STROBIST® PORTRAIT LIGHTING TECHNIQUES

PHOTO TRADE SECRETS

ZEKE KAMM

VOL. 2

STROBIST

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VOL. 2: PORTRAIT LIGHTING TECHNIQUES

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TRADE SECRET CARDS

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STROBIST PHOTO TRADE SECRETS
VOL. 2: PORTRAIT LIGHTING TECHNIQUES

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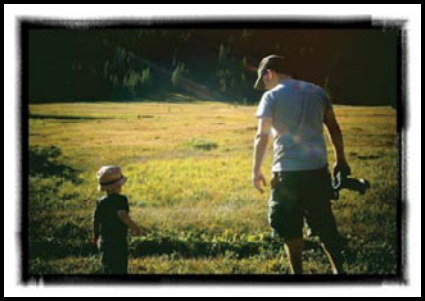


"May your love of photography and light bring you closer to the things you love."

Photo of author and son taken by wife

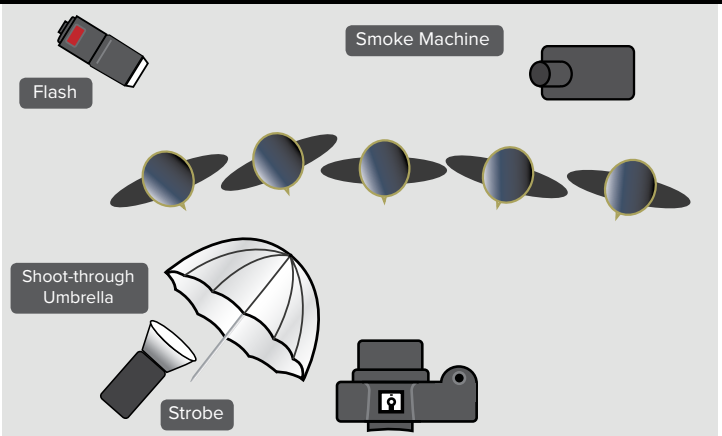
INTRODUCTION

PHOTOGRAPHERS ARE STORYTELLERS. Some photographers are great storytellers, some...not so much. But love it or lump it, every time we trigger the shutter we tell a story. Controlling the light in our images can help us tell the story better—much better. We can use light to tell the viewer what to look at or what to ignore. We can use light to make the image seem funny, scary, mysterious, sexy, or exciting. The same image lit three ways could tell three completely different stories. If you aren't thinking about light when you shoot, you're letting someone else decide, at least in part, what your story is about. Personally, I like to be the one who decides what my story is about.

Still, lighting is a tool, a means to an end, not the end in itself. Practice, learn, experiment, but never let your lighting skills, or lack thereof, get in the way of a good idea or the story you want to tell. Never pass on a photo because the light isn't right. Don't become obsessed with light—or rather, become obsessed: Drink up every drop of light-learning you can. Then relax and let the obsession settle into your gut, your lungs, your spine so it becomes part of how you communicate as a photographer.

If you are scared of lighting your photos, don't be. Do you get the shivers when you decide what part of your photo to set the focus on? How about when to take the shot? Or what angle to shoot it from? No. You don't let someone else decide those things. So why let someone else decide how your image is lit? With just a little extra knowledge and a bit of practice you can control the light in your images as easily as you control the focus. Of course, there is one catch. You can't just read this book. You have to get out there and do it! Go. Take me with you if you like, but get out there and shoot!

— Zeke Kamm
Editor, NicePhotoMag.com



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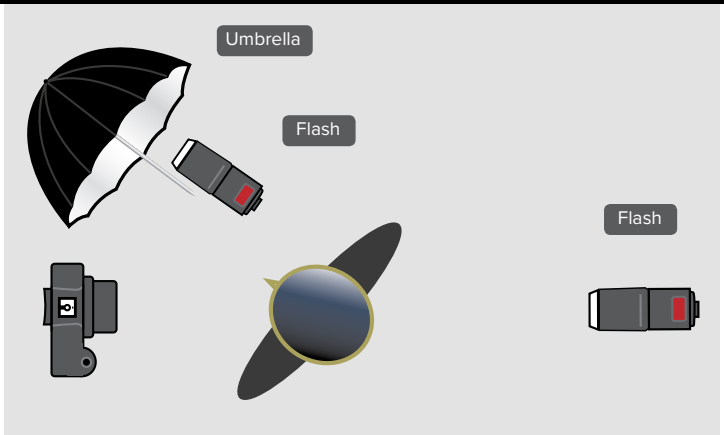
JESSE ROSTEN

Wes Jensen & the Wildcats

SHOOTING IN A small cove, Jesse Rosten dunked his subjects into the icy-cold waters of California's Sacramento River with nothing to defend himself but two lights, a smoke machine, and a great idea. By setting the mood with the smoke—backlit by a small flash and keeping what was revealed of the environment to a minimum—thanks to the overhead strobe and tight framing—Jesse is able to transport the viewer back in time and across the sea.

