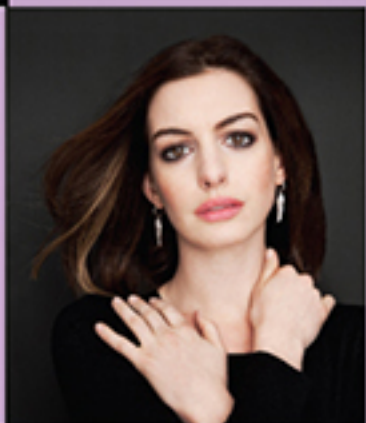


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In May of 2009, photographer Brian Smith and several members of The Creative Coalition traveled to Washington, D.C., to lobby Congress and the White House in support of arts funding. They carried with them a book—100 copies of a self-published portfolio of Smith's celebrity portraits, which he had begun only three months earlier. Smith's path to Capitol Hill can be traced to well before his career as a high-profile celebrity photographer, back to when he was a Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist.

"I spent the first 10 years of my career in newspapers," he says via telephone from his Miami studio, "and I did a wide range of shoots—everything from the Olympics to turmoil in Haiti. But I was always really drawn to portraiture. Typically, I worked for newspapers that used photographs really well and for the most part did a pretty good



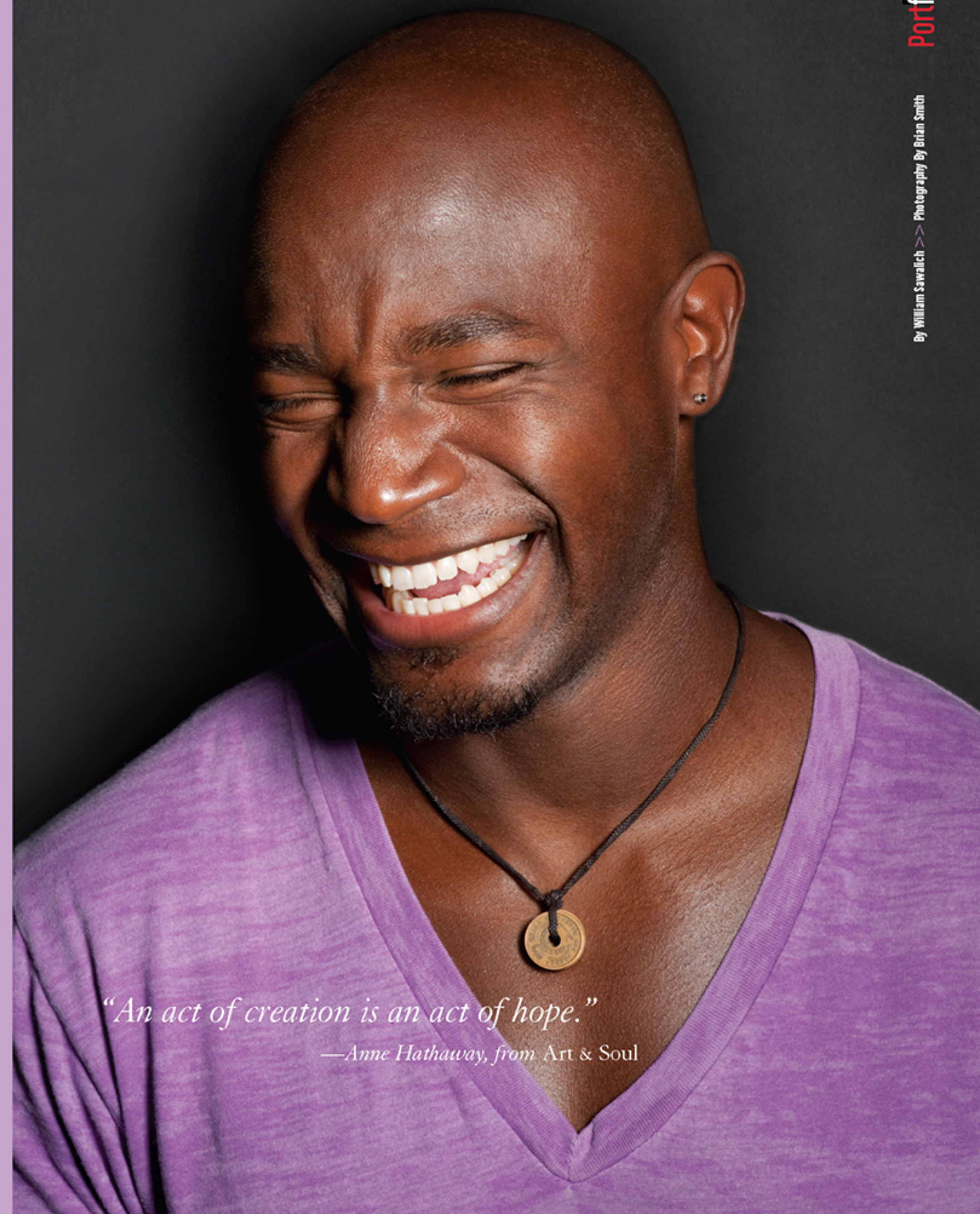
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job with color imagery. I always thought my ultimate destination was magazines. Really, for the last five or six years that I was a newspaper photographer, I was wearing both hats. I'd go off and cover a coup in Haiti and then I'd come back and, on a weekend or a week of vacation, go shoot for *Sports Illustrated*, *Rolling Stone* and *Esquire*. I kind of knew that was the direction I wanted to go eventually once I had built up enough of that work. And I think the way I got out of there was that I would treat every assignment I got, whether it was for the newspaper or for *Rolling Stone*, I would treat it the same way and give it the same amount of attention—treat everything as a potential portfolio piece.

