STUDIO STILLS

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I hereby declare that the work contained in this mini-thesis is my own independent work and that all sources consulted or cited are indicated in full.

Signature

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SUMMARY

This script is an anthology of an extremely broad subject, by which the author tried to narrow it down by focusing specifically on still-life photography in the studio environment. Highlights regarding the evolution of photography, with reference to the chosen theme, the different applications that exist, and current equipment and techniques are discussed. A concise description of other famous photographers that influenced the author, and samples of their work, is provided. Twelve examples of the author's work, with detailed explanations of the creating thereof and a diagrammatic representation of each set-up for each of these photographs, are also included.

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INTRODUCTION

Still life, by definition, is inanimate things that form the object of representation in art. The debate on whether photography is art still continues, but for the purpose of this script, the author felt it fit to include photography under the "art" in the above definition. After all, a studio is generally considered to be the workplace of an artist, is it not?

Artists have been creating still-life studies through the ages long before the revolutionary invention of photography. The advent of photography created another medium for self-expression. In this script, a brief overview of the history of photography is provided, with an explanation of how still life has always been a theme that the pioneering photographers ventured to explore.

The studio is the working environment that the artist adapts to fulfill in his/her needs. The photographic studio has been around since the days of Daguerre, and even earlier. Through the history, it has seen many changes with the development of new equipment and processes, and photographers became more and more aware of the possibilities the studio offered for manipulation of all the elements needed to create the perfect image.

Since the beginning of this century, the scope for still-life photography expanded tremendously, thanks to the development in reproduction processes for full colour in the printed media. The applications that arose were refined into specialist categories of their own, of which the main ones are reviewed in the script.

Today, a broad range of precision equipment, cameras and technology is offered by the industry, that broaden the boundaries for creative expression until virtually no limits exist anymore. A selection of the hardware, with the different functions, that was accessible to the author, is discussed in the text.

The author chose to work in a studio environment where total control of lighting is possible. This enabled the author to free his imagination in expressing himself, creating, rather than taking artistic photographs. The inanimate nature of the subjects allowed for further possibilities of manipulation, to create illusionary images, and allowed the time for the author needed to produce the images as it was visualized. Through the resulting images, of which a selection is discussed in this script, the author wishes to continue the tradition of still-life photography as a means of artistic expression as the early masters established it.

CHAPTER 1

1. THE HISTORY OF STILL-LIFE PHOTOGRAPHY: AN OVERVIEW

For hundreds of years, painters have delighted their patrons with richly detailed and virtually tangible visions of various amenities of civilization. Understandably enough, photography's earliest ventures into the realm of still lifes mimicked the inclinations of painting, depicting much the same subjects and usually evoking the same sense of leisure and comfort (The Great Themes, 1972:46). Thus, as with most other visual forms of art, still-life has always been part of photography. The discussion that follows will therefore be of the history of photography with reference to still-life, rather than the other way around. Today, however, still-life photographers are masters in their entirely own craft, dealing with a wide variety of subjects and moods.

1.1 From "Sunprints" to the Calotype

Thomas Wedgwood was the first to apply the idea of light-sensitive chemicals to the *camera obscura.* His father, Josiah, the great English potter, used the *camera obscura* to obtain accurate images for ornamenting china. Thomas was therefore familiar with the camera, and also a keen student in chemistry — especially the effect of light and heat on chemicals. Toward the end of the sixteenth century, he experimented with creating silhouettes of leaves and insect wings on white leather coated with silver nitrate (Fig. 1.1.1), and produced images that reminds one of Man Ray's much later photograms (Chapter 2). His great stumbling block proved to be developing a fixing agent for his "sunprints", a task in which his friend, the great chemist Humphry Davy, even failed to assist in (Hedgecoe, 1976:19).

The Frenchman credited as the father of photography, Joseph Nicéphore Niépce, took the first photograph in 1827. He used a substance called bitumen of Judea, which hardened as well as bleached when exposed to light, on glass plates. The areas protected from exposure remained soft enough to be dissolved in turpentine and lavender oil. Niépce called this process "heliography", which later evolved into photogravure (Hedgecoe, 1976:20). Louis Daguerre, another Frenchman, was also experimenting with various techniques and processes, and entered into a brief partnership with Niépce in 1829.

Daguerre embarked on finding the perfect fixing agent. In 1837 he managed to perfect his process after fixing his images in a common salt solution. He called his discovery the "daguerreotype", which was executed in the following manner: a silvered plate was sensitized with iodine vapour, forming a layer of silver iodide. After exposure, the latent image was developed by mercury vapour and fixed with hyposulfide of soda, then dried over a flame (Hedgecoe, 1976:21). Subsequently, the oldest existing example of a daguerreotype is a still-life taken in Louis Daguerre's studio in 1837 (Fig, 1.1.2). It was originally presented to the curator of the Louvre, but remains in the possession of the Société Française de Photographie. When presented a daguerreotype, the painter Paul Delaroche said: "From today painting is dead!" (Hedgecoe 1976:21). This was never the case, and photography and the other visual arts would still proceed to influence as well as compliment each other until our present day.

While the daguerreotype was creating a stir and implemented in studios around the world, an English mathematician called Henry Fox Talbot, was pursuing the same objective as his predecessors. Since 1833 he had been experimenting with paper coated with a solution of silver nitrate and common salt, and by 1935 produced the first negative picture with a *camera obscura,* thus introducing the intermediate stage still used today. By 1841 Fox Talbot had perfected his process, and soon patented it as the *calotype* process. By using silver iodide on writing paper, and coating it with gallo-nitrate of silver, the paper could be exposed and developed with an application of gallo-nitrate, gently warmed (Hedgecoe, 1976:23). Positive contact prints were then made in the sun and fixed in hyposulfite of soda, of which the fixing qualities was discovered by Sir John Herschel in 1819. His process was as rapid as Daguerre's, capable of exposures less than 30 seconds, and had the great advantage that many prints could be produced of the same negative.

