

Blaise Bender
December 10, 2015

Heading to my new home.

Talk to me in cotton candy. Soft sweet cloud nothings. Tunnel with me to an eraless daydream. - Blaise



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blaisebender



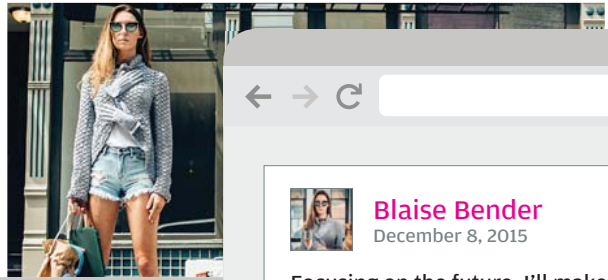
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blaisebender When you are desperate, you do things you regret. I'm not saying I'm desperate.... #commedesgarcons #audi #fendi #docmartens #abercrombie #audi photo by @dustinpowersparks #overtherhine #photoshoot #fashion shoot #models #modelstatus #cincinnati #vscocam



Blaise Bender
December 1, 2015

You move so fast a truth I've been told. But I find blurred shapes fetching, whipped hair enchanting. I raced with a shooting star. I won. - Blaise



← → ↻



Blaise Bender
December 8, 2015

Focusing on the future. I'll make this the best experience it can be.



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Blaise Bender
December 5, 2015

Feel the Glow. Don't look at me with disapproval.



likes

hone Saturday Vibes @BlaiseBender wears @al vintage blouse, @agjeans skirt, and @aldo boots and @altuzarrastudio ghindia bag and @ses Photo by @dustinpowersparks #cincy #cinshoot #givenchy #agjeans #altuzarra #ghiar



PHOTOGRAPHS BY
DUSTIN POWELL SPARKS



Who Is Blaise Bender?

Presumptive symbol of female empowerment? Half-baked social media branding ploy? Annoying Internet phenomenon? Fashion disrupter? Figment of her creator's highly stylized imagination?

Yeah, something like that.



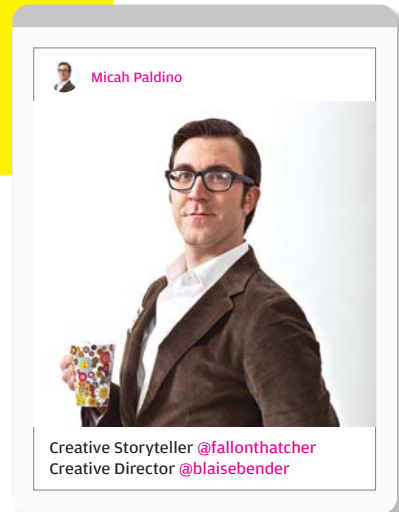
BY ALYSSA KONERMANN

“I REALLY DIDN’T WANT A PRETTY GIRL, YOU KNOW, I WANTED A GIRL WHO WAS SUPER REAL.”

➔ **Micah Paldino is talking about a woman named Blaise Bender, whom he knows intimately.**

“We cast for photo shoots all the time, so I’ve met some really beautiful people. I’ve worked with a lot of models. And I was like, man, I need a down-home girl who looks great without makeup, who isn’t too skinny, who definitely has, like, a good figure and some hips and a nice bust, you know? I wanted to portray a woman not like an alien figure from another world. That was really important to me, to portray a *woman*, you know? A woman who’s vulnerable and who’s going to make mistakes and find beauty along the way.

“I’ve seen a lot of beautiful faces, I’ve met a lot of famous models. But I’ve been out to dinner with Kate [Hempleman, the model who plays Blaise Bender] and we walk in and everyone looks at her. She has that inner spark. She is very stunning. But she definitely—she’s got some good butt cheeks, you know? She’s not perfect. In a lot of our yoga shots, in certain parts of her body [she’s] a little—you know when you’re at yoga and you all of a sudden look over and you have a roll there? That’s there. We were talking all about it. And we had some stylists who were like, *Let’s pull it so we hide it*. And I was like, *No, let’s embrace it*.”



a story for Blaise and presents it as a series of styled photos with pseudo-mystical captions and item listings via an eponymous website and social media accounts. The text is brief, the language vague, the focus visual. The plot, such as it is, is simple—he considers it like a storybook, with “simple, high-level creative messages or themes.”

