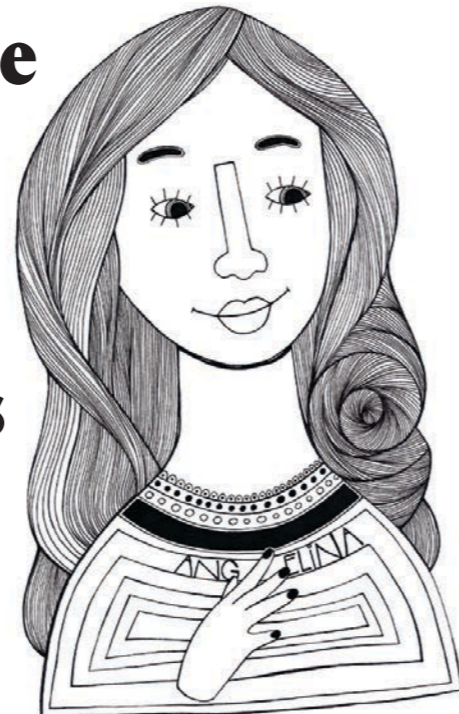


Edwin Tse is a New York-based photographer whose work has been featured in numerous magazines around the globe.

What especially stands out in his body of work are his timeless and sensual nude portraits, a cross between the girl-next-door and a scene out of the *Last Tango in Paris*.

Here he **talks to Angelina Rafii** about his journey and honing his craft in the city that never sleeps.



Can you start by telling us a little bit about your background. What kind of neighbourhood did you grow up in Toronto and how do you think that experience influenced your work?

I grew in a suburb of Toronto called Thornhill. I think it was a pretty typical suburban upbringing, I would go to school and hang out with my friends after school and get into whatever trouble kids get into. I'm not entirely sure how it relates to my work today, but I do feel nostalgic about my youth at times. There are certain things that trigger moments of my past. I speak to people about having an affinity for cartoons because they remind me of my youth and childhood.

Did you stumble upon photography by accident or did you pursue it academically? And if it was the latter, what singular moment attracted you to the idea?

I guess, growing up, often my parents and my sister and I would go to a mall on any typical weekend afternoon. My mom would always let us explore on our own and I often ventured off to the bookstore. You could often find me in the photography book section. I think that is sort of the early beginnings of my love for photography. I just had some natural attraction to photographs, it was like experiencing different parts of the world through photo books. My uncle who was an amateur artist lent me his Pentax and from there I started to approach photography more seriously as an art form as opposed to just vacation snapshots. As I grew older I was on staff for my high-school senior yearbook. The yearbook staff would give me film to shoot "student



PLANESPOTTING

life" around the school, but I would shoot one roll for them and then take three rolls and venture off into the woods and shoot landscapes for myself. I never studied photography academically but do remember doing a few darkroom classes on my own. I actually ventured off into design in art school which definitely had a strong influence on how I approach photography to this day. There tends to be a lot of minimalism and cleanliness in my work. I learned that through graphic design. I started my career on the other side of the lens in art direction and editorial magazines and got a feel for what it was like seeing real professional photographers work. It was during that period when film was slowly making its way to digital, so it was great to see that.

I eventually started assisting photographers on the side and later moved to New York. My first roommate in Brooklyn was an amazing award-winning photographer Adam Nadel. We do completely different things, but what I learned from him was incredible. From there I decided to venture off on my own into the world of photography.

Can you pinpoint the moment you decided that you would dedicate your time and resources to it?

I think the time I really started to take photography more seriously was when I moved to New York, being surrounded by so much talent really rubs off on you. You see what people are doing around you and it really makes you want to try and attempt to get to that same level



GAS STATIONS

as well. I started photographing people more and began using my friends as my subjects. It was a slow build and eventually I started using amateur models, building up to professional models and from there to build my book up. My work today wouldn't be what it is without the move to New York.

I suppose that even though the opportunities are more abundant in a place like NYC, the challenges and competition must also be fierce. How do you navigate these waters?

