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TRASH TALK

Brides dragging their dresses through mud?
It's all in good form for these post-wedding photos **By Echo Surina**

IN THE RURAL EAST COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO lie sprawling open fields. Today, a rare winter storm sweeps through, turning postcard-perfect grasslands into slop. And it is here, at a recreation-area parking lot, that Angel Swanson changes into her wedding dress. With her husband and photographer in tow, she sets out in the rain and wind, treading through mud and collecting thistles along the hemline of her designer Monique Lhuillier dress. The determined crew crests a hilltop, endures the storm awhile and heads home thrashed by weather that was unexpected, yet welcomed.

Despite the rain, the new bride says she got exactly what she had not expected—a picture-perfect moment.

Swanson is among a growing number of brides partaking in a wedding trend that emerged in San Diego two years ago: trash-the-dress photo shoots, or post-wedding sessions. Her favorite image from that day on the hilltop shows bride and groom opposite each other as he pulls at her sash, a photo that went on to win a prestigious photography award from the Artistic Guild of the Wedding Photojournalist Association.

“We were worried because we didn’t know if we were getting anything worthwhile because it was such a brutal environment, but we got a signature photograph,” says photographer Nate Kaiser, owner of San Diego’s The Image Is Found. “That day wasn’t about going out to ruin a dress; it was about wanting to create a specific image that couldn’t be done on the wedding day.”

Photos taken the day of the actual ceremony have limited flexibility because they’re restricted by location, time of day and sometimes the input of parents. These parameters, however, don’t exist during creative post-wedding collaborations between the photographer and bride. Trash-the-dress photo sessions are inherently laid back and fun.

Unlike wedding photos, trash-the-dress pictures are of the bride alone or the couple—there are no group shots. The session is an opportunity for the bride to express herself and the style she gravitates toward—from carefree and whimsical to dramatic and serious, which is just the look that appealed to Swanson, a wedding planner who now recommends post-wedding photography to her clients.

“I felt like my wedding pictures were a little more traditional and didn’t really reflect my own personal style,” she says.

“Usually, it’s really the bride [who] gets the groom to do it,” says photographer Susan Yee, owner of En Pointe Photography in San Diego,

who began doing these shoots about a year ago. She recalls one bride who bribed her husband with a burrito from his favorite restaurant.

Another lure for grooms is that there really are no rules to these photo shoots. As long as his bride approves, he can wear anything comfortable, from jeans and a nice shirt to a vest and hat ensemble. Brides wear the wedding dress and often have their hair and makeup done again, in a style that may differ from that worn at the wedding. Trash-the-dress sessions are taken anytime after the big event, from the following day to weeks or even years later. The location, mood and level of gown “trashing” all depend on the bride.

“For a lot of brides, it’s something different and exciting, and something Mom wouldn’t have done,” Kaiser says. “It’s not moms and dads who are super excited about it.”

For those less concerned with creating cutting-edge art, the post-wedding photo session can simply be fun. What better excuse to frolic in a fountain, walk barefoot in a garden or hit the streets of downtown San Diego in a wedding dress? Fields, asphalt, lakes and ocean—they’re all fair game. Props are also welcome, so brides can bring their sunglasses, Chihuahua or a new bouquet. It’s true some brides have taken a pocketknife to their threads, but all in all, the coined term “trash the dress” is a bit misleading. Most bridal gowns aren’t ruined



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beyond repair and can be restored with a trip to the dry cleaner.

“I’ve certainly seen dresses looking worse by the end of a wedding day than the end of one of my trash-the-dress sessions,” Kaiser says, naming chocolate fountains and spilled beer as common culprits.

“People worry that trashing the dress is wasteful. I understand that, but trashing doesn’t mean they can’t use it again,” Yee says. “A lot of people worry [that] after you trash it, you can’t repair it. A lot of times we don’t trash it to the point where it can’t be cleaned and preserved.”

A handful of wedding photographers in the San Diego area do post-wedding shoots, and they work with couples from all over the world. Clients available for an in-person viewing session see their photos via a slide show choreographed to music. They may purchase photos bound in a wedding album or as individual prints. The photos can also be saved onto a CD and used for thank-you cards, Christmas greetings, wall hangings, gifts for family members or even social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace. Husbands especially like these à la carte items, as they make perfect gifts for Valentine’s Day or a wedding anniversary.

Dirty, soaked, stained and torn are not descriptions typically associated with a wedding dress—but not all brides are typical. From the free spirits who walk the fringes of the mainstream to those who love tradition, brides of all tastes and temperaments are digging this hot trend in wedding photography.

“We drove home thinking the shots were ruined, and it was going to turn out horrible,” says Swanson, who had to warm up in her car after every couple of shots during her session in the rain. “[But] they’re my favorite photos that have ever been taken of me.”