Photo © Jesse Rosten JesseRosten.com



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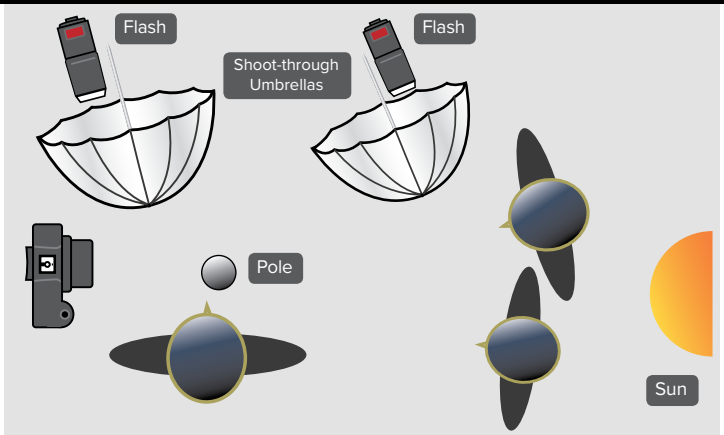
ALEXEY FURSOV

Young, Fashionable Woman

GOOD COMPOSITION draws the viewer's eyes from the edge of the image to the point where you want them to look. Little draws a viewer's eyes more than strong, contrasting lines all pointing to the same spot. To achieve this, Alexey Fursov found the perfect angle to shoot from, then backlit the tunnel to accentuate the shadows between the logs. He hand-held a second small flash aimed into a bounce umbrella to bring up the foreground focal point with a soft light that wouldn't wash out the edges of the frame.

Photo © Alexey Fursov flickr.com/alexey05



STEVEN HATCH

Tongue to Pole

INSPIRED BY THE classic film *A Christmas Story*, Steven Hatch dragged his kids out to a nicely frozen pole at a local park and set up two flashes, each with a shoot-through umbrella. After directing the talent into the positions and expressions he was after, Steven fired away with the model's tongue a safe distance from the pole. Steven took a second shot with the boy's tongue pressed against a plastic bowl and combined the two shots into the breathtaking image you see here.

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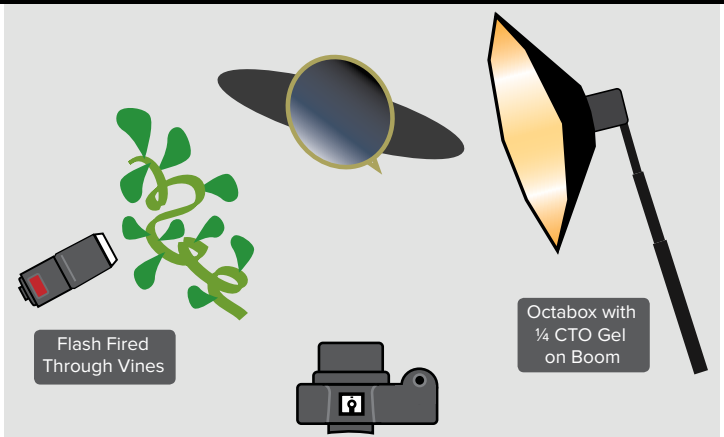
Photo © Steven Hatch flickr.com/photos/shatch



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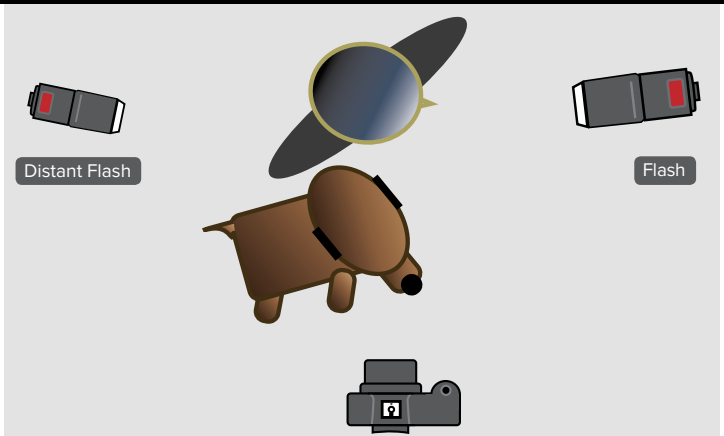
JOSHUA HOFFMAN

Josh Moore Promo

GOING FOR A natural look, Joshua Hoffman warmed up the light from his boomed high strobe with a ¼ CTO gel to mimic a porch light. To draw the viewer into the image, Joshua enhanced the mood of the setting by firing a second light through the bushes without a gel, to simulate shadows cast by moonlight. He pulled the second light back far enough to make the shadows it created nice and crisp. Then he asked musician Josh Moore to play the guitar while he started shooting.

Photo © Joshua Hoffman



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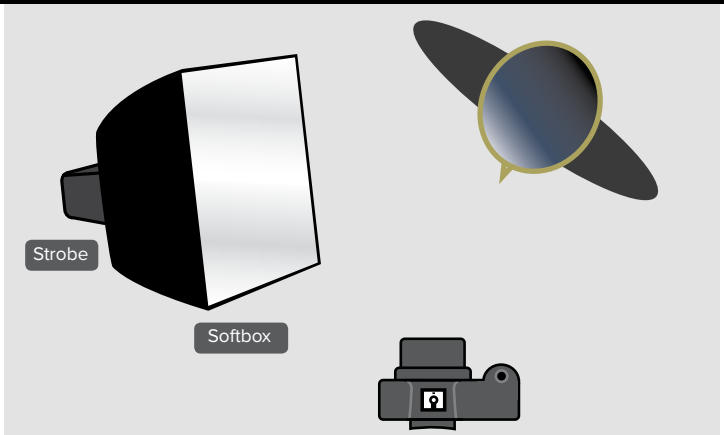
PLAMEN PENEV

Man With Dog

BY SLIGHTLY UNDEREXPOSING the ambient light of the scene, then bringing it back up with two well-placed flashes, Plamen Penev brings out the beauty of the clouds and focuses our attention on the loving relationship of an old man and his dog. The flash coming from camera right illuminates the characters. The one from camera left creates a crisp rim light that separates the character from the background. But it's the man's expression that sucks us in and makes us want to know more.

