

Shooting the Moon



The tradition and technology
of night photography

by Lance Keimig

Photographers have long embraced the literary and artistic tradition of the night as both theme and subject in their work. The romantic notions and sense of mystery associated with the night, as well as the transformation from the mundane world to the unknown, provide ample material for exploration. Tim Baskerville, founder of the night-photography organization the Nocturnes, has said, “Surrealism, the mystery of place, solitude, and a heightened sense of the nature of things — night photography seems a worthy vehicle, a ritual to express these themes.”

Night had been established as a theme in art long before the advent of photography. Artists as far back as the 15th-century Flemish painter Hieronymus Bosch played off the instinctive fear of darkness and the night, as in Bosch’s rendition of hell in his masterpiece, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. The 16th-century Dutch engraver and painter Lucas Van Leyden and the German printmaker Albrecht Dürer repeatedly explored the night in their work. Rembrandt famously relied on dark tones and deep shadows to evoke powerful emotions in his work. James McNeill Whistler painted a series of night and twilight scenes entitled *Nocturnes*.



Case Study House 22, 1960, Julius Schulman.

Night photography became technically possible in the mid-19th century as photographic materials became increasingly light-sensitive. When the daguerreotype process was introduced in 1839, exposure times of 10 minutes or more were required to take a photograph in bright sunlight. While exposures were reduced to 5–10 seconds within a few years, photographing at night in the weak artificial light of the time or by moonlight was impossible. The wet-plate collodion process was a tremendous technical advance over the daguerreotype, but because collodion plates had to be exposed before the emulsion dried on the plate, the lengthy exposures required at night made nocturnal photography exceedingly difficult. It was the introduction of the dry gelatin plate in the late 1880s that once and for all opened the doors of the creative potential of night-time imagery to photographers.

Many photographers experimented with night photography

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and, throughout the 19th century, photographs were often manipulated to appear as though they were taken at night. It wasn't until William Fraser and Alfred Stieglitz in New York, and Paul Martin in London began to photograph at night in the last decade of the 19th century that anyone produced a significant body of night images. Stieglitz would go on to inspire his colleagues at the New York Camera Club to venture out into the night with their cameras. Edward Steichen, Alvin Langdon Coburn, Karl Struss, and Paul Haviland all created significant numbers of night photographs between 1900 and 1910.

As Mary Woods has noted in her essay, "Photography of the Night: Skyscraper Nocturne and Skyscraper Noir," this work was produced at the exact moment when the pictorialist sensibilities of romantic Impressionism gave way to the more hard-edged and sharply defined aesthetic of Modernism. The shift from soft-focus pictorialist images to crisply focused Modernist photographs is evident in the work of each of these photographers, and it seemed an appropriate response to advances in technology and changes in attitude that came with the new century.

As night photography continued to evolve throughout the 20th century, night photographers were increasingly drawn to the built environment for subject matter, which remains a source of fascination for many contemporary night photographers. Night transforms our experience of the world from one of routine certainty to one of mysterious unknowing. The interplay of light and shadow and extremes of contrast on the buildings and structures of the urban environment serve to heighten this transformation.

Brassai's photographs of the seedy underbelly of Paris nightlife in the '30s, Bill Brandt's night photographs of London in the '30s and '40s, and O. Winston Link's famous images of the last operating steam railroad in America in the mid-'50s all mark time and place in a distinctly human world. Berenice Abbott's aerial view, *New York at Night*, ca. 1935 conveys the dynamic vitality of the growing city at night. Other notable examples of the night photographer's attraction to architectural subjects include Julius Schulman's iconic image, *Case Study House 22* (1960) which shows architect Pierre Koenig's futuristic house seemingly hovering over Los Angeles, and George Tice's *Petit's Mobile Station* (1974), in which the dark hulking structure of a water tower lurks menacingly in the shadows behind a gas station.

