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Opposite and above: For the Spring 2010 catalogue, Ewing worked with Marlene Marino to shoot photographs in Japan that invoke a feeling of travel and escape. Marino worked on other projects in Japan and had production experience there. “She hired me for what I do, which is really important to creativity,” Marino says. Below: Catalogue work by Estelle Hanania (left) and Wai Lin Tse (right).

and a constant creativity.”

Working with a “trend team” and creative director a year and a half in advance, Ewing takes the creative concept for a given catalogue season and selects photographers whose work dovetails with the concept. Two in-house producers approach the photographers and, if they’re interested, put them on hold for the catalogue production dates. Ewing then puts together four sets of mood boards based on the photographers’ images, which she shows to creative executives. “The business climate inevitably winds up dictating how many risks we take, which impacts a lot who we actually wind up shooting with,” says Ewing.

Ewing began working for the company as a salesperson at one of their New York City stores during a break from pursuing a fashion design degree at Parsons The New School of Design. She was asked to do visual merchandising for the store, then wound up doing corporate display merchandising. When the company brought their catalogue production in-house, they asked Ewing to translate her merchandising experience into print. She first asked to assist for a year to get her bearings, and was handed the department almost two years ago.

Her decision to shoot everything on film was a product of her assisting experience. On shoots where the photographers used digital cameras, she observed how everyone, even the models, would gather around the monitors after every shot, which she says had a “stilting” effect on the shoot. Because the photographers she uses are often less

experienced commercially, and because she believes on-set atmosphere is important to the finished photographs, she has asked everyone to shoot film, which she says is actually less expensive when you factor in the cost of retouching and the various equipment and personnel required for a digital shoot.

Using a photographer’s actual images for the mood boards is another strategy Ewing developed while assisting. “I had been on so many shoots where they were asking somebody to directly imitate somebody else’s style, and I feel like if I’m going for something that specific I might as well just hire that person to shoot for me,” she says.

When she first took over, Ewing tried to hide the commercial concerns on the projects, she says, but some of the shoots could not be used because certain elements—like the hem of a particular dress—were not present in the images. “I realized I was doing the photographers a disservice,” she says, because their photographs or favorite selects were not usable. “Now I realize that it’s better to put out a really well done catalogue than a poorly done art book.”

While the creative on the major catalogues requires an approval process not unlike those ad agencies go through with their clients, Ewing says there are a number of smaller printed pieces and other jobs that are left to the discretion of her department. With those, she can take more creative risks and tap new photographers. “[Urban

ART AND COMMERCE

Urban Outfitters hires photographers whose styles help the retailer connect with their young customers.
By **Conor Risch**

SINCE JOANNA EWING TOOK OVER AS THE ART DIRECTOR FOR URBAN OUTFITTERS’ IN-HOUSE PRINT AND photography department in August 2008, she has worked with more than 40 photographers on various catalogues and printed pieces; she has asked that all of the photographers who work for her shoot film; and she has taken pride in the fact that they do very little retouching.

The Urban Outfitters brand is all about youthful independence—serving up fashion trends, home furnishings and a mix of other items to artistically inclined, city dwelling 18–30 year olds across the U.S., Canada and Europe. Their holiday catalogues mail to 2 million people, and their other yearly catalogues regularly reach half a million. The company produces ten catalogues per year, three press books, various fliers, and other printed material and in-store displays. Assignments for photographers range from 10-day location shoots in places like Japan, Miami, Stockholm and Paris, to small still-life projects.

The look of the catalogues (and the brand in general) is perpetually evolving, and the photographers Ewing hires are essential to the retailer’s connection with its customers. “They’re looking for the next way to show something,” says Ewing of the Urban Outfitters creative executives. “It’s a constant innovation and constant change that they’re really interested in,

This month on PDNOnline, learn more about how Urban Outfitters’ Joanna Ewing chooses the photographers she hires.



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URBAN OUTFITTERS

Creative staff: **8**
 Photographer contact:
Joanna Ewing
5000 South Broad Street
Philadelphia, PA 19112

Outfitters] recognize that as my opportunity to bring in new people," Ewing says. "Usually someone shoots a tiny project for us and then will make it into the pool of people to be considered for a catalogue, because then Urban knows their work. I can include the images that they did for us in the presentation."

Ewing says that she is "purposefully insulated from a lot of the business commentary surrounding the imagery we produce," which allows her to operate with more freedom than an art director might usually get from a client, and to give her photographers more room to create imagery in their own style. "I don't want somebody who is going to do whatever I tell them," she says. "I want them to have a strong vision and I work really hard to keep it to their vision."

To Ewing, the partnership between Marc Jacobs and Juergen Teller is ideal. "They're producing consistently great imagery which is changing through the years and yet you can see that it's a very fruitful partnership for the business and the artist," she says. "I like the idea of having longstanding relationships with people where we can give them commercial jobs that help them fund their [personal] work."

Photographers who have worked with Ewing on the Urban Outfitters catalogues include Tim Barber, Marlene Marino, Jason Nocito, Estelle Hanania, David Sherry, RJ Shaughnessy, Wai Lin Tse and Marcelo Gomes. The photographers are often in the "young" or "emerging" camps, though Ewing says she hires established commercial shooters as well. "If it suits the brand, it suits the brand," she says.

Urban Outfitters avoids anything "too commercial, too digital, too retouched, or too clean," Ewing relates.

To find new photographers, Ewing reads a lot of blogs, often small ones written by kids whose taste she admires. If she sees an image she likes on a blog she tries to find out who made it. She reviews the work of photographers included in group shows. She looks at the Web sites of photographers who have worked with art directors she admires. "I've hired people off of Flickr, too, much to the chagrin of all of the very well educated photographers I've worked with," she says.

Ewing does not look at promos. She is emphatic when she says, "Tell kids not to waste any money on sending stupid promos through the mail." Instead: Get your work onto blogs or into group shows; shoot for small publications; submit your work to curated sites like nofound and The Company of People; use social tools like Flickr to network and show that you are shooting constantly; use Google tracking to see if someone at an ad agency or other company is looking at your Web site, and if they are, figure out how to get in touch; get together with friends to create a 'zine or conceptual printed piece. "I think that the people who are doing that now are the people who will go on to have larger commercial careers," she says. **pdn**

Top, left to right: Work by Marlene Marino, shot in Shimoda, Japan; by Estelle Hanania, shot in Paris; and by Tim Barber, shot in Miami during Art Basel. "I want them to have a strong vision and I work really hard to keep [the images] to their vision," Ewing says of the photographers she works with.

Above: A photograph by Tim Barber for the Spring 2009 Lookbook.