

# Meredith Jenks Photographer

Meredith Jenks is a New York-based commercial photographer whose photos range from quiet fashion portraits to energy-filled action shots. Her clients include Converse, Nike, The New Yorker, and Bloomberg Business Week, among others. When she is not shooting for work, she is probably taking iPhone photos of her dog, Mouse.

Interview by Tina Essmaker // January 12, 2016  
Photo by Jen Dessinger



**Tell me about your path to becoming a photographer.** My dad is an oil landscape painter, so I was exposed to art while growing up. My dad took us to museums often and I did my first oil painting when I was seven years old.

Growing up, I wanted to be a fashion designer. My grandparents both thought that was cute, so when I was 10, they got me a subscription to Vogue. So, from a young age, I was exposed to fashion and fashion photographers. I noticed Helmut Newton’s photos early on. Those were the ones that really stuck out to me in the magazine. That’s when I realized that there were people who made that imagery.

**Where did you grow up?** We moved around. We lived in England for a year before we moved to Sedona, Arizona, for seven years, and then ended up in Northern California. I went to middle school in Mendocino and then went to Cate School, a boarding school near Santa Barbara, which was an interesting little twist.

While at boarding school, I took a photo class on a whim. For most people, it was a slacker class, but I was into it. When the class started, I thought, “Well, maybe I won’t actually become a fashion designer. Maybe I’ll become involved by shooting it.” I still really loved fashion, thought it was magical to be able to create scenarios on the pages.

In my sophomore year of high school, my photo teacher sent a photo I took to an international contest. I don’t know how big the contest actually was, but I won. I got a brick of 35mm black and white film and a gift certificate to B&H. This was the first time that I had ever won anything, and it felt good. I became known around school as the photographer girl. It became part of my persona.

I decided that I wanted to be a photographer when I was 16. It was an easy decision because my dad was an artist. I knew there were artists out there who created for a living, so I didn’t feel pressure to do something else.

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**Did you go to college after high school?** I applied to three colleges: UCLA, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, and Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. I chose Art Center because I had already gone to boarding school and wasn’t interested in college dorm life. Art Center is like a trade school, where you don’t live on campus. It’s really intense. You only learn about your major. Since I was so young, it helped me push myself and figure out what I wanted to do. That’s the gist of why I’m doing photography. I don’t think all people need to go to art school to become a photographer, but I’m glad I did.

At Art Center, I shot 35mm on-camera flash back in the day before digital was around. A teacher told me I wouldn’t get work because it was unprofessional and that magazines and ad agencies don’t like the look because it appears amateurish. He was trying to be helpful, but that led me into six years of portrait lighting setups, which I was never successful at. It was frustrating. I did everything how I was supposed



to and it didn’t work.

All along, I was still taking snapshots of friends. Two friends in particular—one who now has a design firm in LA called National Forest, and another who I was at college with—told me, “These photos are so much cooler than what you’re doing for your clients. I don’t understand why you don’t do that for work.” Meanwhile, Terry Richardson had gained attention for working with a point-and-shoot. People were out there doing it. That’s when I questioned what my college teacher had said and the work I had been making.

When I moved to New York almost five years ago, I decided to do what felt right. I shot a lot with flash on camera. That’s when I started getting more work—and it was work that I was excited about doing. The lesson I learned is that if I want to do something, I should do it and not fall into the trap of wondering what other people think.

**That’s interesting. So, you started your own business as a freelance photographer right after graduation from Art Center. Were you also working other jobs on the side?** And when were you able to finally sustain yourself as a full-time photographer, which is what you do now? I definitely had other jobs when I started. I did extra work for movies and TV. I assisted a wedding photographer and acted as her personal assistant and babysitter. (laughing) I also assisted my photographer friends on jobs.

The good thing about Art Center, though, is they prepare you to become a commercial photographer. They teach you that you have

Left: An outtake featuring props from a book cover photoshoot

to have a portfolio and a website, you have to do promos, you have to go to New York for meetings. They tell you exactly how to become a professional and they bring professional photographers in to speak to students. We had real-life experiences and knowledge shared with us. So I started with a good base, and I knew it would take at least five years to get started. I have other friends who thought they’d go out and be successful right away, but I didn’t ever think that. I knew it was going to be a slow process.

Eventually, I assisted the photographer, Jeff Lipsky, who did a shoot for Premiere—which no longer exists—and on that shoot I met Catri-ona Ni Aolain, the photo editor for the magazine. The next year when I went to New York, I emailed her to say I was in town. She was really nice and told me to come in. She started to give me these small \$500 all-inclusive jobs, which I was overjoyed to take, and then she went to ESPN Magazine and hired me there. Someone from ESPN went to People, so I got work there. After about five years, I got more and more work and continued to do meetings in New York, which I started straight out of college, even though my portfolio wasn’t ready. People notice improvement, though. They see that you keep coming back. The first time, nobody met with me. The next time I had two meetings. Early on, it’s easy to get rejected and become discouraged. Of course your work isn’t where you want it to be because it takes time. I like that you were persistent. Yeah, that’s my personality. It’s an ego thing, too, in that I didn’t have a big ego about it. I was fine being someone’s personal assistant or doing extra work on the side. Some people aren’t okay with that. They want to shoot covers or do nothing. That’s not realistic. I knew it was a process and my dad was a good example of that. He’s been doing art his whole life, and while he hasn’t been crazy-successful, he loves doing it. For me to give up because I wasn’t getting the jobs I wanted would have been stupid. You have to keep trying.

