Richard Branson photographed on Necker Island, British Virgin Islands, for *Time* magazine story about Virgin Galactic space-flight company

Famous faces

Celebrity portrait photographer **Brian Smith** talks to **Tim Venn** about his journey to the stars and reveals the tricks behind getting the rich and famous to cooperate on a shoot

HARD work pays off. Brian Smith knows it well. Starting out as a sports photographer for a small-town high school, he got his first break when he summoned the courage to show his work to a local newspaper sports editor, and soon found himself shooting several assignments a day for local papers.

'Working for newspapers provided me with the best opportunity to develop as a photographer starting out, as it required me to shoot constantly on many different assignments,' he says.

Several more papers and a degree later, Brian found himself at *The Orange County Register* in California, where he landed his first big opportunity in the form of the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles. As a local photographer for a small newspaper, Brian had none of the privileged access to athletes and events that was enjoyed by the big players, such as the *Los Angeles Times*.

His solution? Get creative. He lined himself up for unexpected angles, putting himself in unusual places to get unique shots – halfway down the marathon

track to catch the runners looking at their times, or up top at the back of the stands to catch the swimmers from above. It was a gamble that paid off spectacularly, as Brian won the Pulitzer Prize for his Olympic images. This was also where, through one-on-one sessions with athletes in later assignments, Brian discovered that he was drawn to portraiture.

'The Pulitzer Prize got me an introduction to photo editors,' Brian says, 'but I still had to prove myself to them through my portrait work, doing smaller assignments initially and then working my way up to bigger ones.'
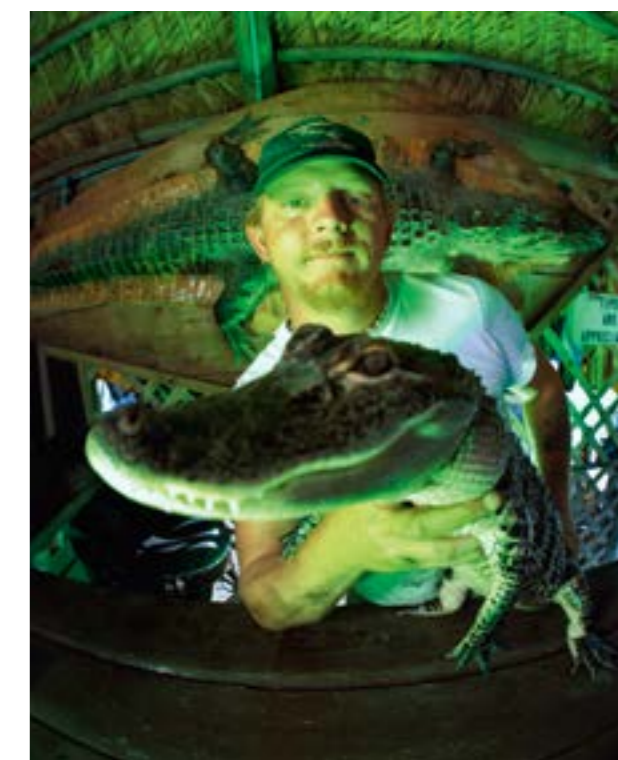
RUBBING SHOULDERS

Brian's list of subjects reads like a *Who's Who* of some of the most famous and influential people on the planet. Bill Gates, Samuel L Jackson, Spike Lee, Anne Hathaway – dozens of people from dozens of spheres, all of whom require a different approach.

'To be a successful portrait photographer, you have to be good with people – the five-minute psychoanalyst,' Brian explains. 'You need to figure out what makes your subject tick in a matter of minutes. I took completely different

Below left: American actor and writer William H Macy photographed for the Be A STAR (Show Tolerance And Respect) anti-bullying campaign

Below: Douglas Marbler holds a baby gator at the Alligator Farm on November 28, 2000

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Left: American actress AnnaLynne McCord photographed at the Sundance Film Festival for the Be A STAR (Show Tolerance And Respect) anti-bullying campaign

Below: A typically vibrant image from Brian's Nude Golf project, which he photographed for *Sports Illustrated*

'A photo shoot is sometimes known as a performance without a script, and I have to direct and reassure the actors'

Above: American actor Aaron Paul photographed in Los Angeles for Brian Smith's book *Art & Soul,* to promote arts funding in partnership with The Creative Coalition and Sony

Top right: French house producer and DJ David Guetta photographed at Soho Beach House, Miami Beach, Florida

Right: Triathlete Fashion photographed in Key Biscayne, Florida

approaches to Donald Trump and Bill Gates. Donald likes things big, loud and showy with a lot of feedback, while Bill is more introverted and prefers simple direction without embellishment.'