In 1844, Fox Talbot published the first photographically illustrated book, *The Pencil of Nature,* in which he included the history of his invention as well as quite a few still-lifes made by himself. Although portraiture served to be the biggest spin-of for photographers of the early 1800's, many excellent still-lifes were produced, since the static nature of the

subject matter were better suited to photograph with the cumbersome instruments and lesser sensitive materials available then.

1.2 Wetplates and beyond

In 1851, Frederick Scott Archer announced his wet collodion process, which resulted from experiments with glass as a base for photographs. Glass had no overall texture, and was therefore much more suitable for producing high quality negatives. Using a mixture of potassium iodide and egg-white (albumen) to coat the glass, then treating it with a silver nitrate solution, and developing it in gallic acid after exposure, the negatives were produced.

Scott Archer made a breakthrough by using guncotton dissolved in ether, called collodion. He coated glass plates with a solution of potassium iodide and collodion, dipped it into a bath of silver nitrate, and exposed it while still wet, since he had discovered that a considerable loss in sensitivity occurred when the plates dried (Hedgecoe, 1976:24) The greater sensitivity, along with considerable improvements in lenses, now made exposures of less than 3 seconds possible.

Even though the collodion process was the fastest method for photography up to date, it still was a cumbersome and tedious process, and required that a darkroom had to be at hand before any exposures could be made. A breakthrough was made by Dr. Richard Leach Maddox, who used an emulsion of gelatin mixed with cadmium bromide and silver nitrate. By 1878, four firms were producing gelatin dry-plates commercially in Britain.

The new emulsion made exposures of 1/25 second or even less possible, which was fast enough for taking hand-held photographs. It also resulted in much more compact cameras being produced, and paved the way for George Eastman, who launched the "You press the button, we do the rest" Kodak camera in 1888. For the first time roll-film was introduced, and Eastman revolutionized photography by making it accessible to the man on the street.

The advent of colour photography took place at the same time. Based upon the findings of the Scottish physicist, Sir James Clerk Maxwell, in 1861, which stated that any colour could be made by mixing lights of the three primary colours (red, green, blue) in varying proportions (Hedgecoe, 1976:32), the additive and subtractive methods were devised. Auguste and Louis Lumière patented the colour screen process in 1904, which was considered a breakthrough. In 1912 Rudolf Fisher made a practical contribution with the invention of dye-coupling, where three layers of emulsion, each sensitive to different colours, were held on one support. Twenty three years later the first colour film, called Kodachrome, was produced by Leopold Mannes and Leopold Godowsky at the Eastman Kodak Research Laboratories.

At the end of the 1920's, Germany was at the forefront of development concerning small, precision cameras. The first of these were the Ermanox, introduced in 1924, the original model of which was equipped with a focal plane shutter and a lens aperture of f/2. A year later, the Leica was introduced by Leitz. This camera was designed by Oscar Barnack, and used 35mm film with sprocket holes that was first introduced by Kodak for making motion pictures.

After the turn of the century, photographers such as Edward Steichen, Edward Weston, Man Ray and their contemporaries revolutionized still-life photography as an art form. The materials and cameras developed over the last century enabled photographers to depict form, tone, texture and colour in the finest detail. *Three Pears and an Apple* (1921), taken by Edward Steichen, is a fine example of earlier artistic still-life (Fig. 1.1.3).

With the improvement of reproduction processes, photography was being used more and more to illustrate books, magazines, journals, papers etc. With the advent of modern lithography, still-life photography were being used to produce advertisements for the whole spectrum of consumer products. With access to electric lighting, and later electronic flash equipment, the photographer had all the elements within his power to create images to exact specifications within his/her studio.

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CHAPTER 2

2. GREAT STILL-LIFE PHOTOGRAPHERS

In this chapter two famous photographers will be discussed from whom the author has drawn inspiration, namely Man Ray and Seth Joel. Man Ray was a pioneering photographer in more than one respect. He produced a vast variety of work and introduced many new ideas through experimentation. Seth Joel is a New York based photographer, that has gained respect as a master in still-life photography through the many commercial assignments he has completed in his vocation. An insight into the above mentioned photographers' backgrounds, careers and a discussion of some of their outstanding work concerning the chosen theme, follows.

2.1 Man Ray

Man Ray was born in 1890 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. At the age of seven, he moved to New York with his family, where he finished his high school career in 1908. He was trained as a draughtsman and received lessons in free drawing, but chose to turn down a grant offered to him to study architecture. As early as 1910-11, Man Ray frequented the Ferrer Center and Alfred Steiglitz's "Gallery of the Photo-Secession," which later became known as the 291 Gallery.

In the spring of 1912, he moved to Ridgefield, New Jersey, to work as a draughtsman for a publisher of maps and atlases. He painted his first cubist painting in 1913 (*Portrait of Alfred Stieglitz*), and married Adon Lacroix — his name is recorded in the marriage register as Man Ray. By then, he was known by his chosen name, which was a pseudonym compiled from two short, striking syllables: man, on the one hand, and ray of light, or of the sun, on the other (Martin, 1982:6). This was mainly to conceal his Russian-Jewish origins.

His photographic career took off when he bought a camera in 1914 to document his paintings. By then, at a very young age of 23, he was set on a definite path: he had met up with Marcel Duchamp in Ridgefield in September 1915, and became a fervent Dadaist himself. In 1921, Man Ray received enough money from selling some paintings to Ferdinand Howald and from

his family, to move to Paris. By then he had held three exhibitions in the Daniel Gallery, and had had two studios in New York: one in Lexington Ave. opposite Grand Central Station, and later one in West 8th Street.