"I was also very fortunate in that all the newspapers I worked for were very open to pushing the traditional boundaries of newspaper photojournalism," Smith says. "Fortunately, I had editors who encouraged that sort of thing and I was never really held back, and I didn't see any reason to hold myself back either. Whether you're doing photojournalism or portraiture, it's all about storytelling. As a newspaper photographer, I was

Brian Smith crafts a series of celebrity portraits for a cause that's close to home



"An act of creation is an act of hope."

—Anne Hathaway, from *Art & Soul*

regarded as being slick and commercial, and as I started showing the exact same images to magazine editors, I was regarded as raw and edgy. I just tried to make the most of every opportunity I was given, and I've been pretty lucky along the way to have been given a lot of great opportunities."

The opportunity to work on *Art & Soul* came when The Creative Coalition, a nonprofit organization dedicated to advocating for the arts and entertainment industry, sought Sony's assistance on a three-day shoot during Oscars® Week 2009. Sony enlisted Smith, one of six Sony Artisans of Imagery, who was eager to dive in. After only one day of shooting, it was clear to everyone involved that they had hit upon something special.

"It's a dream shoot to begin with," Smith says, "but just the way everybody responded to it—it was going so well that, before we finished at the Oscars®, we decided to try to do another shoot in New York. At that point, we just thought we've got to keep this thing going. I've shot a total of 19 days so far; we've photographed well over 200 people."

Because the project ballooned so dramatically beyond its initial scope, it turns out that some of Smith's early stylistic and technical choices were extremely fortuitous—born as much from necessity as from artistic vision.

"It all boils down to problem-solving," Smith says of his approach. "The very first shoot we did was at a charity house called Haven House. The space that was left for me to work in was basically the maid's room, which was 9x14 feet and had a giant king-sized bed occupying most of it. Fortunately, we were able to get rid of the king-sized bed, but we were left with a very, very small space. We had no idea how many people we were going to photograph—it ended up being 63 people over three days—and I felt like the background needed not to dominate the subject. That, to me, boils it down to a white, gray or black backdrop. The room was so small that [with] anything other than black, you end up with light bouncing

ART & SOUL



all over the room. In a way, my great vision for this was necessitated by the space we had to work."

