



THE VISION COLLECTIVE WEEK FIVE.

Learning to See Light

Several years ago, I decided I would spend an entire year learning about light. I read what I could, began to experiment with strobes, and unpacked the idea of light as best I could. At the end of that year, I realized I had only scratched the surface. I am still learning.

Light and time are the most fundamental of our raw materials. Light is especially of interest to the photographer because it has so many facets and can be used and controlled in so many ways. But time (at least as we experience it) is linear and has fewer ways to creatively control it. We have strobes to create and modify light; we have no such tool with time.

That year of learning to see light ended up splitting itself neatly in two. I spent half my efforts learning to see light as best as the human eye can experience it—the quality and directionality of

it—and half my efforts learning to see light as the camera sees it. The two are often quite different, and if we can learn to understand both (particularly the way the camera sees light), we are that much closer to mastering our craft.

This is a massive topic. I can't distill the lessons of that year, nor the years since then, into one email. A book, perhaps. But I can suggest you begin that study for yourself, and point out the highlights that have stuck with me.



The soft light here allows the colours to remain vibrant and allows the scene to play out without the distractions of shadows.

Open your eyes

When it comes to light, you really don't need a book to understand it in relation to the photograph: you need to open your eyes. There's no secret setting on light; it's all visible. If it can be seen, it can be recorded with the camera. And it can be observed and learned. One of the most useful exercises I've asked students to do: put one hand in front of your face in different light, on cloudy days, on bright sunny days, and at different times of day. Now turn your whole body 360 degrees and watch your hand. Watch as the light moves around your hand; watch where the shadows fall. How hard are

those shadows, how distinct or soft? How long are they? At what point is the palm of your hand almost completely in its own shadow, just licked by light around the edges? Do you see that lick of light? This is the beginning of paying attention to light for some of you. In a year, you should be so attuned to light that when you're driving or walking down the street you're thinking, "Look at that light!" Take a minute several times a day and ask yourself these questions: What is the light doing? Where is it coming from? Is it high or low, to the side, or from the back? Is it reflecting off something? Hold a leaf to the sun; how do the colours change when the light is shining on the leaf and then when the sun is shining through the leaf? Observe, observe, observe.



Walking past this man in India, it was the light that pulled me in, the way it came in hard in one spot, bounced around, lit his face, deepened the colours on the wall, even glancing off his cell phone to create the small rectangle of white on the wall.

Luminous Inventory

In addition to observing the light and what it's doing, add this new question to your studies: what is the light giving me? Is it changing the colour in a scene? Is it creating long shadows that can be used as compositional elements? What about reflections? Another way to ask this question is: How can I

use this light? Describe it. Is it soft and moody? Is it dramatic? We talk so much about great light and sometimes about lousy light, but that kind of talk shows a lack of creativity and imagination.

There is an upside to all different kinds of light. It might not particularly match your vision, but you can use it. Recently I was doing my personal project in Italy and depended heavily on early morning light and the hard shadows it created. On foggy or otherwise un-sunny mornings, there was soft light that didn't help much with the specific project I was working on, but allowed me to work on other images that were equally moody. Forget good light. Forget bad light. You can do better than that. Describe the light. What's it bringing to the table? Mood? What kind of mood? What colour? Drama? How so? Perhaps that bright sun at high noon is creating muted, gross colours. That's a great time to consider making monochrome images and focusing on those great shadows and leveraging the power of a dynamic range too broad for your camera to handle.



In the image on the left, the sun was hard and bright, hitting the wall to the left and out of frame; that light bounced around the warm tunnel giving me lovely shape and colour, but it was the contrast with the far building so blue against the warm foreground that I loved the most. The image on the right was just blue. That's how

fog looks, but you might miss it if you're seeing "fog" and not "blue." Know what I mean?

We Do Not See as the Camera Sees

There's a lot of talk these days about high dynamic range (HDR) imaging. Some of it is focused on digital sensors that can capture a broader range of light from deepest shadow to brightest highlight. And some of it is focused on software solutions for reclaiming that broad range. Digital sensors are now incapable of capturing the full range of visible light. So what we see—and how our brain interprets what we see—is so often not at all what the camera sees. This is your next task. On a cloudy day it won't be much of a challenge. But what do you do when the sun breaks through in a beam and hits that barn on the horizon? How do you expose for that? This is not the technical challenge it's often made out to be: it's a creative challenge best answered by asking, "In what ways does the camera see this scene?"

