

Winter Project?

Even staying indoors there are some rewarding photography projects you might like to try. Home Studio Portraiture - which needn't cost a lot - is great for making better family portraits than just putting family 'snaps' in frames, and all the equipment you use can also be utilised for classic still-life images.

The bare minimum you need? A camera, a window, some white card.

Extras? Tripod, Remote release, background material, extra lighting.

Home Studio Portraiture

So you want to take great portraits but feel that you need the latest and most expensive lighting kit to achieve this? Well, you don't. Photography in its most basic form is about 'painting with light', and that means any available light not just the artificially generated type.

The beauty of using such a source is that it's free, gives you natural-looking images, and can be manipulated in the way you want, and with the minimum of equipment.

One of the great benefits of shooting portraits in this way is that you don't need to find exotic locations, or spend money on hiring a studio, everything can be done from your own home, where you can utilise the available light, find brilliant backgrounds, be it a wall, curtains or window. Use a mere handful of props to create stunning images.

As with anything to do with photography, there are no boundaries, the only thing standing in the way of the creativity is yourself.

So what are you waiting for? Grab a camera, a piece of white card, get yourself a subject, and away you go! Start with a family member who rather fancies being a model - daughters are great at this!

WHAT YOU WILL NEED...

You'll first need the right equipment. But fear not, there isn't a great deal of it. Which camera body to use isn't a major concern, but the type of lens you use is. If you've still only got the 'kit lens' that came with the camera, you'll be ok - a faster lens (with wide aperture) is better and the ideal focal length for a portrait is between 80 and 90mm (based on a 35mm or full frame camera). Most KPC members have smaller sensors in their DSLRs, so the focal length has to be multiplied by a factor or around 1.5 to 1.7..... which means that the regular kit lens length of 28-55mm is ideal - 55mm on an APS-C sensor DSLR is around the 80-90mm equivalent. However, your kit lens may have a maximum aperture of f/4, and possibly f/5.6 at its



longer end. That's going to force you to use slower shutter speeds, so you really need a tripod.

The only way to keep your shutter speeds high is to have plenty of light or increase the ISO. In nearly all cases you should get good enough light from a nearby window, but you may find that extra lighting is the only way to keep the shutter speed high - or else we'd have to use a high ISO. As you know, high ISO, unless in a real 'top of the range' camera, will add noise - something to really avoid. So we want no more than ISO200.

To summarise, you need....

As 'fast' a lens as possible, giving an 'equivalent' focal length of 80-90mm. That 'equivalent' is sometimes known as the 'crop factor'.

A tripod is essential - unless you've got very powerful lighting, your shutter speeds will dip below 'hand-held' speeds.

A model.

Reflectors

The next vital piece of kit is a reflector. There is a huge range of these available on the market, [Lastolite](#) being a well-used brand, but you can, if budget is a problem, simply use a large piece of white card, or even a towel. The reason for using a reflector is that because your light source will be coming in from one location, it means that one side of whatever you are photographing will be in shadow. By using the reflector you will be able to position it on the other side of your subject, have it facing the light, and bounce the available light coming through the window into the shadows, giving a more balanced and natural look, and not a shot heavy in contrast. In this shoot there are two reflectors, a circular Lastolite reflector and a large piece of white card.

If you are lucky enough to have an assistant you'll be able to ask them to hold the reflectors for you, but if this is not the case, you may require a stand or a chair that you can use as a prop. Failing that, you can always ask the subject to try and hold the reflector, but that might produce an awkward-looking shoot. This is where it is handy to possess some light stands and clamps, and then position the reflector accordingly.

A common photography tool, and one that will ensure your exposure is correct, is a grey card. This is a popular piece of a photographer's kit bag and when placed next to the subject's face will allow the camera to determine what the correct settings need to be. More explanation below.

Find a Suitable Model

This is about portraits, so family and friends are ideal. It's always a good idea to use someone you know if you're just starting out, as they'll feel relaxed and the shots will look more natural. You have to remember that most family members are not professional models and it will take several 'stiff' shots before he or she (and you!) start to relax - and that's when the pictures begin to flow. Once that happens, your subjects need little prompting, and whenever they hear the shutter go, they will immediately alter their pose so that the photographer captures a variety of different shots to choose from.

It's also worthwhile allowing yourself the opportunity to experiment. Don't feel you have to

organise everything the way a book or person may tell you. And if your model wants to try something different, give them the chance - stopping to re-organise gives you and the model even more time to relax. You have a big advantage over a professional photographer - time is money to them (and their models), but you can choose your time and take as many breaks as you want.

