



**BIG
FEATURE**

WORDS KINGSLEY SINGLETON PICTURES VARIOUS

CABIN FEVER

If you love experimentation and discovery, then still life is the perfect subject to fire your imagination, so stay in and go crazy with your camera this winter...



MAKE A DIFFERENCE
Still life can take a vast number of forms, from traditional, heavily textured compositions paying homage to the Old Masters, through to slick contemporary visions, and it's all doable in your own home this winter with the minimum of kit.



POLINA PLOTNIKOVA



ARON SZAPKOWSKI

Ask most photographers their favourite subject to shoot and you can bet still life won't be anywhere near the top of the list. Hmmmm, this really isn't what you'd expect to read at the start of an inspirational feature on the subject, is it? But if you ask the same photographer what's really important to them in the shooting process you'll often hear words like: creativity, control, freedom... beauty. Oh hang on, that's exactly what still life is all about. It's the easiest, most accessible subject to get into and the most challenging to perfect.

The essential joy of still life is this: you're the auteur. Everything about a still life is decided by you, controlled by you... nothing is left to chance. And that means almost anything is possible. Create the perfect lighting for your subject. Shoot it from seemingly impossible angles. Catch it floating in the air. Create fantastical colours. It's all on the menu.

To make the case for filling your spare hours with still life this winter, and delve into why it's such a great winter warmer, we spoke to two very different still-life photographers as well as taking on a range of projects ourselves. Polina Plotnikova, an award-winning fine-art photographer, finds the greatest thrill in constructing images in her head then turning them into



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SELECTIVE FOCUS Alongside her usual choice of a 105mm macro lens and her Canon EOS 5D Mark II, Polina Plotnikova often experiments with a LensBaby Composer Pro. This helps achieve the blurring as seen left, which adds a more intimate feel to the composition.

“STILL LIFE IS IDEAL FOR A PERFECTIONIST LIKE I AM – NO ONE FIDGETS OR MAKES FACES; NO SUDDEN GUST OF WIND CAN SPOIL YOUR SHOT. IT'S ALL UP TO YOU”

reality in the studio: “The first pleasure, for me, is in visualising the overall composition, the objects I’m going to use, the overall colour scheme, the lighting, the background... still life is ideal for a perfectionist like I am – no one fidgets or makes faces; no sudden gust of wind can spoil your shot. It’s all up to you; the choices are infinite, and the final result is entirely in your own hands.”

Aron Czapiewski, a commercial photographer specialising in clean and classy images, simply enjoys the experimentation that comes with every new subject: “Each shoot is different and each needs unique lighting – I never get bored because I like challenges. Especially when dealing with liquid photography, each splash is unique and the unpredictableness brings interesting results and shapes – sometimes much better than I expected.”

The sheer breadth of the subject – what’s considered still life – can be disarming. Generally you’re looking at inanimate objects in carefully arranged groups or on their own, but true still life sees the picture being ‘made’ rather than simply recorded, and this gives rise to the same feeling in everyone who deals in it. It’s something like a madness for perfection, whether that means technically or creatively.

Aron, for instance, loves his glossy subjects, treating them with forensic fascination: “I like my images to be extremely clean. I see many shots with dust, scratches, unwanted reflections and that’s not acceptable for me; the shot must be perfect with super-sharp details and smooth gradients.” Though very different in the style of images she creates, Polina approaches her work with the same intensity: “In a successful still-life image, the placing of every single object must be thought through, and the perfect – often the only possible – positioning chosen.” Inspired by a more ‘painterly’ style and by the still lifes of the Old Masters she uses her knowledge and love of art history when visualising her shots. The thing is, with everything in a still life being controllable by you, perfection IS achievable. It might take you a while, but it’ll be fun.

