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Behind the Cover

CHARLOTTE ARTIST MELODY CASSEN IS PUTTING HER EXPERIENCE DESIGNING COVERS FOR BESTSELLERS IN THE PAGES OF HER OWN BOOK.

BY MICHAEL J. SOLENDER

Melody Cassen sits attentively guarding her coffee at a corner table in the crowded Caribou at Foxcroft. Appearing lost in thought, Cassen, 47, is actually studying her surroundings, practicing the fine art of observation.

"Observation is perhaps the most important aspect of my work," says Cassen, who recently returned to Charlotte after spending more than 20 years in New York City as an art designer and photo illustrator for some of the most recognizable names in book publishing. "I take in what I see and observe, add my interpretation, and create work to represent this, hopefully in a way that captures beauty and engages the viewer."

Beauty in imagery is a resonating theme with Cassen an East Carolina University graduate in graphic design. "From a young age I remember seeing Swan Lake," says Cassen, "The swan costumes, sugarplum fairies, and ballerinas had a profound impact on me. The idea that real people created something make-believe to tell a story made a lasting impression on my imagination."

She brought these sensibilities to her career in book publishing supporting such industry giants such as Random House, Simon & Schuster, Doubleday, Bantam Books, and others. There Cassen designed more than 1000 book covers and dust jackets including those for such notables as bestselling authors James Patterson, Amy Tan, Bethenny Frankel, and Nicholas Sparks.

While Cassen continues to freelance and support the industry, she has branched out on her own as a commercial photo illustrator and designer. Her work is highly stylized and often features multi-cultural models

depicted in serene or even Zen-like surroundings.

"Photo illustration is a hybrid between photography and illustration," says Cassen. "I enjoy having the ability to go beyond the photograph and bring other elements of beauty into the process, highlighting areas that might not be in the forefront."

Cassen's "Geisha-Girl" is just such a piece. It frames a striking young

Japanese woman in traditional Geisha garb, the strong and symbolic Mt. Fuji over her right shoulder and a flowering maple tree above her left side. The piece captivates the viewer at so many levels, it is subtle yet a powerful display of Cassen's deft touches.

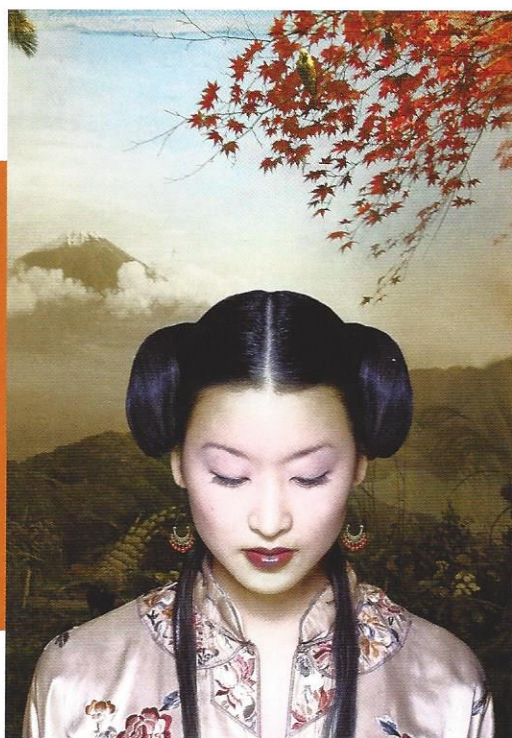
"I've had the opportunity to work with many women from various cultures and see that while we come from different backgrounds, there are many similarities and values that unite us," says Cassen. "This is why I am launching a book project of my own called *Our Voices: An Art book Celebrating Multi-Cultural Beauty*."

The book will feature 20 or so women from different backgrounds and cultures, each with a story to tell and each representing beauty in their own way. Cassen hopes to explore cultural rituals and stories to give voice to the experiences that have had a positive influence in shaping the women featured. She explores rituals such as henna tattooing of Indian brides, the

significance of the Ethiopian coffee ceremony, and how a single article of clothing created memories for a child growing up in the Dominican Republic that remained with her though out her life. After a recent fundraising project to create the book, it will launch this year. In the meantime, you can find Cassen's colorful works on her website. www.melodycassen.com



Artist Melody Cassen in her home studio.



“I want to share the strength, dignity and beauty of women who don’t have a platform or the ability to use their own voice. There is so much there for others to appreciate.”

—MELODY CASSEN

