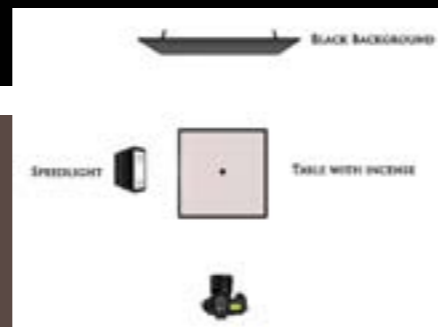


TAKE A SMOKE BREAK

RORY LAUBSCHER GETS CREATIVE WITH SMOKE AND LIGHT



I never cease to be amazed at how much can be achieved with a camera these days. The advent of digital photography has changed image-making in a monumental way, and I will admit that my love affair with digital photography has as much to do with the process of capturing the image as it does with the creative options available in post-processing.

In this article we will be delving into the realm of smoke photography — the technique I'll be showing you encompasses many of the skills and principles I've talked about in previous articles.

Hopefully you'll be as amazed by the patterns and shapes you photograph and appreciate again how amazing it is that a camera can freeze time in a way that lets us see beauty we often take for granted.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED:

- Camera and lens (I used a 100mm macro)
- Black background
- Off-camera flash
- Incense
- Blu-tack
- Cable release

THE SET-UP:

Creating the images is a very simple process, however, there are two important considerations to keep in mind for obtaining well defined images of smoke. Firstly, the smoke needs to be lit from the side. Secondly, the images need to be shot against a black background.

- Set up a table, camera and background as in the images above right. Creating the distance between the table and the backdrop will ensure a black background (remember the principle of light fall-off).

- Set up an off-camera light to side-light the incense.
- Use Blu-tack to secure the incense in a vertical position (I placed it on a saucer to make cleaning away the ash easier).
- Light the incense, adjust the camera position and obtain focus on the smoke.



A COUPLE OF IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS:

- Do not position the flash too close to the smoke. Moving it further away will result in a more even spread of light on the smoke — light fall-off again — and will avoid over-exposing one side of the smoke cloud (obviously, you could opt to use a second light from the other side of the table to achieve the same thing).
- Smoke is three-dimensional — opt for an aperture that will give you an adequate depth of field (remember that the smaller the aperture, the higher the flash power needed to create a proper exposure).
- Shoot in a room that is as free as possible from ambient light.
- Shoot at sync speed to cut out as much ambient light as possible.
- Lens choice is completely up to you. A zoom lens will capture finer detail and patterns within the smoke, which can be quite amazing, whilst a wide-angle lens will allow capture of a bigger portion of the cloud, which will be more suited to using in composites.
- Use a cable release if you have one.
- Waving your hand above the smoke will disrupt the pattern of the cloud and allow for the creation of different images.
- Be patient — you will more than likely end up deleting most of what you shoot. Though skill and understanding are required to capture good images, a brilliant image is more likely to be the product of a happy accident.

Smoke creates some amazing patterns that make for rather impressive images. Sometimes you'll also be lucky enough to capture shapes that are almost recognisable. Can you see the face in this cloud of smoke?



HOW ABOUT TRYING SOMETHING DIFFERENT?

The joy of digital photography is that sometimes the image we shoot is only the beginning of a much grander creative process. The addition of smoke to an image can be a powerful tool to add bucketloads of mood. If you're keen to flex your image-composition muscles, head on over to the Firefly Photography blog to watch the Photoshop video tutorial on the creation of the above composite, at www.fireflyphotography.co.nz/photography-blog/smoke. While you're there, download the images and give the technique a try for yourself. You'll find a composite of this nature is a lot easier to create than you might think. Who knows, it might even inspire you to create your next photographic masterpiece.

