

TIPS & TRICKS

Photography



ISSUE TWELVE

Tips & Tricks Photography.... WHO?

Good question!

Well, its been over a year now since the last issue of Tips & Tricks Photography published an issue, however I'm sure there might be a few of you still around wanting to read so I thought I would see about getting back to it.

I thought I would try to get back into releasing issues again, however this time I will be trying a different format. I liked the format of the previous versions, but when it comes down to how much time I can dedicate it became very difficult to dedicate enough time to trying out 3-4 new techniques and writing about them. The result being longer times between issues. What I'm aiming to try here is cutting the issues down to 1-2 articles, which is hopefully more manageable and hence easier to post. Hopefully, it will also mean more time to dedicate to the photography itself.

As with the previous issues, the goal is to share and explore the world of photography, creative ideas and of course great shots. So if you have any ideas, techniques, or photos to share feel free to send them along.

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Smoke Photography

Written by Jeff Tindall

Abstract, fluid, stunning and cool are just some of the words you will hear from people when they see your photographs of smoke. Smoke photography is one of those techniques that's rela-

tively simple and yields high quality photographs ranging from messy abstracts to precise and identifiable interpretations, kind of like cloud watching.

Photographing smoke is all about the setup and contrast.

The Materials

Smoke photography in its simplest form involves a

camera set on manual, a tripod and an off camera flash or powerful directed light source. Some additional materials that will improve the photo include a mat black background that doesn't reflect light, such as black construction paper (make sure you don't use the type that has a gloss or sheen) or black fabric. You do not want any reflection. Ohh yah, I guess your also going to need a source of smoke! My preference is to use cheap incense sticks, they produce whitish-grey smoke that contrasts well with the black back-

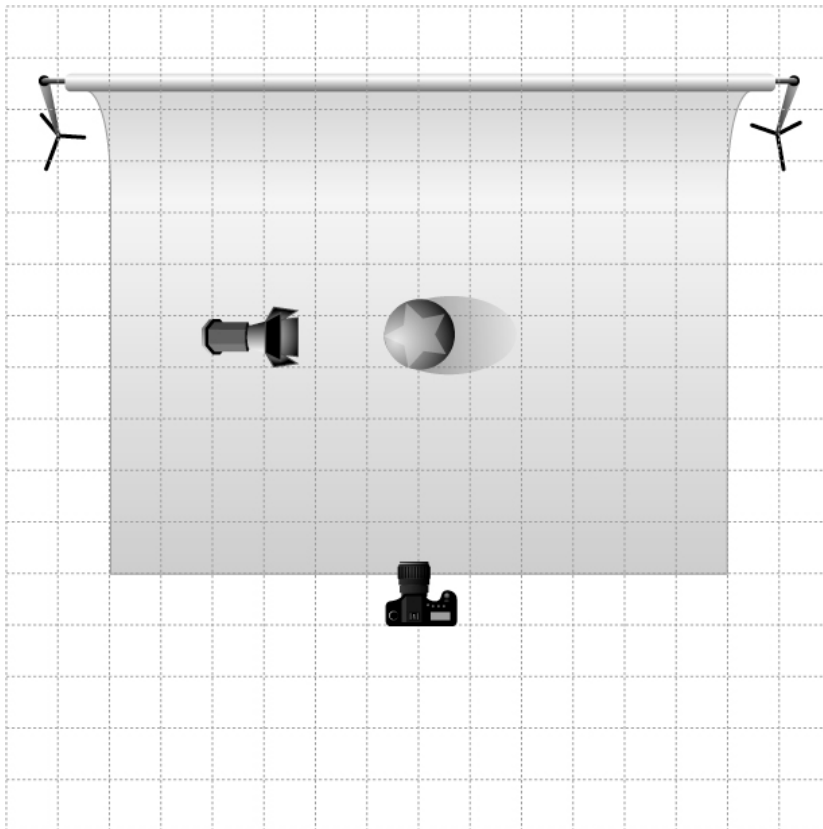
ground and are much more pleasant than the smell of a cigarette. Now I did mention that a directed light source is needed and what I found works the best is putting a long cardboard box (actually a cracker box) on the end of my off camera flash secured with some tape. If you are going to use a cardboard box on a high intensity light source (e.g. a halogen light) that emits a lot of heat I would suggest finding a less combustible means of directing light. After all we only want to photograph smoke from the incense not smoke

and fire from a flaming cardboard box!