I agree New York can be a difficult place to work as a photographer at times. It's insanely competitive, but at the same time the resources here are amazing as are the opportunities. It's all relative, if I was in a smaller market with fewer photographers

there would be fewer opportunities. All things considered, I think for now it's just better to be in New York where I have so much potential and opportunities. I don't often think too much about the competition, if you worry about that, it's going to drive you crazy.

Do you think having worked on the other side of the fence gives you a better understanding of what art directors are looking for? Often, especially in commercial work, there can be a push-pull between the creative vision of the photographer/artist and the commercial constraints. Do you still have to face that or do you tend to try and stand in their shoes?

Every art director is a little bit different

in what they are looking for, but yes, I do understand a bit of the dynamics and sometimes politics of the game better because I have seen it myself. Some clients are very easy to work with and are very open to ideas and there are a lot of others who really want to put their mark on the project. At the end of the day I find if you give them a bit of what they are looking for, yet try your own ideas, you cover all your bases which is what I try to do.

Who are some of the past and present photographers, movie directors or other visual artists that inspire you?

One of my favourite photographers of all time is Richard Avedon. His work is absolutely timeless and classic. No one shot better than him commercially. ...

“I LIKE DOING BOTH ADVERTISING WORK AND FASHION EDITORIAL”

EDWIN TSE

I consider him one of the best, if not the best fashion photographer. I am also a big fan of Robert Frank. His book *The Americans* was such a huge influence on me venturing off into portrait photography. Robert Frank's ability to capture his subjects so in the moment, is second to none. Some film directors who I really like are the Coen brothers. I'm a huge fan of their cinematography. *Fargo* and *No Country For Old Men* are two of my favourite films by them visually. The stark and bleak landscapes that they captured in those films are breath-taking.

In your commissioned work, which do you feel closer to, fashion or advertising? What are some of the challenges in both and what are the things that you particularly appreciate?

I like doing both advertising work and fashion editorial. Often though I do get to be a little more creative with fashion editorials. Some of the challenges are one and the same with both, often you are executing somebody's vision and direction. It's learning to work together to bring out the best possible product in the end. Often a lot of creative people bring a number of ideas to the table and can transform a good idea into a great one.

Do you ever feel like you are getting pigeon-holed in a specific category? And from a different perspective is a “specialization” necessary to being more bankable?

Everyone has a particular style and it's important to keep evolving your work to the point where you don't get pigeon-holed. At the same time, it is important to have a particular look or style. Creative directors or photo editors are hiring you based on a look they want. If you are all over the place, people don't know what they are going to get and you'll never get hired that way. Evolution through a slow gradual process is the best way to go. I've noticed these things over time, where out of the blue someone will ask me to shoot something I never thought I'd be asked to do.

How is it working with an agency? What are the pros and cons, beyond the obvious?

I have in the past been with an agency that shall remain nameless! It wasn't the best experience for me and I've entertained the idea of going back to one, but am not necessarily jumping at it right away. If you can find one that really believes in you and wants to help you push and evolve your work that is the best. I think in my situation it was one where they viewed me only as a money making tool for them. I would be put on jobs at the last second for things I never wanted to do. I would cringe when I saw their number pop up on my cell phone, I knew at that point it was time to go.

What are some of your current personal projects?