Photo © Plamen Penev



LAURENT GIRANTHON

Time Distortion

OUR EYES ARE drawn to others' eyes, even in photos. It's human nature. In this image, Laurent Giranthon draws the viewer in deeper by creating curiosity and an uncomfortable moment, having the model cover one of his eyes. He cranks it up even more by placing the model's hand between his face and the light source—a single three-by-four-foot softbox—casting the viewable part of the model's face in shadow. His motivation? "To focus on our incomplete perception of a reality we don't see and don't want to see."

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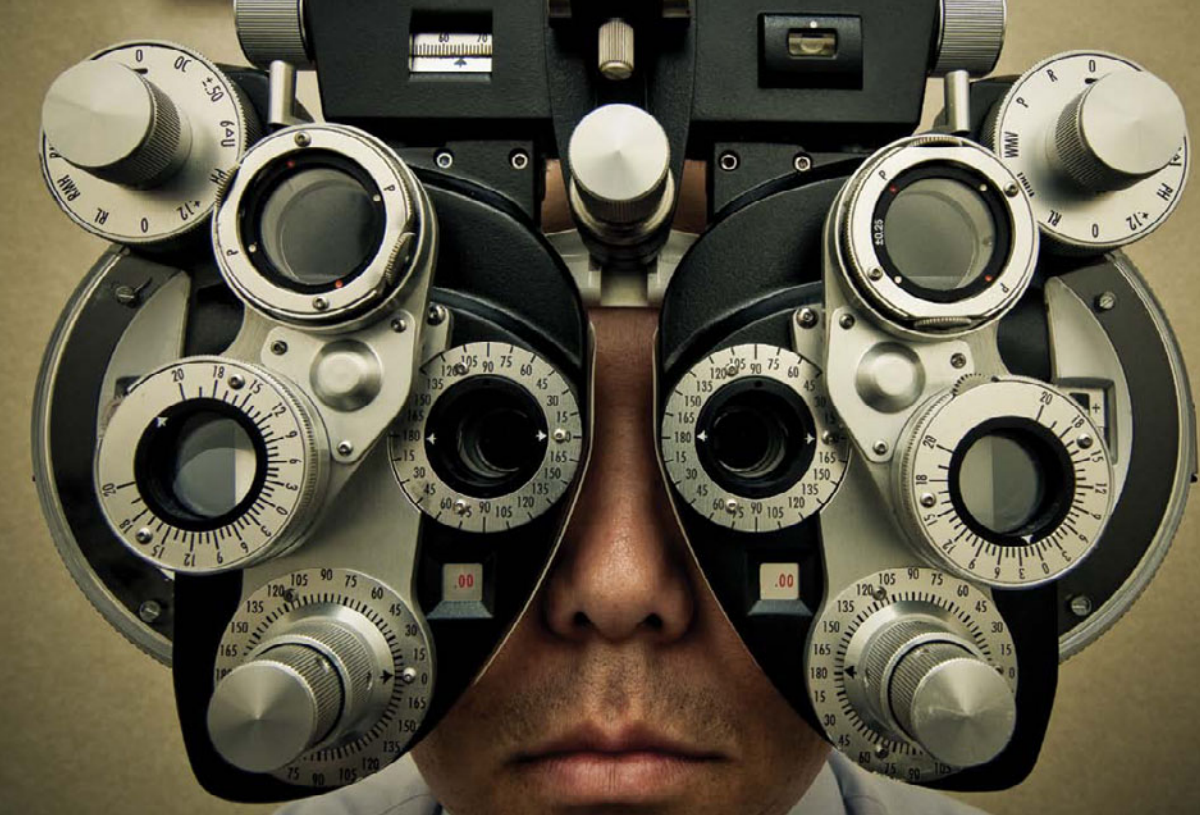
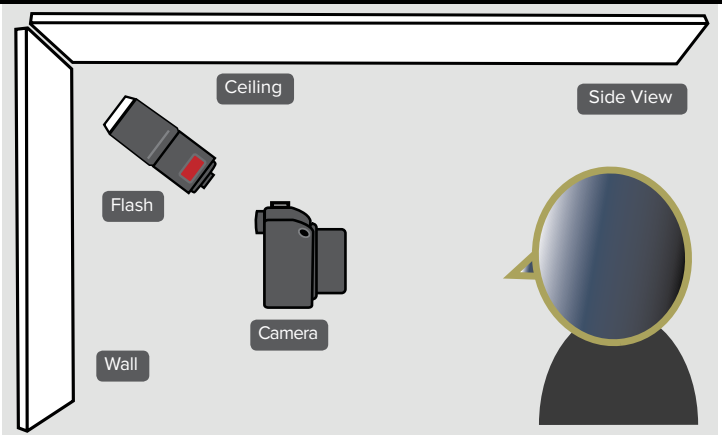
Photo © Laurent GIRANTHON laurentgiranthon.com



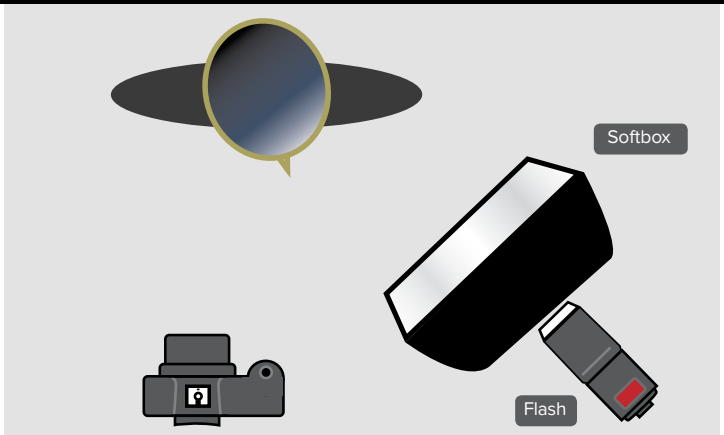


MICHAEL LEE

The Light Focuser

OPTOMETRIST BY DAY, photographer by heart, Michael Lee decided to practice his off-camera lighting at work. In between patients he set up his camera equipment and started experimenting. The result? This eye-catching self-portrait. Michael used just one flash at full power, fired behind and above the camera where the wall meets the ceiling, creating a huge, soft bounce light. The fluorescent lights in the room mixed with the flash to create the greenish look.

