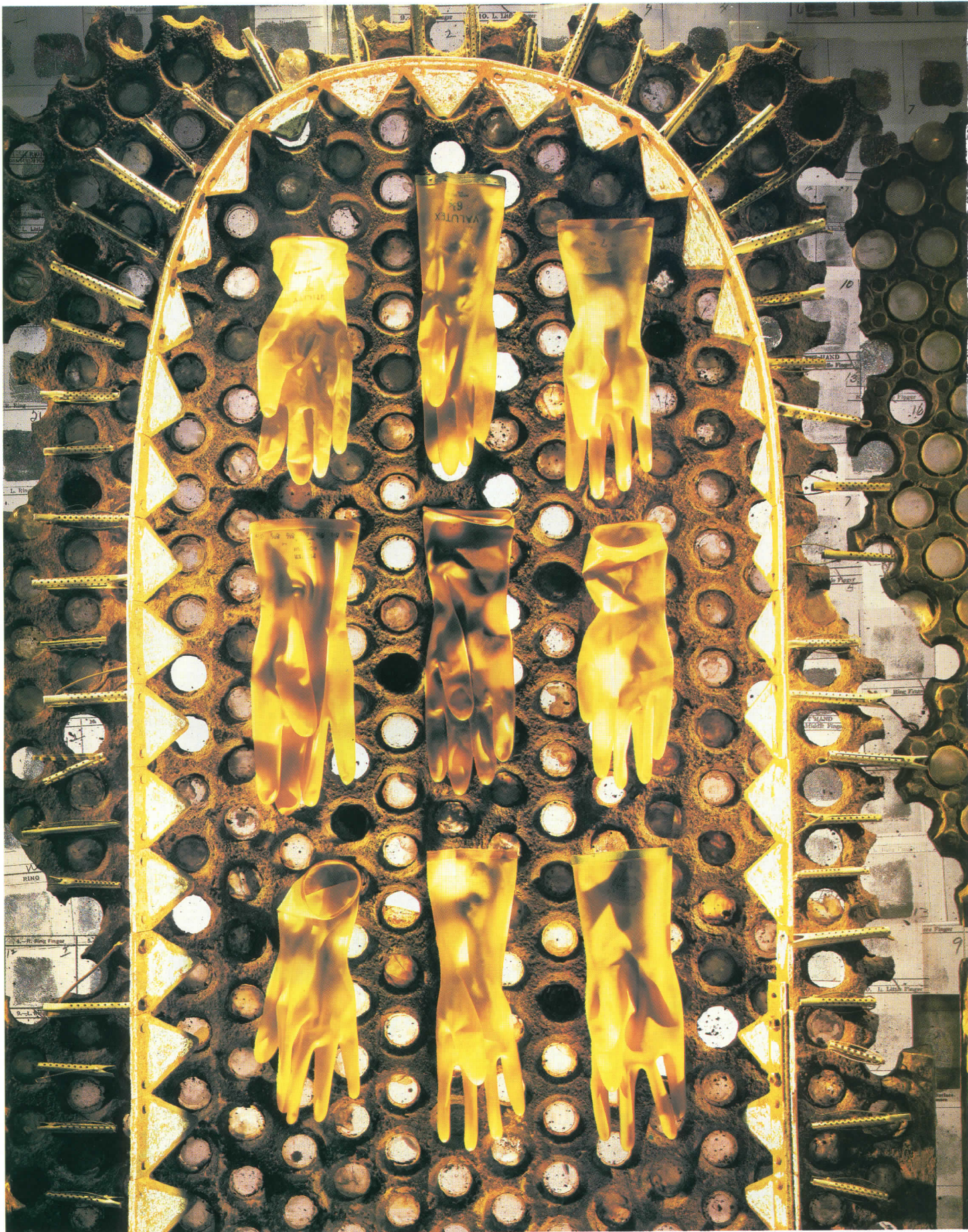
The Kid Creole project was another opportunity for Neleman to blur the line between his personal and commercial work. The idea for it grew out of a series of

like-sized constructions that Neleman had begun making when he found himself with a rare week of down time last February. "People had been asking me why I don't keep my still-life setups together," says Neleman. "Part of the reason is that many of the components are precariously balanced, or too delicate to fasten. But it's always sad to break them

Above: A quirky Christmas promotion for Dayton's Oval Room, 1990. **Right (from top):** International *Newsweek* cover, 1991; award-winning ad from a campaign for upscale Cross fountain pens, 1990; ad from Sauza Tequila campaign, 1991. **Opposite:** Collage created by Neleman for home furnishings story, *The New York Times Magazine*, 1991.









down, so I decided to try.”