You can practically see her rising from the coal dust of her imagined home state of West Virginia, flipping her hair (*Dry shampoo from Bumble and Bumble!*) as she throws on her Fendi shades, climbs into the passenger seat of a gleaming gold Audi, and is whisked off to a new life sponsored by a man she just met for the first time, giving even Disney princesses a run for their speed-mating money. This is the crux of what Paldino has titled “Book One: Normcore No More.” Blaise shows up in Cincinnati and goes straight to the Over-the-Rhine bistro Salazar, where a few arty strangers give her some very expensive designer goods, Aidan pulls up, she climbs in, and... scene!

Where you may say *So... she finds a sugar daddy?* Paldino imagines something else, which he describes as empowering. “A lot of the inspiration for Blaise came with, at the time, a lot of the attacks on Planned Parenthood and women’s rights,” he says. “I just thought if we could tell a story about a woman being vulnerable and have it

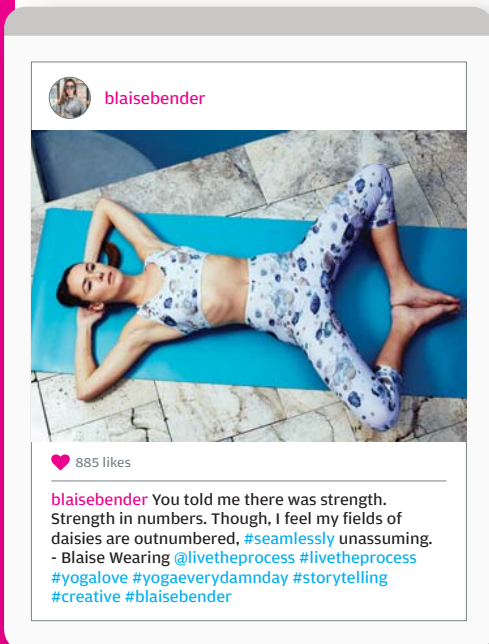


Confused, dear reader?

You’re not alone. For starters, look left. Yes, we are talking about that woman. I don’t know how you classify baked goods, but where I’m from, them ain’t rolls. Also: Can we all agree that *portraying a real woman* is pretty much never commensurate with hiring, styling, and picking apart the body of a professional model?

But let’s back up: Blaise Bender is not a real woman. She is the fruit of Paldino’s imagination. She emerged into this world from his five-person “creative storytelling” startup Fallon Thatcher, which he formed—and named for Jimmy and Margaret, respectively—in the aftermath of the collapse of his previous firm, PB&J. (More on that later.) The conceit is essentially to partake in Internet celebrity branding and aspirational high-fashion

culture through a fictional protagonist. Paldino has long been a fashion aficionado; he loves fashion magazines in particular. So he was understandably excited when *Vogue.com* wrote about the Blaise Bender project in January, which was followed by a flurry of local media attention. Paldino invented



be a powerful [narrative], rooted in a powerful nature, I think that would be important for women. So Blaise kind of is blazing the way for other women.”

Say what? I asked Jodi Wyatt, a literature professor and expert in feminist theory at Xavier University, to take a look. She laughed in disbelief when I repeated what Paldino had said. “No. I don’t see that at all. That’s not empowering,” she says. “I looked at the Instagram posts and thought, *Oh, this is just classically post-feminist*—in terms of taking the hard-fought gains of feminist theory and practice to perpetuate what is ultimately an anti-feminist agenda, to promote a cultural idea that defines successful femininity as white, upper class, young, consumerist, indolent. Unless her yoga is considered active. But that one yoga shot with her legs open is so blatant.”

Wyatt’s initial reaction was: *Look, marketing is sexist, and selling a tired old version of success based on race, class, and gender stereotypes? Not news.* But then she read the précis to “Normcore No More” and realized Blaise Bender wasn’t just marketing a specific product but an ideal lifestyle, coupled with an attempt at making some meta commentary. So, her second reaction: *This has to be parody... right?* “They’re bashing marketing at one point, they claim that it’s the overuse and appropriation of luxury that they’re trying to push back against,” says Wyatt. “And I was like, do they not even see what they’re doing here? Surely this is a joke.”

