



## Fluent In Influence

By **Melisa Yurjar** | Mar 8, 2023

For photographer Marilyn Nguyen (@marilynnguyen), Instagram is still the best way to connect and meet people.

“A lot of my clients find me on Instagram,” says the Dallas-born transplant, now based in Milpitas. “I’ve met a lot of my friends and potential clients through the app and it’s where I’ve seen my business grow the most.”

Nguyen has been photographing influencers and content creators for a little over a decade now, though she is mainly known for her creative conceptual photography. The artist first discovered her passion for the medium in her teens, while browsing social media blogging platform Tumblr.

“I was around 12, perusing these high-quality photography blogs on Tumblr, wanting to take photos just like that. I eventually got a nice camera and started taking photos, but nothing very good until I got to high school and joined yearbook,” she says.

She began to teach herself via YouTube. When word spread among Nguyen’s peers about her photography prowess, she started booking shoots: creative ones, portraits, prom and graduation. While in college, she marketed her other skills, design and illustration, and found herself diving headfirst into influencer culture, photographing content creators when she wasn’t busy attending classes at UC Irvine.

During this time, she was booking gigs for content creators and models near LA. Influencer shoots are heavily tailored, she says.

“We go into it with things in mind like what is the brand we’re shooting for and what are they looking for? What specific things do they want me to consider when photographing my client? There’s always product placement and brand highlights to consider in these types of shoots.”

These days, the content creator sessions she books in the Bay Area are mostly smooth sailing compared to her Los Angeles clientele.

“There’s definitely a bigger business aspect to it there, more criteria that I have to hit when I’m shooting for content creators who do this full time, depend on it for income, or when they have a brand deal. Most influencers I’ve worked with around the Bay Area see influencing as a side thing, a side hobby, so the shoots are less intense,” she says.

Ironically, the now 24-year-old artistic director has become an influencer or content creator of sorts herself. Since joining Instagram after Tumblr, Nguyen has amassed close to 54,000 followers.

Nguyen’s portraits and original conceptual photography led to a rise in engagement on the platform.

“During that time I felt so creative...I was doing a lot of conceptual shoots, getting my friends to pose for me. After Tumblr died, I started posting regularly to Instagram, and began to get a lot of clients through there.”

Though she prefers for clients to approach her via her professionally designed website, she still uses the platform to schedule shoots with prospective clients, book gigs and network.

With content creation, she says, there’s additional pressure added to her workload, meeting deadlines and client expectations—but nothing she can’t handle. Every experience is an opportunity to learn something new: about herself and the industry.

“My work now normally involves portraits, headshots, lifestyle shots, or shooting an event. It’s always tailored to what my client wants or what they do. I’ve learned that it’s always best to ask a lot of questions beforehand so there’s no surprises, and I can get a better idea of what my clients are specifically looking for going into a shoot,” she says.

Now in her 11th year as a photographer, Nguyen says she considers event photography her niche, though her expertise is in portraits. A lover of music, she continues to explore a new avenue of photography: still conceptual, but now for promoters and DJs. When RecRoom opened in 2020, the downtown San José bar hired her as its resident photographer.

“Now event photography is a big part of my life and I can’t imagine life without it, though I still enjoy doing my own shoots for fun the most, that’ll never change,” the young artist says.

Online, however, she’s also begun to notice changes that are hardly subtle, affecting the way her cultivated following interacts with her work and decreasing its visibility to push promoted content in its place.

“Social media has changed because of all of the data being collected from us. The algorithm will show you a photo I posted [today] a day or two days from now but will show you something it thinks you may like immediately when you open the app.”

Changes like this are detrimental to content creators, small businesses and anyone who relies on social media to grow their business, she says. She says she used to see a consistent, linear trend with her engagement, but now it waxes and wanes sporadically quite often. It’s disappointing, but won’t dissuade her from using the app, as it remains her main source for booking and communicating with clients, finding inspiration and discovering new trends.

She also uses it just like anyone else would. On her own page, none of the photography Nguyen posts is paid for by clients. Every photo is just for her. And that’s the way she intends to keep it, she says.

“Much of the work I produce is client work these days. The ideas are provided by the client, I shoot with their concepts in mind and I’m paid for it. Everything you see on my Instagram is what I create outside my client work, shot and edited in my free time. I think of the concepts, direct, and shoot them. They’re really my passion projects.”