

Night Photography with the View Camera

By Tom Paiva

Night photography has been a passion of mine for some twenty years, for more than the reason that I am a night person. The combination of man-made artificial lights, from neon and tungsten to sodium and mercury vapor, adds surreal colors on film. Their reflections and shadows add so much more to the image than during the day, along with the inherent mystery. I enjoy the man-made environment and shoot in urban and industrial areas.

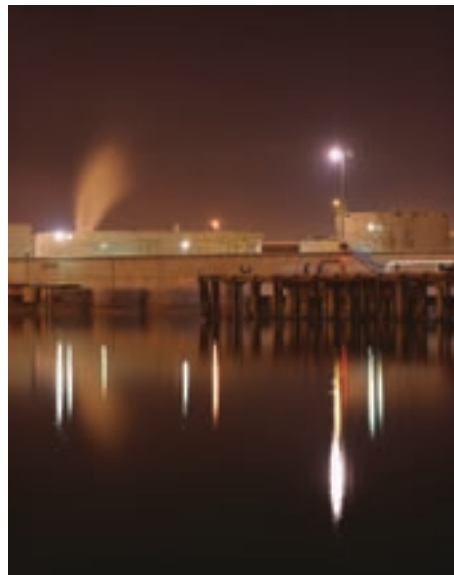
Having been involved in many workshops on night photography, I have been asked many times about how to use the view camera at night, and the pros and cons of this type of shooting. Like most, I started with 35mm and quickly moved up to medium format because of the issues of increased grain. Film was not designed for the long exposures I use. Also, I like to print my work large.

Some 15 years ago, I experimented with an old Speed Graphic to get the larger negative, but had problems with flare and lack of movements. The cover of my book, *Industrial Night*, was shot with a Speed Graphic and a single coated 60s lens. Eventually I started using a field camera and now use field and monorail cameras with short rails because of their rigidity with long exposures in the field. I am rarely more than 100 feet from my car, so weight is not as major an issue as a large format backpacker.

Virtually all of my work is shot under available light at night. The yellow-



Rail Car at Chemical Plant; 10 minutes at f22, 150mm lens, Fuji 64T film]



Channel #2; 8 minutes at f22; 300mm lens, Kodak E100SW]

low-orange of sodium vapor, the cyan of mercury vapor, the green of fluorescent, adds to the drama of the modern industrial landscape at night. Much of the “seeing” at night is the training of your eye to notice interesting highlights, interactions, reflections off objects, light filtering through windows, etc. Most of us don’t really see these details. I’m always looking for them, even when not photographing.

The advantages of the view camera working at night are the same as during the day; perspective control, selective focusing and the large negative. And that large piece of film has the tonality, depth and color I get pleasure from.

Many have asked why bother shooting film in this new digital age. There really are no options for the view camera for the dimly lit environments I frequent. The film holder or Quick- or Ready-Load holders are a simple, compact, easy to carry package. Being tethered to a laptop in the field would take away from the presence of being out in the night.

There are several major challenges with shooting at night with the view camera. One of the first is simply being able to see on the ground glass. To alleviate this, a bright Fresnel is more than an accessory, but required. My two main cameras for night shooting have Maxwell screens each designed specifically for short and longer focal lengths. Since I wear glasses, I had my optometrist make me a pair of glasses that are 5x in my prescription, letting

me get about 6 inches from the ground glass without using a loupe. This aids in composition and focusing, being able to see the entire ground glass under the dark cloth. If you are lucky enough not to wear glasses, then make sure you have a high quality loupe.

Another major issue in shooting at night is focusing. This has always been one of the most commonly asked questions (along with exposure). I carry about a half a dozen small flashlights which I place in critical areas of the shot. In recent years, the advent of the new LED flashlights are excellent, since the battery and bulb life is very long and you have the multiple bulbs on which to focus. Once you have the flashlights in place, you can go through the typical movements of focus, swing, shift, and tilt to bring the lights into

focus (but don't forget to remove them from your shot!) Another common way to focus is to set the flashlight at the hyperfocal distance, focus and stop down. The old rule of stopping down to f64 to get focus is not really practical at night because the exposures would go into the hours

Finally, I usually shoot a Polaroid, using Type 55 to be able to check focus on the negative with a loupe. For very long exposures, I shoot Type 57, which is ISO 3000, cutting the wait time for exposures from many minutes to a few seconds. The exposure information from the Polaroid helps get you in the ball park, but is far from 100% accurate, as films have different reciprocity characteristics from Polaroid. Also, it's nice to have the Polaroid to write on for exposure information or any other particulars about the shot you want to record.

Regarding the issue of exposure, I can spot meter the high-



Oil Pumping Station; 5 minutes at f22, 120mm lens, Fuji 64T]

compendium bellows to protect the lens from unwanted flare. Also, there is a simple but elegant item called a "Flare Buster" that clamps on to the camera.

Like any type of photography, night photography takes patience and practice. Experiment and take notes, as this is the best way to hone the skill. Be familiar with your view camera during the day as it is much more of a challenge working the controls in the dark.

If you have never shot at night, start with a smaller format camera to become familiar with exposures and the color of the artificial lights on film.

The rewards of the final large format negative or transparency are worth the effort when everything comes together, with the detail and tonality, especially in the shadows. Also, you have the advantage of being able to make big prints, as I like to do, to truly show the impact of using the view camera at night. It is worth the effort.



Chemical Pipes; 20 minutes at f32, 72mm lens (with rise, swings and tilts—technically challenging), Fuji 64T]



Oil Tank Farm; 20 minutes at f16, 90mm lens, Fuji NPL negative film.

Tom Paiva will lead the Night Photography workshop and will be a presenter at the View Camera Magazine Conference in Louisville KY this June. More of his work can be seen at www.tompaiva.com

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