Working until four or five in the morning, Neleman built permanent still lifes into shallow wooden boxes, an effort that still consumes the scant hours after his many commercial shoots. Although they're designed to hang on the wall, the boxes take their cue from Neleman's trademark shoot-down approach to still life—a technique that foregoes the traditional horizontal reference point of tabletop photography for a vertical one. This approach

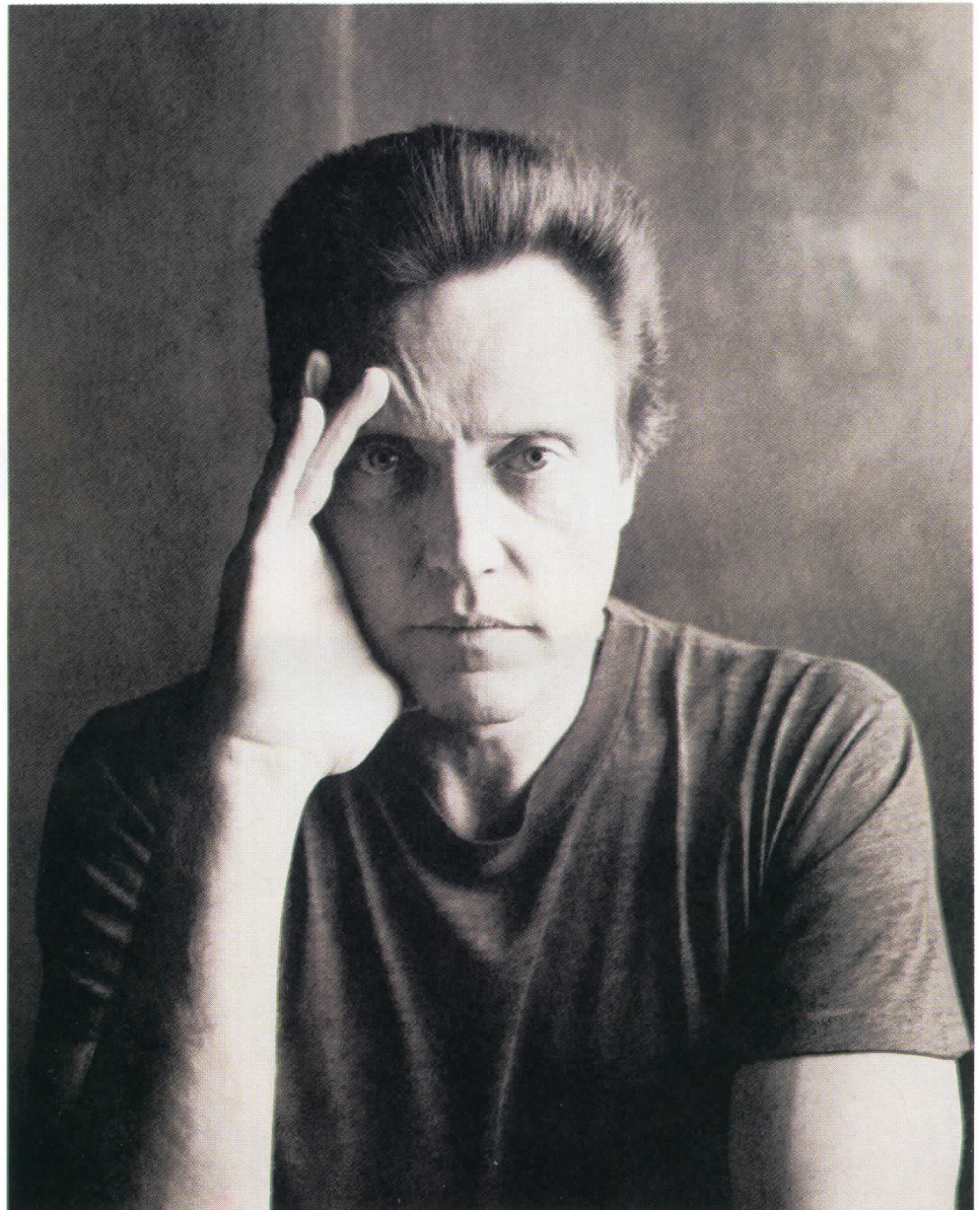
Opposite: Personal piece inspired by a home movie, 1990. **Above:** Photo for print ad “The Art of Picking Numbers” for New York Lotto, 1989. **Left:** Tabletop ad for English Nestlé, 1989.



seems to make photography more akin to painting, not just in its flattening effect but in the importance it gives textures and surfaces. "It's almost like treating the back of the camera like a canvas," Neleman says. Indeed, the process of creating a Neleman still life can consume days, days spent not just combining and positioning objects but painting, sanding, rubbing, gluing, tying, and otherwise manipulating them. And that's all before the lighting begins.

Neleman's shootdowns have a sense of high relief, enhanced by a characteristic raking light, which only an artist with a strong sense of sculpture could create. A feeling for found objects is another powerful force in Neleman's work. His still lifes incorporate everything from delicate bird's wings to pieces of city street; his taste in objects ranges from the macabre to the whimsical, from bones to old photographs. His inventory of such items is considerable. "I go through a lot of garbage cans," says Neleman.