The avant-garde Parisians received him with much enthusiasm, the Dadaists throughout Europe being enchanted by America. Soon he held an exhibition at Mick Soupault's Librairie Six. This exhibition did not include any photographs, but needless to say, included in his luggage that he brought from America, was amongst others a 29×38cm print of his *La Femme* (Fig. 2.1.1), signed and dated "New York, 1920". The size of the photograph, the title and signature, indicated that it was considered a complete work of art by the author.

La Femme (Fig. 2.1.1) is a still-life made by Man Ray of a mechanical egg-beater and its shadow. At first sight, the shadow appears to be part of the egg-beater itself, being clearly defined. The light falling from above, cast the shadow longer than the beater. For several years Man Ray had been interested in shadows. The above mentioned photograph is an excellent example of Man Ray's ability to manipulate the infinite number of virtual forms that can be projected around an object, by merely changing the angle at which the light hits the object. According to Martin (1982:6), these shadows belong to the object (in this case the egg-beater): they reveal it and yet they are elusive, for they are in continual movement as they follow the course of the sun. Only since the invention of electric light could a mastery of these effects be achieved.

Man Ray set out to produce his art (and photography) with the eagerness of a child discovering the world (Sers, 1982:11). He did not care whether he stepped on forbidden artistic ground and experimented with all kinds of materials and techniques. In 1921 he made his first "Rayograph" or photogram (Fig. 2.1.2), which became one of his favourite themes. This was a freer, quite simple form of still-life, and he managed to have them published in publications such as *Vanity Fair* (1922). Man Ray also used solarization in many of his photographs, and claimed to have discovered this technique.

The avant-garde Parisians could not sustain Man Ray for long, and the fact was that he had to earn a living in the difficult post-World War 1 years. He therefore did a lot of portraiture to earn his keep, and accepted numerous fashion assignments for *Vogue* and many other magazines. By 1924 he was a very successful photographer with an established studio in Paris.

Throughout his exciting career, Man Ray participated in many exhibitions in most of the major cities in Europe and America, displaying both his paintings and photographs. He contributed to many publications in the written word as well, and published his autobiography, *Self Portrait* (Little Brown and Co., Boston; André Deutsch, London), in 1963. He received a gold medal for photography at the Venice Biennale in 1961 and took part in Photokina in Cologne in 1960.

Man Ray was not (only) a photographer. He was an avant-garde artist who used photography as research. His ability to artistically portray everyday objects so graphically and simplistically but with impact has inspired the author (refer to Figures 5.1, 5.6 and 5.9). Like his peers, László Moholy-Nagy or Raoul Hausmann — and perhaps even more so than they — Man Ray explored the camera's possibilities, confident in renewal of aesthetic values (Sers, 1982:12). He died in Paris on 18 November, 1976.

2.2 Seth Joel

Seth Joel started his photographic career when he was still very young. His father put a Rollei camera in his hands when he was only six years old. His father was Yale Joel, an award-winning photographer on the original staff of *Life* magazine, and served as a great source of inspiration to Seth. "My father's enthusiasm and passion for taking pictures introduced me to the demanding but rewarding field of photography and set a standard for my own career", Seth Joel (1990:12).

Because Seth had no formal education in photography or design, he chose to apprentice in this field, with the encouragement from his father. After various experiences with other

professional photographers, he met Lee Boltin, a noted still-life photographer who specialized in art objects. His apprenticeship with Boltin gave him the opportunity to experience firsthand the dramatically different results of various lighting techniques. "I learned to be meticulous about every element of a photograph; to leave nothing to chance; and to test, test, test", Joel (1990:11).

In 1977, after Seth had been with Lee Boltin for three years, he signed his first book contract for *Egyptian Treasures* (Harry N. Abrams, Inc.). This was soon followed by another book, *Treasures of American Folk Art,* by the same publisher. These two publications laid the groundwork for his next assignment, *The Great Bronze Age of China,* which was shot on location in China. The latter mentioned was funded and published by the New York City's Metropolitan Museum of Art. By the conclusion of this book, Seth Joel found himself promoted to the ranks of many well-known, established photographers.

Subsequently, Cornell Capa (the founder and head of the International Center of Photography, or ICP) invited Seth to be a guest lecturer. "The invitation was especially gratifying to me because Capa is one of the preeminent leaders of the photographic world, and I know how exacting his standards are", Joel (1990:12).

Since 1979, Seth has been maintaining a studio in New York, where he managed to establish himself as one of the top still-life photographers in the world. He solved difficult lighting problems and photographed his still-life subjects from imaginative perspectives. His creativity has been employed in the past by various advertising clients and publications, such as *Smithsonian, Connoisseur, Art News* and Time/Life Books.

A classic example of Seth Joel's ability as a still-life photographer, is the commission he executed for his client, Food and Wines from France. The stark, minimalistic approach that he applied in photographing the champagne glass, with a red ribbon tied around it in a lavish bow (Fig. 2.2.1), is highly effective in catching the viewers attention. The sparse budget did not allow for extravagancies. For this reason it was done in black and white, and finally printed in duotone, giving the final image a hand-tinted look with a classic appeal. Certain

technical obstructions had to be overcome: the motion of the bubbles in the champagne, for instance, was frozen by a short flash duration (1/800 sec.) in conjunction with a relatively high shutterspeed (1/60 sec.). A black cardboard window was also constructed around the set to prevent flare and to give the glass well-defined edges. The final product was a simple, but amazingly striking image, that bear witness to the photographer's skill.

The work of Seth Joel has inspired the author because of it's artistic nature and the way in which Joel has managed to incorporate this in his commercial assignments. The image that is discussed above lead the author into producing Figures 5.4, 5.5 and 5.6.

