

DIFFERENT METHODS OF LIGHTING



1 HARD LIGHT a torch with diffuser, held without motion at a distance



2 SOFT LIGHT using a softbox or umbrella, this gives a typical studio-lighting look



3 SCULPTURAL LIGHT a torch with diffuser, held closely, with movement

Sculpt a still life

Fine-art photographer Harold Ross explains how to paint with light

I began light painting almost 30 years ago, initially as a way to solve lighting issues. I immediately saw, though, that the areas of an image that were light painted were much more beautiful than the rest. Right away, I started using light painting, or sculpting with light, for all of my photography.

The process involves painting (not pointing) the light on to the subject in a darkened environment over time, in a very controlled way. With proximity (of the light to the subject) and motion, we use a relatively small (hard) light but are able to capture the beauty of a soft light.

By making several captures we can optimise the lighting for each element of the image. This gives us unparalleled texture,

detail and shape, while imparting a softness, which I find beautiful.

These captures are then easily blended in Photoshop using layers and masking.

In the days of film, this light had to be applied 'perfectly' on one piece of transparency film. This was a challenge, and required sophisticated equipment. Today, because we can (and should) combine multiple captures, which are later masked together, we can use an ordinary torch (with diffusion) and two or three other very simple pieces of equipment.

Of course, you also need a camera and a sturdy tripod, as well as a computer, as I highly recommend shooting tethered. I always say that the camera is the least important part of

the kit; it is the lighting and post-processing that create the look of the images. I use Capture One for tethering and raw processing, and Photoshop for layering the images together.

It's very easy to get started, but it requires patience and possibly some guidance to get it right. Shooting tethered is a huge help and I like to refer to the capture software as 'the world's best light meter', as we can determine exposure corrections very easily and quickly. We can also check critical focus very well, look at potential cropping and judge detail. These things aren't possible on a camera display.

One of the biggest challenges is getting used to controlling the light and seeing what works, through trial and error. Seeing the 'pool of light' precisely and the distribution of the light, and using the edge of the cone of light for texture – all at the same time – takes some practice.

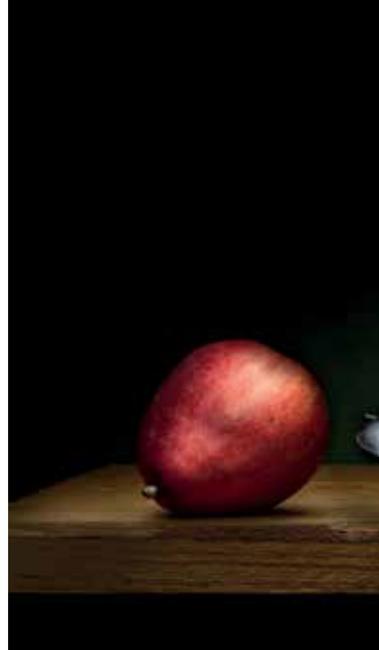
In masking, the most challenging part is learning how to create masks with smooth gradients, and using the mask in a sculptural way, much like a painter does with pigment. This phase is very rewarding (and fun) and, when masking, we are actually painting with light a second time.



STANDARD



SCULPTED



BASIC PROCESS

- 1** Set up your scene and position your camera and tripod
- 2** Set a slow shutter speed of at least a few seconds, depending on your base light set-up. Most light sculpting will be done in very low light to allow



ADVANTAGES OF SCULPTING WITH LIGHT

1 The method gives us the benefits of a small light source (a surgical application of light, great texture, dimension and colour saturation), while also giving us the beauty of a large light source (the soft gradation of highlight-to-shadow transitions).

2 Fine control of light is easier – just move your hand.

3 We can easily compensate for the brightness of everything in the image. This means that we can have a lump of coal next to a pile of salt, and both can have tremendous detail.

4 We can locally skim the light for tremendous amounts of texture.

5 The dimension of objects can be enhanced by using slightly differing lighting directions for various parts of the image.

6 The look and feel of light painting can be beautiful; it can resemble painting or illustration.

7 With no need for reflectors, mirrors, light stands etc, the set is uncluttered, and the tools are cheaper and easier to store.

maximum control

3 Open the shutter and start painting an element of your scene with your light source – a torch with diffuser, LED panel or similar

4 Review your results and repeat step 3 until you are happy with the lighting of that element

5 Open the shutter and start painting the next element

6 Repeat step 5 until you are happy you have lit every element of your shot

7 Take your best results for each part of the image into Photoshop and use layer masking to blend them into one picture



RECOMMENDED EQUIPMENT

- LED torch with a diffuser (pictured left); you may also wish to use a wand attachment to provide a long, thin, soft light source
- Small battery-powered LED panel (pictured left, bottom)
- Diffusion panel (or scrim) approximately 30" in diameter, to be used with the LED panel



AUTHOR PROFILE HAROLD ROSS

An American fine-art photographer who specialises in light painting, Ross teaches workshops on his methods. See haroldrossfineart.com