To Paldino, it’s not a joke, but he accepts the critique. “I think [Wyatt] made some good arguments from the feminist perspective—and class, gender, race,” he says. “I love that people

are talking about this stuff. It’s helping to educate me about things... We never thought it would be this big. It’s so open, it’s so meta, like 30,000 feet in the air.” But, he adds: “It’s early. There’s so much left to the story.”

At press time, Book Two had yet to be posted, but it’s in the works. “The second book is all about her,” says Paldino. “Aidan took her to Hyde Park. It’s very white and very calm and very safe. She spends her days reading magazines and drinking champagne and eating macarons and doing yoga all day.” We’re speaking on the phone—Paldino’s in Florida for a few weeks, working remotely—but he sounds like he’s smiling.

“She’s living the lush life,” he adds, though he intimates it might not last. “I have gotten a lot of questions about *Does Blaise have her own fashion line?* and I’m like, maybe she will. When Aidan breaks up with her, maybe she has to do that because she doesn’t have his credit card, you know?”

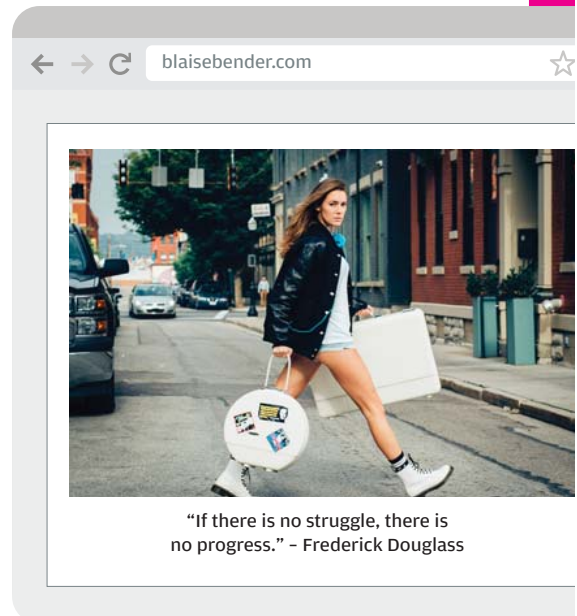
T here’s a hazy, potentially commercial aspect to the venture, in that Blaise is meant to be a walking lifestyle advertisement for the clothes, beauty products, and other fashion accoutrements she sports (Paldino says a client would really need to be the right fit but “I don’t know why a department store like Saks doesn’t do something like this”). However, at this stage, the project—which features at least one of his current clients (Salazar), among other brands and designers—generates no income. What it does generate is questions. Like: Is it a fashion site or a postmodern advertising gimmick? Paldino’s fever dream about female empowerment aside, what objective does it serve? Do the brands know he’s using their products? Ultimately, what’s it selling?

Paldino talks about wanting to show products in a contextual light, to choose items that are unique or come with a story, which is another way of saying—well, here, let the website tell you: “Blaise Bender is a lifestyle. She is an aspiration. She is who you might want to be. She might be like you and me. And then again, maybe she is not. She is who makes sense to you at the time when you need her most. She is a storytelling personae that is a fictional character and became one of us.”

Which is all well and good in the world of advertising doublespeak, but what does it mean? Aside from trying to sell you something (someday, maybe), it’s hard to know for sure.

Paldino worked with a small crew to produce the web story late last summer. Kate Hempleman and Aidan Strasser, who plays Aidan, were paid for their work, as was freelance copywriter Mia Carruthers, whom Paldino hired to write the captions for the photographs. Photographer Dustin Powell Sparks (a regular contributor to *Cincinnati Magazine*) and videographer James Brown both provided their services gratis but are credited on the website.

Hempleman had worked with Paldino on other projects, and speaks positively about the experience. “The shoot went so • CONTINUED ON PAGE 134



“We never thought it would be this big. It’s so open, it’s so meta, like 30,000 feet in the air,” says Paldino.

WHO IS BLAISE BENDER?