Photo © Michael Lee, O.D. flickr.com/photos/thelightgatherer © 2011 TradeSecretCards.com



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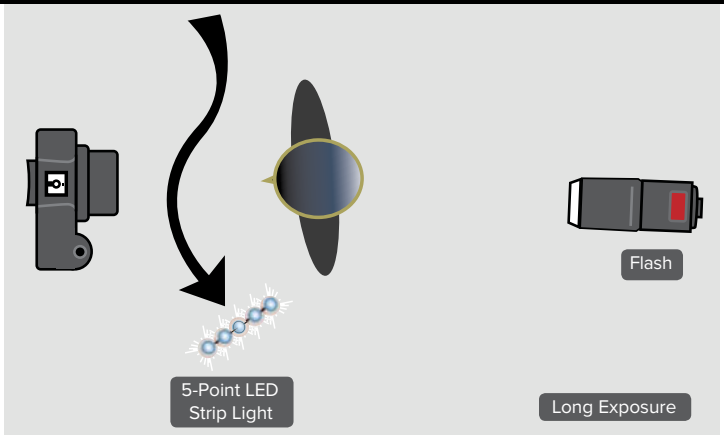
FRANKLYN ESPINAL

Out of the Blue

USING SIMPLE LIGHTING—ONE flash inside a 28-inch softbox—so as not to detract from his goal of shooting a beautiful model in front of a beautiful backdrop, Franklyn Espinal makes sunrise on the beaches of the Dominican Republic look like, well, sunrise on the beaches of the Dominican Republic. Why use a flash? Underexposing the ambient light just a touch and correctly exposing for the flash on the model forces you to look at her. Otherwise you might have just stared at the water, right?

Photo © Franklyn Espinal



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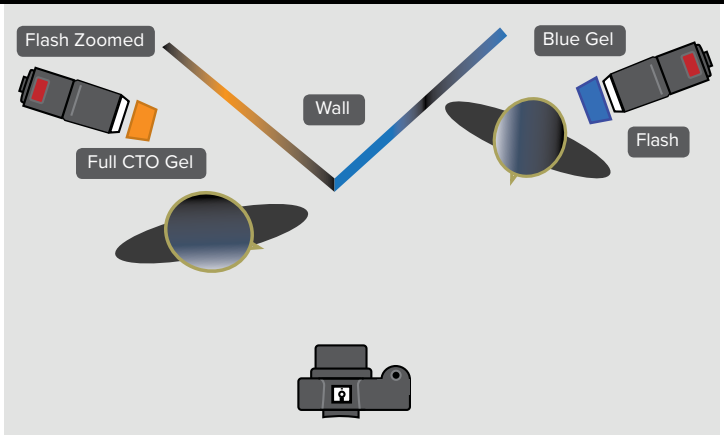
AZ REHMAN

Light Painting

PULLING A PAIR of powerful tricks from his pocket, Az Rehman creates an enticing 15-second exposure. The simulated moon glow comes from a flash with ½ CTO gel. The CTO would normally warm the light, but Az's plans for it are a bit more sneaky. In post he dialed the warm color balance back to neutral to make the blue sky bluer. After the flash went off, Az switched on a 5-point LED strip light and waved it about before the shutter closed, adding a graphical element to an already interesting image.

Photo © Az Rehman



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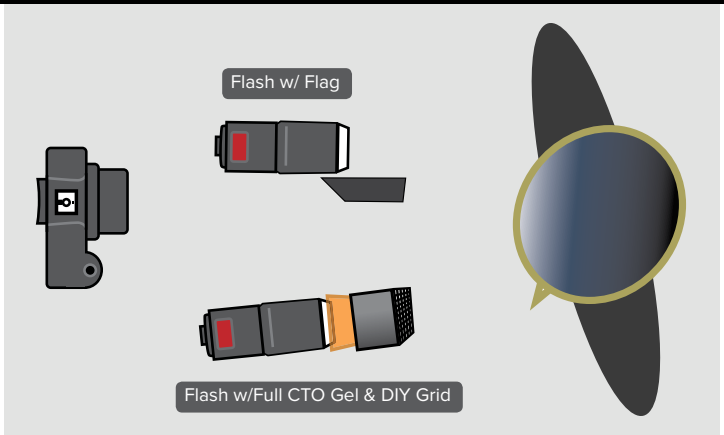
TIM PRENDERGAST

The Corner

ONE NIGHT, BALTIMORE'S Tim Prendergast set out to experiment with perspective and color. For color, Tim covered the business end of one flash with a full CTO gel and another with a deep blue gel. The blue light not only creates a contrasting color and an ominous shadow but also reveals detail in the female model's face. Placing the camera so low to the ground helps increase the creepiness of the shadow and locks in an interesting perspective, helping make this experiment a success.

