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PHOTO INSIGHT



TOM MACKIE

As an internationally respected architectural photographer, Tom brings a wealth of experience to AP

Tom Mackie explains how he created this energetic image of Los Angeles, and shares his expert advice on how to create electrifying light trails

THIS is the Harbor Freeway in Los Angeles at twilight. The main building is an office complex designed by Kohn Pedersen Fox Associates. By shooting as the sun was setting I've been able to capture traces of ambient light in the sky, which contrasts nicely with the twinkling artificial lights dotted throughout the scene. At this time of the day there is a five- or ten-minute period before the light disappears, so you have to work quickly. I took this picture on a Wista 5x4 DX field camera with a 150mm lens using Fujichrome Velvia 50 film. I set up my camera on a tripod and was careful to ensure the vertical lines were straight.

You sometimes see cityscapes with light trails where the sky has gone completely black and they don't look that appealing. I prefer purple/magenta skies like this one that subtly graduate to deep blue at the top as I think it adds to the atmosphere in the image. The colours in the sky greatly depend on where the sun is setting and in this image I'm looking north – there is not as much gradation in the sky as there would have been had I been looking west where the sun sets. Yet the even tone works here as it allows the eye to differentiate between the buildings and the sky. If the sky had been too powerful and overbearing it would

have taken attention away from the rest of the picture. I made sure my exposure allowed me to retain colour and detail in the windows so they would stand out in the composition.

The exposure is decided by the amount of light on the buildings and in the sky. I took a meter reading, and when my exposure for the sky was 1 stop over the exposure for the illuminated buildings I opened the shutter. This allowed me to capture the subtle gradation in the sky. If I had been 2 or 3 stops over, the sky would have looked more like daylight and the colour would not have had so much depth, while too far under and the building would have been lost against the sky. This was approximately a 20sec exposure. I stopped down to about f/16 to give me the long exposure I wanted and also to create a greater depth of field.

As in any composition, there has to be something that the eye is drawn to and in this case the main subject is the series of buildings, which are complemented by the light trails. There are a lot of different elements at work here, and the danger with an image like this is that the composition becomes overcrowded and incoherent. I have tried to use the light trail as a unifying feature to create a sense of perspective

and depth by leading the eye into the image and also bring all the potentially disparate elements together. The red light streaking through the middle is a key part of this. On a basic level, the red contrasts with the blue sky, but it also joins the buildings and the white light together. Without it, elements in the frame would be displaced and the composition would lack vibrancy and balance (see *Talking technique* for more on light trails). The bridge that slices through the middle of the picture also has an important part to play. Falling on a third, it neatly divides the frame in two, which creates an aesthetically pleasing image.

Framing is key. I have made the buildings the main subject, but have chosen an angle to make the most of the myriad lines in the scene. The image is made up of a series of intersecting lines: the vertical lines of the buildings contrast with the criss-cross diagonal lines of the two roads and the horizontal bridge. The effect of this is an image alive with movement in addition to the obvious blur caused by the long exposure. I have tried to create a sense of what it was like to be there at the time and to capture the electricity of the city at night. AP

Tom Mackie was talking to Gemma Padley

To see more images by Tom visit www.tommackie.com

TALKING TECHNIQUE

Photographers who come to my workshops often ask me how to create light trails. It looks complicated, but it's actually very easy to do. Setting a long exposure that records the headlights and rear lights of moving vehicles creates light trails. The first step is to find a scene with moving traffic. This sounds obvious, but you need a road where the traffic is actually moving and in busy cities such as Los Angeles the cars are often bumper to bumper. It's particularly bad at rush hour when everyone is coming out of work and sometimes the traffic barely moves at all. Yet even if the cars are moving slowly, over a 20sec or 30sec exposure it is possible to create a light-trail effect.

A lot of the success of a light-trail image comes from timing. Wait until the traffic lights go green and the cars start to move before opening the shutter, and try to find a vantage point that offers a good balance between headlights and rear lights to give a mix of white and red light. Any stationary subjects such as parked cars or lampposts will be recorded by the exposure and consequently stand out in the stream of light, so bear

this in mind when choosing your viewpoint. If you want a smooth light trail you don't want it dotted with artefacts.

Take care when working out your exposure. Your shutter speed needs to be long enough to capture motion but not so long that you overexpose the brighter areas of the scene. If you are shooting digitally, try working in aperture or shutter priority and aim for an exposure of between 5secs and 30secs. There is no set exposure that will work every time, but one method is to work out the exposure for the sky and other subjects in the frame and see how much blur this gives you. If you want more movement in the light trails, increase your exposure time by using a longer shutter speed. Look at the effect this has on your subject and make sure subject details aren't burnt out. Alternatively, you could choose a starting point for your exposure of, say, 10secs, then take a few test shots and increase or decrease your exposure if the images are under or overexposed. Be conscious of glaring spotlights shining straight into your lens and adjust your shooting angle if necessary.



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