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CHAPTER 3

3. APPLICATIONS

Many different applications for the photography of inanimate objects exist, both in the commercial arena as well as a form of artistic expression. Often considered as tedious and boring, still life photography can be a most fulfilling and commercially viable field of specialization for the more serious professional. The following chapter will briefly touch on the main categories that resort under the description of "still life" that can be carried out within the confines of the photographic studio, with a brief discussion of some applications thereof.

3.1 Product Photography

In day-to-day life we are surrounded by a variety of inanimate objects, which we mostly buy off the shelves or floors of stores. These items can otherwise be called products. The only way, by which we know what product to buy, is by exposure to the advertising thereof.

In every magazine, pamphlet, brochure or newspaper that one pages through, one will find advertisements of products, whether it is food, beverage, furniture, utensils, cigarettes etc. Most of these advertisements contain photographs of the product, its packaging, or some part of it. For this reason product photography is a form of photography that we are most commonly exposed to, but seldom notice.

According to Hicks and Schultz (1994:13), a product or pack shot at its simplest is exactly what it says — a simple, straightforward photograph of the product or the packaging of a product. In its most complex form, however, it is a that involves the use of props, creative lighting, and special effects to create a certain ambience and appeal that may compete with some of the best still lifes ever photographed or painted. The complexity of such a product photograph depends on factors such as the market being targeted, the format in which the advertisement is to be published and the kind of product.

For a successful product photograph, the photographer must go about his work meticulously. From finding the perfect looking product or packaging (or even modeling a product or pack), to calculating the correct technical aspects and lighting to meet with the client's demand, he have to take great care and often pull all the stops to make a shot work.

When the final image is on the table, a lot of time and painstaking effort may have been put into it. Photographers therefore may charge astronomical fees for this kind of work because of the amount of time it takes and the high standard that is normally required.

Not only can product photography provide a sound income for the established photographer, but also a challenging and fulfilling part of the industry for the young photographer to enter — just imagine driving past a billboard with one of your own "product shots" on it!

3.2 Food Photography

The strong public interest in cuisine and gourmet cooking has resulted in a variety of publications exclusively devoted to this topic. Therefore food photography can provide the bread-and-butter account for many still life photographers (Joel, 1990:45). Not only recipe books, but also magazines, are filled with food photographs.

Food photography requires a broad knowledge of lighting technique and special effects that can be utilized within the controlled environment of the studio. The mood of a food shot contributes a great deal to making the food in a photograph look appetizing. There are many tricks involved in making the food look its best, that one should be aware of as well. Of special importance is accurate colour reproduction of the food — the viewer will immediately lose his/her appetite if the food in a photograph looks slightly off or pale. (One must keep in mind that the viewer can only look at the food in a photograph, and not smell or taste it.)

It is often wise for the food photographer to work together with a food and prop stylist. They are experts in their field and have the skill to tend to detail such as the preparation of the food, the specific cutlery and crockery required, presentation of the food and techniques to enhance

the appearance of the food. If the photographer should carry out all these tedious tasks on his own, it could change a possibly profitable shoot into a nightmare.

3.3 Jewelry

Jewelry should be approached by the photographer as minute little sculptures. Regardless what the value of a piece may be, a sense of quality should still be conveyed in the photograph. No matter how exquisite or simplistic a piece, the techniques for photographing any piece of jewelry is basically the same.

The greatest challenge for the photographer when photographing jewelry is to control the highlights and reflections in the object. Many tricks have been devised over the years and a variety of specialized equipment has been developed to achieve this. An intricate combination of small mirrors, optical fiber, light-tents etc. is, therefore, a common set-up for making the gems and metals come "alive" and sparkle.

Jewelry, as a rule, embodies very fine detail, and the emphasis in most photographs for commercial application is to convey the detailed craftsmanship in a specific piece. Because of the small scale that one works with, virtually all jewelry photographs are micro or extreme close-up shots. To be able to capture the detail in its full capacity, a combination of macro lenses and large format cameras is ideal.

The final image that is printed in a magazine advertisement or in a catalogue must be larger than life in more than one sense of the word. It should bear accurate witness to the efforts of the designer and the apprentice and at the same time entice the customer. To be able to produce this image, the photographer needs ample time, patience and experience and has to be an expert in his field.

3.4 Illustrative Still life Photography

Illustrative photography has more to do with conceptual images, i.e. where the object is not to advertise a specific product, but rather to convey a concept or a message, or to associate a certain exclusive idea or image with a more abstract product (as one find in many advertisements for banks and financial institutions).

This kind of photography is challenging and very creative. The success of such photographs may depend to a great extent on the creativity and originality of the photographer. The subject can be anything — the plot of a novel for a cover photograph, financial control for a bank's advertising campaign, etc. In some cases the idea behind certain advertising campaigns for products may demand that the actual product is never shown, or it may be a visual product (think of the performing arts, movies, exhibitions etc.) and can not be shown as a whole in one image.

Still life photography is used as illustration in many specialized magazines and in corporate annual reports. It may be used to create a corporate identity or plainly to lend some diversity to a publication. Greeting cards are often illustrated by interesting still images as well. If one is known for outstanding creative and expressive still life photography, the possibilities are endless for many diverse and challenging assignments.

3.5 Fine Art photography

Fine art photography is not necessarily only , although contributes a great deal to this genre. As is indicated by the category, this kind of is purely about artistic expression by the photographer, and is of a very personal nature. In many instances photographers include their own artistic expression in their self-promotional work.

Artistic still life photography serves to a certain extent as advertisement for the photographer's capabilities and ideas, and allows for boundless experimentation. Exhibitions and competitions serve as an ideal showcase for such work, and in many cases photographic prints are sold for huge sums. For the acclaimed photographer, producing books on one's work can hold great financial reward. In some instances photographers receive commissions to apply their own artistic capabilities to certain exclusive publications (i.e. the Pirelli calendars).

