

Five Tips For Painting With

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PAINTING WITH LIGHT HAS always been a powerful technique that photographers utilize when encountering difficult lighting situations. The method consists of moving a light source around a subject during a long exposure. In most cases the shooting area is dark so that ambient light has no effect on the exposure. This approach is often necessary when a photographer has only one light source, a subject has specular highlights, or the subject is so large that even multiple light sources are inadequate to evenly light the subject.

Although painting with light is a difficult process, digital technology has made it much easier. With a digital camera, you just keep previewing the LCD playback monitor until you have the desired results. The digital file's EXIF data will even tell you the length of the exposure, ISO speed, and focus setting so that you can repeat the task. Here are a few tips to help get you started.

A single flash unit was used at full power to create this photograph. The flash was fired manually, with different colored filters attached.

TIP 1: Use A Remote Control

When painting with light outdoors, you will have to wait until the sun sets to begin your photo session. This means your painting with light will be conducted late in the evening in the summer time, and early evening in the winter. A remote control is handy so you can start the camera and begin your painting without an assistant. Be sure to test your remote control before going on location.

Some digital cameras have restrictions on long exposure times and may not let you expose beyond 15-30 seconds. If that is the case, then take several images that can be used in a composite image using the Adobe Photoshop Blending mode in layers. Most SLR film cameras have a Bulb mode which allows you to lock the camera open for any length of time.



Light

TIP 2: Tungsten And LED Light Sources

In the early days of painting with light, tungsten light was used to paint the scene.

Although this still works today, you will have to use the corresponding white balance setting on your digital camera to obtain proper color balance. Another problem is that most incandescent light sources require AC power, so cords are always a problem.

Today there are LED lights available that are daylight balanced, cordless, and have very wide beams. We prefer these LED lights when using a constant light source.





TIP 3: Flash With Stroboscope Feature

If you have a 35mm camera with external flash, you will probably have a flash with stroboscopic capabilities which you can use to illuminate the scene. Digital cameras are more sensitive to flash exposure, so we recommend that you set the camera to the lowest ISO setting and the flash to the lowest stroboscopic power. When you set your flash to this setting, you also have the option of controlling the number of flash bursts.

Our initial tests with a Nikon SB-28 achieved good

exposures when the flash was set to a frequency of 10 for 22 flashes at $1/64$ power. This gave us a little less than three seconds of flash power per burst. If you put high capacity NiMH batteries in your flash, it should provide continuous bursts with no delay.

If your flash doesn't have this stroboscopic feature, you will have to set it to a very low power setting ($1/32$ to $1/64$) and fire each shot by hand as you paint the scene. This technique works fine, but it can be tiresome holding your finger on the button.

This shot was taken with an Olympus C-5060 digicam in the bulb mode, and a Nikon SB-26 flash unit set on stroboscopic. One photographer walked through the scene firing the flash, while another monitored the camera.

