

## BERTHOLD STEINHILBER: LIGHT PAINTING ON A HUGE SCALE

The cover of photographer Berthold Steinhilber's book *Ghost Towns of The American West* is a photo of a surreally lit, 1937 Chevy parked in the middle of the abandoned town of Bodie, California, at night. While there's a genuinely eerie, even haunted feeling to the image, what's equally striking is how Steinhilber lit the ghost town: He painted the scene with light, using a powerful 1.8 pound headlamp powered by a 12-volt car battery, with an exposure of one and a half hours at f/16.

At the time, Steinhilber was on assignment for *Smithsonian* magazine to photograph 19 ghost towns located in western states in the U.S., including California, Nevada, Utah and New Mexico. As he's refined his light painting techniques over the years, his lights and batteries have gotten smaller, while his subjects have gotten bigger. He's light painted ancient ruins, British abbeys and elaborate castles in the Rhine valley in Germany. The results, though, remain the same: Images in which rich blue backgrounds set off foregrounds so well illuminated that they often look almost too real—every blade of grass exposed, every corner of a car or house or castle exquisitely defined.

His approach is always well thought out. First he sets up his film camera (usually a 4 x 5 Silvestri or Linhof Master Technika) during the day and refines his viewpoint. Then he waits for twilight, for a period he calls the blue hour that lasts about 20 minutes. "That is when I begin to take the photograph. I choose an aperture by experience, usually between f/8 and f/16, open the



In order to bring the eerie atmosphere of this ghost town in Bodie, California, to life, Steinhilber painted the scene with light during an hour-and-a-half exposure.

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**Berthold Steinhilber: “I did research with different kinds of light sources—flashlights, small torches, headlamps—and found it quite interesting to move the light with my hands, similar to how one would use a paint brush.”**

shutter and begin to illuminate whatever I’m focused on—a building, a car, a landscape.” Back when he first started painting ghost towns, he used car batteries to power the lights because that’s all he could afford at the time. He would bring several of them in his van because his exposures could last anywhere from 45 minutes to two hours, depending on the size of his subject.

“After the camera shutter was set on a timer, I would start to light every single part of my subject with the handheld headlight and a strong reflector.” Steinhilber says he buys the headlights (which weigh under a pound) and then switches out the bulbs to halogen/tungsten ones. “This is important because the color temperature stays the same over the whole life of the bulb, giving a constant light temperature around 3200 Kelvin, and a constant result for all of my images,” says Steinhilber. Eight years ago he switched from car batteries to lead batteries, which only have a third of the weight (around 8 to 15 pounds). He is currently experimenting with

lithium batteries which weigh only 2 to 4 pounds.

Steinhilber says he first learned the technique of light painting about 20 years ago when he was learning photography, first at an advertising photo studio in Germany, and later at Dortmund University in Germany and a year at its partner photo school in Falmouth, England. Like many photographers who paint with light, he often experimented in rooms using flashlights. Steinhilber also spent long periods of time lighting small items, including books, chairs and tables.

“I didn’t really discover how to light and shoot all at once,” he explains, “it was progressive. I did research with different kinds of light sources—flashlights, small torches, headlamps—and found it quite interesting to move the light with my hands, similar

**Steinhilber has used his light painting technique on subjects like the Temple of Apollo in Korinth, Greece (above), and an abandoned power plant at an army research institute in Peenemünde, Germany (opposite page).**

# UNEXPECTED LIGHTING



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to how one would use a paint brush. By that time I had learned a lot about the way light works and what kind of atmospheric effects you can achieve." Eventually he began to light paint crumbling medieval churches, illuminating them using a large converted spotlight.

Most importantly, he adds, he learned always to paint strokes of light over the same area not just once or twice but five, six, even seven times to achieve an even tone of light—otherwise, he says, parts of the image can be too light or too dark, and the whole thing would be ruined. He says, "I usually 'paint' a certain part of a building several times, like painting a picture. For a brighter scene, I prolong the illumination time."

After years of light painting in a variety of settings, Berthold is seasoned. "I've had so much experience with this technique using ISO 100 film that I don't measure the exposure time, or the length of time I make a light stroke across parts of a building. It's become instinctive with experience."

He believes that the technique works especially well with certain subjects, like the isolated ruins and ghost towns he's often photographed. "It allowed me to create a certain ambiance and the atmosphere is not pure chance," he says. "Moods can be created with light in an active way, so you can have a personal influence on the photographs without depending on outside conditions."

—Jacqueline Tobin

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