Trying to print night scenes with all their dark subtleties is often more troubling than a trip to the dentist. Many of these rich nuances will appear beautifully depicted on screen but will get 'lost in translation' when printed. Reflective media such as photographic prints or lithographic reproductions such as this magazine, cannot possibly represent the range of contrast that transmissive media can, media such as properly calibrated and profiled monitors of decent quality. If you think of it, it is obvious, light reflecting or bouncing off a surface cannot be as intense as light 'glowing' out of a surface. The image you see before you (see Image-01) was recently created by me during one of my lighting workshop demos at a knock-down, drag-out, leave-no-class-attendee-standing, five-day workshop at Texas School in Dallas, Texas. At this workshop – one of the biggest in the world, so no pressure there, – I was showing off my lighting techniques for dramatic B&W figure studies. Creating complex lighting (see Image-03 & Shooting Specs Call-out box) on the fly while trouble shooting all the unfamiliar gear that doesn't want to work, while explaining what you are doing and the principles involved to a bunch of photographic zealots means that you cannot give your full attention to the actual photoshoot and model before you.

However, luckily for me the creation of this image was a whole lot easier thanks to the incredibly photogenic physique of my subject, Taondrae Caldcleught – thank God for that! But still the situation was far from perfect; I was plagued with several technical issues such as the flash triggers that worked intermittently in a very schizo manner as well as a never-ending barrage of questions – those Texans 'gotta know! I don't blame them, they were paying a pretty penny to be there, besides I love questions it gives me a chance to be the big-shot – pontificating ad nauseam. With just an hour and a bit to do a three-hour shoot, the stress was on. As always, I shot tethered – the Raw files were ported directly from camera to computer using a Tethertools rig. I always, or almost always, create my lighting to my Raw process settings rather than the other way around – this is a more efficient way of working and renders better-quality image files. An interesting point is that this is the way I had to work in the film days before digital because unlike B&W negative films, colour transparency film (slide film), which was my main-stay, had very little processing latitude – it could not be effectively altered with variations in processing, doing so would skew the film's colour wildly, making it unsuitable for all but the most avant-garde imagery, which meant that I had to create my lighting to the range of contrast created by that film and processing method.

Anyhow, once the images ported over from camera to computer they would automatically show up in Lightroom with my custom B&W preset settings applied to the on-screen preview, allowing for a fairly accurate rendering of my lighting. For the sake of the workshop participants, my computer was tethered to a projector so that as the images appeared in Lightroom they also showed up bigger than life on the projection screen. To my immense joy the first image looked absolutely amazing on the big screen, what a relief after all the technical trauma! I almost got a mouth full of cavities from the stress, which by the way, is a little known dental fact that stress can cause cavities – I thought that might be appropriate to mention here since I seem to have a bit of a dental theme going on in this article. Anyhow, this happy outcome should have been no surprise – I had planned this shoot out in my head long before the session started and then during the shoot, I metered it to death to ensure all was perfect. But still, when things you normally count on suddenly seem to stop working for you, you lose confidence creating doubt in yourself and your knowledge.

Upon completion of the shoot and with the help of the workshop attendees, we picked out our favourite image of Taondrae then made a print. This first print looked pretty decent when viewed inside a print viewing booth – these booths are designed to provide near ideal viewing conditions, although I find them a little too bright if you are trying to represent typical viewing conditions of clients. The specular highlights (sheen) on our more than buff subject, contrasted beautifully to his very dark underexposed flesh, even though they weren't all that bright – high 20s to low 70s with Lightroom's 0–100% scale and 53 to 180 in the 0–255 levels scale of Photoshop or Adobe Camera Raw. Either scale puts them in the upper quarter-tone to upper mid-tone range, making these shiny-bits kind of dim for what specular sheen can be, but not unusual for night scenes.

