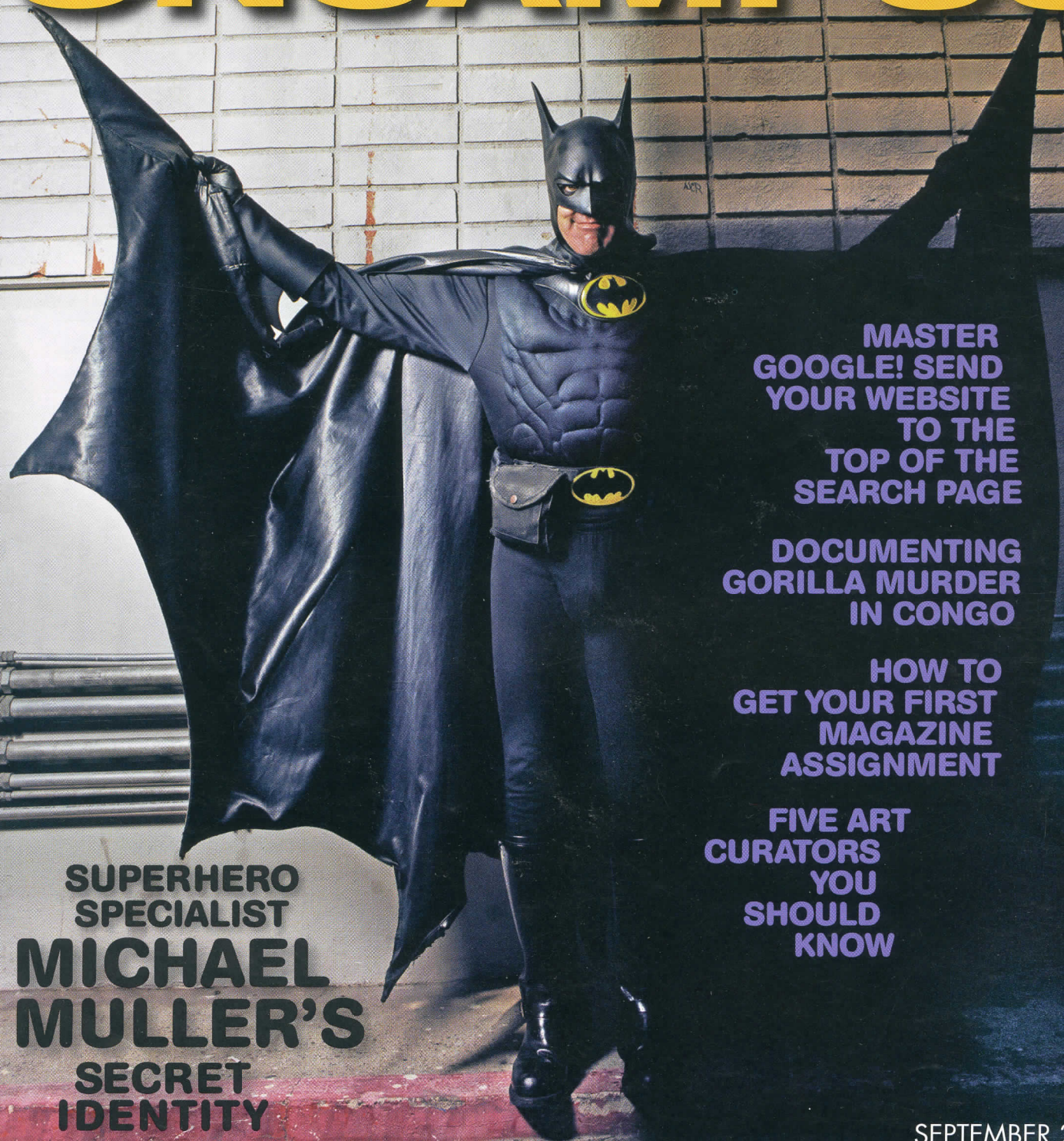


# AMERICAN PHOTO ONCAMPUS



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SEPTEMBER 2008

PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
MICHAEL MULLER

# SCREEN SHOTS

## PROFILE

If you weren't in Timbuktu this summer, there was no way you could miss the posters and billboards for *Hancock*, actor Will Smith's latest movie. The images of Smith as a seriously flawed superhero were created by Los Angeles-based photographer Michael Muller, a relative newcomer to the specialized business of shooting highly stylized images of movie stars to advertise their films.

Shooting movie posters was something Muller had always wanted to do. Yet even his impeccable photographic credentials—ad campaigns for Speedo and Mercedes, magazine covers of Spider-Man Tobey Maguire for *Premiere* and Adrien Brody for *Flaunt*—hadn't won him the chance to shoot those dazzling film promos we see on billboards and bus stops. It was a self-assigned, movie-themed art project that finally brought movie-poster opportunity knocking.

Muller's project, called *Superfamous*, was a series of portraits of the superhero-costumed souls who parade around Holly-

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What mild-mannered photographer creates the images you see in blockbuster movie posters? It might just be Michael Muller, photographic superhero. By Russell Hart

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Muller's take on Spider-Man Tobey Maguire.



© SONY PICTURES MICHAEL MULLER

## PROFILE

wood's famous Chinese Theatre, where for five bucks they pose for tourists' cameras. "Most of the money goes to feed a drug habit," says Muller, "and one of the key pictures is of Batman smoking crack in the alley." Ironic but somehow fitting that *Hancock's* protagonist is a down-and-out, alcoholic superhero.