Unquestionably, the most significant night photographer of the second half of the 20th century is Michael Kenna. Early in his career, Kenna retraced the footsteps of Bill Brandt, who documented the industrial cities and mill towns of northern England in the 1940s. Kenna became more widely known after the publication of his photographs of Ratcliffe Power Station in Nottinghamshire, also in the industrial north of England. Later, Kenna would go on to photograph extensively in France and Japan, often at the intersection of the manmade and natural worlds. In an interview with Tim Baskerville in his monograph, *Nightwork*, Kenna says, “The underlying subject matter is the relationship, confrontation, and/or juxtaposition, between the landscape...and the human fingerprint, the traces that we leave, the structures, buildings and stories. Sometimes the emphasis in the image will be the landscape, the human influence will be slight, but it is always there. At other times, the urban scenery or industry will be more dominant and the landscape will be barely visible, shown only by a passing cloud, moving water, or a veil of mist.”

Time is another element that is central to night photography. Due to the lower light levels at night, longer exposures are required to produce an image. Many night photographers have spoken about the camera’s ability to record what cannot be seen with the eye. Time accumulates on film (or nowadays on a digital sensor) in such a way that it is presented as a single image. All that has transpired during the exposure is recorded in the photograph. The movement of clouds, the moon, the earth, people, and vehicles passing through an image are frozen in time. Unlike the instantaneous daytime exposure that extracts an instant from the continuum of time, long-exposure night photographs record movement in surreal ways that we cannot perceive with our own senses.

Los Angeles–based industrial and architectural photographer Tom Paiva says, “My work rarely shows people. Five-minute to hour-long exposures do not record fleeting shapes moving through the image. I like to think that night photography can somehow stop time: inanimate objects are sharp, but people, moving grasses, and cars slip through the frame smoothly.” Like many architectural photographers, Paiva often photographs at twilight for commercial assignments, during the brief window when ambient natural light is balanced with the artificial lights in the scene he’s photographing. This popular technique can yield spectacular results, but it is different from true night photography in that these images often compromise the sense of mystery and time of a night photograph for the technical perfection of an exact exposure, as required by a commercial assignment. Christian Waeber, a Boston-based architectural photographer who is best known for his night photographs of the Big Dig, wrote in an October, 2004 article for *View Camera* magazine, “When photographing at night, I am trying to find the way that I used to perceive objects in the dark as a child: the most harmless objects become monsters, the sense of space and proportion is altered.” Waeber’s night-time Big Dig photographs seem to do just that: the hulking forms of the freeway structure become a surreal

playground of light, color, shape, and form where anything is possible.

With the proliferation and advancement of digital photography, night photographs have become increasingly common. The instant feedback afforded by digital cameras makes determining exposures at night much easier, something that has always been one of the greatest technical challenges of night photography. Digital sensors do not suffer from reciprocity failure as film does, allowing considerably shorter exposure times. While these advances certainly make night photography more accessible, they do not necessarily make it better. With some exceptions, night photographs taken with digital cameras lack many of the qualities that make nocturnal images so appealing. Each

Bill Brandt’s Snicket, Halifax, Yorkshire, England, 1986, Michael Kenna.





Andrew Holden's *Shadow*, 1979, Steve Harper.

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individual film reacts differently to time exposures and has its own unique personality or signature. Digital sensors behave with relative consistency regardless of exposure length and, as a result, digital night photographs often lack the sense of time that is so important in night photographs. They have more to do with substance and subject than impression and inference. The digital night photograph is more about *place* than *sense* of place.

A quick search of the online photo-sharing site Flickr (www.flickr.com) reveals that literally hundreds of people have embraced this new technology and that night photography is no longer an obscure and rarefied curiosity enjoyed by a few pensive

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night owls. It is now possible to take college-level courses in night photography, something pioneered by photographer Steve Harper at the Academy of Art College in San Francisco in the 1980s. Tim Baskerville of the Nocturnes, an alumnus of Steve Harper's classes, now offers night-photography classes and workshops in California, and the New England School of Photography in Boston offers classes on the subject. With the increased awareness of night photography as a theme, with more people creating nocturnal imagery, and with ever-increasing numbers of night-time images appearing in popular media and culture, photographers continue to expand the boundaries and potential of photography after dark. Despite all of this, night photography is still essentially a solitary experience that allows the photographer to slow down and disconnect from the frenetic pace of modern life, and to reconnect with the physical world and all of its wonders. ■

Lance Keimig is a photographer based in Pembroke, Massachusetts (www.thenightskye.com). He has taught photography at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and the New England School of Photography, and leads workshops in California, Massachusetts, Ireland, and Scotland.



North End, 2003, Lance Keimig.

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