Interestingly enough, these specular highlights actually appear brighter than the densitometer readings suggest due to Simultaneous Contrast. For instance, Simultaneous Contrast makes a mid-tone against a dark-tone appear visually brighter than it really is – your visual system is always trying to pull tones apart making dark tones darker and light tones lighter, so we can better discern detail to help us identify what we are looking at for the sake of survival – can I eat it or can it eat me? But, if you look at this image or any predominantly dark image under less than optimum viewing conditions, such as most people's home lighting, things will start to block-up, losing a lot of those beautiful bits of subtle specular detail making the image look dark and a bit lacklustre. Conversely, an image such as a typical portrait is made up of a lot more mid- through to highlight-tones rather than predominantly dark tones of this night scene of Taondrae. This makes them more flexible in terms of viewing conditions – Taondrae's night-time portrait and all other images like it, have a very narrow range of lighting conditions in which they look okay. But having said that, even a forgiving image like the typical portrait image I mentioned above has an optimum viewing brightness that makes that image it's very best; this is why fine-arts scenic photographer, Peter Lik,
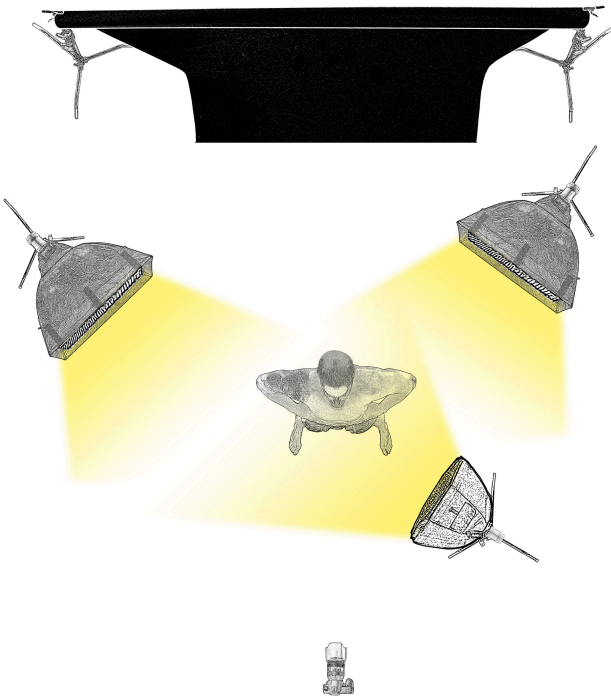
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» includes installation of 'gallery' lighting in the price tag for his prints – he wants to ensure that the viewing brightness levels match the printing 'brightness' levels. But he doesn't stop there, your newly purchased image and the included lighting for that image are installed at your location by his art installation crew – you can't command the high prices he commands and not display those images to perfection.

I remember years ago dragging a couple of tungsten lights and my incident light-meter to my local photo lab who were making prints for me that I was going to enter into the Professional Photographers of America (PPA) print competition – the PPA gave the exact brightness level (f-stop, shutter-speed, and ISO to be metered with an incident light-meter) that the prints would be viewed at by the judges. I painstakingly set up and metered the lights to the PPA spec, then viewed the test print the lab provided under this lighting set-up. I remember having to do this several times over a couple of days before getting what I wanted; what a hassle, but it paid off, I got one of the images into the PPA loan collection!

I'd like to finish things off with a viewing exercise using two side-by-side variations of Taondrae (see Image 02). Look at version A which is printed straight out of Lightroom using the B&W preset (with no further tweaks in Lightroom or Photoshop) employed at the time of lighting him in front of the class. Now look upon version B where you see the result of a contrast-enhancing curve applied to version A. This curve has stretched the image's tonal range up – brightening the specular highlights while leaving the darkest tones alone – making the image more 'punchy' (high contrast) but less subtle. Version B holds together better under darker viewing conditions than A, making it more versatile – an all-around safer bet. I like version A best when viewing on screen or when printed and viewed in my print viewing booth; the look and feel is less harsh than B. But A doesn't do so well under my room lights. Try looking at the side-by-side images in outdoor daylight, then inside under normal indoor room lighting, then once again under even darker indoor room conditions. Which one do you like best; and under which conditions?

