

Digital Portraiture

Graham Whistler FRPS guides us into studio portraiture in the digital age and the principles of good lighting



Portrait photographers have benefited greatly with the advent of digital for at last they have perfect control of all stages of production. Working with most digital SLR cameras it is possible to monitor all shooting stages. Setting up the studio becomes an exact and repeatable process. Balancing simple or complex lighting set-ups and adjusting lighting contrast is simplified by use of the LCD camera monitor. All these tests can be made before your sitter or model arrives for the session. With custom white balance perfect colour can be obtained and saved to camera preset memory (pro SLRs have several preset memories for various set-ups) to be recalled and used in the future.

When the sitter arrives final and exact adjustments to lighting can be made and a few quick test exposures confirm that all is well. With camera connected directly to a lap-top or desktop computer results of the shoot can be monitored and pictures can be seen on a large screen only seconds after taking. The digital SLR is connected by Fire-wire or USB2 cable of at least 12m giving the photographer enough slack to move fairly freely round the studio. Some of the latest professional cameras like the Nikon D2X can even be connected to the computer by wireless technology. A small transmitter fits on the base of the camera and the signal can be picked up by most wireless networks; many laptops are also wireless enabled. This gives the photographer good freedom of movement in the studio with no trailing cables to trip over but data transmission of large 20MB RAW files may as yet be too slow. With the Nikon transmitter costing about £550 as yet I have been reluctant to invest in one!

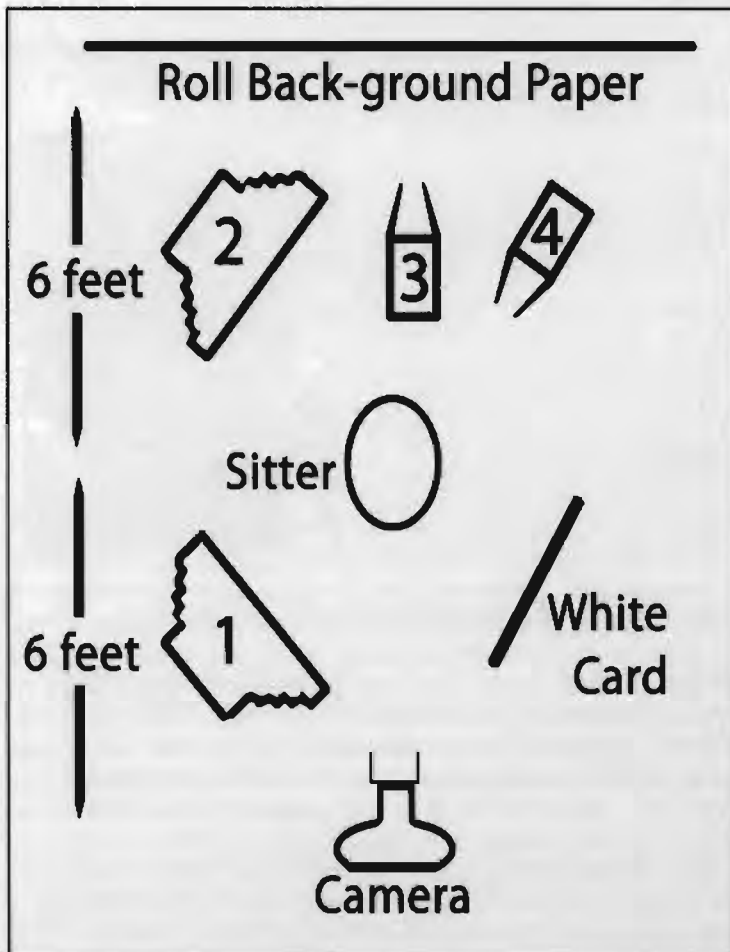
USB2 gives good data transmission speeds and using Nikon Capture 4.4.0 Software in tethered mode 20MB NEF Raw files open fully with a reasonably fast PC in about 8 seconds. (The new Nikon Capture NX software now out promises to be much faster.) Seeing the digital pictures so quickly on a large computer screen gives the photographer every opportunity to make perfect technical and creative images. The computer screen should be turned away from the sitter while you are shooting to avoid them watching for the next picture. After shooting several pictures pause and turn the screen enabling you both to review results. Even professional models find this very reassuring. Bad pictures can be deleted at once: inexperienced sitters find this helpful and become more relaxed as the session progresses. Faults with make-up pose or lighting can be seen at once and corrections made. Histograms can be viewed to check for exposure errors: if in doubt underexpose slightly to avoid blow highlights particularly when back lighting is used with blond or light haired sitters.

