

# GREG GORMAN:

## GREG GORMAN & THE HOLLYWOOD BODY ELECTRIC

*Greg Gorman, Levi-clad boy from Kansas City, Missouri,  
plain-speaker and friend to the famous,  
polite, level-headed, generous with time and space,  
he hails from the wheaty vastnesses of the American Mid-West.*

*Departing that white picket-fenced world in the middle of everything,  
he planted its legs of a thousand leagues on the Western shore,  
stopping to gaze down below upon a grid-crossed ocean of stars.*

*Greg,  
like numberless immigrants before him,  
offered fresh vision to the jaded eyes of coastal dreamers.*

*Spotting his beacon on the slopes of Hollywood Hills,  
trickle became flow, luminaries drew backwards, uphill,  
to that piece of new-planted heartland.*

*For two decades they've clustered, sat,  
for a new season's face to come out of his dark box,  
as he works the agency of light,  
chemicals and lens upon the cherished smiles  
of the Western World's role models, objects of lusts, suns.*

*Gorman, below the surface a ferment,  
hidden depths hinted at by branchy-headed figurines,  
and straining naked bronzes in the sunny engine room of this man  
who also sings the Body Electric.*

**I**N THE LAND WHERE CELEBRITY HAS BECOME AN ART FORM UNTO ITSELF, PHOTOGRAPHER GREG GORMAN REIGNS SUPREME. But while he has two books under his belt and several exhibitions constantly touring the globe, you don't have to haunt bookstores and art galleries to see his work. You are exposed to it every day via movie posters, CD covers and magazine articles on Hollywood movie stars.

Gorman's advertising photography changed the nature of the medium forever. Most notably his L.A. Eyeworks campaign broke new ground when it depicted sunglasses-clad celebrities lit in his signature ultra-hard style, granting the product an aura of mystery and glamour.

After almost two decades in the heart of the dream factory, Gorman has achieved all photographers' most cherished desire – he is now seen as an artist with a unique vision, above the diminishing labels of either advertising, editorial or fine art photographer. Gorman credits his mid-western roots with giving him the strength of character and level-headedness he has needed to bring him this far.

*Karin:* Greg, the easiest place to start is with the beginnings of your career in photography. How did you get started?

*Greg:* Well, I grew up in Kansas City and my first major in college was photojournalism. Then, I think in 1968. I borrowed a friend's camera to shoot a Jimi Hendrix concert, and just found my feet. A week or two later I borrowed it again to shoot a Jim Morrison concert and, based upon those two photo sessions where the subjects were barely recognisable, I was so enthusiastic and so inspired I decided to take it up as a college major and stayed with it.

I moved to California to finish my education at Brooks [Institute]. A couple of friends older than me, professional photographers, advised against it and said I was better off studying film. So, my degree is actually in cinematography from the University of Southern California. I did a bit of film work, but found I enjoyed the more personal relationship of photography, dealing on a one-on-one basis with a person as opposed to dealing with 20 people on a film crew.

So I went back to my stills and, little by little, my career built. I got a few big stars under my belt as a young photographer, people like Bette Midler, Dustin Hoffman, Barbara Streisand and David Bowie. Having people like that in my portfolio, it pushed my career long. And that's kind of how it got going.

Karin: Did you find your education in film helped your work in stills photography?

Greg: Not so much. I think, like anything else, you learn by doing it. You don't learn much in a classroom. You really just have to get out there and fall on your face, learn from your mistakes. I wouldn't advise people to go to art school to learn it [photography]. If you know nothing about it as an art, better that you get out and assist someone whose work you really enjoy and who you like, because you will never learn the trials and tribulations in the classroom.

Karin: But you teach classes yourself every so often, don't you?

Greg: My assistant sitting in the background says, 'But why do you teach a class?' But the class I teach is very different in every respect from what I dealt with when I was going to college. The class I teach is more of a practical application. I give lighting demos and practical applications about how to do it. I throw the kids, well, they're my age, into the arena and make them do all the work, and I sit back and critique it.

Karin: Let's get back to your own photography. Tell me about your nudes project.

Greg: The work in *Black+White* is a bit of a departure for me. I'm known primarily as a personality photographer and it's a departure shooting male and female nudes. It's the opportunity to produce a body of work more under my own wing, my control, where I'm less responsible to someone else, but still incorporating my kind of lighting and my portrait style.

It's also about people who are working for me, as opposed to me working for them. I was the one giving the orders.

Karin: You're known as a photographer who lights rather hard, especially in monochrome.

Greg: For my personal work I tend to light harder, more directional, especially for my nudes. When you're sculpting bodies you don't want too soft a light unless you've got a body cut like a brick shithouse, otherwise the picture will look a bit flat. So I tend to go with a little bit harder, more directional lighting.

I do a lot of my nudes when the sun is high rather than low, because the low light, which is very flattering and very glamorous in colour, can also be very flat in black-and-white.

*Karin:* Do you find that late afternoon light in Los Angeles goes rather amber, with all the smog?

*Greg:* Yeah, and [for colour] I gel all my film anyway. I use the whole series of 81 filters. [Kodak's Wratten gelatine filters, those numbered 81, 81A, 81B, 81C, 81EF, are all amber in colour.... Karin.]

*Karin:* How do you light, when you're using artificial light sources?

*Greg:* Sometimes strobe [electronic flash], sometimes tungsten. With strobes a softbox, or harder with a spotgrid.