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CHAPTER 4

4. AN APPROACH TO STUDIO TECHNIQUES

The making of an expert still life demands close adherence to the basic rules of studio photography: pay keen attention to detail, arrange objects with concern for composition and, above all, take maximum pains with lighting (The Studio, 1972:36). A description of the equipment used by the author to produce the images discussed in Chapter 5, and an overview of their different functions and applications, follows.

4.1 Lighting

4.1.1 The standard flash head

Flash heads are the basic "engines" for a studio lighting set-up and are available in a broad range of different output strengths, sizes and brands. They do have one important similarity though, and that is that they are all daylight balanced (5 600°K). For the purpose of this script, it will be assumed that a "standard head" is fitted with a plane silver reflector of a 45° angle.

The author, to light up backgrounds or to obtain a "rim-light" effect used mainly Elinchrome standard heads. A standard head provides harsh lighting of high contrast (with well-defined shadows around the subject), that illuminates a big area, e.g. Figures 5.6 and 5.9.

4.1.2 Tungsten lights

Any light that works with a tungsten bulb is considered a tungsten light source, and can replace an electronic flash unit in most instances. Tungsten lights do have two major disadvantages though: They are not daylight balanced and run at high temperatures.

Photographic tungsten lights run at 3 200 – 3 400°K, which causes a warm orange cast on daylight balanced colour material, but has no effect on black and white material. The author used tungsten light in certain cases specifically to add warmth to his pictures, e.g. Figure 5.2.

4.1.3 Soft boxes

Soft, diffused light of lower contrast, that cast less defined shadows, are obtained through the use of soft boxes. It can be used effectively to fill in shadows created by the use of other harder light sources as well. Soft boxes come in many different shapes and sizes: from big 2m×2m "swimming pools" to different smaller square or rectangular shapes, and even octagonal. Some photographers even revert to building their own "banks", usually of colossal proportions and powered by more than one head. Soft boxes are reflected in reflective surfaces as broad, evenly lit highlights, and were thus applied in many instances by the author, e.g. Figure 5.7.

4.1.4 Spotlights

This is a directional light source that normally refers to a light that uses a focusing system with reflectors or lenses or both — a "focusing spot" (Hicks and Schultz, 1995:12). Spotlights were used by the author to create a more controlled form of rim-light, or as an effects light for lighting a particular part of a subject. Such a light illuminates a small, circular area, with a very definite edge, e.g. Figures 5.9 and 5.11.

4.1.5 Diffusers and reflectors

A diffuser can be described as any form of translucent material used to diffuse light, including tracing paper, scrim, umbrellas, translucent plastics such as Perspex and Plexiglass, and many others (Hicks and Schultz, 1995:10). The author diffused light from soft boxes even more by placing diffusers in front of them on some occasions, e.g. Figure 5.8.

A passive reflector (or bounce) is typically white, but can also be silver or gold, and is used to bounce light back onto the subject. In some cases reflectors were found to be handy by the author to light up certain shadow areas just a touch, e.g. Figure 5.4. A black "reflector" can be used to obtain a reverse effect — to absorb or subtract light.

4.1.6 Light brush

A light brush is a light source "piped" through a fiber-optic lead, that can be used to add highlights, delete shadows and modify lighting, literally by painting with light (Hicks and Schultz, 1995:11). The author found that the same effects could be achieved by using a small camping torch, either filtered to compensate for the tungsten bulb, or unfiltered for warmer tones.

4.2 The Camera

Regardless of the subject matter for still lifes (or the motivation for taking them) the one thing that all good still lifes have in common is their painstaking attention to detail (The Great Themes, 1972:46). To translate fine detail photographically, a combination of lenses of fine resolution and a large format is ideal. Another important factor that is often overlooked is that the optical instrument used to capture a still life should be braced firmly in position.

The author made use of a Sinar P view camera of 4×5-inch format to create all the still lifes discussed in Chapter 5. This camera was perfectly suited for the task, since it is of a monorail configuration, which allows virtually limitless movements of both the lens and the film planes. The camera was supported by either a heavy studio stand, or a heavy duty Manfrotto tripod, to avoid any possibility of movement while photographing.

The seemingly infinite number of swings and tilts offered by the Sinar P enabled the author to control perspective and depth of field to a great extent. In several of the still lifes, greater depth of field was achieved by implementing the Scheimpflug principal, e.g. Figure 5.7. By using dropped front or risen back, the author succeeded in keeping perspectives from converging, or by keeping the film plane parallel to a plane in the subject, avoided distortion of that plane, e.g. Figure 5.2.

The author also managed with ease to make multiple exposures on the same sheet of film — the shutter being cocked easily on the lens and the film being blocked from accidental exposure simply by inserting the dark slide.

4.3 Lenses

The lenses used by the author were Schneider lenses, known for their quality and fine resolution, of either 150mm, 240mm, or 360mm focal lengths. The lenses never proved to be inadequate for the tasks they were applied for. The covering power of the lenses was substantial enough to allow adequate movement, of both lens and film plains, for the author to achieve the desired effect. The fact that the lenses are of high quality and corrected for maximum aberration prevented any problems concerning distortions and inaccurate colour rendering. The correct coatings also prevented any problems with glare, even under extreme lighting conditions.

4.4 Materials

The author produced most of his work on colour reversal film (transparencies), but experimented with both black and white and colour negative material. For colour transparencies, Agfachrome RSX 100ASA were used because of its neutral colour rendition and the lively warmer tones obtained by this film. The black and white materials utilized by the author was Ilford FP4 125ASA film exposed at 100ASA, to add a touch of contrast, printed on Ilford Multigrade RC Deluxe paper. This produced punchy black and white prints that still contained the full tonal range.

