

VIRGINIE GOSSELIN

FRESH EYES

BY WENDY HELFENBAUM

One bright spring morning in a whitewashed Montréal photo studio, a pile of fruit got an unexpected makeover. A dozen hairy coconut halves, treated to several coats of lime-green paint, were neatly arranged on a table beside turquoise cantaloupes and fuchsia kiwis. Nearby, clusters of mustard-yellow grapes dangled from a black metal rack while a clump of cherries waited to be transformed. About to be paired with this vibrant fruit salad, rows of headphones, microphones and old 45-rpm records are drenched in peach and mint green. Welcome to Virginie Gosselin’s world, where everyday objects become show-stopping works of art.

In business a scant four years, Gosselin, 27, has snagged more than a dozen prizes, from *Applied Arts*, *Communication Arts*, *LUX* and the Gourmand World Cookbook Awards. She’s sought after for her versatile skills, shooting everything from lush documentary images to graphic conceptual shots for product and editorial spreads.

Known for her hands-on approach, Gosselin could easily be mistaken for a prop master as she carefully slices a hot pink kiwi with a large chef’s knife and walks it over to the set, her black leather high-tops squeaking slightly on the concrete floor. An assistant suspends the fruit over a pink microphone base as Gosselin delicately positions both elements. Satisfied, she steps behind her Canon and snaps several frames.

“Our kiwi is gorgeous and juicy; look at that perfectly hairy skin!” she exclaims, glancing at the monitor. Nearby, the creatives from Montréal agency *ēthos* smile. They know from previous shoots with Gosselin that they’re in extremely capable hands.

Born into a family of award-winning artisanal cheese makers in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Québec, just south of Montréal, Gosselin grew up on land first owned by her grandfather.

There, she quickly developed a passion for farm-fresh food. While her older sister, Marie-Pier, planned to continue the family business crafting organic, raw-milk cheese, once Gosselin discovered photography in high school, her path was set.

She moved to Montréal to study photography at Dawson College, where she mostly shot portraits of musicians. However, she was drawn to still life photographs of objects arranged in their natural settings, which she attributes to time spent among cows, food and fresh air. Upon graduation in 2011, Gosselin received a full scholarship to the Savannah College of Art and Design. But when Venezuelan-born Montréal photographer John Londoño spotted her student projects online depicting fictitious ad campaigns for chewing gum and strawberry jam, he offered her a job as his assistant.

“I realized that working with John would probably be better for me,” says Gosselin of the three-year stint that she credits with giving her invaluable insight into the industry. Before long, Gosselin began photographing cheese at her family’s farm.

“To me, cheese is really beautiful; it has a texture that’s fun to work with and photograph,” she says. “It just made sense for me to bring my two passions—food and photography—together and make it my work. It’s fun to talk about recipes and taste new ingredients. Why would I photograph people or fashion when I can photograph food and eat it afterwards?”

In 2015, Gosselin and her sister published a book, *Au Gré des Champs* (What Comes From the Field), named for the family farm. Part coffee-table art tome, part memoir and part cookbook, the project chronicles the fifteen-year history of



Right: “*À la recherche du goût* (In search of taste) is a series that illustrates a scientific article about taste and how it is influenced by other senses. Antonin Mousseau-Rivard, chef at Québec’s renowned restaurant Le Mousso, was the perfect partner to realize this project. In his kitchen, all senses are brought into play.” François Émond, Québec Science, art director; Antonin Mousseau-Rivard, Le Mousso, food stylist; Québec Science, client.



© Rodolphe Beaulieu

the family’s cheese-making business. “The idea came to me many years ago because it’s so inspiring and beautiful at the farm, and nobody really understands the amount of work behind cheese making,” says Gosselin. “You need to grow cereal to feed the 30 cows; you can’t go on

vacation because they need to be milked every day. I’ve always taken pictures of the farm and the cows because they’re so photogenic.”

In 2016, Gosselin created another innovative personal project, *Chasseur de trésors* (Treasure Hunter), which transformed “ugly” seafood into gorgeous creatures. “When we think about octopus, shrimp or soft-shelled crab, they’re not good looking, and nobody wants to eat that if they see it; they have to be hidden and deep fried,” she explains. “I wanted to reveal that, so I shot them dredged in flour, right before they’d get fried, and imprinted the seafood in the flour, like sand.” The series was so striking that *Dînette* magazine published it in a 2017 issue.