Answering that question is easy. Make several exposures of the scene. Make one that exposes for the dark details, letting you see into the shadows and blowing out the highlights. Make a couple in the middle that are something of a compromise. Then make one that allows those shadows to go dark, even black, but exposes for the brightest spots, losing no detail in those areas. This is the constrain of digital photography. Yes, you can blend those layers together in Photoshop, but forget that for a moment. See this constraint for the creative possibility that it is. The camera can see this scene in several ways; does one of those ways feel right to you?

Look at the image below. It was made in Venice just as the sun was coming up. Shooting into the light, with the sun bouncing off the cobblestones was a challenge if I wanted to keep the details in the shadows. But I didn't. I couldn't have cared less; I wanted the textures and the shapes and the beautiful mood. So I underexposed my image until all the highlight detail was preserved. Yes, my shadows went black. There's no rule about that. Plunge those shadows! Use them as shapes! Make a great composition with them! The alternative is what? Blow out the highlights and lose the colour and the mood. The camera's ability to see a lower dynamic range is a gift. Use it.



Colour is a Function of Light

Light and colour are necessarily related: no light, no colour. That's the way of things. And as the light changes, so does the colour. Read this article I wrote called *Seeing Colour*, where I discuss a photograph of two black gondola boats on black water. But you wouldn't know it because the boats are reflecting the blue sky and the water is reflecting the yellow and red building just out of frame. The whole thing is a riot of colour.

Look at the images below: black cobblestones. But at the right time of night, the light from a nearby shop reflects on those stones (best when wet) and turns them red, or the rising sun turns them yellow. I often shoot this kind of scene a little underexposed with the in-camera Velvia film simulation in my Fuji X-T2, making those colours even more vibrant and dramatic. Many people would just walk past this scene because the brain tends to filter our information that's not important, and our brains figured out long ago that shadows didn't matter (except what hides within them) and reflections were just an illusion. Great if you want to survive, but lousy if you want to make photographs.

Ask yourself how the light at any time of day and in any place, is colouring the scene. What is that orange tungsten light creating for you to photograph? What colour are the shadows created by that

light? What about snow? Have you ever looked at the shadows in a snowy scene and noticed how incredibly blue they can be?



Creative Exercise

What I don't want to do is tell you about light; that's not how we learn. I want to encourage you (implore you!) to take up the study of light, for that's how you will take the next slow, lifelong, steps in your craft. Right now, wherever you are, do the exercise I described above: put your hand in front of your face (not too close!). What is the light doing? Where does it fall? What colour is it? Where are the shadows? How hard are they? Now turn your hand, move it, and watch how the light moves. Go outside, do the same thing. Put your hand down and look around you. What are the effects of light wherever you look? How would the camera see this scene? How might you expose for it? Would you expose for the highlights and let the shadows go dark, hiding things and creating

mystery? Would you shoot into the light and play with the lens flare? Would you expose for the shadows and create a really luminous image with blown out highlights? Would you use the soft grey day to make some gentle portraits? Observe, play, repeat. Then, if you're still hungry, pull a book of photographs off the shelf, pick your favourites, and study the light in every image, asking the same questions above.



Study the Masters

Saul Leiter

Saul Leiter was an early colourist, both a painter and a photographer. His work, especially the work reflected in his book *Early Colour*, is very graphical, focusing on shape and colour. I adore this book; it's sitting on the shelf beside me. In it, he seems to have found beauty in the most mundane of places, seeing light with particular acuity. Spend some time looking at [the images here](#) and [here](#) and note how he used the colour and shape, particularly how he often used foreground frames to define the visual space and guide your eye. I can't get enough of Leiter's colour work.

If you like studying this kind of work in your hands instead of a screen, consider budgeting for one photography book (not a how-to) every month or two.

Further Study

Here are a few resources to follow up on as you have time.

- Read my article *Exposing for Highlights*.
- Read my article *Seeing Colour*.
- Two great articles about Saul Leiter, one from Eric Kim about street photography, the other from *The Guardian* about Leiter's life and art.

Final Comments

This one was long, sorry about that. I told you I was going to pour my heart into this. If you're serious about your craft, this one's going to do more for you, especially at the beginning, than many of the others. Take your time with it, come back to it. I study the light, marvel in it, play with it, every day of my life.

One last thing: when you joined the Vision Collective we kept your email in a specific email list only for this one purpose. We will continue to do so. I put out a somewhat weekly newsletter, The Contact Sheet, and it's got great articles and resources, the Craft & Vision Deal of the Week, and new educational tools as they are released. It's a great resource, and we're working hard to make it better. **If you're not on that list and would like to be, you can sign up here.**

See you next week! If you're looking for me, you can find me on **my blog**, on **Facebook**, and on **Instagram**.

For the love of the photograph,
David duChemin