

# The Art & Commerce of Successful STILL-LIFE PHOTOGRAPHY



Text and photography by Jody Dole

The three most important variables to remember when creating great still lifes are: SUBJECT MATTER, SUBJECT MATTER, and SUBJECT MATTER.

When it comes to still-life photography, my images are highly subject driven. I never rely only on my equipment or “fix” these images later with computer manipulation. You must have a unique point of view to begin with to find unique subject matter, one that allows for expression through the subject. I’m always trying to create portraits of interesting objects that are infused with light, integrity and design, using as little Photoshop as possible. How is it done? Read on...

That old Harry Truman line, “The only thing new around here is the history you don’t know...” is a good adage, but when it comes to shooting still-lives and selecting material for your images, the act of discovery and following your instincts usually result in the best images. Composition is also high on the list. When subject matter meets inspiration, great images can come out of the least likely places, such as a burnt log that was pulled right from the fireplace, or the steel mesh ball that came straight out of a factory dumpster. And, ah yes...

## 1: The Tumbleweed

A few years ago I shipped a five-foot tumbleweed back to my studio from Arizona, shot a “portrait” of this object, and put the image in my portfolio. Several weeks later, my studio was awarded a still-life project that involved shooting plants for a pharmaceutical company, which was paying an excellent fee. After the project was complete, we were advised that the client was very pleased with the outcome, and wanted to obtain worldwide usage rights for the images at an additional 100% fee. Astonished, I contacted the creative director and asked what it was about my portfolio that inspired him to hire me for this shoot in the first place. His answer was, “Your tumbleweed image was the shot that made it happen.”

Follow your instincts when it comes to subject matter, and create visuals of objects that you simply can’t live without. That dry tumbleweed drifting along the road in Arizona was not only the subject of one of my favorite images, but also earned its keep. It’s still in our warehouse under lock and key!



## 2: Composition

Sometimes we can get lucky with composition, whether it’s the perfect angle of a single subject or a pleasing arrangement of several objects by chance. But serendipitous composition that occurs by trial and error could take a lifetime to learn from, and even after 20 years, you may never reach perfection.

When there’s more than one subject in the frame, achieving the “right” composition by removing objects from an existing setup—rather than adding to it—usually works for me, so the old “less is more” theory is true when it comes to my still-life table. After thousands of still-life shoots, I always seem to position my camera slightly above eye level or



Previous page, left: Jody Dole shot this portrait of a tumbleweed with a Hasselblad and a Phase One Lightphase digital back. This page, below: As with the tumbleweed image, these Horseshoe crabs were photographed for a personal project. Right: This image of geometric lucite shapes was created for an annual report.



overhead looking straight down for varying compositions. With a solo subject, shooting up from a slightly lower vantage point increases its heroic quality.

There are numerous great still-life photographers from whom you can study: Irving Penn, Josef Sudek, Edward Weston, and Edward Steichen, among others. However, simply viewing other people's photography has never inspired me to create my own images. After all, these photo icons have already done their thing, and in my world, imitation is *not* the sincerest form of flattery. Our job is to be original by looking "outside the box." However, one of my favorite shortcuts to studying great composition is spending an occasional half-hour with a copy of art books that contain the still-life paintings of Giorgio Morandi.

As clearly evidenced by Morandi, awesome still-life images always focus on a fresh vision that depicts the subject as hero, as opposed to using technique as hero. Technique alone is too readily available to all and never makes the best images happen. Your unique vision will create great images, and this vision is only available to those who have the ability to see objects in interesting ways.

# 3. The Holy Grail of Still-Life: Lighting

You rarely see a bad image that features great subject matter, but great subject matter can easily be killed with poor lighting. A rare few were born muttering the term, "Chiaroscuro," and most of them probably ended up working nights on their back for Pope Julius. But short of the Sistine Chapel, learning to "see the light" in my studio has always been a trial-and-error experience. Discovering what makes images look best is the result of thousands of experiments with film and lighting—and now—zillions of experiments with digital imaging.