Setting up the Scene

Once you have your location sorted you will need to do a bit of reconnaissance work to find the most suitable parts of the house to shoot in. Once the exact spot is decided on, you will then be able to set everything up, including working out what camera settings to use. This is where the grey card comes into play.

Grey cards help the photographer get exposure and colour balance right - yes, corrections could be made later if you're shooting Raw but it's much better to get as close to perfect in the camera. The way to use the grey card is to have the model (or your assistant) hold it directly in front of the subject's face. The grey card should be placed as close to the subject you are photographing as possible, if not in its place. First set your camera to Manual mode, so that you have total control over it, and at ISO100 or 200, and also make sure you're on Auto White



Balance (you can change this later if you introduce different lighting into the scene). Then, using spot metering, take a reading from the grey card to see what the ideal exposure would be given the available light. There are no rules to say that the readings you get are the only ones you can use, but it will give you a benchmark from which to work. And by using spot metering you are isolating the area you want to get exposure for. If, for example, you used matrix metering you will be taking a wider reading around the subject and come up with settings that won't expose your subject correctly. Start off with the widest aperture your lens allows (though if you've got a really fast lens, like the f/1.8s and f/1.4s, start off with f/2.8). When you take your grey card reading, with an ISO of 200, let's say this was giving you a shutter speed of 1/15th sec.

Taking some test shots is an ideal way of determining what settings you will need the camera to be set at, so have a few test-runs first. This will also help to relax the model, as he/she gets used to the sound of the shutter. You'll get instant feedback from the LCD on the camera - you may need to zoom in to check everything out, like sharpness, exposure, contrast, saturation.

With any portrait shot, use a wide aperture so that the eyes and a large part of the face were in sharp focus, pick up all of the available light, and at the same time, blur out the background. At this stage camera shake isn't a huge issue, but for the later shots, using a remote shutter release counters this problem and allows me to get sharp images even though I'm using a slow shutter speed. It can be useful to use the shutter delay as well, on

the shorter setting (usually 2 seconds). This lifts the mirror (in the camera) out of the way and there will be no vibration from it during the actual exposure. You'll probably need to let the subject/model know what's happening and actually make sure you've got her attention and that they don't blink during the exposure itself. It also has the advantage, when using the remote control, of allowing you to keep in contact with the model, and not be 'hiding' behind the camera.

Shooting



Shoot One

With ample light and the minimum amount of furniture in the room, positioning the model was easy. However, the light was a little cold, so I decided to try and warm Jenna up a bit with the careful placement of our reflectors. Here the model is sitting on the edge of the bed with her arms resting on the end bedposts. One side of the subject's face was lit up by natural light.

It can often be the case that an inexperienced model will have difficulty in knowing what to do with their hands in a shoot, but by using a prop and offering some guidance this can easily be resolved.

Set Up

In this shoot, two reflectors at the same time, one to bounce light into the shadows and one to direct some light upwards and into the model's face. Although in this example the assistant was able to do a good job in holding



both the reflector and white card together, such a set-up can be made easier with the use of a stand and some clamps. Not only would this free up the hands of an assistant, it would provide a chance for you to involve more reflectors into your shoot, if needed.



Shoot Two

An alternative shoot in a bright area. Lots of available light in the area and a chair placed ideally with its back towards the source. Because of this, the model is completely backlit, and as such, her face is in a lot of shadow. But by calculated placement of the reflectors, you can bounce light back towards her.



Set Up

By bringing two reflectors into play you can light up the model's face without losing the backlight. Again, the model held the white card in front of her to 'uplight' her face, and a reflector is held to one side to throw some warm light back towards the side of the model's face. You need to check your exposure again if using this setup - or you'll just get a silhouette. So do the grey card trick again.