Picking your subject

The first question is what you’re going to shoot and from where you’re going to draw your inspiration. Well that’s the first of many great ▶

GEARING UP

When you’re thinking about lenses for still life, the versatility of macro makes a lot of sense. After all, still-life subjects don’t tend to be very big (and if they are you can always move back a bit!), while standard lenses may not focus closely enough to fill the frame. The Sigma 105mm f/2.8 EX Macro DG OS HSM offers great image quality at under £400 and comes in Sigma, Sony, Canon and Nikon fits, while the 70mm f/2.8 EX Macro DG costs a little less and gives a wider view if required. Of course you can also get a no-frills macro effect using a reversing ring as in the technique on page 36. For creative focusing effects,



as featured in many of her still-life shots here, Polina Plotnikova uses a LensBaby Composer Pro with Sweet and Edge optics, which is a fun and affordable addition at around £150. For larger subjects, a 50mm f/1.8 is always very useable.

In terms of lighting gear, you can get plenty done with a simple torch beam (see page 43), or a couple of flashguns, like the Nissin Di866 Mark II, at around £200, used on page 40. If you need more power, step up to studio flash heads, like the Lencarta SmartFlash II or Bowens Gemini 400, but what’s actually more important is having the kit to modify and aim your lights properly; make sure you invest in lighting stands to help your positioning and avoid misdirected light. Alternatively, with a suitable adapter, you can fit your flashes onto spare tripods.





KINGSLEY'S PROJECT #1 WINTER TIME

Ah, the old frozen-subject trick. Yes, it's not new, but like most still-life treatments, it's a great way to spend a few hours image making. It's also a good workout for your grey matter, because the technique certainly isn't as straightforward as setting up a regular composition. The translucence of the ice which holds the subject means you can light it from any angle, but to do that you're ideally going to need a glass dish. I bought a couple of Pyrex dishes from a homeware store for about £2.50 apiece and decided to use an old watch as the subject. The waterproof watch was just covered with water – too deep and it'll become indistinct – and frozen for about an hour in the freezer. If it's cold enough, it's often better to let your subject freeze outside, as it happens more slowly with less frosting. I first left the watch for two hours, which turned the ice white and unuseable, so keep checking as it freezes.

The next challenge is lighting the ice, and most of the time you'll want to backlight it a little to bring out the sparkle in the frozen textures and show off any bubbles that are in there. I balanced the dish between two piles of books, and positioned an SB-600 flash underneath, with an SB-700 pointed in from slightly



above. Obviously you're going to need to shoot straight down, or as near as dammit, to prevent the ice dripping everywhere as it melts, although you can prop your dish up if you work fast.

I used my Nikon D700 with a 50mm f/1.8D on a reversing ring, giving macro focus to show off all the details. This meant manually focusing so I shot at f/22 to make

it easier, and fired the flashes using the D700's Commander mode.

I set them both to TTL and using different groups on the same channel meant I could dial down the flash underneath to -0.7EV, keeping the top flash brighter. I finished it off in Photoshop, giving a slightly blue tint to the ice, using the same technique as on page 47.

“COMPOSITION IS A PROCESS OF EVOLUTION AND FINE-TUNING, SOMETHING THAT SHOULD BE NAILED BEFORE YOU START THINKING ABOUT LIGHTING AND EXPOSURE”

things about still-life photography – with the right composition and lighting you can turn almost any subject into a great image. Take a look around you right now, and no matter if you're at home or at work you'll find something to shoot. Draw inspiration from your job, your hobbies, even your kitchen utensils... if you're sitting in an empty room, shoot the corners and the light switches!

If you're still stumped, you can get inspiration by working in themes, setting yourself a project, based on a word or phrase, or around certain types of subject. “Sometimes,” says Polina, “it is an object, or a texture, or a colour that triggers a chain of thoughts in my head. Then I spend days, sometimes weeks or even months, visualising the final shot and sourcing objects for a particular set-up until I get the exact one I imagined. On one occasion, I spent almost half a year looking for a vintage vegetable cutter that I wanted to combine with a few objects I already had.”

Aron is captivated by glossy objects with interesting shapes: “I can't go to perfume shops anymore... there are just too many interesting bottles!” He also draws ideas from advertising shots in magazines, deconstructing how the image has been created, and what lighting set-up has been used; how it could be changed or improved.

Visualising or simply coming up with an idea is often the hardest part, but once you have that in the bag, you can get your teeth into shooting.



HIT THE SPOT If a background light is needed, Aron Czapiewski adds this in shooting rather than in software. Likewise, the hanging coins are as shot, held with strips of clear adhesive tape, which are removed in post. With the least amount of manipulation, quality is kept at its highest.