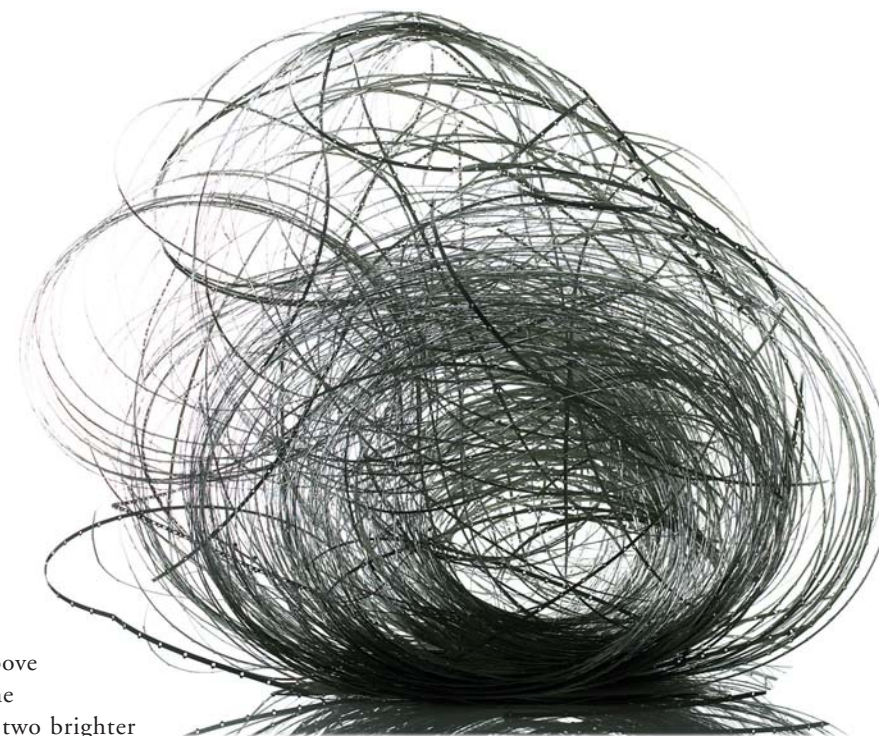
Every day, there's a new test. Observing the effects of sunlight on the natural world hasn't helped me, as Mother Nature's shadows are too deep for my taste. When it comes to creating still-life and product shots, a bank of HMI lights has become my sunrise. Lighting setups vary with every project. No two shots are ever alike, but a few tools around the studio remain constant, especially when shooting on a white backdrop. Among my favorite tools are 1200- and 2400-watt HMI or tungsten lights and strobes to silo the backgrounds. I've never purchased an "off the shelf" light modifier at a camera store; I prefer the shower-curtain department at the bath shop for the critical task of selecting diffusion material.

With the simplest images, such as the burnt log, I never use a sweep of seamless backdrop paper. Instead, I recommend positioning the camera

at eye level when viewing your subject, using a sheet of white glass or Plexiglas as your surface. This adds a simple reflection of the subject at the bottom of the frame. By using a polarizer on the lens, you can control this effect. The wall behind the still-life table, which is 10 feet away, is blasted with light from strobe heads positioned above and alongside it to create the silo. The backlight exposure (usually a stop or two brighter than the light in front) is controlled by my aperture, while the front HMI or tungsten light is controlled mostly by the shutter speed.

Sometimes, depending on the shape of the object, I begin by rendering the subject as a completely black silo on a white background. Then I slowly wrap the illumination around the object, a little brighter with each test exposure. I use a constant HMI or tungsten source, either diffused or reflected, to slowly open up the subject on the glass. Thank God for digital photography; no filters are needed. I click away on the computer screen until I see what I like. It's never the quantity of light that makes the image work—it's always the quality. ■

*A long-time contributor to PHOTOgraphic, Jody Dole is a highly energetic individual who shoots images for use in commercial ad campaigns in his studios in New York and Chester, Connecticut.*



Previous page, lower left: This group of antique microscopes was photographed for Bausch & Lomb.

This page, below: A charred log, pulled right out of a fireplace, photographed as a personal portfolio piece.

Above: An image shot for "The Art of Whelen Engineering," shot with a Nikon D1x and a 60mm macro lens.