Shoot Three

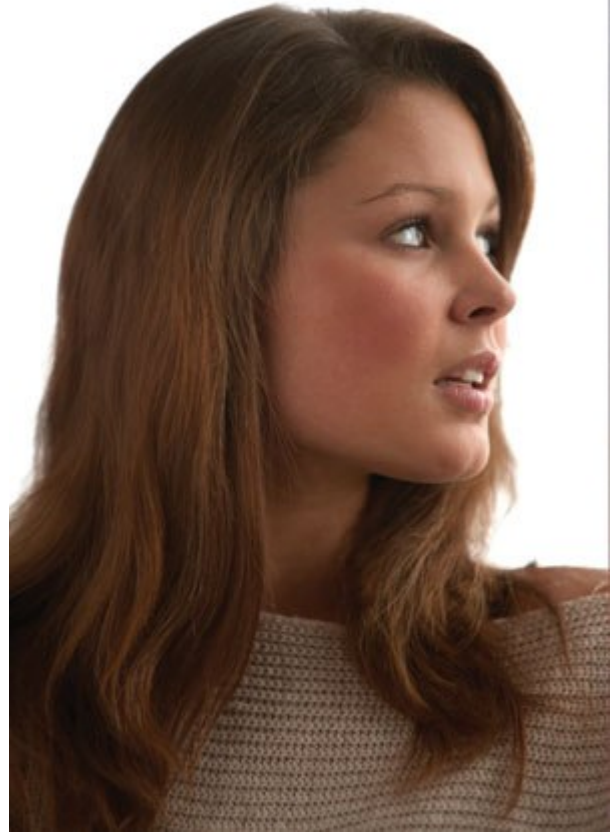
Another room. The room is large, with a bay window located behind and to the side of the subject, who had been positioned on a chaise longue. There was plenty of available light shining through the window but there was a problem.

Outside the window, and just over the head of the model, there was a big yellow skip. To eliminate this problem a sheet of tracing paper was tape on the window. Not only did this block out the sight of the skip, but it still allowed the ambient light to shine through.

Hands can get in the way of a good shot, and so move them out of shot, leaving the portrait clear of any clutter.

Using these settings adds sharpness to the salient features of the model, her eyes and face. The camera settings used - large aperture, fast shutter - allowed me to use the available light, and with the introduction of a reflector some light is bounced on to the side of the face that was in shadow.

There is always the possibility that the light will change so alterations will often have to occur on the move. If the light gets stronger, move the model further away but on the same line as the direction of light. This means that a less harsh light is bounced into the shadows, which in turn helps towards the natural look. Always be aware of changes in light and adjust accordingly.





Set Up

The white card faced the light source, bouncing it into the shadows on the model's face. Select a spot for the camera that's at about 90° to the direction of the light, and that allows you to alter to high, middle and low shooting angles with ease.

TOP TIPS

CLEAR BACKGROUNDS

Look out for clutter in the background that will distract the viewer of your image. If there is any, just remove it.

Don't feel you have to stick to the furniture set-up as you find it. If the light is better in another part of the room, just move things around a bit. Take a grey card reading to get the colour balance just right.

HAND POSITIONS

If you do include a shot of the model's hands in your shoot, make sure that you have them positioned carefully, and not looking like an afterthought. If not done correctly, they will cause a distraction in the image. Also, remember that if you move the model to a different



Also, remember that if you move the model to a different

position during a shoot, always check the background again, because there might have been something in the first position that, after moving the model, suddenly becomes a visible distraction. You don't always have to use reflectors. Merely using the light available can produce excellent results.

CHAT TO YOUR SUBJECT

Make your subject feel at ease by constantly chatting to them. This will help them relax and be more receptive to what you are asking them to do.

FOCUS ON THE EYES

It's where the portrait comes to life - and keep at least one 'catchlight' in the eyes. Portraits sometimes have the eyes obscured - for me, the image fails in many ways. Only something very special can work when you can't see the eyes and some light in them and they have to be sharp. Eyes looking out of the picture can also be less than ideal but it depends on the look... and if your model's eyes are looking to one side, always allow some space for their eyes to be looking at.

Don't expect great images straight away - it takes time for model and photographer to relax and get a feeling of what can be achieved.

Take a break every now and again to see how your pictures are looking. Tiredness will be reflected in your images if your sessions are too long.

If you want to develop your skills you'll need, at some point, some lighting. You could invest in quite an expensive Flash setup - even triggering the whole arrangement from your camera - but you can still make some great shots with one good 'continuous lighting' lamp (which are really quite cheap and use 'daylight' bulbs) and a couple of reflectors. The important thing to remember is, in most cases, to soften the lighting - by reflection, bouncing, diffusion etc.

Next stage might be to add a couple of backdrops - coloured sheets (but not wildly colourful ones, which really alter the white balance and distract from the model). Be careful to stick with one 'temperature' of lighting for the sake of white balance, but a mixture of daylight and tungsten bulbs can actually warm up the picture quite well. No need to worry too much if you're shooting Raw.

Whether using available light, from a window, or with powered continuous lighting or even flash.... once you get the hang of it you will find that you can set up a mini-studio quickly and cheaply.... and begin to move on to lighting for still-life and a whole world of opportunities.

Geoff