The choice is somewhat subjective, but generally speaking I find that the majority of viewers agree. This is not unlike those TV ads where a high percentage of dentists agree on something, you know something like, '9 out of 10 dentists agree that brushing your teeth has nothing to do with photography' or '8 out of 10 dentists agree that brushing your teeth between print making promotes stronger healthier teeth and fresher breath' – such photo-dental revelations! So, when sending my work out to be printed at a lab or on a printing press, I print it on my photo-quality inkjet printer, then view it in my viewing booth, then in daylight outdoor lighting, and finally under room lighting in my studio/home/office. Then, if necessary, I tweak the image in Photoshop with a curve to make it work in all three conditions – obviously a bit of a compromise, but at least I walk away with something that works and with less cavities!

Shoot Specs For B&W Body Light Sculpting

- **Camera Exposure: f8.0 at 1/125th at 100 ISO.**
- **Camera: Full-frame mirrorless.**
- **Lens: 70–200mm set to 70mm.**
- **Camera Distance: 7.5 feet from subject.**
- **Camera Height: 3.5 feet from floor to imaging sensor.**
- **Background Distance: Black nine-foot seamless backdrop paper positioned 9 feet behind subject.**
- **Main-Light Source: 500W mono-block strobe fitted with a two-foot Octa-box with 50˚ soft-grid was placed three feet from subject and with 6.5 feet from floor to strobe tube.**
- **Main-Light Source Brightness: For this dark look, I typically underexpose this main-light two to three stops below camera setting using an incident meter reading with back of meter against subject, dome pointed at source.**
- **Separation Light-Source Distance – Two 500W mono-block strobes fitted with 1x4-foot strip-light light-banks with 50˚ soft-grids were placed vertically and slightly behind subject on both right and left sides, each set three feet away from subject. These two back-light sources were positioned 2.5 feet from floor to the bottom of the strip-light.**
- **Separation Light-Source Brightness: These two back-lights were set to 1.5 stops below camera setting using an incident meter reading with back of meter against subject and the meter's dome pointed at source in question.**

