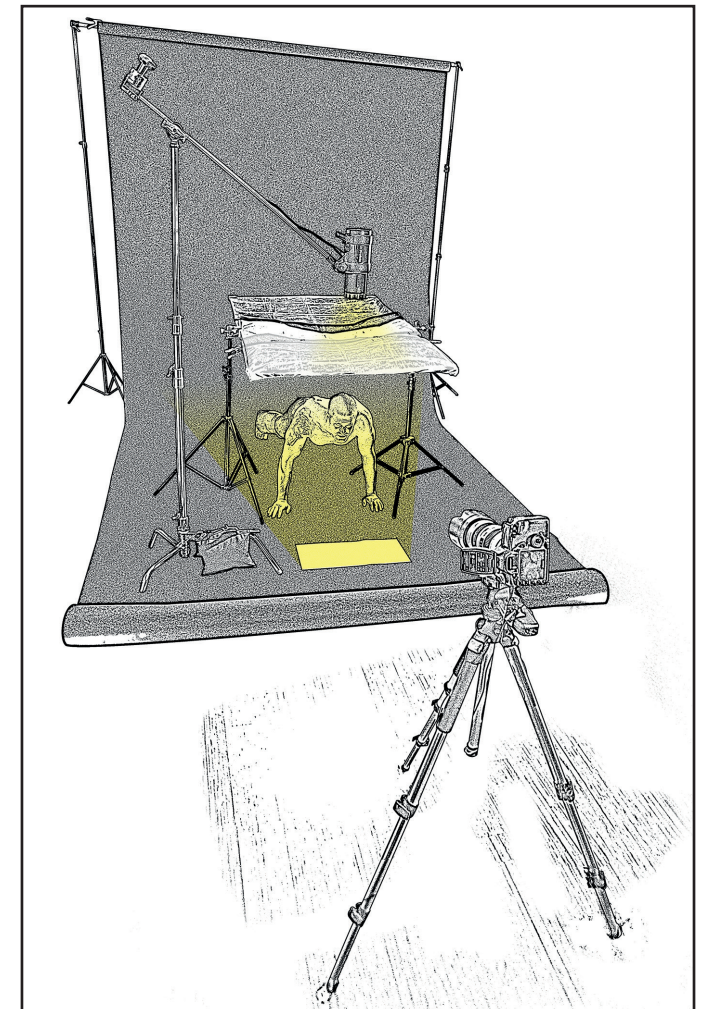Dave Montizambert©

I believe photography is a beautiful abstraction of reality and that black and white (B&W) is even more so. With proper care and attention, B&W is beautiful, artful, but if you intend to create something more than the mediocre, there is much more to consider than simply applying a mono-chromatic conversion to a digital image capture. There is an infinite number of ways to create B&W; I give lighting and processing equal consideration as both are absolutely key to great mono-chromatic images.

First off photography is all about light and B&W photography is no different. Lighting for monochromatic imagery offers more freedom in the highlight end of the tonal scale than does lighting for colour imagery. Generally speaking, in B&W the highlights can be pushed higher up in the grey scale than you can in colour. Think of a fashion image in B&W where the model's facial flesh is or is almost burned out to white. This same image in colour may not be so appealing; burned out areas of flesh in colour can make the subject look oily or greasy. Photographers have always loved lighting black flesh-tones. Generally, you shape lighter-toned faces and bodies predominantly with shadow and to a much lesser degree with specular (shine, sheen). With darker flesh-tones you rely more heavily on specular and way less on shadow.

When I say specular I'm referring to specular highlights which are mirror images or reflections of a source of illumination imaging on the surface of your subject. This bright shine sitting on the surface of your subject makes for a dramatic contrast on darker-toned subjects and less so on lighter ones. This is why lighting dark flesh is so loved by photographers since they get to play with this specular light-form. When I was originally learning lighting back in the early 1980s, there were not that many dark-skinned people to light and photograph in my home town Vancouver BC. I loved the artful figure studies that I saw of dark skinned models. I wanted to try this out but alas with no dark flesh at hand I had to get a little tricky. Knowing that the brightness of a specular highlight (called specular contrast in tech-speak), can be controlled independently from the brightness of the subject's true tone, (called diffused value in tech-speak), it occurred to me that I could turn a light person into a dark person by simply underexposing them and then showing all their shape and form by creating bright sheen or specular highlights over their face and body. I recently used this technique on an image of kick-boxer, Michael Donnellan (see image 001), from my '*Dances With One Light – Dramatic Illumination Techniques*' lighting tutorial DVD.