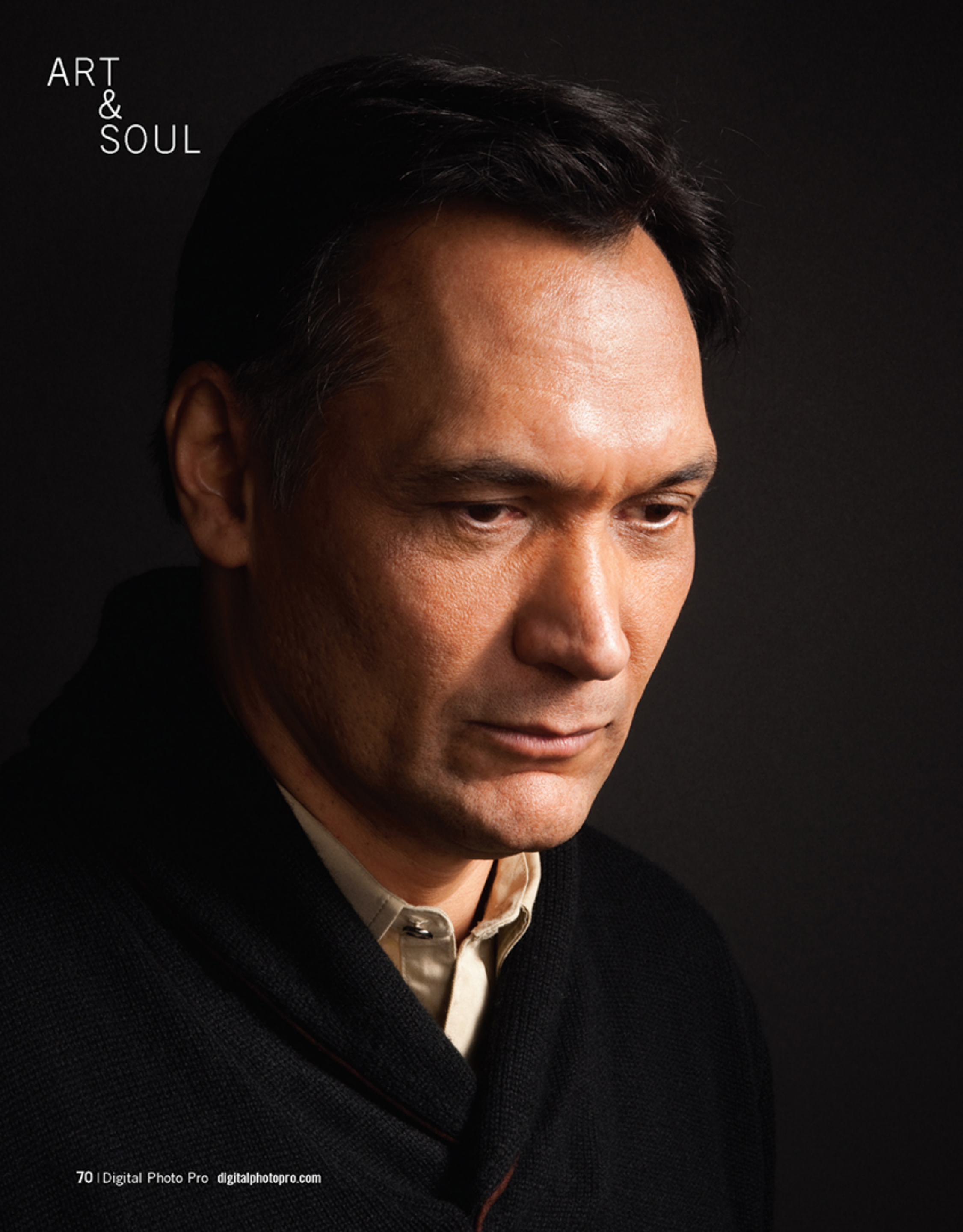
As a Sony Artisan of Imagery, Smith has worked with Sony's α900 camera since its introduction in late 2008. He tested it extensively prior to the project and knew he could count on the camera to produce detailed image

files, even under tricky conditions.