I've got a few personal projects on the go

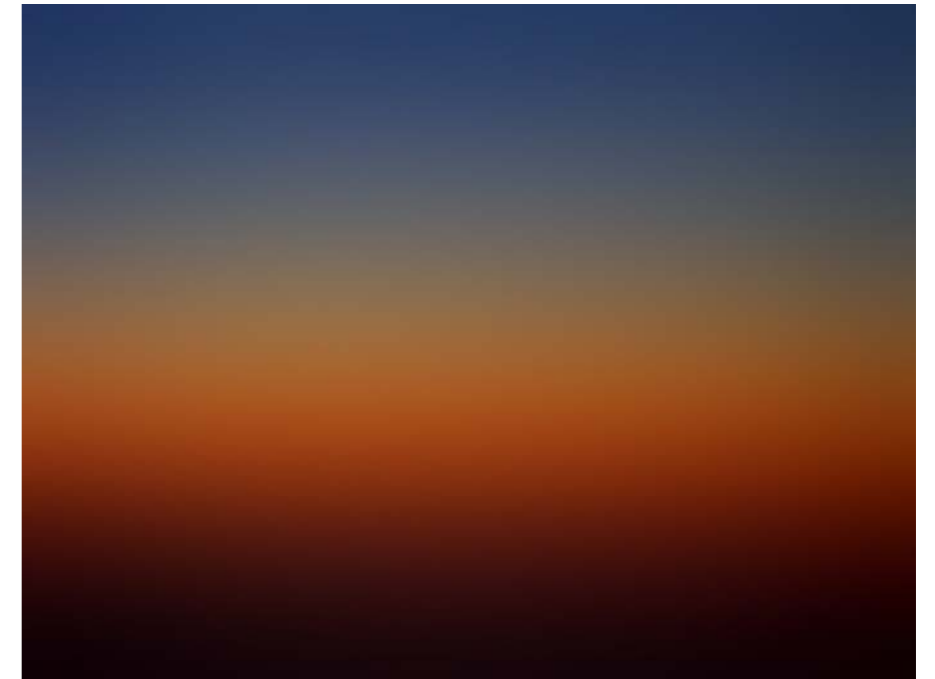


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right now which are a bit more in the fine art photography field. It includes gas stations in the middle of nowhere shot at night. I've been told there is a strong Edward Hopper feel to them. I just love the sparseness of night being illuminated by these gas stations, it brings a rather bleak landscape to life. I've also got another project photographing commercial airplanes landing and taking off and the relationship of people who follow them. It's a whole subculture that I've gotten to know since I started this project. It's usually men ...

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who have radios and know what planes are flying that day and at what particular time and what type of plane it is. I think they really get off on getting a snapshot of a big 747 that might be flying in. It's a very interesting group of people.

You have mentioned being drawn to personal photography projects that have a humanitarian component.