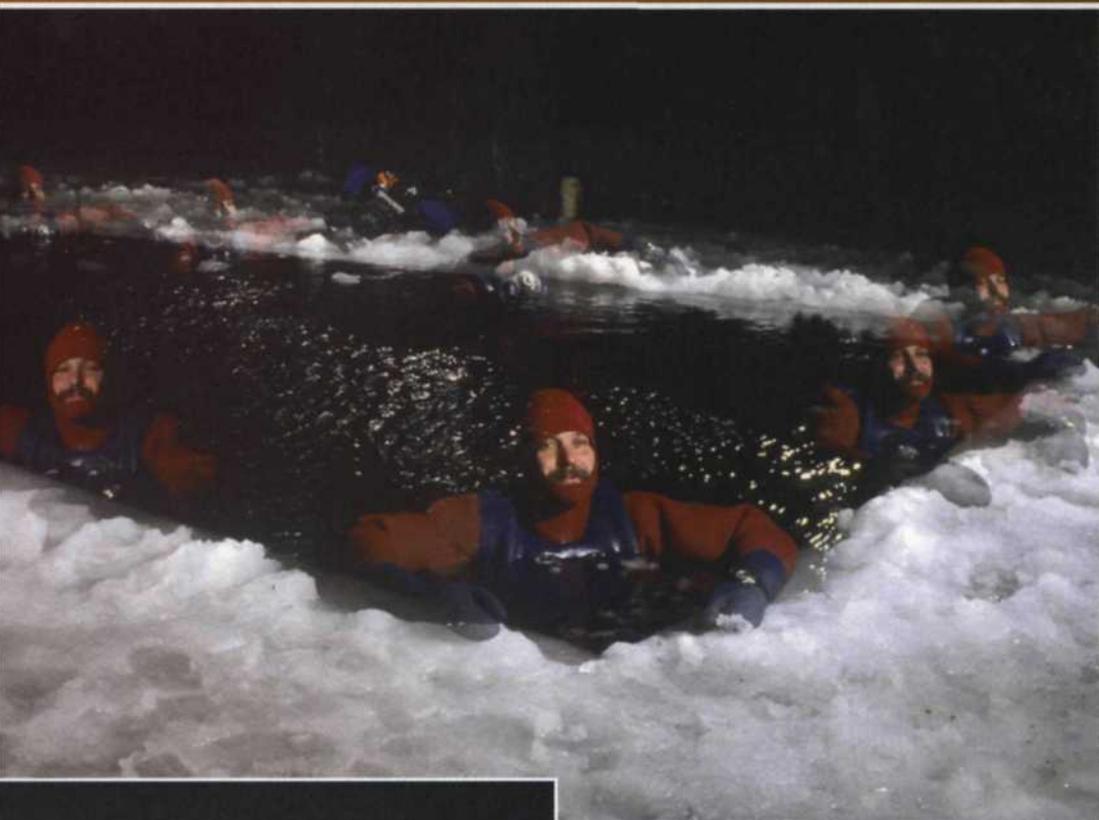


Below: This frog broach was photographed against a plain black background. A single flash unit was used.

SHOOTING INDOORS

If you are shooting in the studio it should be easy to turn off all the lights and create an environment conducive to long exposures. Make sure you have a clear path to the light switch or keep a flashlight handy so you can check settings between exposures. With a good familiarity of your camera controls, you will probably be able to adjust various settings by feel and not have to turn on the light for each exposure change. Most of today's higher-end digital cameras have an illuminated display which makes it easier to change camera settings.





Above: A single flash unit illuminated the edge of a hole cut in thick ice, while ice diving at night in Blue Lake, Oregon.

TIP 4: Techniques For Large Subjects

If you plan to paint very large subjects, you will have to become part of the scene. Be sure to wear dark clothing so that you don't show up in the image. Unless you have an assistant you'll need a remote control device to activate the camera. Once the shutter is opened, hold the light source in front of your body, pointed at your subject, and walk through the scene. View each exposure and add or decrease painting in the areas that need adjusting. Some digital cameras have limitations on exposure times and may not enable you to make exposures longer than 15-30 seconds. In that case, you will need to take several images and blend them together as layers in Adobe Photoshop.

TIP 5: Painting Indoors

You can modify the foregoing approach for painting with light in the studio. After mounting your camera on a tripod and have the subject framed, you should make an exposure without painting to establish a base exposure. Set the flash to $1/16$ manual power, or hold a constant light source on the subject for about four seconds. To begin painting, press the shutter (or use a remote) and slowly pan your light source from side to side during an 8-second exposure. If the results show an overexposure, move the light

source back and pan from a greater distance. If the resulting image is dark, you can increase the ISO speed or use a larger aperture.

Once you have a correct base exposure, you can then add a background spot by holding the light source on an area behind the subject. In some cases the light will be too bright, even when the ISO speed and the light source are at a minimum. If that be the case, you might try bouncing the light off the ceiling and allowing the diffused light to paint the subject. ■