The composition mission

The exacting nature of still life means composition is a process of evolution and fine-tuning, something that should be tinkered with and largely nailed before you start thinking about lighting and exposure. There's no need to rush; the best compositions have been pored over through the viewfinder, via the screen or test shots, with minute changes to the position and spacing or angle of the subjects – it's the only way to work if you want to shoot a winner. Watch out for clashes between the subjects or you can easily end up with just a jumbled pile of stuff rather than an elegant arrangement. Everything, even down to the folds in a fabric background, must be examined and assessed as to whether they're helping or





ARON CZAPIEWSKI

Backdrops

The background is just as important as the rest of your composition, because there's no point getting a great subject and lighting it beautifully, only for the backdrop to distract and lessen the impact. A fitting background will take your subject out of its everyday context, setting it alone and uncluttered, with space to breathe. So where do you get good backdrops? Shooting in a small home studio, Polina relies on collapsible backdrops: "I definitely could not do without my Lastolite collapsible black velvet background – it's the best when you need a pitch black backdrop."

In some cases a blank wall will do the trick, but dedicated still lifers also find great backdrops in flooring, DIY and fabric stores. Rough textures like hessian and stone work well on traditional looks; metal, glass and polished tiles are the choices for reflections or modern subjects. Avoid plastics as they scratch easily.

WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU GET Glossy subjects are some of the most challenging to shoot as you're constantly battling against hotspots and unwanted reflections. Aron Czapiewski uses lots of diffusion on his lights to create smooth gradients on the shiny surfaces.

hindering the overall look. A good composition looks effortless, but is nothing of the sort.

As Polina says: "It takes me a lot of time to set up; sometimes it's tricky to get everything the way I saw it in my mind's eye. It often helps if I draw a quick sketch before I start and sometimes, while setting up, I realise that some elements should be changed, or even taken out of the picture altogether. If I have doubts, I take a step back, leave everything as it is in my studio, switch to doing something else and come back to my set-up after some time." Throughout this process you'll often find your original ideas aren't working, or that you need to adapt your brief to explore something in the subject that you hadn't originally

thought of. But this should never be taken as a failure; it's just a natural progression in how you create the image.

Still lighting, moving pics

Just as with portraits, there's nothing to stop you shooting with window light and a reflector, and the winter is a great time to do it, as the light is inevitably softened by cloud or the low angle of the sun. Of course you'll need to think ahead here and make the lighting part of your composition. Most still lifers, however, prefer the adaptability of artificial light, whether it's from a torch, continuous lighting, speedlight flashes or full-on studio heads. There's nothing to stop you mixing >

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WILL'S PROJECT
MAKING A SPLASH

I've shot water droplets lots of times before, but I always return to them. The reason is simple: I don't feel I've attained one I'm perfectly happy with. I've got a lot of shots that are good, but 'the one' still eludes me. It's the same as the desire to return to a much-loved landscape location, trying to catch it in light that's ideal, except with still life, the ideal is already there – you just have to find it.

The set-up is important, of course. And it's not something you can necessarily throw together at the kitchen table in five minutes. I shoot in my garage, using a clear glass bowl on a workbench and I have two stands for the required flashes (for this shot I used a Nissin Di866 and Nikon SB-900 powered by a ProPac PB820 battery) as well as a boom to hold the dropper. The dropper is just a large syringe from Amazon. You can improvise this stuff, but it's easier to invest in proper studio gear to help, and of course it's useable for many other subjects, too. Waterdrop specialists invest huge amounts in dedicated gear, but this is all you really need to get to a good level.

The best place to position the flashes is to the rear which gives the best shape to the droplets; lighting from the front makes it look very flat, just like it would with a pop-up flash. It's important to diffuse the light, too. Unfiltered flash will look harsh, creating lots of hotspots on the water. I use a sheet of white Perspex, which does the job on both. On the Nissin I attached a Honl blue gel filter and the Nikon was fitted with a Lastolite strobe grid to focus the light a little.