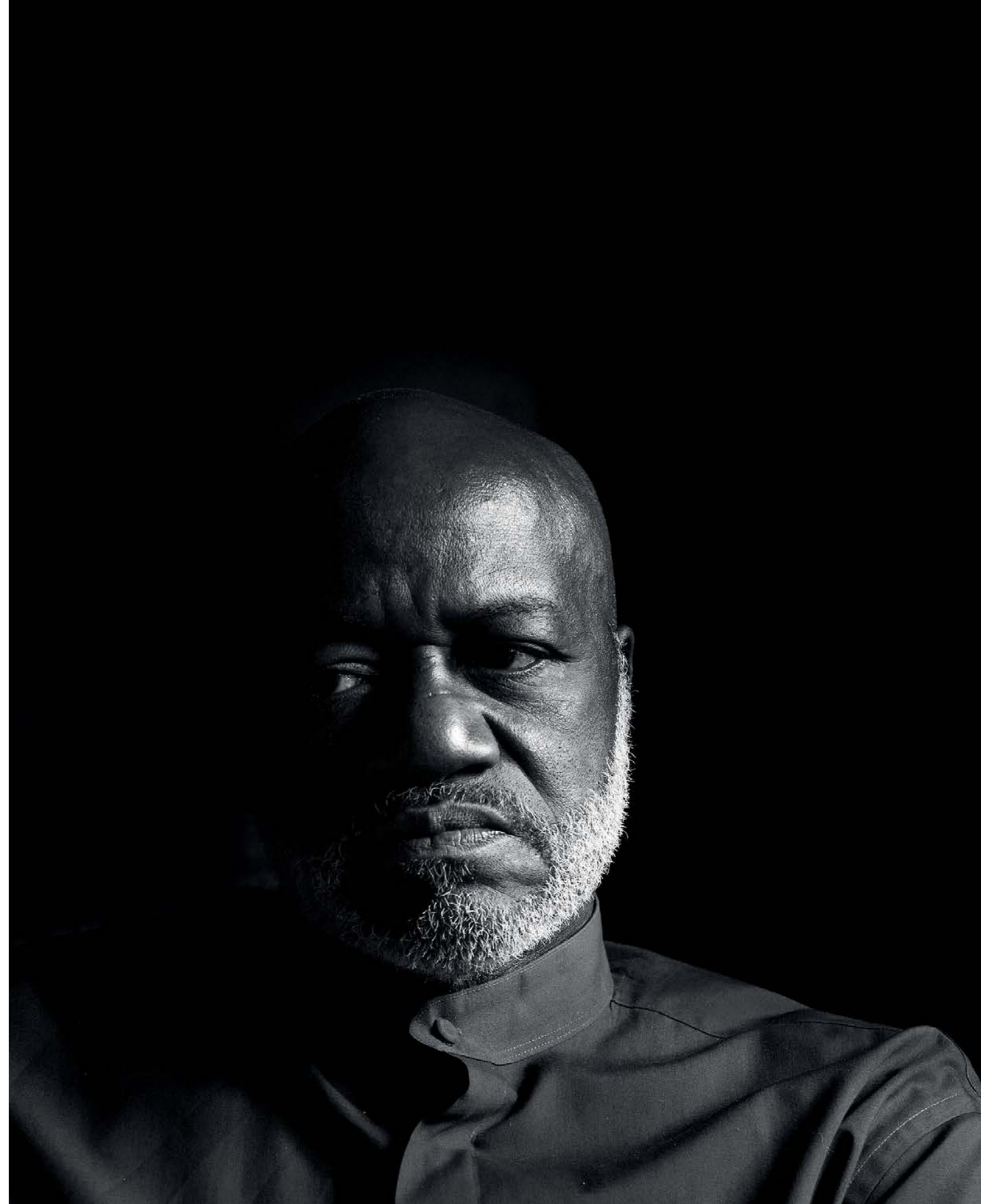
Can you talk about that?

I've started another larger project with a non-profit organization based in Philadelphia called "Witness to Innocence." WTI work with exonerated individuals that have been on death row in America for crimes that they have not committed. A lot of the people who I have photographed have spent anywhere from 4 years up to 20 years on death row. It's an insane thing to think about, an absolute horror story.

You go one day feeling everything is fine, and the next the government is saying they are going to kill you for something you didn't do. What I've been brought in to do, is to show the more intimate side of life after they have been exonerated and the challenges they face today. It's not like you get off of death row and are released to resume your life as it once was. You don't come out the same person as when you went in. Often these people develop a lot of mental problems, drug and alcohol abuse, PTSD. There is a big chunk of time where your life has been put on hold and when you get out it's really hard to play catch up with a world that is 10, 20 years ahead of you. Some of the people released have a hard time coping with a new world that is foreign to them. It's really a sad set of circumstances that these people have gone through and we are trying to document their lives as they are today. The experience has been so humbling. It has made me a better photographer and person just for being around these great people. It's maybe the best thing I've ever done photographically.

How did the collaboration with the non-profit come about?

Humanitarian work, photojournalism has always been something I've had an interest in. My first roommate in New York specialized in that and the more I saw what he was doing, the more it really rubbed off on me. I guess working mostly in fashion, it's an all too consuming industry about buying clothes, selling clothes, making money for other people. I get that and it's fine, but in the end I needed to do something else on the side. My photographic career cannot be about that and only that. I have been following the West Memphis 3 case since the early 2000s, it's a case of exoneration and death row and really hit home for me. When they were exonerated in the summer of 2011, it really made me want to do something and affect change. ...





