

TECHNIQUE:

Troy Paiva on Night Photography

By Sam Cornwall | Photo courtesy of Troy Paiva

Where are you from?

I was born in New York and moved to the San Francisco Bay Area when I was five. Aside from a few short, failed experiments, I've lived here ever since.

Did you go to school for photography?

No I didn't. My training is in graphic design and illustration. Night photography started out as a hobby, a way of creating personal art, without having art direction and outside influence. Over the last twenty years, it's really become an obsession.

When and why did you start shooting abandoned night shots?

I've explored abandonments and been a high desert ghost-towner since I was a teenager in the 1970s. In 1989 my brother was getting a photo degree at a SF-based art college. One of his classes was in night photography, taught by Steve Harper. He told me, "You're gonna love this." So I tagged along to a few lectures and field trips to the industrial sections of SF to shoot. A few people were waving flashlights around to fill shadow areas during the time exposures and I immediately saw the potential of using these techniques to shoot the abandonments I had been visiting my whole life. I bought some cheap 35mm gear, hit the desert during the next full moon, and never looked back.

Please describe what this shot was for.

All my light-painted, full moonlit, night photography, is personal work. It's intentionally non-commercial—a pure art project. I gladly license my photography for commercial use, but that's not my intention when I shoot this stuff.



How did this shot come about? Did you have the location/angle/timing planned prior to the shoot?

No, not really. My trips for shooting are very loose and freewheeling. While I may have a region, stretch of bypassed road, or town in mind, I never know exactly what I'm going to shoot. Because it's not client-based work, I can be totally flexible and open to shooting whatever the locations give me.

Where was this shot taken?

This was a roadside food stand in Yermo, California, a small highway-town East of Barstow. It was bypassed by Interstate 15 and has been a half ghost town since the 1960s. It's about a seven-hour drive from my home.

Was this a new spot for you or had you shot there before?

I've been through Yermo many times over the years and shot the abandoned gas stations on the opposite side of town, but this was the first time I shot this building.

What type of lights did you use?

This was lit with a hand-held, yellow-gelled, Vivitar 285. The rest of the light is ambient sodium vapor streetlights and full moonlight.

What camera did you use?

I shoot with a Canon 20D and a 12-24 Tokina lens.

What specific equipment do you use to be able to shoot in full-moon conditions?

For digital, you need a DSLR with a CMOS sensor. For film you need a fully manual camera that doesn't use a battery to drive the shutter. You need a tripod and remote release too. That's really all you need to get started. If you want to add light during the time exposure, you can use a flash that can be fired manually, or simple flashlights. It really can be done with a minimum of gear and on a shoestring budget.

How long did you spend preparing this shoot?

Well, aside from the seven-hour drive, virtually none. It was one of those "Hey, that's a cool building, I'll shoot that" as I drove by kind of moments.

How long did the shooting take?

The exposure itself was two minutes long, but I did a couple of takes. Maybe fifteen minutes total at the site.

Did you run across any special obstacles?

When I walked through one of the interior doorways, I felt a tugging on my pants at my ankles and up across my shoulder. I knew immediately it was a big spider web. Shivering with revulsion, I quickly did my yellow flash-pop and staggered outside. Shining a flashlight on my leg I found a Black Widow as big as my thumb making its way up my pant leg. A quick flick and stomp and it was over, but my skin still crawls whenever I think about it.

Was there any retouching involved? If so, to what the extent?

This particular image is a combination of two exposures. When I bolted out of the building with the spider on me, I closed the shutter too soon. The interior was lit properly, but the exterior was too underexposed (even for me). So I did another frame that I left open for the full two minutes, but I refused to go back in there and re-light! I stacked them in Photoshop and used the "lighten" layer effect to let the yellow light appear. Most of my images are S00C with minimal post-production, but occasionally, I've got to resort to techniques like this to get the image.

Why are you going back to film, if only occasionally?

Film night work has an x-processed look, as the grain pops, contrast increases due to reciprocity failure, and the color temps of the ambient lights wreak havoc. My old film night work has a Holga-esque, skronky quality that many people find endearing. Still, I moved to digital in 2005 and never looked back. I occasionally shoot film during my workshops to illustrate that making sixty-minute exposures with massively long star trails can't be done with a DSLR (because the sensor overheats)—but even that can be simulated with consecutive, stacked images in Photoshop.

Do you have a favorite film you always rely on? Are there any new films you are experimenting with?

Back in the film era, I used almost exclusively Kodak 160T, a now discontinued, tungsten balanced chrome film. In the early days of Hollywood, tungsten film, with its strong blue cast, was used to create a "day for night" look—shoot during the day, underexpose by 2-3 stops and you'd have images that look like they're bathed in cool, blue moonlight. If I shoot film today it usually ends up being Kodak 100VS. The color saturation with that film really compliments my colored light painting.

How has your technique evolved?

Digital changed everything. The ability tochimp the shot on the back of your DSLR before you ever pick up the tripod revolutionized night photography. In the film era, I would set up, do the shot and HOPE I got it right. With digital, I just keep reviewing the image on the back of the camera and reshoot it until I get exactly what I want. This allows me to attempt much more complex and sophisticated lighting set ups.