"I loved the way the camera held a lot of shadow detail even with dark-on-dark subjects," he says. "We knew going into this that photographing celebrities, you've got a better than even chance they're going to wear a lot of black. So maybe it was a bit of a gutsy move to shoot black on black, but I also

As part of an inspired project to draw attention to the need for funding of the arts, photographer Brian Smith has taken a portable studio to locations around the country to capture actors and other artists. Explains Smith, "We have Emmy winners, Tony winners, Oscar winners, Grammy winners, but we also have people on their way up. The arts—it's something that we all hopefully enjoy and benefit from, whether we're four years old in a school play or someone 80 looking back on a fantastic career, so I wanted from the start to have a wide demographic on this project." OPENING PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM: Jimmy Smits, Dule Hill, Richard Belzer, Anne Hathaway, Robert Davi, John Turturro. PREVIOUS PAGE: Taye Diggs. THIS PAGE: Debi Mazur.

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As one of the Sony Artisans of Imagery, Brian Smith is not only a user of Sony cameras and lenses, but an evangelist for their technologies. For the *Art & Soul* project, Smith tried to keep to a single light source whenever possible. It's a philosophy a lot of pros could stand to learn from. Instead of unpacking a grip truck full of gear, by working with that single light as much as possible, Smith creates clean images without strange and illogical shadows. The images are all shot in similar, but not identical conditions to maintain some continuity while letting the talented subjects and their expressions and body language carry the shot. OPPOSITE PAGE: Jimmy Smits. THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Portia Doubleday, Richard Belzer, Dule Hill, Robert Davi. NEXT PAGE: Anne Hathaway.



knew that the shadow detail wouldn't be cooked on these things, and I'd be able to hold that detail that I wanted.

"We covered every wall in black so that we had this little dark cubicle," Smith continues. "It didn't really matter how big the space was, and actually, when we've gone to shoot in studios after that, we've replicated the same thing so we're able to get that same look. Instead of being in a 9x14 room, we could be in a 2,500-square-foot, all-white, all-cycled studio, and we sort of

darken everything down so it becomes this very quiet, small, intimate space."

Smith's technical approach to *Art & Soul* may have stemmed from necessity, but the motivation was deliberate—to provide an unobtrusive platform for each subject's personality to come through loud and clear.

"We just tried to keep it very, very simple," Smith says. "I guess it's a lesson I learned a long time ago from Irving Penn and Richard Avedon: Sometimes when the photographer

doesn't scream out what they're doing, the subject takes center stage. I tried to put them on stage and then get out of the way and let them feel free to express themselves.

"We gave people a lot of space in terms of my direction," he continues. "A lot of times, actors are so used to an agenda from the magazine or the studio or their publicists or whatever, and I just felt I didn't need to have an agenda myself. So when they would come up and go, 'What do you want



ART & SOUL

me to do?’ my direction was basically the same thing: ‘You can do whatever you want—this is a book about the arts; it affects everyone differently. One of the keys about the arts is improvisation and being yourself, so this is whatever you feel comfortable doing.’ I think sometimes people took that like, ‘Well, gee, I’ve wanted to do that for 10 years.’ When my hands weren’t tied, I didn’t want to force myself into a corner. I wanted the subjects to feel like they had the freedom to do what they wanted.”

To maintain the effortless feel with each new session, Smith kept the lighting setup fairly streamlined and unpretentious, too.

“I tried to make the light optimal for each person,” he says, “but also not to the point where I had to constantly say, ‘No, you can’t look that way, turn back this way, stop, oh, wait.’ When people are very animated, you want that looseness. I tell people constantly not to get in the way of a great photograph, not to let a technique become the sole emphasis. Sometimes a photograph really needs something, but I’ve photographed enough celebrities over the years to know that when somebody’s really responsive in front of a camera, the last thing in the world you want to do is say, ‘Well, hold on a second while I move this light.’”