RENY



EVA DOLL

“I BELIEVE THAT EVERYONE HAS A STORY TO TELL”

EDWIN TSE

I knew my photographic sensibility could lend itself well to this topic. I knew I needed a fixer in this situation. I first reached out to a few authors who had written on this sort of subject in the past and asked them for help. They then put me in touch with a few ideas and avenues to go down and eventually it led me to Witness to Innocence in Philadelphia.

Portrait photography is close to your heart, and seems to be the main focus of your work, although you work on

other projects as well. What is it about portraits that draws you in?

I think at heart I am very interested in people and their stories and I like to try and exhibit that visually. It's a very intimate relationship where one trusts you so much to exhibit them in a positive way. I really like portraits and believe that everyone has a story to tell and I like to try and bring that out of everyone I photograph.

Some of your most seductive and appealing work is your nude

photography, there is a real sense of longing that emanates. Some feel like scenes cut out of a movie. Are you trying to tell a story?

I think in the nudes there is some selling of fantasy, with these really beautiful girls, often people wonder what they are like in more intimate moments. It's trying to show that sort of sexy girl-next-door idea. I try to use natural light to generate shadows and very soft intimate lighting. That helps create a very compelling image.

Further to that, do you start with an idea in mind or does most of the work flow spontaneously out of your encounter with a particular person at that moment?

I usually have a mental map of where I want to go and the direction I want to take with the photos, but there are always inevitable factors that you can't control for better or worse. Sometimes these surprises work in your favour and you take a photo you didn't even think you could. Then sometimes you have factors such as weather that can really rain on your parade.

Other times there will be a spontaneous moment where we will try something new and it will work out, or somebody will suggest something that I wasn't thinking about.

How important is print media to your work? What magazines do you really like? Which ones do you read and which ones do you flip through to get a visual fix?

Print is very important to me. I think paper and texture make a big difference. ...



Work-wise I still target a lot of printed editorial. I think it's important since many online magazines are just everywhere. Most magazines I like are ones that I like reading a lot, *The Atlantic*, *New York Magazine*, and *Mother Jones*.

It is definitely a tactile experience and something that is palpable to the touch. What do digital magazines bring to the table?

I normally am not a fan of digital magazines. I don't think they really offer a great experience for the viewer and the product on screen. So much of it is determined by what device you are using. There sometimes is a real loss of importance and quality when you are viewing it on a mobile device or a smaller screen. I'm also not such a fan because it seems like just about anyone can start one. It really over saturates the market and downgrades the quality of work out there.

What is in your opinion the role of digital media in photography? How do you see it evolve?

I can definitely see more emphasis on Instagram photos. Instagram has just picked up so much steam these days. I don't really see it slowing down. There are certainly pros and cons. I'm happy that more and more people are expressing themselves visually, but at the same time there is just so much visual noise out there now, and photos have a feeling of becoming more disposable. So many pictures are posted and if it's older than a day it's already old news.

Do you feel like it undermines the work of professional photographers who dedicate much more time and money to their craft? There is a movement of "democratization"

that one sees in all sorts of media touching on journalism, photography and fashion. What are we losing and what are we gaining in the process?

I think the filters often take a somewhat mediocre picture and can transcend it to becoming a better picture, but that is very much our reality now anyways with photoshop and computer manipulation. No photo that you see out there hasn't gone through some process of manipulation. I think Instagram hopefully gets people excited about the process of photography and maybe gives people an appreciation for what real photographers go through. I find most people do approach it with a sense of "*this is my life in pictures*," whereas I approach it with a more artistic approach

and hopefully more and more people will approach photography this way too. In some ways, I think Instagram is hurting the photography business. Now publications are going to Instagram as an actual photo source for getting images for professional use. This is obviously a cheap route to go as opposed to hiring a professional to get the job done.

What is going to be the next big revolution in your opinion?

I can't really predict what the next big thing will be. We've seen things that we thought might be the next big thing turn out to be flops. I don't think any of us thought the iPhone would really be as revolutionary as it has been. |

“I THINK IN THE NUDES THERE IS SOME SELLING OF FANTASY”

EDWIN TSE