*Karin:* Do you work alone, or do you have staff?

*Greg:* I have an assistant, Kevin Lynch, who's actually more like a partner. He's been working with me for a little over 10 years. We hire our second and third assistants on a freelance basis. Then there's usually a makeup person, a hair person, a stylist. I have an office manager, a runner and a housekeeper. So add the people you're photographing, add the agent, assistants, a couple more hangers-on, a couple of people who come out to be the yes-people and you have a pretty full house.

*Karin:* Almost as many as in a film crew anyway.

*Greg:* Pretty much. A good support team is very, very critical, crucial, to producing good art. I realised early in my career that you're only as good as the hairdresser or the makeup artist who's painting the face. They do a shitty job, the picture can be glorious but if the person looks like hell it isn't going to help you.

*Karin:* Tell me about your commissioned work, because we see a lot of it here but it often doesn't have your name on it.

*Greg:* I do a lot of commercial work. I shoot a few album covers, I shoot a lot of movie posters, 'one-sheets' for movies. Recently I've done a lot of campaigns for my European clients that feature nudes. There is so much more

of that [nudity in advertising] in Europe than in America because here they're still too uptight to deal with it.

*Karin:* How do you find the Japanese to work for?

*Greg:* Great, great. The Japanese art directors are very hip, cool guys and they get me because they like my work, so they pretty much let me do my own thing, which always makes me happy. It's better than someone who gets you in to do a job because they like your work, then basically does everything but push the button. It's kind of bullshit because then why are they hiring you?

In the field of advertising, people should hire photographers because of their style, their look, and they should let the photographer bring their own trip to the pictures instead of inflicting their own. But for some art directors I guess that's a difficult thing. Sometimes I have to battle a little bit with them. Usually, if they're difficult, I'll try to do their idea, then get them to let me do mine, so they can pick from the two.

*Karin:* Name some recent movie projects you've worked on.

*Greg:* Besides the commercial projects I've done lots of movie posters. I've just done one for Touchstone Pictures, for a movie about Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday. I'm leaving Monday to do a shoot in New York with Eddie Murphy for Beverly Hills Cop III, and then I come back to do a campaign for Capezio, which involves Gregory Hines and some other dancers. I'm also in the midst of a big campaign in the United States for Dewar's Scotch.

*Karin:* And you direct music video clips every so often?

*Greg:* I've had plenty of opportunities but it's very time-consuming. Once in a blue moon I'll say 'yes' to something if it's for a friend. I did a video a year or two ago for Grace Jones, for *Love On Top Of Love*, and I recently completed a couple of commercials with Brooke Shields for a Japanese Health Spa. I'll do stuff like that but not too often. It takes too much time.

*Karin:* Greg, I'm intrigued by your very large art collection.

*Greg:* I have a pretty wild art collection. That's one of my hobbies, sculpture and painting.

Karin: How did that come about?

Greg: I was always interested in art and now I can afford to buy it. One of the first I bought was *The Butterfly Collection*, a series of six large lithographs by Salvador Dali, in 1971. Since then I've bought more sculptures, paintings and things, mostly by European artists, Super-Humanist art and some Russian artists.

Karin: How do you define 'Super-Humanist' art?

Greg: It's a description given to the kind of art I collect by a gentleman named Nicholas Treadwell, the majority of which I purchase from his Art Mill in Bradford, Yorkshire. We both share an interest in crazy art. It's art that deals with the human form, but personified in an exaggerated manner, strained and pushed to the limits.

Karin: Is there any connection with your own nude work?

Greg: I tend to try and shoot my nudes so they have a kind of sculptural look to them. I don't really go for overly developed, muscular men or women. I go more for lean, sinewy bodies.

Karin: That amazing life-size sculpture in your studio looks uncannily like Peter Garrett of the band Midnight Oil in a naked frenzy. You've used other versions of the same piece in your photographs – your portraits of Arnold Schwarzenegger, for example. Do you do that much?

Greg: Not that much, but when shooting in my own home, it's nice to be able to use some of the art as a complement to the people in my pictures.

Karin: And you're known for the huge record collection you keep in your studio, too.

Greg: Oh, I've got a massive CD collection. I'm a big music fan. I listen to artists like Chet Baker, McCoy Tyner, Charlie Mingus, Miles Davis, John Coltrane.

Karin: When you're shooting or just to relax?

Greg: Both. In general I listen almost exclusively to jazz, but a lot of times the people I photograph are not necessarily jazz enthusiasts so I play a little more mainstream then,

more R'n'B. You tailor the whole environment to the personality so they feel comfortable, that's what matters when you're shooting. I just shot Debbie Harry the day before yesterday, and she was gracious enough to listen to jazz all day.

*Karin:* Oh, that was nice of her.

*Greg:* Yeah. She looked terrific, she looks wonderful, and this was for her new album that's just been released.

*Karin:* You've done quite a few nude photographs of other celebrities in the past...

*Greg:* Yeah, sometimes I'll do a bunch of stuff for some magazine layout, and then more for my own personal body of work. If I'm working with a celebrity I like, if I'm interested in the person, at the end of the day I'll ask them if they'll stay and do a shoot for me. It's just kind of something different from the magazine's requirements. That's how I get a lot of the pictures I end up liking. Pictures that not only have my trademark but also something with a little more twist, that're a little more out there.