Taking stock: How photography is surviving uncertain times

Last week saw stock image platform iStock release timely guidelines for photographers on adapting to the current COVID-chaos.

With advice ranging from embracing authenticity over polished lighting and staging, to capturing scenes of household chores and the like, the advice from iStock is an apt and helpful guide for stock creatives in these uncertain times.

Speaking with fellow photography providers, the issue of limited mobility is a relevant one to photographers now, and poses some interesting positives in relation to the big I's of Imagination and Illustration.

So how is stock photography surviving the current crisis – and in what way can illustrators play their part in the stock trade?

Dining, décor and daily reality

"There are very few places in the world that haven't yet been impacted by COVID-19 and, as a result, outside shoots have felt the effect," says Kristen Sanger, senior director of contributor marketing at Shutterstock. "However, artists have a great ability to shift to new environments and use what they have available to them to continue to produce content.

Stephen Lovekin for Shutterstock‘s *Words At The Window* series
“Working from home doesn’t mean you can’t be as productive and creative as working in a studio or office setting. To help our contributors know which subjects to focus on, we create a list of high-demand content each month called the Shot List. Our most recent list recognises the importance of social distancing and focuses on visuals that can be created indoors. Customers will be looking for images of unique home décor, working from home, family and friends, and celebrating our inner food lover.

“It’s all about capturing our ‘new normal’,” she continues. “With everyone staying in, there’s been a considerable shift in contributors creating content which is more personal, where family members are now being used instead of professional

models.”

The Shutterstock approach dovetails with iStock’s guidelines on how objects, when handled appropriately, can ‘demonstrate togetherness or the lives that exist around those items,’ which is a very Zen way of looking at things. Closer to home, our own media corp of IDG has also seen its photo talent utilising what they have at home, close family included.

Getty Images is another service encouraging photographers to look around their surroundings with a fresh perspective, as its global head of art Guy Merrill explains.

“(Getty has) brainstormed more than 20 specific topics that our creative contributors can shoot while stuck at home, ranging from literal depictions of remote work, schooling and home lockdown adjustments to innovative conceptual interpretations of new terms like ‘social distancing’,” he tells me.

“(In April) we launched one of the first briefs – Working from Home & Home Schooling – and our exclusive Getty Images and iStock contributors have already submitted over 3600 new fully released assets on this topic alone. Authenticity in casting, settings, styling, and emotion is the default, as contributors are constrained to shooting mainly themselves and their own homes, families and daily realities.”

Of course, taking photos from home brings up its own difficulties, ones which we recently had Tigz Rice solve on the site with this tutorial on photographing artwork during lockdown. It seems Shutterstock has been having the same ideas as us, too, as Kristen Sanger notes.

“We conducted a poll on our Instagram feed asking what type of content our contributors wanted to see us publishing (and) the top-rated blog post requests were advice on how to set up home studios and how to shoot in natural light,” she reveals.

“We want to support our creative network as much as possible and provide them with content to get through this challenging time. Our contributors are finding value and inspiration in the content we’re sharing related to how they can be productive and creative at a time like this – without putting anyone in harm’s way. In fact, over the last couple of weeks, we have seen increased engagement in new contributors creating profiles and uploading content and increased activity from those who are already on the platform.”

Illustrating the illness

We’re all now used to that iconic image of the Coronavirus microbe, the pronged ball that’s been haunting our news feeds for what feels like forever.

It should be no surprise then that stock imagery of viruses and scientific practises and persons have risen in demand both for print and online.

“(Shutterstock has) certainly seen an increase in demand for virus and scientific imagery, simply because publications and customers are seeking ways to visualise the abstract concept of the virus,” Kristen says.

Shutterstock/a_compot

“According to our data, worldwide searches for the phrases including virus, infected, quarantine, COVID-19 and few others on Shutterstock.com were up 97% in January 2020, 255% in February 2020, and 1,920% in March when compared to December 2019. It looks like the interest is continuing to increase by the day.

“As soon as the virus started to hit the news towards the end of last year and the beginning of 2020, we saw artists and photographers in our community start to create content to reflect this concept. Our contributors watch trends very closely and as a result, they were some of the first to create coronavirus-related content.

“In the beginning, the images and video created focused more intently on the actual virus; however, our contributors quickly expanded beyond this to create content that reflects the impact of the virus on our everyday lives.”

Some of this imagery has been illustrative as opposed to photography-sourced, and there may be a boon in art for the sort of things housebound photographers can’t tackle right now.

“Currently, illustrators play a huge part in showcasing what we are unable to capture on a camera and we have seen a recent increase in volume of illustrations on the platform,” Kristen continues.

“Illustration submissions were up an average of 28% week over week (during the last week of March and first week of April.) It is unsafe for photographers to be capturing frontline workers; however, illustrators are here to tackle this need and visualise the experiences people are having right now – in the safety of their own homes.

“Illustration has a great ability to show emotions and feelings in a way that photography can sometimes struggle to. It is challenging to capture some aspects of present life

right now through a photograph, therefore illustrators have an important role to play. Our next shot list is going to be exclusively illustration focused to highlight this. There will be a large focus on people, feelings and experiences as well as scientific concepts.”

Shutterstock/GoodStudio

Illustration’s great ability to show inner life is much-needed during a time when not only the body is under threat, but also the mind.

“In stressful times such as this, anxiety can put a strain on our creative drive,” write Kristen. “(Shutterstock has) experienced an increasing demand for mental health image and video content as a result of the pandemic, and illustrative design can be powerful in showcasing this. As a result, mental

health will also be a key theme within our illustration shot list in May.

“We are trying to help our contributors as much as possible to enable them to continue creating under the current circumstances, producing ‘how-to’ blog content and really listening to their requests and needs, but most importantly ensuring they all stay safe.”

Shutterstock/GoodStudio

Conversely, Getty has seen a slight decline in illustration since the outbreak, but its global head of creative insights Dr Rebecca Swift has noticed a trend in art around social distancing and mask wearing .

“I think there will be a visual representation of heroism

focusing on healthcare workers/teachers/delivery drivers/checkout staff/small businesses that keep us going during this period," she predicts. "There will most likely be more illustrations (portraying) connection, togetherness and unity."

Art, then: it can fill the gap in showing our internal worlds and inner lives, but also that of the community around us.

Related: How to photograph artwork and sculptures at home during lockdown

https://www.digitalartsonline.co.uk/features/photography/taking-stock-how-photography-is-surviving-uncertain-times/