

Light Painting

Light painting is a photography technique that uses a moving light source (e.g. a torch) to add light to a subject while taking a long-exposure photograph.

It's like any low-light photography, except you use an external light source to enhance the image by illuminating all or part of the subject.

Take Care!

When the lights go out it's dark (duh!), so...

- Take a while to allow your eyes to become accustomed to the dark.
- Use a dim light, like a mobile phone screen or red light to help you when you move about.
- Have a good look around for and make a mental note of hazards before turning out the lights.
- If you are with other photographers make sure your lights do not shine on their subjects or into their lenses and spoil their photos.

What Do You Need?

- **Camera** – A digital camera capable of manual settings and with a Bulb setting. This will allow exposures of many minutes.
- **Tripod** – Light painting requires long exposures and it's important that your camera does not move during the exposure.
- **Shutter release** – A cable release or a remote shutter release to begin your exposure avoiding the need to touch the camera which will cause the image to blur. If you don't have either of these, use your camera's self-timer function to initiate the shot. It is very important that you never touch your camera or tripod during the exposure.
- **Stopwatch or timer** – A stopwatch or some other way of timing your exposures is helpful, since most light-painting exposures will use Bulb mode.
- **Light source** – Many different types of lights can be used for light painting, e.g. torches, lasers, glow sticks, flashguns and mobile phones. Note that different light sources will produce different colours of light. For example, an LED light source will produce a cooler (bluer) coloured light, while a halogen source will produce a much warmer (orange) coloured light.
- **Colour gels** – Coloured plastic or sweet wrappers can be used to alter the tint of your light to add or change colour to your light painting.

Camera Settings

- **Mode** – Shoot in Manual mode, which allows you to set your shutter speed and aperture.
- **ISO** – Start with a low ISO, such as 100, and increase it to shorten exposure times if required.
- **Aperture** – Using f/8 or f/10 allows you to get more depth of field and enables you to use a longer shutter speed.
- **Shutter speed** – The longest shutter speed on most cameras is 30 seconds, so it may be necessary to set your shutter speed to Bulb mode. This allows you to keep the shutter open as long as you want for really long exposures.
- **Image stabilization** – Set this to Off. It's not required if your camera is on a tripod. Having image stabilization turned on may cause your camera or lens to introduce blur.
- **Long exposure noise reduction** – The recommended setting is off. If set to on it will double exposure time as the camera takes a second black exposure the same length as the first to reduce noise. If your camera is set to a reasonable ISO, the noise level will be low enough in most cases that in-camera noise reduction is unnecessary. Some older cameras may require this setting to be On to get acceptable noise levels.
- **Image quality** – It's recommended you set your image quality to RAW, which allows you to capture as more information. This is not a necessity, JPEGs are fine.
- **White balance** – Either Incandescent or Tungsten white balance settings are recommended. However, feel free to experiment with other white balance settings to produce some interesting light effects. If shooting in RAW you can usually change the colour balance when photo editing.
- **Histogram** – Use your histogram to check your exposure. If the histogram skews heavily to the left, your image is going to be too dark.
- **Over Exposure Warning** – Sometimes called blinkies. If available on your camera they will help you determine if your highlights are exposed properly. It is perfectly acceptable for your brightest highlights to be slightly clipped if the rest of your image is properly exposed.

Finally

There's always plenty of help online on photography-focussed sites and on YouTube.