“Virginie has an exceptional eye, but what makes her unique are her incredibly fresh and eye-catching personal projects,” says Gabriel Lefebvre, creative director of *éthos*. In fact, he notes that one of Gosselin’s personal series—*Painted II*, featuring hand-painted cabbages that appear to be floating—inspired the concept for the very first campaign that he and *éthos* copywriter Rachel Lecompte collaborated on with Gosselin.

That campaign was for *Piknic Électronik*, an electronic music festival staged in a Montréal urban park once a week throughout the summer. The clean, powerful visuals Gosselin shot of typical picnic fruits fused with electronics illustrated the

event’s “savor the summer” theme and were displayed in Montréal subways in 2016. The images were also showcased in the festival’s other locations—Barcelona, Dubai, Lisbon, Melbourne and Santiago.

“She’s developed a whole new visual language and way of seeing things. Looking at her portfolio gave us great ideas for strong branding concepts,” Lefebvre says, adding that for the festival’s 2018 campaign, *éthos* is expanding upon the same concept with more surprising color combinations. “Virginie’s work is so easy to sell to our clients because they can see the proof of her vision and her artistry.”

Following the hugely successful 2016 *Piknic* campaign, Lecompte and Lefebvre were tapped to work on *Igloofest*, an outdoor electronic music festival that takes place each winter in Montréal. The concept: celebrating and defying winter by billing the event as the coldest electronic music festival in the world. The *éthos* team thought that freezing items of winter clothing in giant blocks of ice would be, well, cool. And they knew exactly who could realize their vision.

“The clients wondered if Virginie was the right person because she is known for food photography, but the photographers who had already shot ice photos weren’t ones we wanted to work with,” says Lecompte.

The items had to look like they were “in action,” and Gosselin offered to do tests on her own by freezing different things in blocks of ice and photographing them. “Most photographers would retouch the images by adding an ice texture in post-production, but Virginie wanted to do it for real. She froze gloves and boots in giant coolers, and we did some tests to show the clients she was the best person for the job. She was amazing,” says Lecompte.

Food stylist Heidi Bronstein says one of Gosselin’s greatest strengths is her determination to try new things. “Virginie is so down-to-earth, with no pretense. Maybe because she’s a country girl who grew up on a farm, she has a great work ethic, and she’s not afraid to get her hands dirty. That’s part of her work; you really feel that,” says Bronstein, noting that although Gosselin is young and new to the industry, she’s already proven herself.

Right: “Featured in the *Salé* issue of *Dînette* magazine, this personal series shows raw and naked **seafood** right before they are buried in flour to be deep-fried. I shot this series before even knowing where it would be published. I first showed the images to writer Alexandre Soublière and asked him to write a short text to accompany them. He wrote a story about a little boy’s poetic interpretation of his thoughts as he looks at the raw seafood.” *Dînette*, client.

“Every winter for the past twelve years, thousands of electronic music lovers have been gathering in Montréal’s Old Port to celebrate **Igloofest**, the coldest electronic music festival in the world. The campaign presents the event as a challenge, practically daring participants to party hard during some of Québec’s coldest winter nights. Its double-meaning tagline—‘You’ll stick to it’—promises a memorable experience while implying that attending is a risky business. To illustrate the concept, winter clothing was arranged into festive positions, frozen in huge blocks of ice and photographed in a giant freezer. The artistic direction recalls darkness and frigid night temperatures lightened with the lasers and colorful projections traditionally associated with the *Igloofest* event.” Rachel Lecompte, *éthos*, writer; Gabriel Lefebvre, *éthos*, creative direction; Mariane Stratis, prop stylist; Julien Doré, Arctic Glacier, contributing artist; Visual Box, retoucher; Maripierre D’Amour/*Piknic Électronik*, clients.





VIRGINIE GOSSELIN

Last year, for hotel Fairmont The Queen Elizabeth’s upscale restaurant Rosélys, Gosselin’s clients needed 60 photos during a one-day shoot, including fifteen chef portraits. “That was an intense, crazy day, but really fun,” Gosselin recalls. “When I go on location for a restaurant, I only want to work in natural light because that’s what the [restaurant patrons] are going to see. It’s important for me to work this way. The space was amazing; the lighting was perfect. The chef was very helpful, making sure everyone changed jackets quickly.” Gosselin so impressed the client that she has since photographed several other Fairmont properties across Canada.

