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Howard Schatz: With Child

Howard Schatz's 20-year study of the pregnant female form in black-and-white

By William Sawalich, Photography By Howard Schatz



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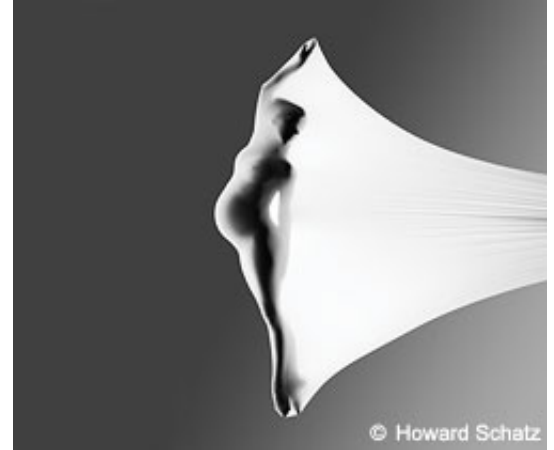
In his 18th book, *With Child*, Howard Schatz has created a compilation of images that span 20 years of photographing pregnant women and infants. The body of work is extraordinary. Schatz is a genius with lighting, a master of composition and an artist with form and texture. The images in the book are shown in black-and-white. When he shot film, Schatz worked in black-and-white, but when he went digital, he shot in color and converted to black-and-white down the line.

Howard Schatz has children to thank for some of his best work. A physician, Schatz converted his dining room

into a photo studio in 1987 when his second child, Jessica, went off to college.

"From the time I was in medical school, I've had a camera," Schatz says, "and I have made pictures. So this gave me the opportunity to really explore it. I devoted every Saturday to making pictures. And I was interested in everything, as I still am today. Around this time, with my interest still hanging on the hook of my memory, I went to the University of California Medical Center, where I was a professor and teaching, and went to the head of obstetrics and told her I was interested in studying pregnancy, pregnant women and their newborns. And she gave me access and made it easy for me."

So began a 20-year photographic study of pregnant women and babies that culminated last fall with the release of Schatz's 18th book, *With Child* (Glitterati, 2011). Culled from 10,000 black-and-white nudes, the images in the book could pass for sculpture. The effect is intentional. It's partly why Schatz worked in black-and-white.



"It was biologic sculpture," Schatz says. "I'm interested in everything about the body. I'm interested in the body as a structure, and I'm interested in its psyche. And if it was going to be about sculpture, I didn't need it to be about skin. I'd rather it had been about stone or marble or some inorganic material. Color documents what's there, and black-and-white leaves room for interpretation. I wanted it to be about sculpture, and I did everything I could to make it be about sculptural. You see, I painted people, I did strange things to their bodies, I projected light on their bodies."

One of the most amazing things about the collection is how energetic, even athletic, pregnant women can be. Schatz's subjects included acrobats and dancers, some of whom wanted to be photographed doing what they love.



"They taught me," he says. "They'd show me they could do just about anything short of spinning on their belly. You can see what a pregnant woman can do. It's totally and completely miraculous. See the girl who jumped in the air? Lenna Parr—she's a dancer. I said, 'I've wanted to make a picture of a dancer not only dancing, which I've done, but in the air. Because the best pictures of dance are in the air.' She says, 'Oh, I can do that, no problem.' And she did."

Schatz photographed Sara Joel, a performer for Cirque du Soleil, suspended precariously in a sheer fabric cocoon.

"She performs in that thing," Schatz says. "And she says, 'I'd like to do the shot in this.' I said, 'Well, I don't know that I want to do that; what if you fall?' She says, 'I never have. I've done this 10,000 times if I've done it once.' Her husband is a neurosurgeon. I said, patronizingly perhaps, 'Have your husband call me. I want to talk to him about it.' So her husband called me, and he said it was okay. I said, 'If she falls, she can't stop, it'll hurt the baby, hurt her.' He said, 'She'll be okay. She really wants to do it—it'll be okay.' But I didn't want to do it. What do I need someone to hurt themselves for? It's beautiful, she's a great, special person."



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Even if his subjects weren't photographed in midair, Schatz still asked them to take a leap of sorts by allowing him to photograph them nude at a time when many women complain of feeling as if their bodies are no longer their own.

This may have worked in his favor.

"Many women said they'd never have done it if it weren't a temporary thing," he says, "or if they didn't want to document it. I had women, when they'd heard about the project, come over and meet me when they were three, four, five months pregnant, just to meet me and to meet Beverly [Schatz's wife]. And I'd say, you know, these are the pictures—there's no clothes. And if they went 'Oop!' I'd say, 'Don't do it. If you're shy, that's okay, that's who you are. That's fine, don't do it.' So if they were interested, then I'd say call me at 37 or 38 weeks and we'll make an appointment and you can come in."

The project isn't just about pregnant women. Schatz paired each image of the mother-to-be with one made later—with her newborn baby. These images aid in completing the visual circle, fully illustrating the miracle of pregnancy and childbirth. But because Schatz has done other projects about newborns, these quieter images take a backseat to the dynamic images of pregnancy.



"I wasn't really interested in the baby part," Schatz says. "It was sort of sweet and nice and lovely, but I wasn't as interested. That's why the book was designed the way it was. I had the mothers come back and do that, and I enjoyed doing it, but I wanted the book to be about the pregnancy."