But it's not just the quality of individual objects that makes Neleman's still lifes so excep-
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Top: Three takes from test session with model Stephanie, 1991. **Right:** Christopher Walken, for a fund-raising campaign for New York's American Place Theater, 1991. **Opposite:** Album-cover image for rock group Toad The Wet Sprocket, 1991.



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tional; it's the surprising and meaningful ways in which he combines those objects. His attitude smacks of Dada: "When you combine one thing with another," he says, "it becomes a third thing." He likes the term "juxtapose," a Dada buzzword. The difference is that Neleman is less willing than the artists who championed Dada to leave his juxtapositions to chance—he's a control freak. Still, Neleman recognizes that significance is in the eye of the beholder. "The meaning of the piece often comes afterwards," he says.

Neleman's illumination, an angular, hard light, bounces off objects like a fiery pinball. "Hans is a magician with light," says DDB Needham art director Ray Groff, with whom Neleman works on the New York Lotto account. "He was a pioneer in that very dramatic European lighting. Now, in a week, I probably get five or six promo cards from photographers working in the same style—and not doing a very good job of it."

The way people struggle to define his lighting style both flatters and amuses Neleman. "Now that I'm in America, people are always asking me for that 'European style' lighting," he says. "When I was in England, the same style was always called 'American!'" Whatever the label, Neleman admits to heavy use of mirrors (he calls them "blasters") to send beams of light through his subject. But mirrors aren't always the answer. "You can't light everything the same way," he says. "The other day, we shot something with just one source—the hot light we'd set up just to style the still life. It was beautiful, so we decided to go with it."

This sensitivity to light also transforms Neleman's portraiture. "I wouldn't want to shoot exclusively still life or exclusively people," says the photographer, who circulates both portrait and tabletop books. "The rewards and satisfactions are so different." (Indeed, both portraiture and still life will be represented in a one-man exhibition November 5–22 at the Visual Arts Museum of New York's School of Visual Arts.)

Neleman's determination not to be typecast pervades a recent series of

portraits for a membership drive by New York's American Place Theater. Neleman's subjects were former players who've made it big, including Christopher Walken, whom Neleman managed to coax into sitting for an additional five-minute session with the 8x10 camera he ordinarily reserves for still life.

"He was intense," says Neleman. "With portraiture, you get an immediate response. You don't have that with still life—you get a response later, when people see your work."

Ray Groff attributes the success of Neleman's recent foray into film and video to his distinctive lighting. "It's

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very theatrical," says Groff. "It gives the subject a kind of movement that works well in film. Most tabletop photographers who do film create a very stiff look, but not Hans." Indeed, Neleman says that he often takes his cues from the movies. "Some of the lighting I do that people might consider European is totally filmic, and very American," he says.

Neleman's film projects to date have included several pieces for MTV and a couple of music videos. A Hershey's commercial, which the photographer made at the end of 1988, actually started it all. Jean Wolff, then an art buyer at Ogilvy and Mather, called on Neleman to do a photomatic—a sequence of still photographs to help develop a TV spot for a new upscale chocolate bar. "I thought of Hans because he's so great with textures," says Wolff, "and the layouts called for this richness and opulence of texture, to suggest the velvety nature of this premium chocolate."

Everyone involved was so impressed with Neleman's pictures, and with what Wolff calls the "baroque" quality of his lighting, that he was asked to shoot the actual ad. The ad was produced under the aegis of San

Francisco-based Colossal Pictures, and the experience led to Neleman's co-founding an affiliated film-production company.

Neleman's involvement with film, the ultimate team medium, is also indicative of an ever-increasing willingness to collaborate in artistic endeavors and to delegate responsibilities. "I did film for six months back in school," he says. "But I didn't pursue it with the same intensity as photography because it's so much a group effort, and at the time, I was determined to make my own statement. Now I'm realizing that if you work with the right people you can still make your statement. It just takes time to find the right people."

Neleman's most important collaboration yet is scheduled for December—his wedding to former model Susana Delgado, now a film student at the School of Visual Arts. Neleman met Delgado two years ago last May, shortly after she came to New York from her home town of El Paso. Delgado was originally scheduled as a neck and ear model for a DeBeers' diamond shoot in Neleman's studio, but the model for the other body parts was unavailable so she filled in. Needless to say, Neleman liked more than the sum of the parts.

Meanwhile, Neleman has just moved into a refurbished studio in a landmark building on Soho's Mercer Street. A former tannery, it has all the Neleman touches: cast-iron columns from floor to ceiling; a front door with a richly rusted surface that's been sanded down to bare metal in tasteful patches; an office area dwarfed by a huge, ancient winged clock (still working) from a hardware store; and desks and counters custom-made from sections of metal scaffolding with sheet-metal bolted to them. The only unexpected touch is Neleman's private office, in which a lone weathered desk is surrounded by half a dozen fluted wooden columns whose capitals fall far short of the tall ceiling. The effect is regal, an attitude the unprepossessing Neleman clearly has not taken to heart. □

Russell Hart, who writes our View Finder column, is an author, photographer, and magazine editor based in Larchmont, N.Y.