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A rubbish still life

Out of the dark

Creating still life images with a touch of Renaissance atmosphere



SIMON CAPLAN LRPS puts his garage to good use, but there's no room amongst the masterpieces for a car.

Today we take for granted the ability to attach a flash to our camera, plug in a continuous lighting source or use the natural light coming through windows to illuminate our still life or table top photography.

However, the great Renaissance painters had

no such advantages. They had to make do with candlelight or whatever seeped through narrow and poorly glazed windows and skylights. Caravaggio famously even punched holes in the thin walls of his dingy lodgings (much to the chagrin of his angry landlady) to create extra



Coffee break

shafts of directional light whenever he needed them.

As a result, the paintings of these artistic giants have very specifically directed light and plenty of moody shadow - and are imbued with a drama and atmosphere we can find very hard to replicate today.

So when I set out to try to give my own still life images that kind of classic feel and atmospheric drama, I found it far from straightforward. There was almost too much light available to me.

The solution was to work in complete darkness (in my case, in my garage with the windows and doors covered by blackout curtains) and to paint the light on to the subject matter with a hand held torch - mine is a simple LED one bought from a camping shop. This approach enables me to control the amount of light in the scene and keep it focused on the subject matter in a way that replicates the limited light available to those Renaissance masters.

It's not as easy as it sounds. You can fail to adequately illuminate the darker, less reflective areas or, more commonly, paint in too much light where it shouldn't be - blowing out the

highlights on particularly reflective surfaces, and leaving unsightly pools of excess light on the table top itself. A great deal of care has to be taken and the brightness or output of the torch; the angle you hold it at; how close you bring the light to the subject; the reflective qualities of the items you are photographing and how long you dwell on each of those different elements are all factors. I don't use a diffuser over the head of the torch, but if you can find a way to make the beam more specific and focused more precisely on the smaller elements of your subject matter then that might be helpful.

My approach is to shoot the whole 'scene' in one long exposure. The camera is supported on a tripod and put on Bulb setting, using a cable release to control the length of the exposure.

I shoot most of these particular kind of images at $f/18$ on a 50mm lens. The camera is set about 3-5 feet away from the subject matter - usually level with or only slightly above the level of the table top. I manually focus on the front edge of the table top itself, with the subject matter usually positioned a few inches back from there. The background might be a further 3-5 feet away from the very back of the set up. This is



Romance in self isolation

because I usually want all elements of the main subject matter to be sharp but the background slightly out of focus. Some people feel a still life has more atmosphere and 'three dimensionality' if they use shallower depths of field to create an image where most of the subject matter falls away into a delicate softness. This can be true, depending on your subject matter and the effect you want to create - there is no right or wrong. It is an artistic decision for you.

The direction of my lighting is very important. The light available to Renaissance painters usually fell through a narrow aperture on one side or from above. That light would brush

across the subject at an angle, leaving much of it in shadow but highlighting some features and reflecting off of others. Such directional light creates drama and a sense of 'three-dimensionality', something I think all good photography in any genre should seek to achieve. For this reason I light the set up from the side, usually at quite an acute angle. Flood something with light straight from in front of it and you'll see how flat and lifeless it can make an image.

Once I've settled on the direction and angle for my light, I open the shutter and keep the torch moving with the head angled. I try to 'skim'



The workman

the light over the surface of the subject matter rather than just flood it with light. This helps replicate that way limited natural light would flow in a dark setting and enables me to better manage how much falls on each element. I tend to dwell less on brighter, reflective surfaces and more on darker ones - keeping the torch a few inches away from the item being lit but taking it closer in if that item is particularly small.

After lighting the subject itself I always shine some light on the background - mine is most often just a basic piece of grey, heavy-duty, textured weed-suppressant fabric I bought from a garden centre. I usually aim this light

immediately behind the largest or most important element of the set up. I feel that having some limited light on the background draws the eye through the image from front to back and helps create that elusive sense of 'three-dimensionality'.

It might also be a good idea to start by practising on a simple object - like an egg or a piece of fruit or even a length of fabric.

Some photographers light, shoot and process each element separately - piecing together the final image through a series of layers in Photoshop. It is a complex and time consuming approach but may give you more precise and



Is there a doctor in the house

polished results and is worth considering as an alternative way of working.

Once I have an image I am reasonably happy with, I seek to improve it further in post processing. I usually have to warm up the white balance as LED torches generally give off a blue light. In addition to subtle dodging and burning, I may also create a blank layer and gently dull down the brightest 'white' reflections and highlights with a very soft black brush set at opacity of just 3-6%. A carefully and selectively applied Gaussian blur can also help restrain particularly harsh highlights and create smoother, more realistic reflections. In addition, I will often create another blank layer and use a white brush of a similar low opacity to enhance any natural shine or reflection that should be there - such as the reflected light along the rim of a plate or the edge of a metal handle or blade.

Of course, before you even start lighting and shooting an image, you have to decide on your subject matter and work out how to arrange it.

I see many still life images that appear to be of a random collection of objects that don't

normally go together. In my view, this rarely works. I feel that the content of a still life has to make sense to the viewer - either telling a story or representing something innately beautiful that might potentially exist in an everyday setting. Some of my images are the collective tools or objects associated with a particular profession or task - as if the person working with them has suddenly upped and left, leaving clues behind as to what has been going on. Other shots are simple representations of a meal or household items that, to my mind at least, feel right together. There is no right or wrong answer here though - your subject matter has to be an artistic decision for you.

I sometimes roughly sketch out an idea for a set up on paper and then spend weeks or even months looking for the right items to stage it - browsing in charity shops or flea markets or borrowing items from friends. I can spend significantly longer planning and setting up a shot than actually taking and processing it.

A big influence is the work of the 18th century French painter Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin. He was probably one of the first artists to realise



Feeling blue



The passing of time

that everyday foods and kitchen equipment could make attractive subject for paintings. In fact, studying the work of still life painters is a useful starting point. Chardin and other Renaissance masters like Pieter Claesz are worth considering, but it is also useful to look at how contemporary still life painters such as America's Sarah Lamb or the UK's Lucy Crick choose their subject matter and structure their paintings.

What you notice with all these works is that the careful placement of each item matters to ensure they work together and give the overall subject matter a sense of flow and balance.

Objects that overlap slightly work better than those that are placed too far apart. Objects that offer a gentle step up or down in height from whatever is next to them, create a better overall sense of proportion and balance. Long, thin or flat objects that run horizontally across the frame - or point straight at the camera - rarely work well. Colours that subtly complement each other work better together than those that clash.

Personally, I like to create a simple triangle with the different elements in my set up. This often

starts with something leading the eye in from one side of the frame (sometimes a piece of fabric) followed by a series of items building in steps towards the image's highest point, with the most important element ideally on the third of the frame. The shape of the set up will then often drop down again in steps before reaching an item that takes the viewer out of the frame again on the far side.

Whichever approach you take to lighting; subject selection or post processing I can promise you one thing: being able to create a still life image is very rewarding. It has got me through the isolation of lockdown during this COVID-19 outbreak - giving me plenty of opportunity to continue enjoying my photography despite the restrictions.

And unlike Caravaggio I have been able to get the most from my art without upsetting my landlady.

See more of Simon's work at simoncaplanphotography.co.uk or at [flickr.com/photos/simoncaplan.](https://www.flickr.com/photos/simoncaplan/)