Schatz treated the two sessions very differently, as well. In each case, he listened to the mothers and what they were most comfortable with, most inspired by. But with the newborns, he had to defer to the babies who would dictate how the shoots would proceed.

"My direction was, 'Look, with the baby, it's different than the pregnancy,'" he says. "'With the pregnancy, I told you what to do, but this. First of all, the baby is very vulnerable. There's no directing the baby. The whole shoot is going to be about the baby. We'll think of the baby's comfort and the baby's happiness, and we'll go real slow and take our time. And second, I just want you to be in touch with how much you love this little thing. That's all you need to do, and the pictures will be marvelous.'"

To a photographic audience, Schatz's work is also a study in lighting the human form—pregnant, nude or otherwise. The photographer was very deliberate in his approach to creating high-key images, dynamic patterns and moody, dark images. He did it with minimal digital imaging and a deliberate command of light and

shadow.

"You have to know what you want to see," Schatz explains. "If you make a black-and-white portrait of somebody and then select them, separate from the background and make the background light, the portrait becomes about black. Make the background black, and it becomes about light. Make the background gray, and then you see everything. You have to decide what you want to see. Is it a curve, is it the form, texture, shape, position? How do I want to crop and compose it? I tried things. And after a while, I had a lot of experience."



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To make the bright white, alabaster look of some of the more sculptural images, Schatz lit in a shadowless, high-key fashion and then used a minor amount of postproduction magic to enhance the illusion of stone.

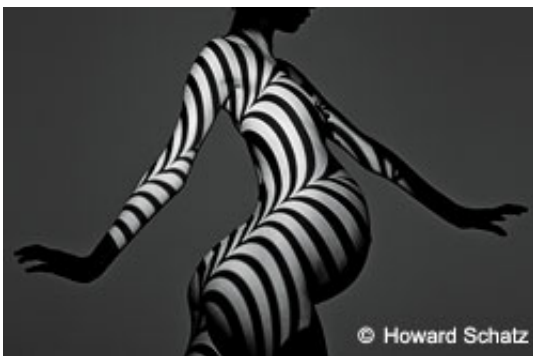
"That's just a contrast curve," he explains. "Instead of making lights lighter and darks darker, you enhance contrast. I just made lights light, midtones light and darks light. I lit without shadow. I lit to minimize the pain and angst I would have in trying to make it light. I said I just want this to be alabaster, and so I lit it that way. And sometimes I lit for a lot of shadow. For one or two women, I put a projected spot above them and shot it straight down so it's like really hard light and dark. For a few, I used a pattern in projection. The zebra one, for instance, that pattern I made myself. I use Photoshop to bend lines and turn curves and things. I make patterns in a way that pleases me. I sometimes convert these patterns to a 21/4 superslide and I put that in a Balcar digital projector and project it onto my subjects. There's a girl who's facing front who looks like she has black stockings on. That's just a round projection spot on her tummy."



One of the hazards of working with pregnant women was the risk of going into labor during a shoot. Schatz explains, "Two women had water break, and we just said, well... When I was a physician, I delivered 120 babies. When I graduated medical school, at age 23, my first rotation a week after graduation was on the obstetrics ward of Cook County Hospital in Chicago. And in two weeks I delivered 120 babies. That's what left its mark on me. That's what got me to do this 25 years later."

Schatz worked with black-and-white film for the first half of the project, turning to digital capture in full color for the second half. It was important that the work not look different, so Schatz's digital conversions must be perfect. His approach is surprisingly basic.

"I'm going to give you my secret," he says. "Everybody talks about channels and this and that, and you've got to make sure your reds and yellows are this and your blues and your greens and cyans are this. I don't believe it. I do believe that's true when you're converting color work of anything but human skin—like outdoor work, mountain work, landscape work, rivers, snow, sea, forest—perhaps even photojournalistic work in which there are colors in addition to skin colors. But Photoshop is built to desaturate skin perfectly. So I just go to Hue/Saturation, I zoom it to zero, and I'm happy with that."



Adds Schatz, "The only Photoshop work I did other than desaturate was to do some spotting. When there were spots—two kinds I did. One, when there's a new zit. Lesions, stretch marks, scars I didn't change. But if there's a new zit, I had no reason to embarrass anyone. And the second thing I did was I spotted when there was a spot on the digital back. Other than that, there's no Photoshop."

Though he's rightfully proud of this body of work, the publication of *With Child* is also a mixed blessing for Schatz. He shoots personal projects that he loves, and it's very difficult for him to stop. He doesn't plan to cease shooting this one, either.

"The joy is in the journey for me," he says. "The book—I feel like it's nice, I feel good about it. But I'm not crazy. I feel good about it, but I'm not nuts over it. It was the doing of it, the shooting of it, the making the pictures that was the joy, the pleasure, the happiness. The book is an affirmation of my work, it's a calling card, and perhaps it's a contribution to mankind, hopefully. That would be nice—for an artist to do something to make other people happy. But that's sort of not why I did it. I think if you shoot what you think someone else wants, you're not going to make good images. You've got to shoot what's inside."

You can see more of Howard Schatz's photography, including images from his other 17 books, by visiting his website at www.howardschatz.com.

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