**How many years did you stay in LA before moving to New York?** I started at Art Center in 1999 and graduated in 2002. I started working a good amount by 2007 and thought, “I’m doing it!” Then 2008 hit, and the economy took a dive. I didn’t get a job for five months. It was a dark time for me; I was taking a lot of crying selfies. I had to get a restaurant job and then a retail job. I thought it was over. I even applied for art buyer positions and other photography-related staff jobs. I somehow got through that and eventually decided I had to move to New York in 2011.

I was about to turn 30 and it seemed like now or never. I was just out of a relationship and there was nothing to keep me in LA. My friend, Anna Wolf, already lived in New York and told me I could stay with her as long as I wanted. I moved out and lived with Anna for two months. The first year and a half was brutal. I was poor, living in a slummy building, and worked whatever jobs I could. I also had \$30,000 in credit card debt. I was in a rut.

**This is the good stuff. I think many of our readers can relate to what you’re saying. They’ve either been in this place, are in this place now, or might be in the future.** When you’re a freelancer, work ebbs and flows. Yeah, to be a freelance artist, you have to really want it and keep going for it. It doesn’t come easy.

And you’re not riding the wave all of the time. It can be a roller coaster. Right now I’m definitely financially stable and I’ve paid off most of my credit cards and I just bought an apartment. I did well enough over the past two years that I accomplished all of those things. In the back of my mind, I still think, “Any minute the phone could stop ringing.” It’s scary. Because of past struggles, I work harder and don’t rest on my laurels.

Moving to New York has been good for me. I’m a social person and I’ve met so many people here. It’s been helpful to talk to people in person—I’m no longer an anonymous person who lives across the country. I also got a great agent when I moved here. On top of that, I have been shooting for ten years now, so I am more confident and don’t freak out about jobs.

**What kind of work are you doing right now?** I do everything. I’ve been shooting food for The New Yorker. I’ve shot accessories and done reportage. Celebrities are fun, but there’s also ego involved, so you can’t always do what you want. I love shooting fashion because it’s a little more creative. You have more control over the situation, which I like. I do think that shooting a beautiful portrait of someone I think is cool for W or Vanity Fair would be amazing.

**Do you have any interesting celebrity stories?** The first person who ever bummed me out was Scott Baio. I was so excited because I grew up watching Charles in Charge. I showed up to the shoot thinking it was going to be amazing and he was a jerk. In his defense, he wasn’t filled in on the artistic direction and I don’t think he was into the idea for the shoot, but I was still super disappointed.





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Meredith recently started doing go-sees,  
shooting each model for 5 minutes;  
here, Katiusha Feofanova from Re:Quest  
Model Management



**“Anyone who starts a trend is interesting to me. The people who stand out are the ones who are doing something different.”**

Generally, I find that celebrities want to be treated like normal people, so that’s how I approach them. I’ll tell stories or ask them questions like I would with anyone else. I’ve gotten great photos because of that. I still have moments where I find myself wishing I had asked for more because I realized later that they would’ve done it. With celebrities, the idea of the celebrity can be more intimidating than the actual person.

**What advice can you offer to a photographer who is starting out?** Shoot as much as you can. Even when I wasn’t working, I shot with a little Canon PowerShot G10 camera everywhere I went. That’s important because people notice if you’re adding new work to your website.

E-mail people. I’ve cold-called and emailed so many people since I’ve started. It’s important to get your name and work out there, even if you feel insecure about your work and don’t think it’s ready to show. Just show your work and take jobs. It’s practice.

Promos matter. Last year I started doing bigger, more expensive promos, partially because I needed a write-off and partially because I wanted to send something that felt like a zine. I had emailed the Converse art buyer for a few years. She was always nice and said my work was cool, but I never got any work. Last year, I sent her a big promo poster and she hired me because of it. Since then, I’ve shot for them three times. The New Yorker magazine hired me because of a promo I sent last year. Even if you get one job, it’s worth it because you’ve opened up the door to a relationship with someone who didn’t know about you before. The industry is small and people move around a lot. If you do a good job, they remember you and will bring you with them.

To sum it up, there are three things in photography: 1) Who you know: building those relationships, 2) Business: understanding the money side, and 3) Talent. Unfortunately, all three are pretty equal; it’s not just about taking a good picture.

You mentioned that your dad is an artist. What does he and your family think of what you do? My dad used his inheritance from his parents to pay for my college. I had some student loans and scholarships, but most people who go to art school come out with \$100,000 in student loan debt, and I left with about \$30,000 in debt. That was way more manageable. My parents value education and they set me up. I’m forever indebted and will definitely take care of them. It’s not like they were super wealthy, either—my mom is a teacher and my dad is an artist.

I would have pursued photography either way, but it would have been a different course if my parents hadn’t been supportive. It’s hard to imagine not having that. I recognize that it’s a big help in life to have people who support you, push you along, and help you. I value that in my parents.

Trinidad James at the Billboard  
Hot 100 Music Festival







Left: Betty Who at the Billboard  
Hot 100 Music Festival

This page: Natalie Jobs photographed  
for her blog, Tales of Endearment