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 77



smooth. It was flawless,” she says. It wasn’t clear to her what the plan for the project was from the outset—nor did she necessarily understand it once they were at the shoot—but she trusted Paldino. When I ask if it’s strange to have her face and body associated with another persona, Hempelman laughs. “Oh my God, yes. I mean, we’ve got storytelling, fashion, and social media all at the same time. Some of my friends were like, *Kate, I didn’t know you had this other personality, I didn’t even know you had an Instagram!* And I’m like *No, no, I just show up and do what Micah says for the photo shoots.*” I ask her about her take on the storyline. “It’s definitely different,” she says. “I honestly don’t think about Blaise that much outside of the shoots.”

If you’ve clicked on BlaiseBender.com by now, you won’t be surprised to hear that the words were written after the initial shoot. Paldino showed Carruthers the photographs and told her what he wanted the captions to accomplish. Some are signed as if Blaise wrote them, some are not, but all are accompanied by product listings. The end result tends strongly toward the fantastical, and at times veers closer to unintelligible aphorisms, like Friedrich Nietzsche on LSD:

I was born a wildflower. Now, I’m just wild—plucked and rearranged in a vase of my own design. . . . The faintest breath can bring a whiff of wisdom, a hint of peonies. We’re all just one blink away from a bohemian downpour. . . . A body born of broken mirrors and shots unfired. If you listen, you can hear my pink cheeks. A static warmth. An AM radio. . . .

→ **CONFOUNDING? KIND OF. EMPOWERING?** Not really, but then in a world where sex sells, few pieces of brand marketing are. Commercially viable? Hmmm.

For something of a reality check I

turned to Steve Kissing, chief creative officer of Wordsworth Communications (and a former columnist for this magazine), who has worked in PR, advertising, and brand marketing for three decades.

“In many ways, Blaise is but a 21st-century version of the mannequins that used to be in the store window at Shillito’s 40 years ago,” he says. “You walk by, and the whole intent is to get you to stop and pause and look. There is something of a story that was told in those windows, and some fantasy involved in that.”

Kissing notes that, yeah, he didn’t really get the captions either, but laughs that he’s probably showing his age. Still, he’d be interested in the target audience’s take—a question he comes back to when we’re discussing the storyline: “I’d wonder, did they pick up on that? If so, were they like *That’s great!* Or would they say *Lighten up, it’s just a story?* Or is it possible that their number of followers would have been higher if the story were different?”

Kissing appreciates the creative storytelling behind the fiction, but wonders about its commercial potential: “One of the social media channels had a couple of thousand followers, and that was the largest number I saw. And that’s a nice group, but if you’re a big brand trying to communicate with people nationally, and are accustomed to running ads in *The New York Times* fashion magazine and *Vogue*, it just doesn’t have the reach. That’s something they’re going to have to [figure out].”

Sharon McCafferty, a former associate director of insights at Landor and strategy director at LPK who now runs a creative strategy consultancy, found something unique in the smallness of Blaise’s world, especially in this era of superconnectivity. “For me what’s interesting is, in a world of big data, [to] just focus on a single person, her life—as charmed as it seems to be—I think that’s refreshing,” she says. “There’s not a ton of tension in her story yet, but it could just be building.”

In some quadrants it already has. Internet commentators live in well-earned infamy. But amid the cosmic levels of derision and nonsense, they have their moments of clarity. Take, for instance, the message left on Instagram by one @wilamops: “y’all are literally making shit up and still chose all

white ppl.” To which “Blaise” (a.k.a. Paldino) responded: “More than ‘just whites’ coming soon @wilamops! I promise.”

Lack of diversity is not the only blind spot. See “Book One, Chapter One: A City Ablaze” (We get it!). In one photo, Blaise struts across 14th Street in OTR, suitcases in hand, sporting cutoff jean shorts that one can only assume Paldino chose to showcase those aforementioned butt cheeks. Photo quality: Strong. Model: Stunning. Caption below the photo? A Frederick Douglass quote: “If there is no struggle, there is no progress.”

