

DOWN TO THE WIRE

BY MARK BECKELMAN

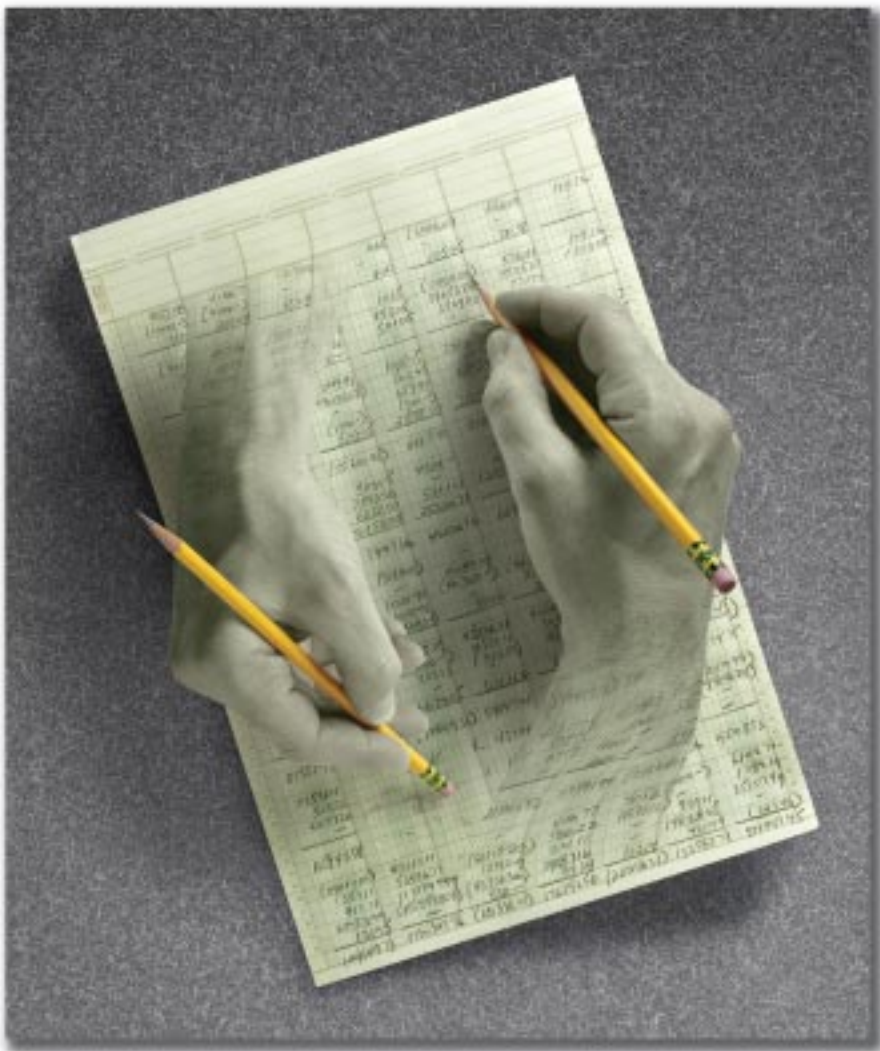
At the beginning of 2002, the Enron/Arthur Andersen accounting scandal was just becoming news, and *Business Week's* art director, Malcolm Frouman, approached me with the assignment of creating a photographic illustration for their cover article entitled "Accounting in Crisis: What's to Be Done?" The time frame for this project was very tight. The assignment was presented to me midday on a Friday, a visual direction had to be agreed upon by the end of the day, and the final digital file had to be delivered by the following Tuesday. A rough layout of the cover masthead and type requirements, along with a summary of the article, were e-mailed to me, which we then discussed—brainstorming possible props or icons that spoke to the accounting theme.

