

Romance lives! Wedding clients seek photography that captures their passion on the first day of happily ever after. Nichole Van Valkenburgh delivers that, and more, with subtle photo enhancements.

WEDDINGS

By Lorna Gentry

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Novel romance

Nichole Van Valkenburgh's literary lens

Nichole Van Valkenburgh knows what her wedding clients want: photographs that capture their passion on the first day of happily ever after. “A lady’s imagination ... jumps [rapidly] from admiration to love, from love to matrimony in a moment,” Jane Austen wrote in “Pride and Prejudice” nearly 200 years ago. Despite the sobering contemporary realities of relationships and marriage, Americans are still enthralled with the enduring notion of romance and wedded bliss.

A former college English professor, the Utah wedding and portrait photographer is well versed in literature, and is especially fond of the Pre-Raphaelites, the Brontë sisters and Jane Austen (indeed, she named her daughter after the author). Van Valkenburgh also has an undergraduate degree in art history. When she focuses her Canon on a bridal couple, these sensibilities naturally come into play, to give the images drama and romantic tension. Her juxtaposition of texture, color and environment makes for photos that surprise and charm. In just four years she’s earned a national reputation and a business growing by word-of-mouth alone.

Environment is an important element in Van Valkenburgh’s romantic aesthetic. Influenced by the provocative integration of people and place in Andrew Wyeth’s paintings and Willa Cather’s novels, Van Valkenburgh incorporates the disparate, often rugged Utah landscape in her images. In isolating the subject in nature, she shows his connection to it, as well as his vulner-



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ability. It's this compelling, intimate perspective that separates her work from the competition's.

"In Utah you don't have to drive far to go from the Rocky Mountains to the desert Southwest," she says. "It gives you great opportunity to create the grand vista, and great art prints. Often people think my photos have been altered in Photoshop, but it's really that beautiful here."

GOWNS AND HIKING BOOTS

Van Valkenburgh will go anywhere for the perfect shot. She lives in southern Utah County, about 90 minutes outside Salt Lake City, and drives a Jeep to navigate the craggy back country. With her clients, various pieces of furniture and yards of gauzy tulle



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on board, Van Valkenburgh stops at ghost towns, sparsely populated mining towns, salt lakes, and mountains. A couple once asked her to photograph them in their favorite canyon—a three-hour hike. “Some brides have something very specific in mind and they come to me because they are confident I can do it,” says Van Valkenburgh. “I will, too, as long as it’s not illegal or tacky.”

She’s fond of setting upholstered furniture outdoors. “I like the unexpected juxtaposition of the elements,” she says. “It’s in that mix where true art happens, that causes you to really focus on what you’re looking at. Furniture also helps clients feel at ease, as well as helping with posing and logistics.”

Light is always a character in Van Valkenburgh’s portraits, so getting it just right is critical. “Ninety percent of my wedding photos have light [added] on them somewhere because it enables me to



get the light right,” says Van Valkenburgh. “I shoot RAW and use Photoshop Lightroom heavily.”

Van Valkenburgh’s travel light kit includes a Canon Speedlite 580EX II, which she uses with a soft box or 60-inch umbrella. In addition, she’ll use as many as six AlienBees and Vagabond battery packs. “In my portable studio for formals, I have at least two lights, usually plugged into Vagabonds. At receptions, I use PocketWizards for two to three strobes I’ve set around the room.”

SUBTLE TOUCHES

Post-production, Van Valkenburgh works with a palette of colors from muted to vivid. The image drives the choice, she maintains. “If the color is so strong it overpowers a subject, I’ll tone it down. I have a 1948

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Ford pickup truck painted the brightest blue on the planet. I don't like it much, so I always mute it. But I also have a 1920s red velvet couch that packs a visual punch."

Van Valkenburgh uses an array of patterns, vignettes and other digital effects to enhance her portraits. She dislikes busy backgrounds, but relishes experimentation with styles and the collection of textures she's worked with for years. "I like using

textures to separate the subject from background," she says, "but I'm not a fan of making texture more important than the subject."

She taught herself Photoshop, but learned photography from her hobbyist husband, David, whose SLR film camera she inherited when they married a decade ago. As her talent grew, so did her freelance portrait commissions, but eventually the

moonlighting eclipsed her day job as an English teacher at Brigham Young University. She took a sabbatical from the university three years ago and has never looked back. ■

To see more of Nichole Van Valkenburgh's work visit her website, nicholev.com.

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