

# An Interview with JONATHAN KNOWLES

By Anne Pinto-Rodrigues



*In the past fourteen years, Jonathan has consistently featured in the '200 Best Advertising Photographers in the World' books. He is one of the top 10 all time award winners in the Graphis Annuals.*

*Notable commissions include campaigns for many globally recognised brands, such as Coca-Cola, Guinness, and Smirnoff. He is also the creator of the famous O2 bubbles.*

*He shot the Black Sabbath 13 Album cover, as well as directing and filming the footage that is currently played on stage during performances. Black Sabbath loved the imagery and invited Jonathan to the album launch in New York, where he received a friendly strangle of gratitude from Ozzy.*

*Jonathan Knowles is one of the leading photographers of his generation. Specialising in drinks, liquids and still life, Jonathan's unique photographic style has earned him award-winning advertising commissions worldwide.*

On the Right: Dole  
Photographer – Jonathan Knowles  
Art Director – Misha Newby  
Creative Director – Mark Elwood  
Production – Another and 101  
London  
Retoucher – Gareth Pritchard

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**Hello Jonathan! Thank you for agreeing to this interview with Lens Magazine. It's our absolute pleasure to talk with you! We look forward to getting to know the person behind the iconic O2 bubbles image, and sharing your stunning portfolio of work with our readers.**

**Please tell us a little bit about yourself.**

I was born in Yorkshire, and then moved to Windsor, aged five. At age 16, I bought a camera and became obsessed with photography. I was fortunate that my school had a good darkroom so learned to process and print. Later, I assisted a photographer for a total of three months...one month when I was 17 and

two months when I was 18. The rest I taught myself. Aside from that, I have a great family, love film and opera, and relaxing holidays!

**How and when did this fascination with photographing liquids come about?**

As a young lad of eight, I saw the iconic Harold Edgerton image of the milk splash in a science laboratory in school. When I got my first camera, two of the frames on my first film of 20 exposures were of milk splashes – I dropped a stone into a glass of milk in the garden, in bright sunshine. I thought 1/1000th of a second should do it! Since then, I have always loved and

# BLACK SABBATH



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BLACK SABBATH  
Photographer – Jonathan Knowles  
Agency – Zip Design  
Creative Director – Neil Bowen  
Designer – Nick Dart  
Retoucher – Gareth Pritchard



**Please enlighten us about your technique of capturing 'liquid in motion'. How did you perfect this technique?**

Practice and understanding! The main issue with liquid photography is knowing how the liquid will move and twist and turn. We have developed a lot of ways of controlling the liquid flows and shapes to achieve the result we need so that we can position the lights correctly to give highlights and shadows where they are wanted. It can be tricky - there is nothing to look at because the liquid is not yet there.

**What special equipment are you using to capture these 'liquid in motion' images?**

The camera I use now is a standard Hasselblad. In the past, most of it was done on 5x4 or 10x8 film. For lighting, most of the time I use normal studio flash, though I do have some slightly unusual lights that give a flash duration of 1/111000th of a second. That helps a lot in certain very fast situations!

**Can you tell us about the editing that goes into these stunning liquids images?**

In the modern era, we do obviously use Photoshop quite a lot, but I do try to keep the look of the liquids as close to what was caught in camera as possible. It is all the subtleties in a real capture that bring the 'magic', and I don't like to retouch those out.

In the past, we had to photograph it all in camera. For example, on the O2 images, all we did was take out some of the microscopic bubbles that had developed in the tank. All the backgrounds had to be lit in with exactly the same rate of graduation, whatever the scale of the bubbles (large or macro). We got through a lot of Polaroid!

**From the wide range of campaigns you've photographed over the years, any interesting memories you'd like to share with our readers?**

Liquids, paints and exploding objects get everywhere. We are still finding bits of pineapple

wanted to investigate these 'unseen moments of nature', and capturing them in the best and most interesting way has been the challenge.

**Which was first commercial campaign you worked on?**

My first professional photographic assignment was photographing a party for Tatler the week I left school, aged 17. I worked on a lot of other things after that, but my first big advertising commission was for Interflora. I had shot a lot of personal images of close-ups of flowers with brightly coloured backgrounds, and that technique answered exactly a brief that the agency had. The first ad promoted a service saying that if you ordered your flowers before midday they would be delivered by sunset. We shot an orange flower half cropped out of the bottom of the frame against a graduated orange background, demonstrating the flower and the sunset. All shot on 10x8 film, and no retouching! Several others in the series followed.