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CHAPTER 5

5. THE AUTHOR'S WORK

In this chapter, twelve examples of the author's own work will be discussed with reference to details such as theme, composition, lighting, techniques, materials used and problems that had to be overcome to produce the images. Each image is also illustrated by a diagrammatic representation of the specific studio set-up used to capture the image. A key to these diagrams is also provided.

Figure 5.1: "Subdued Beauty"

The theme of this still life is the apparent decline in value of natural things as opposed to technology and industry — the two fundamental aspects of our current economic activities. Today, the aesthetic value of beautiful cars, clothing, houses, furniture etc. seems to have become of increasing importance. Nature, that provides us with most of the raw materials to fabricate things, has to take second place. The imitation of natural things has, in certain respects, become a form of art in itself.

The rose was juxtaposed with the spanners in an arrangement that resembles a fresh bunch of flowers out of the florist's shop (wrapped in green cellophane and tied with a bow of wire). Furthermore it was covered in netting to subdue the contrast in its obvious beauty and to offer protection from the metal objects. The strong diagonal lines of the composition make the perfectly vertical long-stemmed rose stand out even more. The sheet of rusted steel that served as a backdrop adds to the contrast between the soft rose and hard metal. The warm tones of the rusted surface effectively added some warmth to an otherwise very cold image.

A softbox to camera left provided the key light (Diagram 5.1), and created the interesting pattern of broken highlights on the cellophane. It brought out the rough texture on the spanners, but made soft shadows around the rose's leaves. Two spotlights, with blue and orange gels respectively, were used to obtain the cold blue highlights in the chrome, and to further enhance the warm tones of the backdrop (Fig. 5.1). The image was captured by a 4"×5" Sinar view-camera with a 240mm lens, on colour reversal film.

The only difficulty that had to be overcome to create this image, was to get the arrangement to stand up, but by precariously balancing and positioning the objects, the author managed to capture a relatively straightforward image with a minimal lighting set-up. The result: an image with mood and strong compositional elements that intrigues the viewer.

Figure 5.2: "Space Peppers"

Where will one find silver peppers but in space?
The surrealistic theme of this image was achieved by merely spraying a capsicum, sliced in half, with silver paint. The pips were left the natural colour to add a further twist to the idea. The knife was added as background detail to suggest how the object was cut — not by a hacksaw or a grinding disc or a blowtorch, but by an ordinary knife. A rusted sheet of metal was used as an infinity curve to complete the idea of different textures of metal.

A spotlight from behind the subject, with a pale blue gel, was used to create a strong, directional, rim-light (Diagram 5.2). A softbox to camera right, produced a degree of fill in the shadows cast by the peppers, and made a broad highlight on the sharpened edge of the knife in the background (Fig. 5.2) An ordinary camping torch, of which the angle was narrowed by a cardboard snoot, substituted for a light-brush, and was used to "paint in" the pips in the foreground.

The composition may look straightforward at first glance, but quite a lot of thought lies behind it. The two halves of the pepper were placed at a 90° angle to each other. By swinging the film plain, an effect was achieved by which the cross-section of the left half was slightly distorted, but more accentuated. At the same time the rear end of the right half was brought into better view, for it was parallel to the plain of the cross-section of the left half, and to the film plain. The pips in the middle of the foreground complete a triangle between the two halves of the pepper.

Two exposures were necessary to capture the image. The first exposure was for the flashes, and the second for the painting with the light-brush (all the other lights were switched off). It was done on colour reversal film with a 4"×5" monorail camera equipped with a 360mm lens.

Figure 5.3: "Target Practice"

"Target Practice" is a composite image where the still life is further illustrated by a series of fashion photographs taken in the studio by the author. For the purpose of this text, a more thorough discussion of the still life concerned will follow.

The pepper suspended in mid-air by three lines, has a hole in the center. The fashion photographs, of a new-age cowgirl holding a pistol, are juxtaposed with the image to explain the hole in the pepper: she shot at it! The smoke twirling from the pepper creates the impression that the image was captured the instant after the bullet had passed through it, singing the edges of the hole.

The composition is very graphic, giving the image an "in-your-face" quality. The diagonal lines lead the viewer's eye into the center of the picture, where the object is placed. The definite lines of the camouflage pattern on the backdrop add to the graphic composition. The fact that the camouflage is not the traditional blend of greens and earth colours lends a pop-artistic feel to the image. The twirling smoke is the only element that breaks the extremely rigid composition, immediately accentuating itself.

The lighting set-up was fairly simple: a softbox to camera right served as the key light, with a standard head equipped with a honeycomb grid (for a more concentrated, directional light), from below (Diagram 5.3). The background was lit by a single head with a red gel. The author painted the background, using a bright orange sheet of cardboard and painting a camouflage pattern on it with dark olive paint. The red gel rendered the orange to exactly the same colour as the pepper, and the olive green to black — a much more pleasing effect.

The difficult part of the image was in triggering the shutter. The smoke was cigarette smoke blown into the hole in the pepper. Since there was no assistant available, the author had to do everything himself: the smoking, the blowing and the triggering of the shutter. Certain acrobatics were necessary to capture the image at the right moment before the smoke disappeared. It was shot on 4"×5" colour transparency with a 240mm lens on a Sinar P. No movements were applied to the camera, accentuating the simplistic nature of the image.

Figure 5.5: "Skewered"

A tomato suspended on three knives that have been run through it reflects on the vulnerability of the soft flesh to the sharp metal edges. The perfection of the tomato has not been spoilt, but has been perverted by the sharp contrast with the man-made objects that are meant for disfiguring. The viewer cannot help but to cringe at the sight of the image — if the tomato had a brain, it would have felt the pain.