Photo © Tim Prendergast sensoryworkshop.com



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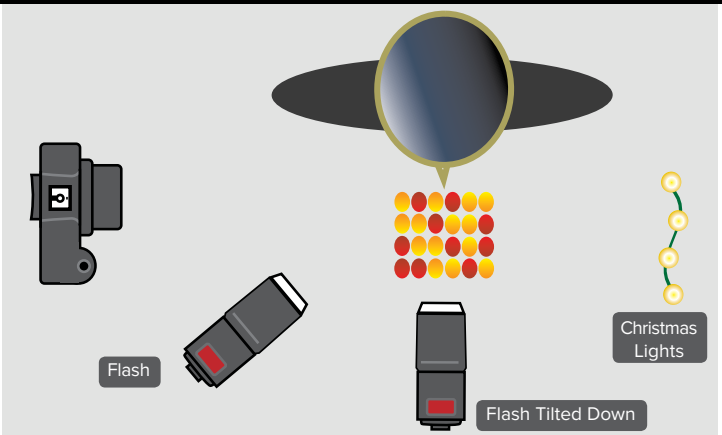
PETER MARIN

My Mug

SUCKED IN BY the piercing stare and dramatic lighting of Peter Marin's photo, who would guess it is just a test shot fired moments before his clients arrived? Peter set out with the goal of creating something different. To get there he killed off the ambient light with a decent shutter speed and a relatively high f-stop (f/11). Then he fired a flash at his face from chest height through a DIY grid with a full CTO gel. A flagged second flash (this one without a gel) completes the package by filling in the detail.

Photo © Peter Marin



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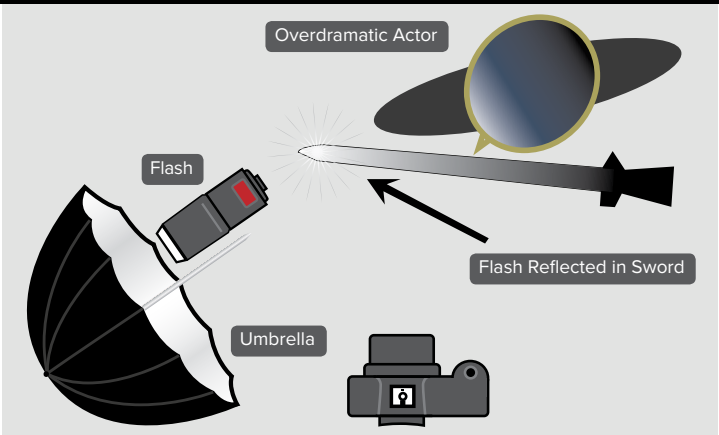
DANIEL SCHNEIDER

Delicious Ritual Suicide

ALL THE LIGHTING skills in the world won't make a great image without a great idea. Fortunately Daniel Schneider had both. The idea? Create the impression of an endless sea of Gummi Bears lined up waiting to be eaten. Not having an endless sea of Gummi Bears, he used a tight crop and short depth of field to let the viewer's imagination fill in the blanks. The tricky part was to avoid distracting shadows. So he aimed one flash at the perfect angle and used the edge of a second flash to illuminate the suicidal confections.

Photo © Daniel Schneider rapturedmind.com



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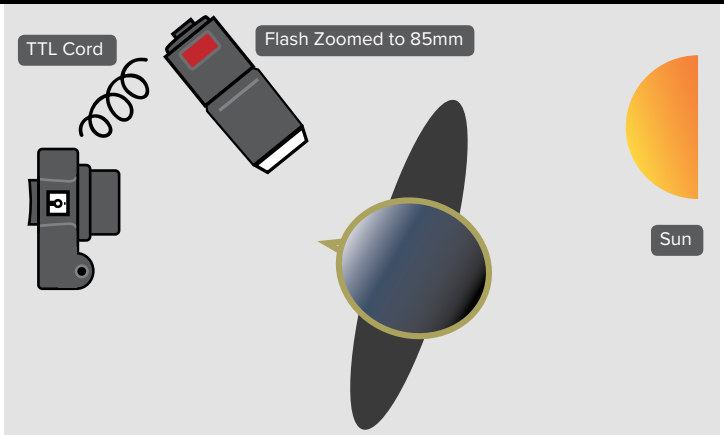
ZEKE KAMM

Man with Beard and Sword

THE LIGHTING FOR this image was insanely simple. I underexposed the ambient light to bring out the dramatic clouds and lit the model (it's a self-portrait) with a single flash into an umbrella. What makes the image work is the insane expression—not easy to do with families walking by staring at the crazy shirtless guy with the sword. The hardest part? It was so windy I had to keep one foot on the bottom of the light stand to keep the umbrella from dumping over while waiting for the self-timer to trigger!

Photo © Zeke Kamm ZekeK.com



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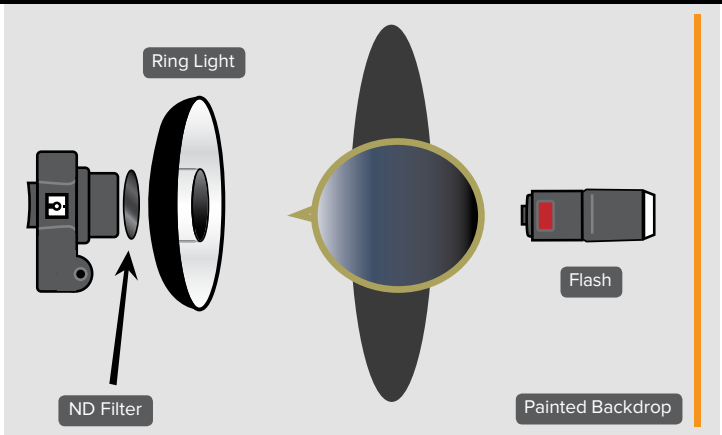
IMRE KISSIK

Esztergom

ON VACATION IN Esztergom, Hungary, Imre Kissik had better things to do than spend hours preparing for the perfect shot. That didn't mean he couldn't get what he wanted. With his lens at a wide 24mm and his flash zoomed in to create that nice falloff of light without the need for a snoot, he used high-speed sync to get a blazing-fast 1/6400 shutter speed and overpower the sunlight. No need for a light stand. He hand-held the flash off to the left. Fast setup. Fast getaway. Long-lasting image.