OMO  
Photographer – Jonathan Knowles  
Art Director – Kumkum Fernando  
Creative Director - Chris Catchpole  
Agency – Lowe Vietnam  
Retoucher – Gareth Pritchard

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from a shoot when we exploded a lot of them last December! A couple of years ago when we refurbished the studio, we found coffee beans stuck behind some cable tracking that must have been there for five years. However much you think you are protecting the studio and the set, it will never be enough.

**Photographing the Black Sabbath 13 album cover must have been quite a memorable experience. Please tell us a little more about that and your meeting with Ozzy Osbourne.**

There are certain projects that arrive as a brief that I immediately know will be iconic, and this was one of them. To shoot the last album sleeve

for Black Sabbath was, by definition, a chance that would never come again. I had worked with the design company, Zip Design, before, and they came to me because they knew I would be able to capture fire. They wanted to do the whole shoot 'for real' without any CGI. We had the wicker sculptures built, and burnt them at sunset in the Buckinghamshire countryside. The final image has obviously had a few tweaks, but it is pretty much as captured in camera.

The record company kindly asked me to attend the album launch in New York where I met Ozzy, Sharon and Geezer. They were all very open and friendly and as part of this, Ozzy decided to give me a strangle of affection in lieu of a handshake.

# PURE COFFEE PLEASURES

THE CAPPUCCINO



McCafé  
Photographer – Jonathan Knowles  
Agency TBWA\Zürich  
Creative Director – Bruce Roberts  
Art Director – Battina Klossnor  
Food Stylist – Eliza Baird  
Retoucher – Gareth Pritchard

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McCafé

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# PURE COFFEE PLEASURES

THE CARAMEL LATTE



McCafé

## What are the challenges you have deal with on your campaigns?

Every campaign has its own intrigues. Most of the issues these days tend to be non-photographic; most importantly in managing client expectations where the brief is not as clear as it might be, or when the brief changes as the shoot (or more often post-production process) goes on, or perhaps the budget is not sufficient to achieve what is being asked.

## Can you tell us a little bit about what you are working on presently?

We are currently in post-production for two posters and two moving image pieces for a well-known coffee company. We are also shooting a worldwide campaign for an Irish whiskey company where we have literally taken a whiskey cask apart and suspended all the staves to surround a bottle. In another execution, we took a glass slice out of a bottle. CGI was discussed for these, but it was decided that to shoot them would be better, quicker and more realistic.

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**What is next for you? What direction would you like your photography to take in the future?**

It's hard to say. Things often take unexpected turns. I still love the liquids, drinks and luxury goods, and I like to think that I learn new things on each and every shoot, so that is a definite continuous path. I definitely see a rise in moving image commissions heading my way. I've recently wrapped on a shoot where I was purely shooting moving content; not a still image in sight. That is really a big change – I never set out to be a movie director, but that is where I am at these days. On moving image shoots, the team inevitably gets bigger, and I have to learn to sit in my director's chair without interfering with everybody else's job too much. That is a big change. Most photographers have OCD and I am no exception. I have to learn to let that go!

**What advice do you have for aspiring photographers or those starting out in the field of commercial photography?**

Be tenacious, but always polite. Work hard, and remember to shoot what you love. When editing your portfolio, make sure you only have in it the kind of work for which you'd like to be commissioned.

**Is there anything else that you would like to share with Lens?**

Looking through a camera yourself, shooting, seeing what happens and assessing the result is the most valuable training in photography. Watching others and looking at their work is helpful, guiding and inspiring, but no substitute for doing it yourself. Get out there and shoot!

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Agency – Rose Design  
Retoucher – Gareth Pritchard

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## ANNE PINTO-RODRIGUES



Anne is a writer and a storyteller, with a keen interest in nature photography and fine arts. Having lived in 5 cities, in 4 countries, across 3 continents, and having travelled long-term to several more places, she identifies as a global citizen.

When she is not out exploring, she can be found crafting articles for magazines or blogging about her travel experiences on her blog '**No Roads Barred**'. Anne has contributed to inflight magazines like Holland Herald (KLM), Silkwinds (Silk Air), SilverKris (Singapore Airlines) as well as cross-cultural publications like Passage and ScandAsia. She writes about a variety of topics, from nature and indigenous art to history and culture.

Anne lived in Singapore for nearly six years, and in 2015, researched and authored a 200-page coffee table book on the decorative tiles seen in the heritage precincts of the city. This book briefly traces the history of tiles from nearly 6,000 years ago to modern day Singapore, and was well received, both by the general public and the media.

During her time venturing through the rainforests of Asia, Anne dabbled in nature photography, an interest she hopes to continue pursuing as soon as she is settled in her new home city of Amsterdam.

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## JONATHAN KNOWLES

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