As he is a celebrity photographer, actors are of course a common sight in Brian's studio. While you might expect people who perform for a living to be comfortable in front of a photographer's camera, Brian reveals that the reality is anything but.

'In a portrait shoot, actors are showing their own personalities, which many are not comfortable with,' Brian says. 'A photo shoot is sometimes known as a performance without a script, and I have to direct and reassure the actors just like I would someone who is not used to being in front of a camera. Treat them like a normal person and don't gush over them – find out what makes them tick, don't just fall back on their filmography.'

If Brian had to pick a favourite shoot, it would be his session with Richard Branson. *Time* magazine had suggested putting the industry mogul in a space suit, in relation to the news story about Virgin Galactic space flights (see page 36), and to Brian's delight Branson was immediately on board. 'Branson gets a good concept when he hears one,' Brian says.

With that, both Brian and the spacesuit

headed off to Sir Richard's private island in the British Virgin Islands. Brian's plan was to capture Sir Richard in the 'heroic' first light of dawn, but planning a shoot where a billionaire gets out of bed at five in the morning and actually proposing the idea to said billionaire are two different prospects entirely. Sir Richard's response? 'Let's do it'.

Before he knew it, Brian found himself on a boat with Sir Richard in the small hours the day before Christmas, heading for a tiny spit of sand to capture a picture that would subsequently be published in *Time* and become the cover photo for Brian's book *Secrets of Great Portrait Photography.*

TOOLS OF THE TRADE
Brian's assignments these days are a spread of editorial and advertising. Depending on the budget and the project, he can find himself working with a crew from two to 30. His most valued crew member, however, is his wife, who serves as his stylist.

'She has a sharp eye,' Brian says. 'When I'm focusing on interaction with the subject, she's checking the way clothes are falling and what can be fixed then and there, as opposed to in post-production. I can only focus on so many details, so on shoots with a limited budget I would rather be my own assistant and have her there.'

Kit-wise, Brian has bound himself to Sony and uses the company's Zeiss lenses, including the 24-70mm f/2.8, 85m f/1.4 and 135mm f/1.8. They proved to be the substitute for medium format that Brian had been searching for, with 'beautiful sharpness and a blessed lack of chromatic aberration'. Brian so extolled the virtues of Sony that he found himself approached by the tech giant for consultation on the then-in-progress Alpha 900.

In addition to his Sony/Zeiss lenses, Brian has also been known to use an adapter to hook up some of his old Leica M-mount glass. 'Being able to use my uncoated or single-coated glass from extinct systems, like the Minolta MD glass or Leica R lenses, offers me invaluable additional looks and options,' he says.

In post-processing his images, he favours a mixture of Lightroom and Photoshop. 'Lightroom's feature of applying settings across a group of images gave back the life that Photoshop layers sucked out of me,' he says. However, while Brian has fully embraced digital post-production and finds the ability to capture files in raw and process

them in a multitude of ways to be a godsend, when his images require special effects he always prefers to do these in-camera.

'Movie-studio executives assume that added elements in my Hollywood assignments, such as a portrait of Hollywood director Robert Rodriguez in LA next to a limo covered in flames, are green screen and added in post-processing, when they invariably are not,' Brian says.

IN THE RIGHT PLACE
You might not think the choice of location all that important for a portrait photographer, but for Brian, his life on the sunny shores of Miami in Florida has frequently been instrumental in getting him work.

'Miami has been a great influence', he says, 'particularly in location assignments from magazines up north during cold winters, where their brief has been to have blue skies and palm trees in the images. Miami's bright, bold colors have definitely influenced the work that I have become known for,' he says.

It's probably for the best that he didn't learn his portrait-photography skills in the UK, then. **AP**

Secrets of Great Portrait Photography: Photographs of the Famous and Infamous is published by New Riders, price £31.99. Second-hand copies of *Art & Soul* are available at sites listed at artsoulbook.com. To see more of Brian Smith's work, visit **briansmith.com**