Both flashes were triggered with Pocket Wizards and manually set to their lowest power, giving the shortest flash to freeze the drop. After a few tests using my Nikon D3s with 105mm Micro Nikkor lens, I settled on an exposure of 1/200sec at f/7.1, ISO 400. Focusing is the next thing. It has to be set manually at the point you know the droplet will fall. To do this, I send a drop on its way and mark the position it strikes the water with a skewer or pen, autofocusing there, and then switching to manual to fine-tune.

The rest is all shoot and review. I also tried using a TriggerSmart which fires the shutter as the droplet breaks its infrared beam, but here I wanted to show it can be done with manual timing. In just over an hour I shot 700 frames, and I got about 20 or so that I was okay with. With every shot being different depending on your timing and the shape of the splash, it's endlessly rewarding and addictive.

“I'VE SHOT WATER DROPLETS LOTS OF TIMES BEFORE, BUT I ALWAYS RETURN TO THEM”



WILL DEJUNG



INSPIRATION FROM COLOUR Polina Plotnikova draws inspiration from many places, often using colour or texture as her starting point for an image and then drawing in the subject to follow the theme.

“THERE'S NOTHING TO STOP YOU MIXING LIGHT SOURCES... BUT THE ADVANTAGES OF ARTIFICIAL LIGHT ARE IN ITS CONTROLLABILITY”

sources, or using flash to supplement the natural light, but the advantages of artificial light are in its controllability. Just like your composition, you can position the angle, strength and style of the light to create exactly the effect you want.

For Aron, who takes a clinical approach to reflections and smooth gradients, the lighting is the biggest challenge and the part of the process he relishes most of all: “It sometimes takes a few hours to build my lighting and many times I have to make my own modifiers out of card or plastic to get the unique results I want from my flash heads. The more time I spend, the better the results I get. Careful lighting is certainly more important than having an expensive camera or lens; even most expensive gear is useless if the lighting is bad.”

Working with reflective subjects, a lot of care needs to be taken to combat glare and add form to the subject, all the while avoiding any unwanted reflections of the camera, flashes, stands or surroundings. Reflections can be controlled by careful positioning of the subject, and using a lot of diffusion on your lights, either a large softbox or a more tailored accessory like a lighting cone. For his jewellery shots, Aron uses a Foba Large Acryl Diffuser Cone: “It's the perfect light modifier for jewellery because [unlike a regular light tent] there are no edges which will be reflected on glossy surfaces.” You can make your own lighting cone from thin white acrylic plastic and say hello to nice, smooth gradients. Sometimes reflections are required though and to give much-needed definition to clear or glossy subjects, try positioning black deflector cards either side.

The need for speed

The power and speed of flash lighting over natural or continuous illumination is also a big plus for Aron when it comes to shooting his frozen water splashes. Working with a minimum flash duration of 1/4000sec, which can be achieved at very low power settings, keeps the motion from blurring and for maximum quality he shoots at the lowest ISO possible, and at f/16 or f/22 to get enough depth-of-field to keep the water in focus; so with the light also diffused it's not the kind of thing that's possible without flash.

Shooting more traditional subjects, but with equal care, Polina uses natural, flash and continuous light: “It all depends on the results that I want to achieve.” Her favoured flash set-up is using two Bowens Gemini 500 flash heads and

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“PHOTOSHOP SHOULDN'T BE USED TO PAPER OVER THE CRACKS, BUT TO BUILD ON AND ACCENTUATE WHAT'S THERE”



AFTER

KINGSLEY'S PROJECT #2 SURREAL LIFE

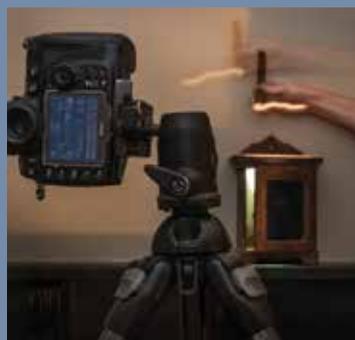
One of the most compelling ways to light a still life is with nothing more than a torch beam. It's liberating when you see the beautifully smooth or perfectly targeted effects you can achieve – all without expensive kit. By shooting multiple frames with an eye on combining them in Photoshop you can also use a variety of styles all in the same shot. I used this route as the basis of an idea I had for a surreal still life, mixing several shots and textures.

