

TPS Tech Sheet ■ 23

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A Year with Arnold Newman by Julie Soefer

Introduction

How do I begin to describe what it was like to be the Studio Manager and Assistant to Arnold Newman? Arnold Newman. To be in arms-length from his entire body of work, and the man himself, every day for a year. To buy tuna fish sandwiches, every week, for the man who inspired my passion for photography, to chart the course of my life – whether he knew it or not.

I guess I should start off at the beginning. I was 14, a freshman at the Kinkaid School in Houston, sitting in Mr. Veselka's classroom with a projection of Igor Stravinsky's portrait on the wall. The lecture was on "the environmental portrait," and naturally Mr. Veselka projected a slide of Arnold Newman's 1946 portrait of Igor Stravinsky. The image was simply perfect; the composition, the scale, the tonality, the flat shape of the piano. I wanted to make images as powerful as his Stravinsky. In fact, when I first heard about the job opening at Arnold Newman's studio, I knew I just had to write to him and tell him how much his photograph meant to me. Even if I didn't get the job, I still wanted him to know how his images immensely influenced my way of thinking about making portraits.

I saw the job posting on craigslist.com (a website where you can seriously sell, buy



Poster for the Movie
Supersize Me
© Julie Soefer

result in disqualification. Applicants could either fax or mail in their resumés, no email. So, I figured I would call a messenger, and send him my prints in a big 16x20 box, and maybe, just maybe he would like my work and want to meet me without having broken any of his application rules for the job. The very next day I got a call from Mr. Newman himself, asking me in on an interview.

I told my mother, 15 minutes before I went in for the interview, that I was sooo nervous. Mom calmed me down, I buzzed his studio and his assistant answered the door. She took me upstairs and instructed me to

or find anything) and I just couldn't believe that a job working for *The Arnold Newman* was posted on this, free-for-all information site. The job posting said "no calls" and "no studio drop bys;" both would

or find anything) and I just couldn't believe that a job working for *The Arnold Newman* was posted on this, free-for-all information site. The job posting said "no calls" and "no studio drop bys;" both would speak loudly because he couldn't hear very well. I took Mr. Newman's hand for the first time and I put my other hand on top of his hand grasping mine and said clearly, "It is a pleasure to meet you Mr. Newman." I sat down, took my jacket off, and we started talking. He told me that he was thinking that I should be "disqualified" because he specified no studio visits... and I sort of broke the rules in sending a messenger. I quickly apologized saying it was wrong of me to have cheated. He followed with — "You don't need to apologize."

The very next day was a "training day." I had a computer test and a spotting test (he felt I was an excellent spotter), and the next day he hired me. Words cannot describe how excited I was; whether it was my work or my loud voice, Arnold Newman had given me a chance, and I knew this was going to be a job I was never going to forget.



Llama © Julie Soefer

The Assistant

My day started at 9:30 am. I opened the studio, made sure Arnold's desk was tidy, checked the messages on the answering machine, then checked to see if there were any faxes that had come in, and once internet was installed, I checked the emails. Arnold did not have internet until five



Studying images from a shoot.

months after I began working for him and I must say, persuading him into the ways of the 21st century was a personal highlight. For the first month, I was his only employee until we hired our full-time printer, Jason, who took care of the maintenance of the darkroom, handled all of the black-and-white film processing and printing, and assisted with me on photo shoots.

Arnold would arrive between 9:40 and 10:15, and usually he would get right to returning his calls. Arnold loves to talk to people, and people love to talk to him. In fact, I've concluded that he has mastered the art of "schmoozing." But the thing is, Arnold has amazing, endless, historical stories to tell: from studying Mondrian at work, to photographing Picasso, to having Carl Sandburg (a house guest at the

time) and Marilyn Monroe over for dinner, listening to him talk about his life was not only interesting, but also a daily history lesson.

Arnold Newman earns his living in three different ways: photo shoots, print sales, and image reproduction sales. My job was



to keep track of everything coming in, as well as everything going out – the prints, the bills, and scanned images. Commerce Graphics, the company that handles the print sales of Arnold's work, serves as the liaison between Arnold's work and the galleries that sell his work. Print orders from Commerce Graphics would come in weekly, and it was my responsibility to make sure that Arnold was aware of which images we already had in stock in the studio, and which images needed to be printed to fulfill these orders. Arnold maintains the most amazing filing system for his prints and his negatives. Every shoot is assigned a number that is organized by date; so that sitting #s 1-50 would be his earliest shoots.

