

Eye-Catching Photography

Magnified images reveal a unique beauty and the usually unseen wonder of irises

Story and photos
by Nick Thomas

If living with an active special forces husband while juggling five children and working as a real estate agent along the Florida Gulf Coast weren't enough to keep Gia Roche busy, in 2021 she opened a unique photography studio at Destin Commons—a large outdoor shopping complex between Pensacola and Panama City.

Gia doesn't snap traditional portraits of smiling families, festive weddings or fidgety pets. Her focus is exclusively on the eyes of her subjects.

"I was in the banking industry for 10 years before moving to Florida in 2014, but always loved photography," Gia says. "I began taking close-up photographs of the fingers and toes of my newborns. I also attempted to photograph my husband's turquoise eyes. They weren't very good, so I had to teach myself about macro photography."

The technique requires special lenses to magnify small objects, allowing the photographer to reveal unseen features in spectacular detail.

"I showed the pictures to a friend who told me they had seen similar images by a European photographer on TikTok," Gia says.

After browsing the internet, Gia discovered several photographers in other countries were marketing eye photography—or, more precisely, iris photography. But she found no similar sources in the United States and decided to open a studio, which she named Eye Wonder.

"I was trying to come up with a name for the business, and one day someone said to me, 'I wonder if that store is open,' or something like that," Gia says. "I thought, 'Eye Wonder!' What a great name."

While she works largely by appointment, Gia also sets up a

booth at regional festivals and events. She estimates she has photographed more than 1,000 eyes since opening the studio in November 2021, with some clients traveling from out of state to have photos taken.

Gia has invested thousands of dollars in photography equipment, computers, software and a high-quality printer to produce high-resolution photos.

"Most people love the final image and frame it," she says. "I also get a lot of optometrists and ophthalmologists who want to hang one in their office."

To accurately capture details of the color-defining iris that surrounds the eye's pupil, the head must remain stationary on a chin rest with the eye as wide-open as possible, just 1 or 2 inches in front of the camera lens. Small flashlights illuminate the eye as the photo is snapped.

"I photograph both eyes and display the images immediately on a screen so people can choose which one they prefer for printing," Gia says.

She processes the images using software, but makes few changes unless requested.

"There are always small reflections from the flash, which I Photoshop out," Gia says. "The light can also wash out the color of some eyes, so I can correct that with a little retouching. But I like to keep the color as natural as possible."

"I wrestled with that when I first started. Should I use the software to make the images more artsy, which is what the European photographers do? Or should I try to photograph



Gia Roche uses special equipment to take detailed photos of the eyes, revealing features not often seen.



Gia shows an example of heterochromia—two different eye colors. The blue eye has brown flecks, and the brown eye has a large blue fleck.

the eyes as they really are? I decided to go for the real thing, with minimal editing.”

In addition to showing the varying eye colors produced by melanin pigments in the iris, Gia’s macro photography reveals a dazzling display of intricate patterns due to layers of pigmentation and muscle fibers that enable the pupil to constrict or dilate.

The combination of colors and patterns is so vast, no two individuals are likely to have the exact same eyes.

“I think that’s a big appeal for people—to have this unique image that’s so personal,” Gia says. “Plus, there’s the stunning artistic quality that’s quite surreal.”

Although images can be printed on any background, a

dark backdrop compliments the eye’s dark pupil and highlights the iris’ color, which is a composite of several pigmentation colors.

Gia says the colors revealed by magnification surprises some people.

“Anyone with green eyes, which are quite rare, is usually amazed to learn their eyes are actually composed of blue and yellow pigmentation,” she says.

Gia has encountered people with two different-colored eyes.

“It’s rare and called heterochromia,” she says. “But to me, what’s even cooler is partial heterochromia, where someone may have, for example, brown eyes with blue flecks. People think I Photoshop in the different colors, but I don’t. They’re completely natural.”

The youngest subject Gia photographed was 3 years old, although she has attempted to photograph the eyes of babies.

“Obviously, it’s much harder to get them to remain still,” Gia says. “The same is true with pets. People walk into the studio with their dogs, wanting them photographed. I would love to, but do you know how hard it is to get a dog to stay still, even for a few seconds, and not blink?”

Born in Paraguay, Gia moved to the United States as a child. She lived in Pennsylvania before relocating to the Florida coast and starting her company.

Ten years ago, tragedy struck when Gia lost her sixth child, a 5-year-old daughter, from a rare brain tumor.

She found photography therapeutic, although she had

not yet delved deeply into macro photography.

“I spent 20 months knowing I was losing her, trying to remember every inch of her—nails, nose, teeth—everything I could,” Gia says. “I wish I’d had more macro training at that time and been able to get some iris photos of hers so I could stare into her eyes forever.”

Today, Gia provides the opportunity for people to view themselves or a loved one in a unique way.

“The locals have been very supportive, telling their friends and family about my photography,” she says. “I love what I do, and I love this area. I couldn’t see myself living or working anywhere else now.” ■

For more information, visit www.eyewonderflorida.com.