Focusing and framing up with the room lights on, I set a manual exposure of 15secs at f/11, ISO 200. With the room lights then switched off, 15 seconds is plenty of time to move the torch around, creating some wonderfully smooth lighting. Lower powered torches are actually better for small still-life subjects, so you stand less chance of burning out parts of the pic. The trick is to keep the beam moving throughout the exposure for the smoothest results – don't let it hang anywhere too long.

The main torch I used had a tungsten bulb, but I placed a second LED light within the box to give it an interior glow. The differing temperatures lead to a nice contrast of warm and cool, which you can accentuate by shooting on Tungsten white-balance, although my shot was in Auto, with colours tweaked in Raw. I combined several exposures in Photoshop using the Lighten Blending mode, and then added a twist – the same box shot reflected in its mirrored door with some Magritte style clouds dropped in to match the cooler tone of the LED light.



BEFORE



a mixture of softboxes, umbrellas, grids and gels, which provide all she needs to shape the light to her wishes. What this really means is that if you have a basic portrait set-up you'll have most of the gear you need for great still-life lighting already. But with the exacting requirements of still life, other gear can come in handy in getting the results you want. Polina, for instance, uses Helicon remote shooting software to connect her Canon EOS 5D Mark II to a laptop so she can see an image on screen before it's taken, cutting down the editing time and allowing easier monitoring of whether the composition and lighting are working for her. With his reliance on super-clean and smooth results, Aron keeps a kit of cleaning gear to hand: "Very useful are nitrile rubber gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints and smears on shiny surfaces, as well as compressed air and soft brushes to remove dust from the subject. During liquid shots towels are a must!"

Hitting the post

As different as the still-life images they create are, Polina and Aron both start with a 'get it right in camera' philosophy, then apply modest post-production, always directed towards the perfection that they're looking for. "As much as I love the power of Photoshop," says the former, "I prefer shooting my images as close to what I intended as possible. And when it comes to post-processing, I know in advance exactly what I'm going to do with every shot – whether it's adding a textured layer or cropping it into square format." This planning certainly avoids the scattergun approach that many unsuccessful images are treated with in software, but there's nothing wrong with topping off your still-life efforts with a layer of texture or two. Photoshop shouldn't be used to paper over the cracks if you can help it, but to build on and accentuate what's there.

Polina also makes a point of shooting her own textures where possible, building up a collection of effects that she can deploy in her projects. And turning the process on its head, a coloured texture she's discovered can even kick off the creative process, with the image then specifically shot to work with that theme or colour. "I remember a few images of mine that were created because I was inspired by overall colour – that idea all started with the right texture!"

Aron's processing is more restrained and economical: "There's always lots of work to do with glossy subjects. Any scratches must be removed, along with any dust and other imperfections left after cleaning, or too small >

STILL LIFE AT HOME

MAKING NOT TAKING So intensive is still-life shooting and the attention to detail required, that pictures are essentially 'made' rather than taken in the traditional sense. Total control is what pays off in the end.



ARON CZAPIEWSKI



POLINA PLOTNIKOVA

Thanks to Polina Plotnikova and Aron Czapiewski for their tremendous help with this article. To see more of their excellent work head to polinaplotnikova.com and aronczapiewski.com respectively.

to see when shooting. I always edit at 100% magnification to make sure everything is perfect." Occasionally, he'll combine exposures, too, if the lighting or focus was not possible in a single shot. "I don't like overly digital effects but Raw processing, cleaning, colour work and exposure blending or focus stacking is all good if it gives the best results."

Life goes on...

Still-life photography takes you on a journey without leaving home, exercising your creative muscles all the way, and there are always new places to go with the subject; new ways to create images, and new tools to help make the scenes in your head. "What I've learnt by shooting still life," says Polina, "is that technical skill is just a means to that end - I'll always be looking for new ways to get as close as possible to the images I conceive." And for Aron, "Every subject is a new experience; that means new lighting set-ups, new light modifiers... there's no single way to shoot a subject, but that's the variety that I love." ✕

NEXT MONTH WINTER LANDSCAPES