“The key light on most of the shots is a Profoto Beauty Dish and Grid,” Smith continues. “We kept that throughout. There’s a second light—in some cases, it’s the only light—a giant wall of light coming straight on. That’s what’s providing the fill. I always start with a single light source and then only add a second or third if I feel like I need it because I want to concentrate on that main light. I think a lot of times that’s one of the keys: not to get bogged down where it’s all about the equipment and all about cross shadows and backlights.”

By all accounts, Smith is accustomed to landing assignments in which he’s shooting in a colorful South

Florida style, so confining himself and his subjects to a tiny black box with a single light source was atypical. Perhaps that slight discomfort was partly why he was able to craft such sublime portraits.

“This was a big departure for me,” he says. “Typically, because I’m based here in Miami, so many times, they’ve assigned 10 shoots in New York, and they’re all in studios, and it’s gray and dingy, and it’s like people want to see big, bright, beautiful colors. That tends to be what I get assigned a lot. When you pull all of the background elements that I’m used to working with—in terms of environment and color and light—how do you tell these people’s stories with nothing other than a black background and pose and gesture and expression?”

Obviously, his efforts were spot on. Not only did Smith create photographs that his team and The Creative Coalition couldn’t be happier with, but the subjects had a great time working on the project, as well—a true testament to the photographer, no doubt.

“One of the greatest compliments I had from the people I was photographing,” Smith explains, “as they’d get ready to leave, they were like, ‘That was the easiest shoot we’ve ever done.’ That was great, and I think that was one thing I learned from, as well. If you keep things a little bit simpler, what can be an arduous process for a lot of people becomes a pleasure. The best thing in the world is having someone go up to their publicists and say, ‘This was great. I wish all photo shoots were like that.’”

Smith probably wishes he had more shoots like that, too. He’s kept this one alive for more than a year, and now, even though he’s getting close to putting the coffee-table-book version of *Art & Soul* to bed, he’s still shooting.

“This has been really beyond a dream of an assignment,” he says. “If we don’t sit down and get this to print, I could shoot this for the next 20 years. But frankly, the stories need to be told. As much as I love doing these photographs, at some point, we need this book to have a wider audience. It’s been a

blast. I tell everybody I’ve been extraordinarily lucky having many wonderful assignments in the course of a career, and this is right up there at the top.”

His target audience was apparently pleased with the work, as well. The reception he and The Creative Coalition received in Washington, D.C., was even warmer than they had hoped, and it came from both sides of the aisle.

“This year was the first time in eight years that funding actually increased in the budgets of the Congress, Senate and White House,” he says. “They all boosted their goals for the arts. It’s still below the peaks, but it’s moving in the right direction. That’s a very encouraging outcome, and it makes me feel like this is going along the right path.”

“I think it’s a great opportunity to give back to something that I’ve benefited greatly from,” Smith continues, “and I think probably the same is true for a lot of the people I’ve photographed. I’ve been very lucky to be able to make a living doing something that I love and doing something that’s creative and keeps my life fresh and interesting on a daily basis. I think the opportunity to be an advocate for that is an absolutely wonderful experience.”

Brian Smith is a Pulitzer Prize-winning photographer and one of the Sony Artisans of Imagery. His photographs of famous and infamous faces of the noteworthy and notorious have appeared on the covers and pages of hundreds of magazines. See more of his photography at his website, www.briansmith.com, assigned 10 snoots in New York, and

Smith’s Equipment

- Sony α900 cameras
- Sony 100mm f/2.8 lens
- Sony Zeiss 24-70mm f/2.8 zoom lens
- Sony Zeiss 85mm f/1.4 lens
- Sony Zeiss 135mm f/1.8 lens
- Profoto Pro-7 2400Ws packs and heads