

Still Life Photography

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What images come to mind when someone mentions still-life photography? Traditionally we think of still-life as an image of bowls of arranged fruit, cheese and wine, bottles of wine with grapes. This image comes from the famous still-life paintings from days of old. When photography first started to become popular, a lot of the early art photography was imitation of earlier art works.

A still-life photograph can be the arrangement of most any thing. One dictionary defines still-life as “a picture consisting predominantly of inanimate objects”. This definition covers a lot of ground and you are limited only by your imagination.

To produce a good still-life image you need to carefully arrange your subject matter. To get a prize winning image, great care needs to be taken in the arrangement, selection of subject matter, color and lighting. Because in setting up your arrangement, you have complete control over all these qualities, there is no room for mistakes. Everything has to be perfect and pleasing to the eye.

While our first thought of a still-life is the traditional image we have discussed, we can produce strong images using more contemporary techniques. We can develop compositions with items painted with fluorescent paint and lit by black light to give strong color impact. We can use objects that conflict or give a feeling of tension such as a beautiful red rose lying among the rusted pieces of metal. We can create interesting compositions from everyday items such as crayons, rubber bands, paperclips, candies or create an unreal image such as the hand grinder with big tomatoes going in the top and little cherry tomatoes coming out the bottom.

The key to success with a still-life is to come up with an interesting arrangement of “things” that blend together as a pleasing whole or go together as a complete conflict but grab the attention of the viewer. A still-life must have impact and be pleasing to the eye. Most importantly the still-life must be well lit. Think about the rules for composition, the rule of thirds, leading lines, triangle arrangements and the fact an odd number of items are more pleasing to the eye. The scale of items is very important, if the size relationship between items is not proportional, your image will not be pleasing.

You will need a flat working surface large enough for the items you are going to photograph. Your set up can be a simple table top with cloth or paper background. The cloth background could be a colored sheet or blanket. You can purchase rolls of seamless paper background material from most camera stores in a wide assortment of colors. You don't need a large amount of lighting gear. A small soft-box with reflectors to fill in works best. Nice lighting coming in a window can be augmented by fill cards. It's not the quantity of light but the quality and direction that is paramount.

Remember, you have control of all these details; any mistakes you make will be held against you. Have fun, experiment, try new things. One of the best things about a still-life is you can do them in your home; you are not dependent on weather or controlled by someone else's schedule. If you have questions about still life photography or would like to have me comment on one of your images, contact me by E-mail.