One can understand how this happens: It’s quote number two on link number one from a quick Google search for “struggle quotes.” But it adds a hefty dose of tone-deafness to a storyline already replete with it. Wyatt adds to this list the appropriation of an Eleanor Roosevelt quote (“No one can make you feel inferior without your consent”) on the Instagram account; the choice of West Virginia as the home Blaise is escaping; and a misrepresentation of OTR (and the Cincinnati lifestyle on the whole). “He doesn’t have *any* of the cultural resonance thought through here,” she says. “It just sort of blithely accepts that those kinds of privilege”—wealthy, beautiful, young, and white—“are what we all aspire to and what we all want, and doesn’t even acknowledge the fact that it is unearned.”

Paldino sees such criticisms as part of the process. “The whole point of projects is to form an opinion, or a strong opposition, of what it means to you—what it’s lacking and what it’s hitting on the head,” he says. “This is definitely a fashion project though. The point is to include the beauty of lifestyle, fashion, and food.”

And all of that further complicates its commercial potential. “It’s one thing for a brand to be included in something like that,” says Kissing. “[But] when a brand starts *paying* for that, the brand is also going to be paying more attention—as they should—to that story. [It] will get more scrutiny.”

→ **PEOPLE WHO HAVE WORKED WITH AND** for Paldino in the past are able to make some sense out of where Blaise Bender comes from. But they do not come to that knowledge easily.

WHO IS BLAISE BENDER?

Paldino started PB&J in 2009. In 2011, he joined forces with B. Emmitt Jones and his design firm Syn/Tax Ltd. to bring a design presence in-house. For a time, things were bright: Recognition. Rapid growth. Clients like Busken, Cincinnati Art Museum, Procter & Gamble, Yagööt. “There was a way that the company was working together and putting out really awesome work for awhile there,” says Sara Hussain, PB&J’s former director of communications and a high school friend of Paldino’s. Michael Altman, who worked there as the brand director, agrees: “The talent level was so high. It was like a super-group. I was really inspired most days.”

But in 2015, after a raging dumpster fire of a year, PB&J collapsed. Paldino prefers not to talk about the denouement, saying simply “my business partner and I decided to go our separate ways.” But in interviews with six of the small firm’s former employees, it is clear the end was not that polite. “He has a great eye for talent. That does not mean he has a respect for it,” says Hussain.

The number of managerial impositions and humiliations they list is impressive for its sheer chutzpah: Paldino belittled and berated members of his staff. He would regularly leave for yoga at 5 p.m. and sometimes go on long, lavish vacations, leaving his designers and staff to toil on projects past midnight. One media coordinator was tasked with cleaning up after Paldino’s dog when it defecated in the office. Another assistant was required to run personal errands for the boss, picking up his dry-cleaning and exotic cheeses for his non-work dinner parties. “It was like nothing I’ve ever seen before in a workplace,” says Erin Prus, a communications strategist (and occasional contributor to this magazine) who worked at PB&J for a few months. (Paldino says that when he went on vacation he usually worked two to four hours a day; he also denies that he left regularly for yoga and made his employees clean up after his dog.)

“Expectations were always through the roof. Which at the time I thought was a good thing, you know? But these were things that were over the top,” says Chris Uihlein, a media coordinator Paldino hired straight out of college. Uihlein says he was deputized as the one-man shovel brigade

for the dog and that the work he produced “was never good enough... it was just so much pressure and negativity and hostility. I had no idea what I had gotten myself into. That was the headspace I stayed in for three years.”

Paldino, his former employees say, can weave an intoxicating web. But once they were caught up in it, things changed. Usually not for the better. In what they described as a dysfunctional office environment, relationships with clients suffered. From an operational standpoint, client briefs—essentially marketing triage, how a firm gets a handle on what problems they need to solve for the client—were not regularly produced. From their perspective, the team was often shooting in the dark no matter how much effort they poured into a project. “It’s a lot harder to define success when you have never established what success even looks like,” says Altman. “That’s how you get fired [by clients].”

“At some point along the way, I believe that Emmitt and Micah were not seeing eye to eye anymore,” Hussain says. “Emmitt’s eye was firmly on the integrity of the design. As the company got bigger and bigger and the overhead increased, I think Micah was just focused on getting money in the door. Which I understand, someone has to do that. But what that meant was he was... saying yes to outrageous timelines, piling on the workload when we were already behind.” (Jones declined to comment.)