The marketing head of Fox Studios saw a 4x6-foot print of the Batman image at the home of Joaquin Phoenix, whom Muller befriended when he was doing publicity photography for *Walk the Line*, in which the actor played Johnny Cash. The Fox exec happened to be working on the runup to *X-Men: The Last Stand*, the third, Brett Ratner-directed installment in the Marvel comic-based series. He was so impressed with Muller's image that Phoenix immediately phoned the photographer to come meet him. Muller was hired on the spot to do the posters for the movie. "You never know what's going to open the door for you," he says.

**M**uller pored over pictures by *The Last Stand's* full-time set photographer "to get a feel for how the movie looked." (He also likes to see a film's script to better understand its characters, though that sometimes requires reading it in a high-security vault.) Then Muller put together what amounted to a roving studio, outfitted with battery-powered, 1,200-watt-second Profoto 7B strobes and mobile C-stands, which could be moved to any part of the set



## LESSON 1 IMPROVISE

When **Michael Muller** did the poster photography for **Hitman**, starring *Deadwood's* **Timothy Olyphant**, the improvisational skills he cultivated on the set of the latest *X-Men* film were put to the test. The concept for the main *Hitman* poster, a variation of the one at left, called for Olyphant in front of a bullet-riddled wall with light pouring through the holes.

The *Hitman* crew was shooting on location in Bulgaria, and Muller planned to fly his set designer over to set up the wall. The studio nixed that plan because of its cost, so Muller photographed some bullet holes in a blown-up room on set. Then he shot Olyphant separately standing in the right pose. At home he composited the two together. "We saved the studio \$25,000 and ended up getting the exact shot we wanted," Muller says.

## LESSON 2 DIGITIZE

"I shoot all my movie posters digitally," says Muller. "The time constraints require instant results." He uses the 17-megapixel **Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II** for much of this work, including the *Spider-Man 3* and *Iron Man* posters at left. The camera's image quality is good enough for the biggest tasks, he says. "If you upsize the right way, you can make an image that will hold up on the side of an eight-story building."

These poster images are usually made from "plates," the generic background elements (sky, landscape, buildings, weather) that are comped together with so-called hero shots of the actors themselves. Unlike other poster photographers, Muller likes to shoot these kinds of photos. He did so for the movie *Hancock*, along with the photos of **Will Smith** and costar **Charlize Theron**. "The movie takes place in L.A.," Muller says. "So we rented a helicopter and flew over downtown, and I hung from a harness so I could shoot rooftops."



**CLASS NOTE:**  
"I CHALLENGE MYSELF TO KEEP LOCATION SHOTS WITHIN A SHORT RADIUS."



© PARAMOUNT PICTURES/MICHAEL MULLER (2)

Opposite page: Muller's posters for the movies *Hitman*, *Fantastic Four: The Return of the Silver Surfer*, *Iron Man*, and *Spider-Man 3*. Left: Iron Man in full regalia. Below left: Halle Berry for *X-Men 3*. Below right: Robert Downey Jr. and the *Iron Man* supporting cast.

where filming wasn't in progress. "I'd walk around and find little nooks and crannies to shoot in, then pull aside Hugh Jackman or another cast member who was available," he says.

Digital capture—17 megapixels' worth, shot with the Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II—helped close the deal with Jackman. Muller just fired up his laptop and showed the actor, who played Wolverine, what he had already produced. "When you can show the director and the cast on the spot that the pictures you've been doing are good, they're much more open to working with you," says Muller, who has since posterized superheroes for *Spider-Man 3*, *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer*, and Robert Downey Jr.'s *Iron Man*. "It becomes a very organic, collaborative experience." Yet the time constraints remain. "I've got to be able to light and shoot someone in less than five minutes," he says. "Time is money, maybe a million dollars a day on a big movie, and the poster photographer is low priority."

To add to that challenge, Muller likes to get as much of the image right in-camera as he can. "Whenever I've shot someone on location, I challenge myself to find settings within a couple of blocks, and do the whole shoot within a very short radius," he says. "And that way of working translates into what I've been doing for the movie posters. I go and find little pieces of the set, or walls, or something they blew



© FOX STUDIOS/MICHAEL MULLER





Left: A Batman impersonator smokes crack in a photograph from Muller's self-assigned *Superfamous* project. Below: Muller at work on the set of *Hancock*.

Wacom pen," he says. "You don't have to put your hands in butterfly mode like in the darkroom and burn in spots one at a time."

Muller says he wouldn't like it, though, if he had to shoot movie posters day in and day out. "I'd get a little crazy," he says. "I love the challenge of new stuff." That said, his movie poster experience has affected the way he thinks about his other work—especially sports subjects such as surfing, another of his specialties. "Surfing's been shot the same way for 20-plus years," says Muller, who has also been photographing snowboarding since its baby bonks in the early 1990s. "I'm going to bring my cinematic approach to surfing photography." To that end he's having underwater housings built for his Profoto strobes and plans multi-light setups both on and under the water. He even wants to use the same technique for his ongoing photography of (gulp) great white sharks. If we were him, we'd stick with superheroes. ■

up the week before, and use that as a background element."

**M**uller's improvised yet controlled approach is a radical departure from the movie poster custom of shooting the subject on a seamless sweep and letting the studio "comp" the rest. In fact, he says that the studio just "slapped a bar code" on two of three

images that were used in posters for the movie *Hitman* (see sidebar). Of course Muller has to arrange the pose and compose the image so that empty spaces are available for type and other graphic design elements, but he says this allowance is now "wired into my shooting."

Unlike most other Hollywood photographers, Muller also does his own postproduction work on individual images, whether for movie posters or ad campaigns. And most of that happens with the RAW file. "Ninety percent of the look I get comes from how I process the file," he says. "I'm really the only one who can decide, at least from an artistic perspective, if the image would look better in black and white or could use a

greenish feel." He does pull the processed image into Photoshop, but that's the easy part. "Once I get a file processed I probably spend about five minutes on it, adjusting curves and burning and dodging with a

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