The compositional elements are quite simple in this image: the diagonal lines formed by the two knives on the sides lead the viewer's eye into the center of the picture where the tomato is suspended. The tomato binds the vertical and diagonals of the knives together and thus becomes the focus point in the image. The emphasis is wholly on the objects because of the white background.

The lighting was supplied by a softbox to camera left and a spotlight from behind the subject to camera right (Diagram 5.5). A normally undesirable "hotspot" was caused on the tomato by the spotlight, but in this instance gave the tomato more dimension. Two standard heads were set up at a 45° angle with each other to light up the background (Diagram 5.5).

The exposure was set according to the reading taken for the tomato. The two heads that lit the background were then adjusted to give a combined reading of 1½ stops higher than the exposure for the objects, thus blowing out the background to pure white. Two sheets of 4"×5" black and white negative film were then exposed through a 360mm lens, with a difference of one stop in exposure.

The final print made from the better negative was hand tinted with food colouring, which accentuated the texture in the tomato's skin, and added a colder feel to the steel blades of the knives.

Figure 5.6: "Peel Here to Burn"

A surrealistic rendering of a common fruit to resemble a man-made object is the theme in this photograph. The half-peeled banana was put in a candlestick. The long wick, and the wax dripping down the side, lends a romantic mood to the picture, normally associated with candlelight. The wick, together with the amount of wax, suggests that it has been burning for a long time before the flame was put out. The high key of the image suggests a light, airy room, after the curtains were drawn back to let in the morning sun, in which the "candle" was discovered.

The composition is drab in its simplicity, which focuses the attention on the object itself, yet the image remains eye-catching because of the nature of the object. It is completely up to the viewer to form his/her own explanation for what he/she sees. The background is completely white, as not to distract the viewer's eye from any of the facets in the object.

The lighting was kept as simple as possible as well. Only a softbox to camera left, and a white reflector to camera right, was used to light up the subject (Diagram 5.6). Two standard heads at a 45° angle with each other lit the background at 1½ stops more than the exposure for the banana (Diagram 5.6). The romantic feel was strengthened by the use of the softbox in conjunction with a reflector, creating softer shadows and showing the subtle textures of the banana's flesh and the wax drops.

The image was captured on black and white negative by using a 4"×5" monorail camera with a standard lens (150mm). A slight drop of the front and raise of the back was applied to control perspectives. The final print on glossy paper was hand tinted. The food colouring applied to this image was especially effective in creating a whimsical atmosphere.

Figure 5.7: "Carbonara"

A traditional Italian dish that is still enjoyed today around the world, is the theme of this image. The traditional textures of the linen tablecloth, the wooden cutting board and the dried flowers, combined with a bright motif on the cloth, modern cutlery and crockery, bring two different eras together in one image. The pasta — on which the main emphasis lies — has a certain timeless quality exceeding that of the other objects in the image.

The viewer's eye is led further into the image by compositional lines with a common origin at the bottom of the image, fanning out over the image towards the top. Only the flowers lying horizontally across the composition break these lines. The portrait format strengthens the effect by adding extra depth to the composition.

Overall lighting was supplied by a 2m×2m softbox above the objects (Diagram 5.7). Another softbox at camera right brought out the texture in the tablecloth, the wood, the flowers and the food, and provided the highlights on the olives and the cutlery. A spotlight with a tobacco gel directly opposite the softbox, on camera left, further enhances the texture in the food (Diagram 5.7). It also adds life to the oil in the bottle. A silver reflector below the lens was used to fill in the shadow around the bowl.

Two equal exposures were made to capture this image, each one stop under the desired exposure. The one only differed from the other in that it was taken through a sheet of clear plastic wrapping, resulting in the soft focus effect and the haloes around the highlights.

Sharpness and accurate colour reproduction was crucial, therefore the image was captured on large format colour reversal material, implementing a Sinar P camera with a standard lens. The Scheimpflug-principal was applied to obtain maximum depth of field.

Figure 5.8: "Great-Great-Great..."

The old photo albums are filled with pictures of generations long past. An eerie mood was created to imply a certain notion of many untold stories and secrets forever locked up in the albums. The glasses, lying in the position as they were put down, the apparent disheveled arrangement of the objects, and the candle still burning all suggest that the person studying the albums only got up for the photograph to be taken, before he/she would sit down again to continue the trip down memory lane.

The composition was kept as natural as possible to lend authenticity to the image. The interesting combination of the diagonal placement of the many linear shapes combines in an overall pleasing composition. The emphasis falls on the album lying open diagonally across the image, forming diagonal lines running from the one corner to the other, along which the other objects are arranged. The high camera angle was very effective in capturing a broad, overall view.

It was lit by a softbox to camera right, diffused further by a sheet of white Perspex, a standard head to camera left with a deep blue gel, and a spotlight further removed from the subject with an orange gel (Diagram 5.8). The diffused softbox provided extremely soft, subdued light and a slight reflection in the eyeglass. The blue light gives a hint of moonlight entering through a nearby window, and the orange light provides the effect of candlelight. The lighting was the most important factor involved in the success of this image, creating the desired mood.

The image was exposed twice on 4"×5" colour transparency film through a 240mm lens. The first exposure was for the overall lighting; the second was with all the lights turned off, for the flame on the candle only, made through a sheet of "cling-wrap". Thus the effect of the halo around the flame was obtained. The Scheimpflug-principal was applied by focusing on an imaginary plain, cutting through the top of the album (standing upright) and the candle's flame, and through the bottom edge of the photos in the foreground. By this technique overall sharpness was achieved.

Figure 5.9: "Five Roses"

"Five Roses" has an impressionistic character, given by the out-of-focus parts in contrast with attention to specific detail. The pale colours, and the reflection in the glass surface, add to the effect. The bent teaspoon at the bottom end of the frame is juxtaposed in such a manner with the ordinary objects that fill the upper half of the frame that it carries the most emphasis. The teaspoon embodies the theme: frustration.