“It’s really disappointing,” says Uihlein. “We all actually believed that we were doing good work, and we really did. We were all on board... and at some point, one by one, everybody got sick of it.” Hussain resigned at the end of 2014, and Uihlein followed suit within weeks. Soon after, Jones left, starting a new firm with two of the other designers. As the client list dwindled, Paldino let go of most of the remaining staff: “I remember sitting there in the room, and he’s talking about how tough things are for *him*,” says Prus. “All about him. I thought, I’m just going to let it ride. But [it] blew my mind that he never asked me *Are you going to be OK? You have to feed people, you have a child.*”

At the end, only Paldino, his husband Marty Wisbey (the CFO), and one other employee remained. PB&J served its last client in November 2015.

As for his take on the rise and fall of PB&J and its effects on the people who worked there, Paldino seems to have moved on. “It’s frustrating for any employee to see a company crumble from the inside,” he says. “We were a young company with a lot of dreams. We gave a lot of people without a lot of experience an opportunity to shine with their own creativity. That comes with pitfalls. At the end of the day, I look back at that time as a time of incredible learning, from a leadership perspective to a creative learning perspective. I just wanted to create something really beautiful.”

A kinship formed among those who went through the PB&J crucible. “Everybody was sent through some kind of dark period because of this man’s actions. I don’t think that he gets that,” says Hussain, who still does some communications work for Jones’s new firm, Cosette. “Sometimes we’ll talk to each other and it’s like we’re a survivor support group of people who went through some shitty thing together. But it wasn’t always shitty. There was a dream that was PB&J, and we all very firmly believed in it.”

Altman is still able to compliment Paldino’s creativity and vision, just with a caveat: “He’s best operating solo.”

→ **SO IS BLAISE BENDER JUST PALDINO’S** way of rising out of the ashes of PB&J?

“It makes total sense,” Altman says with a wide-eyed, almost amused look. I’d just posed a question concerning my own cognitive dissonance about Paldino’s belief that Blaise’s storyline is empowering, which he had told me with such assuredness, but which seemed so out of alignment with what was actually there. “He’s playing out his fantasy, to be honest. Like, straight up. And I’m sure [others] would say that. There’s no variation. That’s exactly what he wants out of life. He lives in a fantastic world.”

Altman was right. The four others I asked all said roughly the same thing: wish fulfillment; Micah’s empowerment story; he is Blaise. It’s something Paldino alluded to as well when we discussed how he developed the story. “Blaise is really about kind of reliving your 20s again, that fiery, wonderful, very unstable time,” he told me.

"I try to imprint a lot of my experiences in my 20s into Blaise's narrative."

But this understanding doesn't necessarily make Blaise's story more appealing. "It makes sense that he would create a character that is completely helpless and then gets saved by money," says Uihlein. "It's upsetting how incredibly shallow the entire concept is."

"If you have the imaginative capacity to put yourself into the shoes of someone who isn't you, to truly empathize with someone who comes from a different place and perspective—that is the stuff of good fiction," says Wyatt. "Men can write meaningful female characters. It's unfortunate in this situation that someone's definition of what it means to be empowered is bound up in very tired tropes and stereotypes."

On the business side, Hussain weighs in on Blaise: "It's a vanity project. I'm not sure what the value is that's demonstrated to potential clients. Getting what, 5,000 likes? Is that supposed to measure into sales? What's the ROI on that for an actual client? It looks nice. But does it achieve anything? Does it purport to accomplish anything? When [clients] call you it's because they have a problem. They can't usually articulate it themselves. It's up to the agency to figure [it] out and find the right solution."

As someone who has worked in publicity, Paldino sees Blaise Bender as a way to stretch his creative storytelling muscles. "It's a creative expression," he says. "If brands want to buy into it, then great. If they don't, then it's a fun, creative outlet."

So, say it's not business, that Paldino never seeks a commercial return on Ms. Bender. Does that make Blaise's story any less problematic, any less offensive? Unfortunately not. Because the stories we tell—even the fantasy stories we broadcast on social media—have power. They shape our consciousness, how we understand ourselves and the world we live in. Perhaps Paldino should heed the tags he puts on Blaise's web posts: *influencer storytelling, influencer marketing agency*. As Blaise herself has said: "The faintest breath can bring a whiff of wisdom." ©

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