Notice how dark his flesh looks, yet we see his form and details perfectly due to the specular light-form wrapping his face and body. The placement of the light helps with this lighting effect too. I typically skim the light across the person to put them in shadow as much as possible – shadow is an underexposed area and so helps with the darkening of the flesh. In the case of image 001 the main source of illumination was light bouncing off two sheets of A4-size office printer paper directly below Michael's face, (see lighting diagram in image 002). This skimmed light projects big juicy shadows across his face and body. These shadows I barely fill in so that they are dark (high shadow contrast in tech-speak), this further enhances the dark-flesh effect. In Lightroom or in Adobe Camera Raw processing software, I often push this effect further with the "Black & White Mix" or "HSL/Grayscale" luminance sliders to darken Reds, Oranges, and Yellows (the colours that flesh-tone is made up of), which effectively darkens the flesh-tone with little effect on specular sheen.
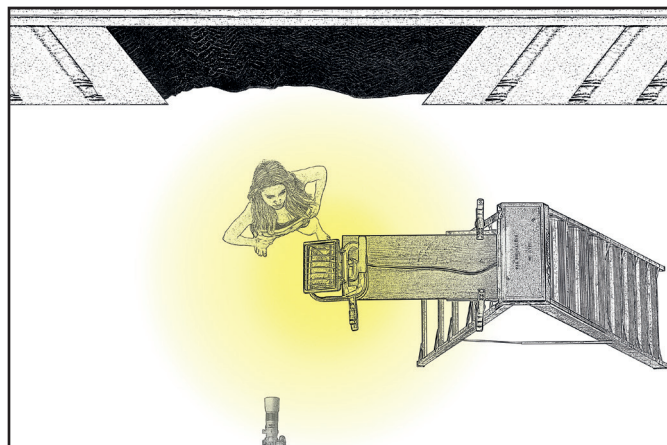
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Different Raw processing settings can really affect the feel of the image; case in point, see image 003 of two versions of the same image of aerialist Loretta Hope which I created during a workshop on minimalists' approach to lighting in London at the Societies' Convention a couple of years ago. The A version used process settings such as those used in image 001 of the kick-boxer Michael to create a hard feel, whereas version B, I set the "Black & White Mix" sliders in Lightroom to lighten the Reds, Oranges, and Yellows to mimic shooting B&W film with a red filter over the lens. This really lightens the red colour range that makes up flesh and creates a soft B&W feel to the image with a bit of a glow. Which one is best? That is totally subjective, I love both, each creates a different mood. Lighting for this image was very simple (see lighting diagram Image 004), a 500 watt workman's tungsten light attached to a makeshift stand (a step-ladder) was bounced off the white ceiling above Loretta.

I'd like to finish off by saying that I absolutely love B&W; perhaps it is its simplicity over colour – there is no colour contrast to distract us, only tonal contrast to consider. Or perhaps that it has such potential for creating drama, something I strive for in my images and not in my life:).

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Dave's Bio:
Dave Montizambert lectures internationally on lighting, digital photography and Adobe Photoshop. He is also a published author having written two books on lighting and digital photography (www.montizambert.com) plus numerous magazine articles on these topics in North America, Europe, Russia and Asia. Dave also creates lighting and Photoshop tutorial DVDs for www.software-cinema.com and www.PhotoshopCAFE.com/video and authors 'Dave On Demand' (www.montizambert.com) a photo blog with free and subscription-based video tutorials and articles. Dave is available for lectures and workshops in your area and can be reached through www.montizambert.com.

A

B

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