



By Mark J. McCourt

**Some critics may insist that no** amount of studied technique and talent can elevate photography to the realm of fine art, because those naysayers think that lining up a shot and clicking the shutter is all that this medium requires of its creator. For the last 20 years, California native Troy Paiva has been carefully crafting often-surreal light-painted night photography, and the legions of enthusiasts who follow—and

emulate—his groundbreaking work would argue otherwise.

For Troy, whose father was a flight engineer, the attraction to transportation machinery in all its forms was a foregone conclusion, but his love of photography came about by chance. “My brother was going to the Academy of Art in San Francisco in 1989, and they had the only semester-long night photography class offered anywhere on the West Coast at the time. He knew that I’d liked going to abandoned places and doing the whole ‘urban exploration’ thing since I was a kid, so when he began taking the class, he told me I had to attend, and that I’d go nuts for the technique.

“I sat in on a couple of classes and went for a couple of lab sessions, where everybody piled into a car and went to the bad part of town after dark to take pictures. The teacher talked about the concept of ‘light painting,’ about adding light with flashlights and strobes while the lens is open during time exposures. My head just exploded,” he told us.

“I wasn’t a photographer before that... I was working as a lead designer and project manager creating cars and play sets for Micro Machines at Galoob. Since 1999, I’ve run my own freelance graphic design company,” Troy explains. “But I love cars and pop culture roadside history, so when I saw this photography technique, I immediately saw it as a great way to document the roadside stuff



### Galaxie

*“This 1966 Ford was on top of another car in the yard, so I was able to get underneath and shoot up at it. It was a great cloudy night, and the clouds were rolling really fast, so I was able to get a lot of nice movement in the sky. I lit the taillamps with a little bit of flashlight, and intentionally left the underside of the car black so it would leave this imposing, Darth Vader-looking black hole.”*

that was already starting to disappear. In 1989, there were no books about it, and there was no Internet. I thought that somebody had to go out and cover the fine art angle.

“It started out very innocently as a



### Kowalski

*“It’s the wrong year for it to really be a Vanishing Point reference, but it’s the spirit of it. That was a very important movie in my formative years; it started me on wanting to go into the desert and road trip. It’s a 1973 Challenger, from Pearsonville; there aren’t a lot of pony cars left in Pearsonville, just a few Mustangs, this Challenger... the pony cars are basket cases, if there’s anything left at all.”*



### Fat Bob

*“It looks like Boba Fett to me. The ‘Silversides’ bus is in a bus graveyard out in Central Valley, California. The place is surrounded by rice paddies, and there were gigantic spiders that built webs between these buses, which are parked in rows five feet apart. As soon as dusk hit, all the mosquitoes came out, and I was eaten alive. I understand now why the spiders are so big.”*



### Floating Headlights

*"This 1963 Imperial is another car in the Pearsonville junkyard. It's pretty straight and complete, just sitting there among the creosote bushes. The headlamps were lit with a little keychain LED light; I held the light against the headlamp, masked it with my fingers, and rotated it around during the exposure so I got it from both sides, and the shadow of my hand was blown out by the light from the other side. The green light was done with a flashlight with a green gel over it. The Imperial's so unique, I can't think of any other car that had headlamps like that."*



### Wrap Around

*"The Studebaker Land Cruiser's in a little junkyard in Antelope Valley, California. It's a small yard, and the guy does a tremendous turnover of parting out modern cars, but along the back fence, he's got a collection of interesting Fifties and Sixties cars. He was totally cool about letting us come in when he saw my pictures, and even set up a barbecue; his junkyard dog was super-friendly, too, and it would sneak up on you while you were kneeling, looking through the viewfinder, and lick your hand. You'd just about jump out of your skin!"*

pure art project that I did for 10 years without anybody knowing. I started shooting on 35mm slide film, and eventually put some images on the Internet in 1999. Once I got the work online, it started to snowball," he recalls. "Within a few years, I had a book deal."

Troy used two vintage Canon film SLR cameras until 2005, when he switched over to a Canon 20D digital SLR. Because he works at night, sometimes sneaking into locations guerrilla-style with only the moon to illuminate his path, he's learned to pack light; "I carry a tripod, and everything else I need fits in a backpack: I have the flash and battery pack, a half-dozen flashlights, a jug of water, some brownies and that's it. It's very easy to slip through fences and get in and out of places. I can do up to 25 or 30 setups in a night, and each setup may have multiple exposures where I'm experimenting with different lighting; I can work this fast because I've been doing it for 20 years.

"People always think of photography as this instant thing, happening in a fraction of a second, so in that case, all the lights have to go off in that fraction of a second, too. That's not how I do it at all—it's a very deliberate and slow process," he explains. "All of my lighting is hand-held, and I think about it in the context of studio photography, except I'm not using soft boxes or umbrellas or remote fired lights. Because I do timed exposures, I can open up the lens, take three steps to the right, whip out my flashlight, mask the light with a colored gel and do a little light painting. Then I'll walk over to the other side, find another

gel and do the light painting on that side. I'll then hang out for a couple of minutes until the exposure finishes."

The often-eerie results we see here are just as shot, without heavy Photoshop manipulation.

Troy's continuing love of exploring junkyards, ghost towns and deserted places to document the final stages of life for cars, airplanes, buses, buildings and other objects has culminated in two books: 2003's *Lost America* and 2008's *Night Vision*. And he's got the seeds for a third: "I want to do an all-junkyard book, all cars; car culture is so big, I think

people would love seeing cars in this new way.

"It's like a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup," he says; "I didn't invent night photography, I didn't invent light painting and I didn't invent taking pictures in abandoned places, but I was the first person to do all three at the same time. I think that's what people are keying on." 🐾

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### Park Lane

*"This 1959 Mercury is in a junkyard in the Mojave Desert with all kinds of hearses, ambulances and other really great stuff. This was a two-minute exposure with a full moon and red- and blue-gelled strobe flash."*