So, when a print order came in for let's say, his portrait of Picasso's head, I would look up the number (2255), pull all of the Picasso images we had filed so Arnold could see how many images he had in stock, and then he would choose one for me to spot and prepare to send to Commerce Graphics to send to the gallery or client. Every print that left the studio had to have Arnold's approval.

Once it was approved, Arnold then would sign the prints. If an image needed to be

printed for an order, our printer would print the image, bringing tests of it over and over again until Arnold had approved its quality.

Almost daily, we received requests from magazines, museums, and organizations that wanted to use or reproduce one of Arnold's images. Getty Images handles the reproduction of Arnold's work, and has hundreds of his images scanned and on their site for purchase. Often clients would request images of people that Getty did not have in their database. In that situation, either Jason or I would scan the image and work on it in Photoshop with Arnold next to us telling us exactly how he wanted it to look. Again, nothing left Arnold Newman's studio without Arnold Newman's stamp of approval.

On the days shoots were scheduled (or often the night before the shoots), Arnold and I and one other assistant would spend about half of the day preparing equipment for the shoot. He still uses the same equipment, in the same cases, that he carried through the African Congo in the 1950's (which he reminded us of each time we took those massive cases out.) He photographs with either an Arca (4x5), a Hasselblad, or a Canon

depending on which format he chooses for his shot. He also uses his old tungsten lights, seldom strobes, but will use them if they help him make a better picture. Appropriately, in his words, "I'll use those fancy things if they help me make a better picture; everything is basically the same."

Assisting Arnold Newman on a shoot was an experience in itself – he really has the most amazing work ethic of anyone I have ever met. Especially since he's 86 years old, it's really remarkable to watch him work. And he does everything; deciding the concept, positioning his subjects, the framing, and the focusing. After the shoots, we would go back to the studio and our printer would process his film (Tri-X) in the darkroom downstairs in the studio.



Checking darkroom tests.

The Studio

Arnold's studio, which he owns and married his beautiful wife Augusta in, is on two floors. The downstairs consists of the studio, film-processing darkroom, and storage. The



The print wash room.

upstairs includes the traditional black-and-white darkroom, his office, and workroom filled with drawers

of organized prints and negatives, as well as the computer, scanner, and printer. Oh, and I must not forget, upstairs you will

also find the only bathroom, where you will find his print washer, in the bathtub.

People often ask me what it was like to work for the Master (although Arnold hates titles), the great Arnold Newman. My reply is simply that I know that I will never have a boss like him. Each day at the studio was an unforgettable new surprise, a new photography tip, a new history lesson. People constantly came to Arnold's studio. They were museum curators, famous photographers, executives of photography companies offering equipment and tribute in exchange, hopefully, for Arnold's endorsement.

Arnold always had an hour or two and stories to share. I was lucky to get a whole year. I must say that I grew very fond of him and

became close with him and his wife Augusta. Four months later, I still visit them for tuna fish lunches at which I greet and am greeted with enormous hugs. In September 2004, I left to begin my career as a portrait photographer, but I took with me all the lessons, the history, the art, and photography skills I learned from my old boss, my professor, my friend — Arnold Newman.



Arnold and his grandson in the workshop.

About the Author: Julie Soefer

Born and raised in Houston, TX, Julie Soefer started photographing at the age of 14. In 1998, she won the PIEA international photography competition, and in 1999 was named by the Association of Texas Photography Instructors as the number one high school photographer in Texas. She attended New York University's Tisch School of the Arts and received her degree in Photography and Imaging. Shortly after graduating, Julie was hired to be a still

photographer on the feature film, *Supersize Me*, and created the iconic image used for the movie poster. Julie then took a job working as the 1st assistant and studio manager for one of her personal heroes in photography, the legendary Arnold Newman. Currently, Julie lives and works in New York City. Her work has been seen in publications such as *The Village Voice*, *Time Magazine*, *Heeb Magazine*, *The New York Post*, *Variety*, and *People Magazine*.



Mr. Newman and Julie Soefer

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