The whole purpose of controlling the light is to ensure it falls on the smoke and not the background; this boosts the contrast between the two even more and allows the smoke to really stand out. If you're a little confused about why we are using whitish-grey smoke when the photos seen in this article are of different colours, don't be! The colours are artificially done in the post-processing which is described later on in this article.

The Setup

The general setup is easy to do, but you may have to play around with how the light source is oriented, the position of the smoke relative to the background and the focus of the camera. For this technique, the best type of lighting that works is focused side light. Front lighting (light from the camera itself) doesn't work well because not only will it light up the smoke, but also lights up the



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background killing the contrast between the two.

Position your subject (the incense stick) below the scene so that the smoke rises into the photograph. Next place

the focused light source (flash or light with a cracker box attached) to the side of the smoke and direct the light source on to where the smoke will be in the scene. Test the flash or turn on the light to

see if any light falls on the background if it does, tweak the position of the light source to minimize. With your camera on manual focus estimate the approximate location of the smoke and focus. I would also suggest making your aperture small (e.g. $f/11$, $f/16$, $f/22$), this not only will reduce stray light from being recorded by your camera, but it also increases the focusing range so if the smoke is slightly off the focused area it should still come out fairly sharp. However, do keep in mind that you are freezing the action, so if that aperture means long shutter speeds you will have to adjust so the smoke doesn't blur across the photo (unless that's the effect your going for).

The room is one factor to be considered. Larger rooms tend to have more drafts which can blow your smoke out of frame and generally cause frustrations. I prefer working in smaller rooms where there are less drafts and it allows me to better control the smoke's movements. The one caveat with

small rooms is that they can quickly fill up with incense smoke making your photos foggy, so if you are going to be shooting a lot (and I imagine you likely will be), I would suggest doing them with intermittent breaks to allow the room to clear. When you notice your photos are becoming foggy, put out the incense and open a door. This would also give you a chance to play around with the setup like changing the light source side or setting up two incense sticks for a double smoke pattern. Those being said do take a break yourself and get some fresh air.

Taking the Shot

Photographing smoke is a bit different from looking through the eye piece, composing the picture and taking the shot. In fact I don't even attempt to look through the camera with the smoke continuously changing what's the point! A better idea would be to know the area the camera is photographing and using a cable or remote release. That way you can sit beside the camera and just



watch the smoke, when it shape-shifts into a pattern you like hit the shutter.

Play around with the smoke, it doesn't take much to manipulate it. Breathing is often enough to create air currents that will dramatically change

the smoke's shape. The general rule would be the more air current in the room the more messy and abstract the photo. If you want straight lines or tight smoke patterns try to minimize the air flow. This is where the creativity comes into play, move you

hand, intentionally blow air in to the frame and see how the smoke reacts. You will be amazed at endless designs and patterns.

Remember your not photographing smoke, your photographing patterns and designs created by the smoke.

Post-Processing

Cleaning the Image

Smoke provides very fluid and stunning looking patterns, however there is often stray smoke that ends up in your photo that distracts and

detracts from the main smoke pattern/design that you intended to photograph. To get rid of the stray smoke I just clone them out. This is easy to do since your background is uniformly black, so there is not need to blend with the background.

Contrast and Inverting

This is more of an optional step for my purposes, but if you are not satisfied with the contrast between the smoke and background you can boost it using the contrast sliders or curves in your software program. Another

cool effect is to inverse the image, so you have black-grey smoke on a white background (see the Ribbon Photo below).

Colour

Adding colour is relatively simple and can be done by simply manipulating the hue and saturation sliders to change the smoke. The black or inverted (white) background would not be affected, only the smoke. If your more technically inclined, try blending multiple colours to the smoke.