Where has the pursuit of the next shot taken you? All over the West?

Yeah, I've done this work in every state West of the Rockies.

Is there any one spot on your dream list that you haven't made it to or found yet?

No, not very much. I love the lonely, wide-open spaces and lack of man-made ambient light that exists in the desert. Last year I traveled to England to give a lecture on my technique and managed to get three nights of shooting in the UK—at a WWII POW camp, a train junkyard, and a plane bone yard, all under typically British, socked in and rainy skies. The entire country seems to be bathed in sodium vapor light. I was happy with the work, but shooting in these conditions is a very different aesthetic. There's interesting abandoned locations everywhere, but I'll take shooting in the warm, quiet deserts of California, Nevada and Arizona any day.

How do you research and track down new locations?

So much of it is just heading out to the desert and driving around on the forgotten local roads. I get ideas from old road maps too. I have a fifty-year-old Shell Oil map of Nevada and it's covered with little towns that don't even appear on modern maps. I also use the Internet—Google Earth has become invaluable for assessing locations. I get a lot of word of mouth recommendations too.

Do you have particular locales or ghost towns that continue to draw you back?

I always come back to the aircraft bone yards. The sight of a 747 with its nose and wings clipped off, sitting on its belly, weeping hydraulic fluid in the sand is an incredibly evocative sight. These locations are virtually impossible to access without paying astronomical fees anymore, but I have a connection that keeps coming through for me.

How many times has Johnny Law thought you were a terrorist?

Not a terrorist specifically, but I've been questioned by every kind of cop imaginable, countless times. Dealing with authorities and property owners is a complex dance that you have to master to do this kind of photography. My standard three-point tip: Always carry samples of your work to show them, because they will be skeptical that you're "taking pictures . . . at night?" Plus showing them interesting pictures calms them and changes the conversation from "You're trespassing and I'm going to bust you" to "Wow, that's cool, how did you do that?" Don't run. If you make them chase you, you're only admitting guilt and they'll hate you for making them sweat. If they catch you, nothing you can do from that point on will make them treat you well. Understand the ramifications of trespassing in the location you're shooting. Sneaking into an abandoned gas station or warehouse has less potential for problems with authorities than sneaking into functioning infrastructure. If you get caught shooting on the tarmac of a functioning airport, don't expect to be released with a simple warning.

Any good stories about your run-ins with cops, property owners or security guards?

One time I was shooting an old pet cemetery outside of Ajo, Arizona, about seventy-five miles from the Mexican border. A very quiet, isolated spot. After shooting for about an hour, I noticed a Cessna slowly circling overhead. A few minutes later, two cars, blue and red lights blazing on their roofs, approached on the highway from both the North and South at about 100mph. They careened into the parking lot in a dramatic cloud of dust. At the same time, a Jeep came bouncing out of the gully to the West. I was simultaneously hit by spotlights coming from three different directions. Moments later, several more cars showed up. Before I knew what was happening, I was surrounded by over fifteen very serious and heavily armed Border Patrol agents. Even though the site was public with no hours posted, they threw me out "for my own safety" because "the surrounding hills are filled with desperate fugitives that wouldn't think twice about sticking a knife in your neck and stealing your car." That was the biggest, most ridiculous bust I've ever experienced.

Do you ever pursue the history of these locations? What they were? Who owned them or worked or lived there?

Sure, all the time. I've done two books (Lost America: The Abandoned Roadside West, 2003, MBI Publishing, and Night Vision: The Art of Urban Exploration, 2008, Chronicle Books) and the publishers required a lot of historical data about the locations. The historical aspect enhances the images, but my intention is to create imagery that can stand alone, without written explanation.

When and why did you start sharing your knowledge through teaching?

I've always been very open about what I'm doing. The Technique page on my website is as long as your arm and lays out my process in great detail. I teach workshops in an abandoned high desert car junkyard a couple times a year, too. This kind of photography is an adventure. Every trip is filled with peak experiences. It's extremely gratifying when you come away with a great image, because night shooting and light painting are so difficult to master. I enjoy sharing that because I want more people to go out and have these bizarre and exciting experiences.

Is there any advice you'd give to a young photographer working on night projects?

Light painting is about practice, so set up in your house or garage and light paint mundane objects like your water heater or washer, so that you understand what works and what doesn't. That way you're more prepared when you actually get out in the field to shoot real subjects. Just get out there and shoot. The hardest part of doing this is dragging yourself out of your warm home on a cold night.

After twenty years of night photography, two books, numerous workshops and a countless amount of images, how do you keep it fresh and your interest piqued?

I still simply love the act of doing it. You know the awe that most normal people feel when they visit Yosemite Valley or the Grand Canyon? I get that same feeling standing, alone, under a full moon, in the middle of a ghost town, an abandoned military complex or a junkyard filled with airliners and locomotives. These sites have always been powerfully evocative and thrilling for me, and I really get off on capturing that feeling with my camera. And because these sites come and go and are constantly evolving, it's always a new experience. I don't expect I'll ever really tire of it or run out of new locations to explore.