Photo © Imre Kissik



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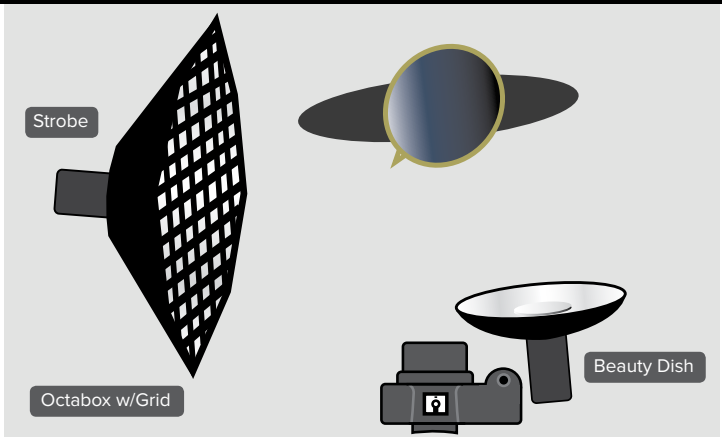
JOSHUA YOSPYN

Josh 21

WHAT IS A hungover photographer supposed to do on a hot, humid 5th of July? Head outside and wrap his face in a wool scarf for a self-portrait, what else? Joshua Yospyn beat down the ambient light with an ND filter and his camera set to 1/250 sec at an f/8. Then he built it back up with a flash lighting up an orange backdrop and the camera shooting through a large ring flash. Lining up the catch light in his pupil was the hardest part. Looks like he caught a winner.

Photo © Joshua Yospyn yospyn.com



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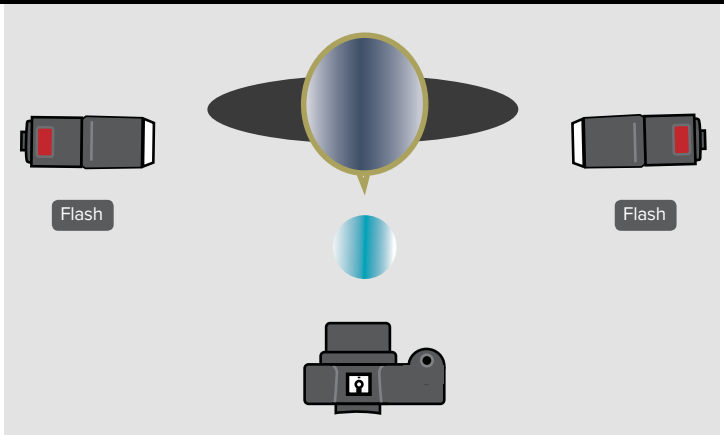
ERIC FAGERHEIM

Waiting for the Storm

LOOKING TO ADD something majestic to his portfolio, Eric Fagerheim headed to the beach with two strobes and a pair of modifiers: an octabox with grid and a beauty dish for fill. Unfortunately, the wind that brought the dramatic movement to the model's dress also blew away all the clouds, forcing Eric to find clouds to add in post that would match the majesty of the environment, along with the model's pose and expression.

Photo © Eric Fagerheim



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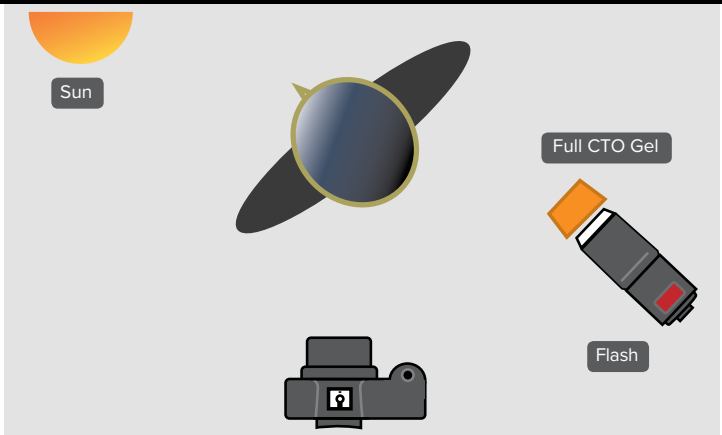
JOSH TURNER

The Water Whisperer

TWO BARE FLASHES pointing in at 90° were all Josh Turner needed to get the high-contrast moody light he was after. Shooting in complete darkness to let the flashes act as an ultra-fast shutter, focus preset, Josh skipped the expensive sound-activated flash triggers and went with the old "1, 2, 3, GO!" method of synchronization. It took 50 balloons and enough water to drown a rat, but eventually they were able to nail the timing and capture the perfect moment when balloon disintegrates but water remains.

Photo © Josh Turner Photography joshturnerphoto.com



BEN SLAVIN

RRG - David

TO GET THIS shot Ben Slavin hiked deep into the woods, which meant traveling light. No studio equipment. No light stands. No light modifiers. One camera. One lens. One flash. Ben warmed up the flash with a full CTO gel to get some artificial late-day sun. Then he had his girlfriend position the flash to cross-light the climber, giving the image plenty of texture and a splash of color to draw the viewer's eye right to the climber. Proving again it's not how much gear you have—it's how you use it!

