



A close-up portrait of a woman with voluminous, wavy brown hair. She has dramatic eye makeup featuring bright green and blue eyeshadow with black winged liner. She is wearing a red top and black lace gloves. She is holding a chain necklace with a pearl and black beads. The background is dark and textured.

Dan Frievault helps  
clients feel dazzling

BY STEPHANIE BOOZER

# Costume DRAMA





an Frievalt is a photographer and in many ways, a creative jack-of-all-trades—a hybrid film director, art director, costume designer, storyteller, graphic artist. Oh, and maybe a kind of therapist as well: Female

portrait clients often leave his studio with a more confident swagger than they entered with. His high-fashion, stylized photographs of women, which he markets as Beautiful You sessions, are like vignettes from an indie art film in which the corseted heroines could be femme fatales from a darkly romantic thriller.

This is Frievalt's take on female empowerment. "I needed something different and unique but that still had a boudoir-type feel. Not everyone wants a wall portrait of herself in lingerie," says Frievalt from his studio in De Pere, Wis., on the outskirts of Green Bay.

### CREATIVE COSTUMERY

It's not all vamped up Victorian themes. Frievalt has captured women in brash '80s punk-inspired frocks, elegant sequined and silk gowns, and conceptual couture bits of fabric juxtaposed in front of beautifully decayed urban backgrounds. The client's individual tastes inspire the theme, and Frievalt's vivid imagination takes it from there. To help make those visions reality, Frievalt partnered with a friend, a model and fashion designer who goes by the name Twig Noir, to conjure up and create clothing and accessories for the studio. Her steampunk-influenced style jives with Frievalt's moody, theatrical sensibility.

"She sews all this amazing stuff, buys and repurposes clothes, and turns them into something else," says Frievalt. "We use a lot of corsets over dresses and shirts so that you get all of these interesting layers. What's so great about the corsets is that no matter what size you are, they give you a great shape, and the outcome is amazing."

Frievalt creates costume pieces himself as well,





including a Queen Elizabeth I neck ruff. He'd found one at Etsy.com, but with an asking price of about \$900, Frievalt instead improvise with a \$5 pair of thrift store boots, a bit of lace, and a glue gun. It was the perfect complement to the sweeping bell skirt he'd deftly fashioned with an underpinning of chicken wire.

"I love to make little accessories and props, but you definitely can't walk around in them. Twig is the seamstress," says Frievalt, who has bins of fabrics, gloves, and various odd accoutrements such as antique goggles and skeleton keys. "I raid Halloween stores the day after, when everything's on sale, and get funky eyelashes and lace gloves, anything we can repurpose. I love watching the show Project Runway, how they make a dress out of newspaper or everyday goods from a hardware store. Theirs only needs to last for the runway, and mine only has to last an hour or two for the shoot."

Wedding dresses can be dyed, tutus can find any number of creative uses beyond of the waistline, and deer antlers can become elaborate headpieces. Frievalt and Twig Noir can turn pretty much anything into haute couture costumery.

The Beutiful You sessions represent an amalgam of Frievalt's interests. Growing up the youngest of seven children, Frievalt says he was less interested in the hunting and mechanical ventures of his brothers than in artistic abstractions. He would build just about anything with his Erector set except the object pictured on the package. He considered pursuing electronics or architecture in college before realizing his strong suit was in art. He studied marketing and communications with a focus on graphic design then worked as a graphic artist for 12 years after college.

He'd always meddled in photography, but it wasn't until digital imaging became viable that his graphic and photographic interests collided. As a favor, Frievalt pho-



tographed a coworker friend's son, scanned the negatives and experimented with them in Adobe Photoshop. That tiny spark lit the flame. About a year later, he opened a studio, and things took off.

That was in 2005. Eight years in, Frievault's enthusiasm hasn't waned. He's won multiple awards at the state and national level, and now holds the title of Wisconsin Photographer of the Year.

"If you're passionate about your work and you really believe in it, the right people will relate to it," he says. "In the beginning, I thought I had to do the basics, and for many years, I was trying to do things I couldn't do. I would watch other photographers pose and try it and get frustrated. Then I realized that's just not me. I needed to be me. People are coming to me now because of these images, because of my look."







## MAKING DRAMA

Part of coming into his own style meant finding a way to bring all of his interests into his photography. An avid fan of movies and cinematography, Frievault watched films with more than casual interest. He examined everything that came into play cinematically to guide the viewer, everything that conveyed mood and emotion, no matter how subtle.

“From lighting to composing to color harmony to music to final post, the director is controlling the viewer,” he says. “There are those key elements that give things away, that take your eye right where the director wants it. I want to use the same elements to tell the story, but I want to do all of that in a single still image.”

It was that drive that led him to create his

unique beauty sessions. Frievault gathered friends, developed up a few concepts, and set to work, with the intention of creating something a little edgy to use for photographic competition. “Everyone had so much fun,” he says.

Word got out, and it wasn’t long before models in the area wanted something similar to enhance their portfolios. People raved about the experience, and Frievault realized he was on to something. He wasn’t interested in doing boudoir photography, but these stylized sessions fit the same niche. They made women feel sexy and provocative without begin so overtly provocative as to as to limit product sales.

It appeals to the large demographic of women who haven’t had any portraits make of themselves since their wedding, says Frievault. “Most of them have been spending so much time and

money on their children and taking care of everyone else that it’s time to pamper themselves.”

What started as a creative outlet for Frievault has become a transformative experience for his subjects, many of whom report feeling more confident afterward. (A handful of before-and-after interviews with his portrait subjects can be found on Frievault’s blog, [frievaltphotoblog.com](http://frievaltphotoblog.com).)

“I always say that everyone is beautiful,” says Frievault. “I want to capture something about each person that’s going to tell the story of her beauty, whether it’s in the eyes or whatever that spark is that each person has. I want to break the stereotype of what defines beauty.” ■

*See more of Dan Frievault’s work online at [frievaltphotography.com](http://frievaltphotography.com).*

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