Sometimes, Gosselin works with clients whose products aren’t edible but are still very much related to food. For example, a 2017 project for ceramic artist Pascale Girardin showcases dishes and cups inspired by the raw beauty of Québec’s Saint Lawrence River. In Gosselin’s images, the pieces hover in midair.

“My vision started with three colors: dark black with a little bit of purple, and then gray moving towards green, followed by more blue,” says Gosselin. “The texture reminded me of cement, yet the dishes are fragile, so I wanted them to float in an elegant way. This was all about movement. I like doing projects with artists because I enjoy being creative with them.”

Left: “I have been hired by many Fairmont hotels to help them build new and fresh imagery for their restaurants. I had the creative freedom to take this casual portrait of **Fairmont Tremblant’s** food and beverage outlets director in the hotel’s Choux Gras restaurant.” Claudia Emde/Nicole Lapointe, project directors; Fairmont Tremblant, client.

“This portrait was part of a series of images taken for the new website and Instagram account of the restaurant **Rosélys**, which is revisiting the splendor of a golden age, crowned with a touch of royal refinement unique to Fairmont The Queen Elizabeth in Montréal. It was a pleasure to be asked to photograph the ambiance, food and people in such a beautiful restaurant. The natural light was unique and gorgeous!” Simon-Charles Couture-Labelle/Paul Transon, art directors; Brad, agency; Fairmont The Queen Elizabeth, client.

“This image is very central within the cheese book that my sister and I created about our family farm. It shows the beauty and art of **handmade cheeses**.” Julia Duchastel-Légaré, editor; Johanne Depelteau, food stylist; Noémie Demers, prop stylist; Les éditions du passage, publisher.

This page: “This series was created to showcase, in three diptychs, local ceramist Pascale Girardin’s classic dishware collection **Intemporelle**. Capturing the raw beauty of the Saint Lawrence River, Intemporelle evokes the texture of granite river stones and the ethereal quality of sea foam on the waves. Natural and sophisticated, the tone-on-tone collection in its subdued palette of charcoals and grays is—as its title suggests—timeless.” Pascale Girardin, fabricator; Collections Girardin, client.

VIRGINIE GOSSELIN

Bronstein predicts that Gosselin’s success story is just beginning, partly because of her great respect for the teams she works with.

“Virginie is really chill; she may be stubborn sometimes, but that’s because she knows where she’s going,” explains Bronstein. “She can be motivated to change her mind sometimes, but she pretty much knows exactly what she wants, which is something that usually comes later in life. She’s not afraid to say, ‘No, that’s ugly.’ Being self-confident really helps in this industry.”

While Gosselin’s rising star means putting some personal projects on the back burner, she intends to keep following her muse.

“I’ve been really, really busy, and I need to think about another creative project because that’s what inspires art directors, and that’s what I love doing,” she says. “When I see my personal projects on their mood boards, I’m so happy because it means I did my job.” 



This page: “**Piknic Électronik** is an all-day electronic music festival. Playing with the name of the event, we combined picnic fruit and electronic DJ equipment. The images were created by photographing real objects that were hand painted in bright, surprising colors. The Piknic team had the excellent idea of running the campaign over a period of several years, once again asking ethos and me to design a series of visuals to be added to those already existing. This enabled them to continue using the images we had created two years ago while adding fresh new visuals. The result was an extended family of eight colorful, eye-catching posters destined to adorn the subway stations and streets of Montréal all summer long. What was originally intended to be a seasonal campaign has become the ongoing visual identity of the event.” Rachel Lecompte, ethos, writer; Gabriel Lefebvre, ethos, creative director; Mariane Stratis, prop stylist; Visual Box, retoucher; Maripierre D’Amour/Piknic Électronik, clients.

Right: “**Rendez-vous**, a personal series imagined with prop stylist Pierce Atkinson and food stylist Heidi Bronstein, plays with perspective while revisiting the food styling of past decades. I found recipe inspiration while flipping through some old French cookbooks at the Grande Bibliothèque, a public library in Montréal. I really love the art of plating from the late twentieth century.” Heidi Bronstein, food stylist; Pierce Atkinson, prop stylist.

“I really like to work with small artisans because they are always open-minded to creative projects. I suggested this colorful idea to ceramic design and production studio **Atelier Make** to go with its new pottery collection. A simple and fun shoot, where I had the chance to do the styling as well.” Maya Ersan/Jaimie Robson, fabricators; Atelier Make, client.