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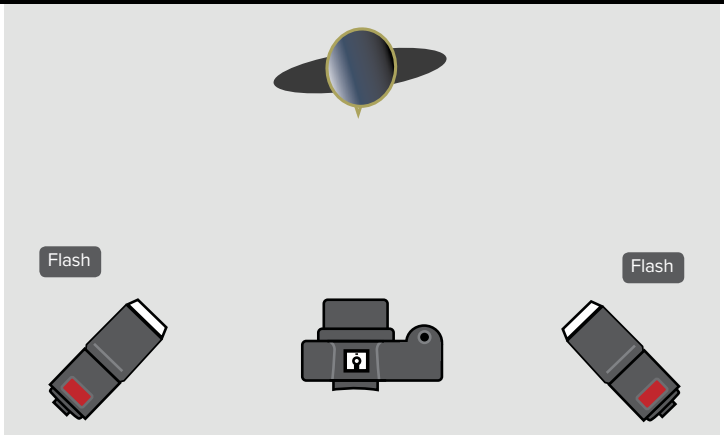
Photo © Ben Slavin flickr.com/photos/benslavin/



JAMES MADELIN

McCombie Flip

WOODHILL FOREST, NEW Zealand. Rider Luke McCombie pulled this back flip high above the head of Orbis ring flash inventor/photographer James Madelin. Fortunately, James was prepared with the exposure locked down, set for the sky, and two flashes on the ground in just the right spot. Flash sports photography is all about predicting where the action is going to happen. It's a combination of skill and luck. So get out there and practice the skill. The more skill you have, the less luck you need.

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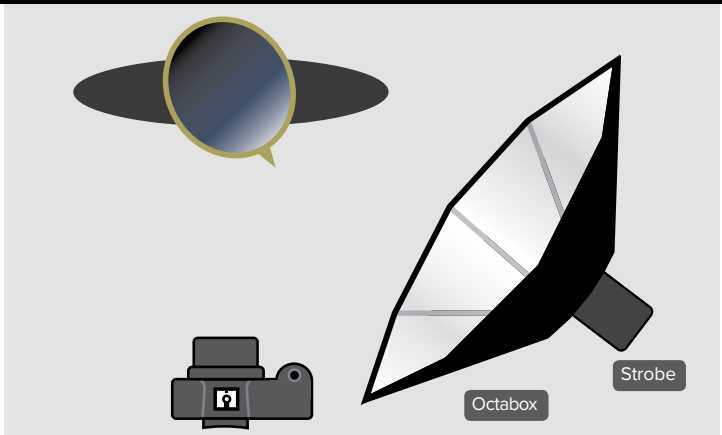
Photo © James Madelin jamesmadelin.com



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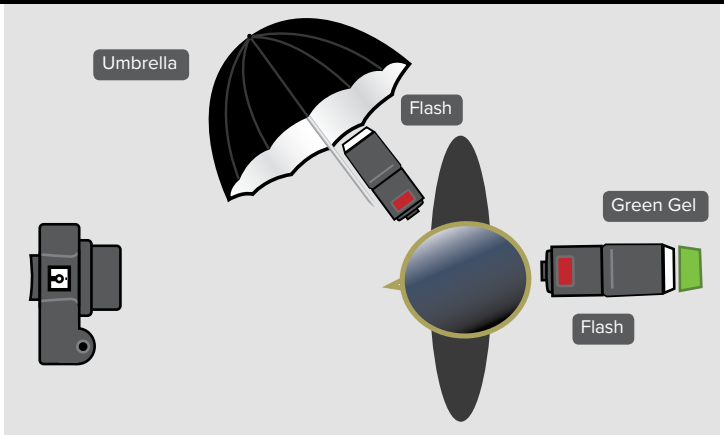
STEVE KORN

Get to Work!!

ONE STROBE SHOT through a four-foot octabox turns what could have been a flat, lifeless family photo into a three-dimensional, emotionally deep work of art. Steve Korn took his kids out to an open field, set up the light, and started shooting, but something wasn't quite right. He removed the outer diffusion on the octabox to eke out a bit more contrast and power. Bam! Perfect. Even when your shot is coming out well, don't be afraid to fiddle with it. A small adjustment might take something good and make it great.

Photo © Steve Korn Stevekornphoto.com

I'M POPULAR
I MAKE FOOTBALL BETS
I'M A TEACHERS PET



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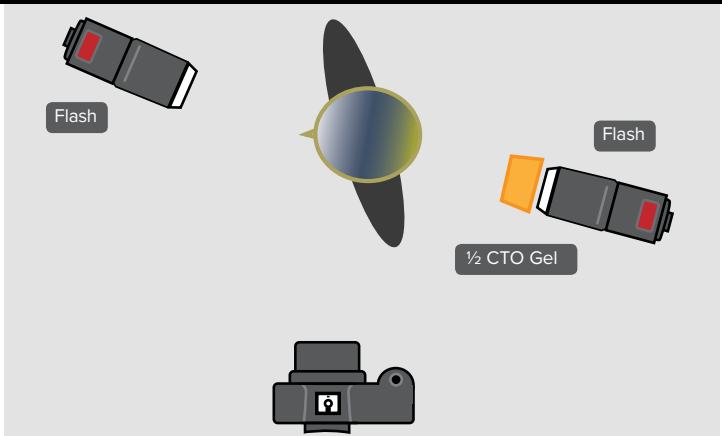
DUSTIN DIAZ

Goggles

THIS FUNNY, WELL-LIT image is from Dustin Diaz's 365 Project collection, in which Dustin dedicated himself to taking a decent photo every day for a year. For day 141 Dustin bounced a flash into an umbrella high camera left and triggered a green gelled flash with its head zoomed in for a snoot effect at the wall directly behind. The pose and expression complete the package, but the use of text elevates the image by forcing the viewer deeper into the character's story.