A

B
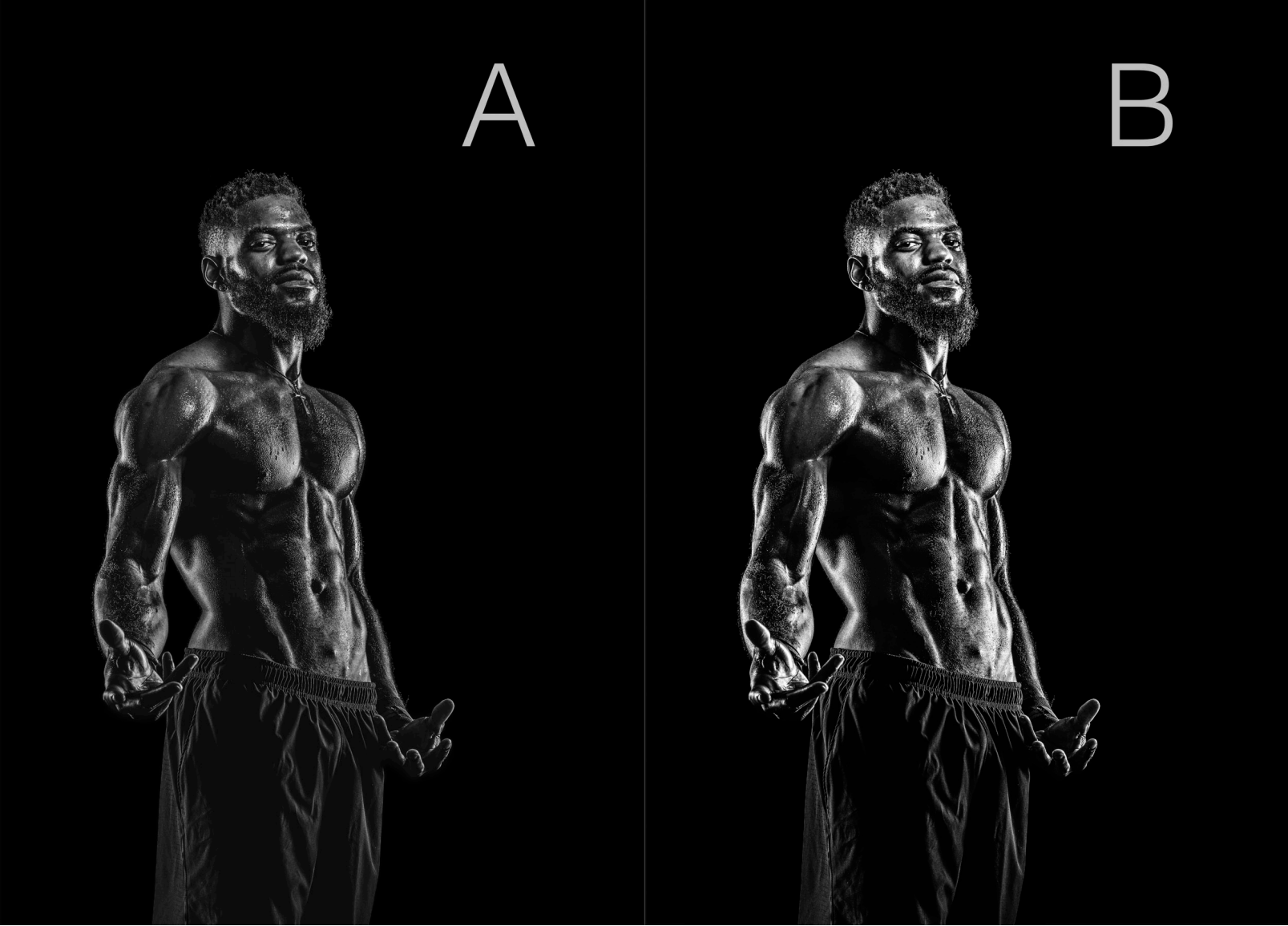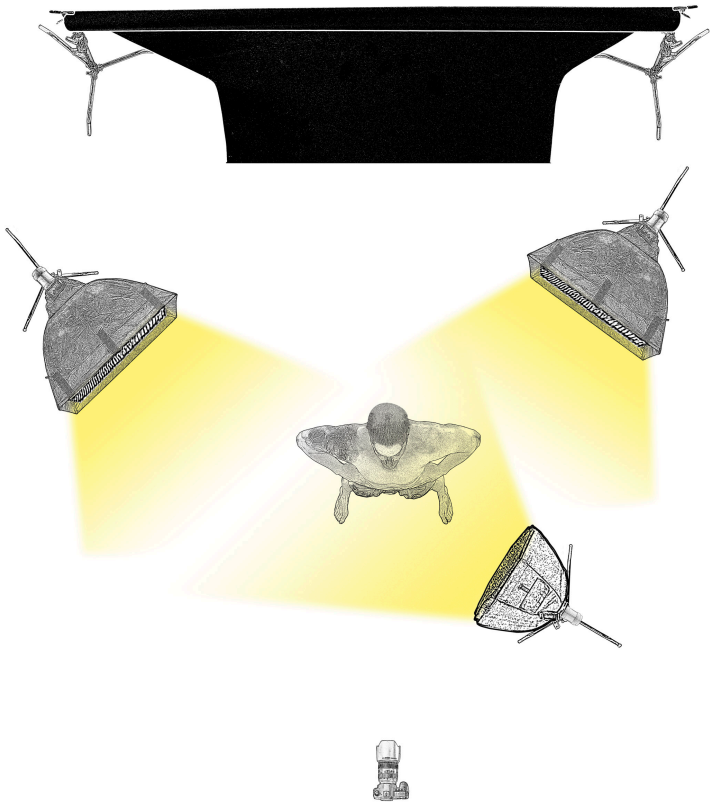
Bio:
Let me tell you a secret! I'm not really a photographer … I'm more of a light sculptor – I bend the light to my will, to my vision using lots of cool geeky lighting equipment then immortalise my creation with my camera.

I lecture internationally on lighting, digital photography, and Adobe Photoshop. Check out my Lighting and Photoshop tutorial DVDs for
www.software-cinema.com and *www.photoshopcafe.com*.

I'm available for lectures and workshops in your area and can be reached through *www.montizambert.com*.

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