At the time of the assignment, I had yet to convert over to shooting digitally (I now have a Canon D60), so all photography was done on film with a Hasselblad. This assignment, however, convinced me that it was time to switch to digital as my traditional way of shooting. Exposing film, running to the lab, editing the shoot, getting drum scans, etc.—all of this reduced my creative time and added another layer of stress to an already time-crunched project.

In this particular assignment, photography was completed Sunday night, scans were back in-house by midday Monday, and digital imaging was completed by early Tuesday morning. While everything went according to plan with this assignment, shooting digitally would have given me more options had I decided I needed to shoot additional pieces or alter things at the last minute.

AN IDEA'S EVOLUTION

Regarding concept development, I usually try to reduce the idea that needs to be conveyed down to its most basic elements—a couple of words or a phrase that really communicates the message. It's important at this stage to allow yourself total free-



Mark Beckelman's final image for *Business Week*.

dom without censure. It's a time to play, to free-associate. The impulse to edit yourself, to be negative and harsh, is strong, and it's a constant battle to remain open and receptive to ideas that present themselves.

I always try to keep in mind what Milton Glaser, the graphic designer, has written about regarding coming up with the creative idea: "These things happen when you release your mind from its willful demand for something to happen." This is not necessarily an easy thing to do when time is of the essence! For me, getting into this creative state of

"nonthinking" might involve such mundane activities as walking the dog, driving, or even standing in the shower.

On this particular day, I browsed through my local *Barnes & Noble* art book section, where I had remembered seeing an MC Escher illustration entitled "Drawing Hands" in which two hands emerged from the page, each drawing the other. By altering Escher's concept a bit, I came up with a variation that addressed the accounting improprieties, yet still kept Escher's surreal quality. Instead of having one hand draw the other, the hands in my creation emerged



Beckelman shot each element separately before merging them later on in Photoshop.

from the accounting ledger, one writing in the numbers and the other erasing them. A quick e-mail of Escher's illustration was sent to *Business Week* for discussion and approval, and we had our visual direction.

Once the final okay was given, props were assembled. A blank accounting ledger page was found, a conscientious accountant filled in the numbers (and she made sure they all added up correctly!), knuckles were shaved (you'd be surprised how hairy they can be), and planning began for the best way to approach the photography and postproduction.

PARSING THE PIECES

I broke the image down into four distinct elements for greater control, with each part shot separately—the ledger, the background, and the two hands. This allowed both the art director and myself the flexibility to play without being locked in.

Because the goal was to assemble all these elements into a “believable,” photo-realistic composition, I needed to keep the lighting consistent, not just in the direction of the light but also in the quality of it. So my main light, a small Chimera light bank, was kept in the same position for all the photographs. Fill and edge lighting was more flexible—and was adjusted to balance out the lighting and create shape on the hands.

Photographing each hand against a white background provided me with options. I'd have a clean background from which to silhouette the hands, and it gave me clean shadows to overlay on the ledger and background later on in Photoshop. I ended up placing the hands and their shadows on different layers, allowing myself the ability to use blending modes (in this case, Multiply) to overlay the shadows onto the ledger and background. To help make the

hands more a part of the composition, the color of the hands were altered to better match the ledger sheet, and sections of the ledger were distorted with the Liquify tool to curve into the wrists. A graduated layer mask blended the wrists into the curve. The final touch was erasing parts of the ledger's numbers with the Clone tool and adding some eraser shavings.

Throughout the postproduction process, JPEGs were e-mailed to Malcolm for feedback, with final approval coming Tuesday morning. The finished magazine was on the newsstand by that Friday. **DI**

Mark Beckelman is an award-winning photographic illustrator who has served clients in the editorial, corporate, and advertising community for the last 23 years. Business Week, Novell, and JVC are just a few that have counted on Beckelman to deliver their message. A graduate of Rochester Institute of Technology, he uses a surreal graphic style to effectively communicate ideas and concepts. Beckelman was recently selected as a 2003 Adobe International Digital Imaging Competition winner. For more information, please visit www.beckelman.com.