Photo © Dustin Diaz flashbullet.com



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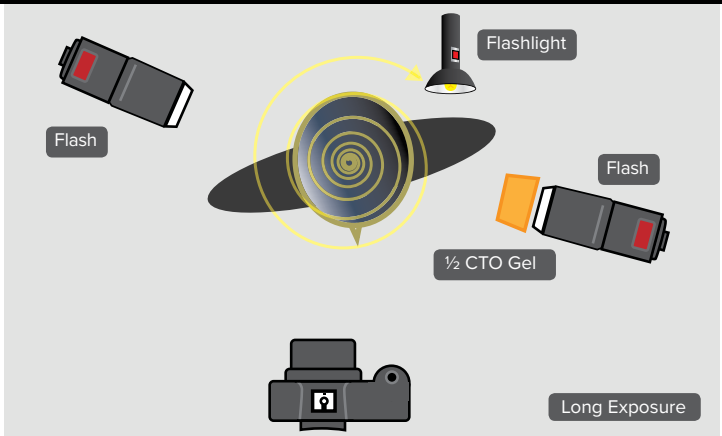
JON SENIOR

Peter Pan

THIS IMAGE BY Jon Senior was an accident waiting to happen. Some experimentation with the model led to this wonderful pose. Then Jon set up three flashes: one for the rim light, one with a ½ CTO gel to warm it up (unmodified to get that clean shadow on the wall), and a third flash pointed—I'm not going to tell you. Why? During a test shot the third flash didn't go off. One look and Jon knew this was the setup he needed to make the image soar. A couple more jump shots and they nailed it.

Photo © Jon Senior jonsenior.com



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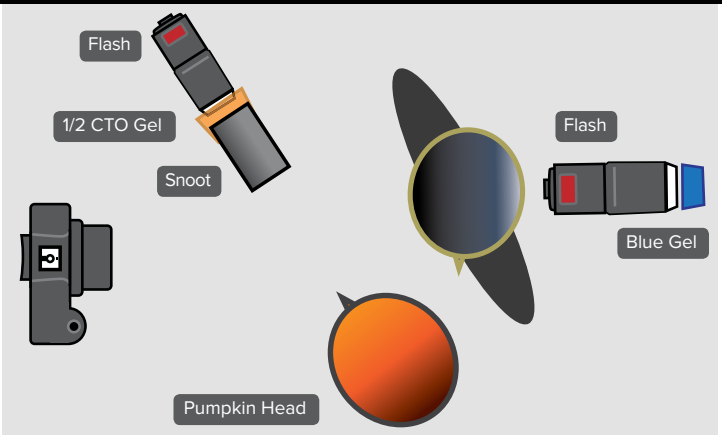
DARREN STEVENSON

Summons Energy, Prepares to Pounce

DARREN STEVENSON HAD two flash-powered DIY cardboard strip lights made from light stand boxes, foil, wax paper, a ½ CTO gelled flash, a small flashlight, and a plan. He took the time to explain the whole lighting setup to his son, including the long-exposure light painting. He had yet to say a word about his plan for the pose. But his son was too excited to wait. By the time Darren walked back to his camera his son had already decided for himself, striking this striking posture.

Photo © Darren Stevenson flickr.com/pa-d



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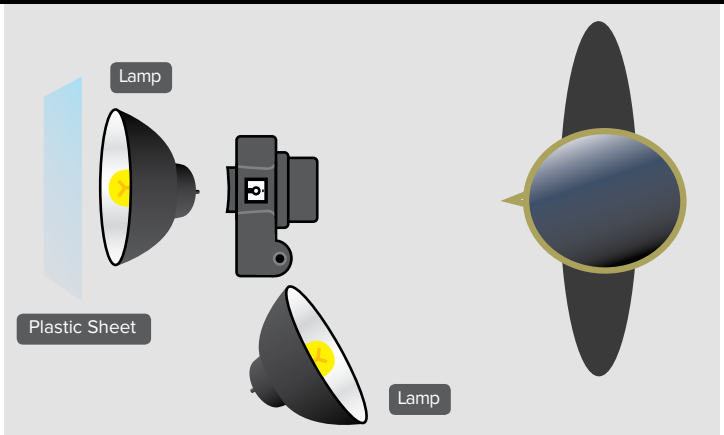
THERESA THOMPSON

Bewitching

SILHOUETTE IS A powerful tool for any photographer's bag. Here Theresa Thompson uses the effect with great adeptness, from the perfect profile to the transparency of the lace. Even the mottled backdrop illuminated by a blue gelled flash proves exceptional. Theresa could have stopped there and had an amazing self-portrait, but no. She took an orange gelled flash and slapped on a snoot to keep the light nice and tight on the pumpkin, not only adding a contrasting color but implying a deeper story.

Photo © Theresa Thompson

BEER



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MONTINE RUMMEL

Beer Belly

INSPIRED BY THOSE cute but cliché portraits where expecting moms spell “girl” or “boy” to reveal what is inside their belly bump, Montine Rummel found the perfect subject and set out to make a parody. No fancy strobes or flashes needed. A living room lamp diffused with plastic behind the camera acts as fill. Take a look at the thumb shadow on the “R.” Without the fill light the second lamp—off to the right—would have left that shadow almost as black as the thousands of hairs covering Mr. Beer’s belly.

Photo © Montine Rummel