

Montage

Art, books, diverse creations



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Styled Blue Yonder

Jessica Ambats's spectacular air-to-air photographs

by CRAIG LAMBERT

THE IMAGES have so much *air* in them: high above the ground, planes cavort in open space, seemingly at play. They fly astonishingly close to the viewer, at times only 20 feet away from the camera lens. Backdrops—bridges, cities, deserts, rivers, forests—fall away majestically, far below. This is air-to-air photography, pictures that only someone flying in another plane could take. Many have appeared in *Plane & Pilot* magazine; its editor, Jessica Ambats '95, belongs to the small cadre of those who make such pictures. Her airborne shoots typically last about an hour, with specially trained pilots

maneuvering the planes. "Every detail is planned," she says. "Usually we end up flying in circles for the whole hour."

What's tricky about such pictures is that both camera and subject are in motion (typical airspeeds are around 150 knots, or about 172 miles per hour), so there's not much wiggle room on timing the shutter release. Another element is the setting. "I work very hard on backgrounds," Ambats explains. "I'm choosy—I want clean, uncluttered backgrounds, no roads or telephone poles." She also tries to match a background with the featured aircraft: she might position a private jet

that flies to business meetings over a city skyline, or place an older aircraft like an open-cockpit biplane above sand dunes.

Ambats (www.jessicaambats.com) is a trained pilot herself, with instrument, multi-engine, and seaplane ratings. As a 12-year-old, she flew in a private plane with a family friend, and "during the flight, she let me make left and right turns with the yoke," Ambats recalls. "It was my first exposure to the idea that regular people can fly airplanes—I'd thought it was only for the military." After college, she went up with a flight-instructor friend, spending the afternoon hopping around small airports in the New York and New Jersey area and discovering "general aviation," the term for non-commercial civilian flying. (*Plane & Pilot* is one of the three biggest general-aviation magazines.) Ambats began flying lessons at Andover Flight Academy in Andover, New Jersey, and finished in California, having moved to Los Angeles in 2004 to work for *Pilot Getaways* magazine, where she took up air-to-air photography. Today she likes to fly a Cirrus single-engine propeller plane for



Left to right: An Aero L-39 Albatros (foreground) and Dassault Falcon 2000 over the Golden Gate Bridge; a World War II-era North American P-51 Mustang over New York City; an Oracle Challenger (red) and Wolfpitts (yellow); Ambats shooting from a Beechcraft A36 Bonanza photoshop

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID FARR

pleasure. (She rents these craft, which cost around \$480,000 each; private jets fall in the \$3-million to \$10-million range.)

For shoots, she hires only “formation

airplane exactly 10 feet.” During the shoot, she constantly feeds both pilots directions to line up the planes properly with each other and the background: “Biplane, 15

feet higher.” Even such a small change can drastically alter the composition.

Ambats usually works from a Beechcraft Bonanza with the rear doors removed. (She does not shoot through glass.) A harness holds her securely in place. Working with a handheld high-end digital camera, she exposes several hundred images per flight. Lenses with image stabilization can help, and at times she deploys a gyroscopic camera stabilizer, “if it’s a bumpy flight.”

Midlife Leading Man

Breaking Bad’s Dean Norris, a prime-time stalwart

DEAN NORRIS ’85 is headed home by limousine after finishing a photo shoot with—he kids—“a few underlings from the network”: CBS Entertainment president Nina Tassler and CBS Television Studios president David Stapf. The 50-year-old actor seems to be taking the media attention he’s receiving in stride.

“*Under the Dome* turned out to be a huge summer success,” he explains matter-of-factly. “And it was profitable from day one, so it was a big game changer from a business standpoint.” A rare summer triumph for network television, CBS’s *Dome*, based

on a Stephen King science fiction novel, was anchored by Norris as “Big Jim” Rennie, a power-hungry local politician in a town suddenly cut off from the world by an invisible barrier. Season two will begin production in March.

But Norris is perhaps best known for playing Drug Enforcement Administration agent Hank Schrader on AMC’s cable series *Breaking Bad*, which won 10 Emmy Awards during its seven-year run, including Outstanding Drama Series in 2013.



URSULA COYOTE/AMC

Dean Norris, at right, in the television series *Breaking Bad* with Bryan Cranston

In an industry often criticized for emphasizing youth and good looks over talent, Norris’s leap to leading man in middle age sounds improbable. Yet his stardom