Studio set-ups still follow the same basic rules that have been used for years. The sitter should be placed on a simple backless chair if possible at least 6-8 feet away from the background. This will help to avoid shadows from the lights falling on the background; also long lenses can be used to keep a complex background out of focus. With back lighting great care must be taken to avoid any light falling on the surface of the lens causing flare so use a good deep lens hood! Continuous rolls of colour studio paper can be used rolled down from a stand well above the level of your sitter's head in a seamless curve towards the sitter, and forward (under the chair) towards the camera if full length pictures are to be taken. I use basic "wrap round" lighting



as a starting point. With the sitter facing towards the main lights with body at 45 degrees to the photographer, the head is then turned towards the camera as lighting is set. I use two large metre sq soft boxes on my studio flash heads. The main or modelling light (No 1) is at 45 degrees to camera and raised to be above the sitter's head. Height should be enough to give a reasonable nose shadow without losing the all important eye detail. Only this light is directly on your sitter's face.

Care must be taken to get a good catch light in the eyes. (Several catch lights are bad news and need retouching out in Photoshop.) The light needs to be set with great care particularly if your sitter has spectacles! The gentle progressive shadow from the soft box adds shape and modelling to the side of the sitter's face nearest to camera. The shadow can be filled in by use of a large white reflector with lighting contrast adjusted by moving the reflector in or out. With digital a few test exposures helps you set the exact level of fill in required.



A second soft box (No 2) is placed behind the sitter as shown. This gives rim lighting to the hair and side of the face; also if hands are included they too will be rim lit to dramatic effect. This light is often set to be brighter than the main modelling light (No 1). The combined use of the two soft boxes gives the wrap round lighting that gives character, shape and roundness to the sitter's face. Light No 4 is a flash head with honeycomb grid or snoot fitted to give a very directional hair/rim light to the back of the sitter's head. Together with soft box No 2 this back lighting of the sitter's head adds dramatic interest to the portrait and avoids the top of the head merging with a dark background. A final light (No 3) on the floor behind the sitter can be focused on the background to give a graduated tone behind your sitter's shoulders.

Before you start the shoot spend some time getting to know your sitter: spend some time relaxing with a cup of tea. As you both talk you should observe your sitter noting mannerisms and features. Think about how you can use lighting to enhance the sitter's good features. Think about camera angle or shadows to hide bad features. As you move into the studio your ability to converse will put people at ease.

As you start to work keep talking to your sitter advising what is going on. Set up your camera at eye level. Low angles will make the jaw-line too heavy; high angles lose eye contact and make no friends with bald sitters! With bald or light haired subjects great care must be taken with angle and strength of your two back lights.



Your first few exposures help to relax the sitter getting them used to the flashes and the camera. Be positive in your direction and quick to praise when you get a good picture. As the session progresses pause and look at the images on the computer. If the sitter is unhappy take time out for checking hair and make-up. I like to work fast, so tend to shoot handheld for more relaxing pictures - the tripod can slow you down and is not required with studio flash (1/800 sec or faster).

As the session draws to the end, tell the sitter. Often your last few exposures will be relaxed and the best images of the day.

So far I have only talked about fairly dramatic low key lighting. High key with a white background is simpler to manage and works well with young active children or is softer and kinder on older ladies. With the white background there is no need for rim lighting. Two soft boxes will work well in much the same position with white card fill in. The floor and rim spot are fitted with standard flood-light reflectors and turned round on either side of the background. They are adjusted to overexpose by one stop.

I hope this will help you get started. Good luck.