The objects are arranged in a triangular composition that is broken only by the petals that has fallen off the dried roses. The high camera angle manages to lend a different perspective that makes the separation of the teaspoon more apparent. Another factor that makes the composition even stronger is the circles in the old tin and in the teacup that is halved by framing it very tightly.

The image was lit by a softbox from camera left, to provide the key light (Diagram 5.9). A spotlight from camera right gave a rim-light to accentuate the textures of the dried flowers. A standard head with a green gel lit the green background below the glass surface (Diagram 5.9). The background had to be separated from the objects by a distance of 1½ m to prevent any green light spilling onto the objects.

Two exposures were made: one on large format colour negative material, and one on black and white negative, using the exact same settings. It was done with a monorail camera equipped with a 150mm lens. The two negatives were then printed on the same sheet of paper, the black and white at 1/3 of the total exposure, and the colour negative at 2/3 of the exposure. Special attention had to be given to the registration. To hide any error in registration, the black and white was printed through a sheet of "cling-wrap" to soften the edges of the objects slightly. This technique is referred to as colour desaturation.

Figure 5.10: "Pokerfaced"

The Jack of Spades is singled out from the rest of a deck of cards on an old wooden table of which the paint is flaking off due to years of exposure. A dagger has been stuck in it, pinning it to the table and preventing it from being moved until the raging dispute is settled.

The diagonal lines formed by the position of the card in the composition, the lines where the planks of the table have been joined and the positioning of the remainder of the deck, all run in the same direction. The dagger is the only object at an angle with these lines, emphasizing the reflection in the blade of the dagger.

The lighting was from a single softbox to camera left, and a spotlight at a 90° angle with the softbox, fitted with a pale orange gel to warm up the picture slightly (Diagram 5.10). The directionality of the light from the spot was broken slightly by placing cardboard slats in front of it. The softbox provided the key light to illuminate the cards evenly and to bring out the texture of the paint on the wooden surface. The softbox had to be maneuvered as to not reflect in the blade of the dagger, thus intruding on the reflection of the card.

Colour reversal film was used to produce the image. It was shot with a 4"×5" monorail camera from a high angle, to obtain a broader, overall view. Rise front and drop back was used to keep the parallels, swinging both the plains on the camera to align with that of the wood.

Figure 5.11: "Strange Workshop"

In the workshop of the surrealist, anything is possible. Using carpentry tools to create something from freshly picked tomatoes (the dew still on their skins) will not be a peculiar sight. The vulnerability of the fruit, when confronted with tools such as a saw, hammer, nails etc., becomes apparent in this image. The tomato was taken out of context and placed in a foreign environment, which emphasizes the contrast.

The tomatoes become the focal point in this composition, for all the diagonals of the other objects lead the eye to them. The tomato that has been "sawed" in half, were positioned in such a manner as to not obliterate the viewer from the detail in the background.

This image required a more complex lighting set-up. A softbox was used behind the objects to form the broad highlights on the saw-blade and the metal surface on which the objects rest (Diagram 5.11). A spotlight from behind, with a pale blue gel, created the blue highlights in the metal of the tools. Another spotlight from behind the objects was focussed on the sliced surface of the tomato, accentuating the juiciness. A snooted spot from camera right, with a pale orange gel, was used to warm up other areas of the composition (Diagram 5.11). A white reflector was placed below the lens to bounce a certain degree of light back at the shadow areas.

The Scheimpflug-principle was applied with the monorail camera to achieve greater depth of field. The final image was captured on colour reversal film. In this photograph, the author was especially pleased by the incredible colour rendition that the chosen material provided, namely Agfachrome RSX 100 (4"×5" format).

Figure 5.12: "Hangi'n Out to Dry"

The surreal is once again the theme for this image. A teacup and teaspoon is hanging on a clothesline. A spoon-full of sugar is pouring from the teaspoon, as gravitational force pulls it towards the earth, but the tea in the cup remains stagnant. In the background, leaves of trees are silhouetted against a gradual blue sky, with the single blue cloud drifting by, elaborating the surrealistic theme.

The angular, graphic composition is further accentuated by the black, double-image of the objects. The angle at which the photograph was taken appears to be from slightly below the object, but as a matter of fact is part of the illusion. The illusion was created by placing the objects on a horizontal sheet of clear glass. The shot was thus taken from above at an angle virtually perpendicular with the glass. The tea is therefore level, while the spill of sugar is supported by the glass. The background was arranged on the floor, 1m below the glass.

Two exposures were required to obtain this image. The first was for the objects alone, lit by a single softbox at camera left and a white reflector from the opposite side, to bounce some light back into the shadows (Diagram 5.12). During this exposure, the background was covered by black velvet. The second exposure was for the background (the black velvet removed), with the softbox switched off. The background was lit by a snooted spot with a dark blue gel (Diagram 5.12). In between the exposures, the focus was adjusted on the 4"×5" view camera, thus giving a silhouette of the objects against the background.

The final image was captured on colour reversal material. The plane of focus was the glass sheet, and was obtained by means of the Scheimpflug-principal. The 240mm lens had to be stopped down to get the rim of the cup in focus as well.

* * *

CONCLUSION

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The main thought of this script is that photography is as good a medium as any other for artistic expression. This idea was clearly exhibited by the work produced by the author. Still-life photography has many commercial uses in our modern age, but often little appreciation may be offered for the more artistic orientated work produced by many photographers over the world.

As the same landscape is interpreted differently by ten different painters, the given objects included in the images in this script will be interpreted differently by ten different photographers. The photographer that goes about his work in his studio, creating images and paying attention to elements such as composition, lighting and detail, may thus be regarded as an artist in his/her own right.

The question that comes to mind is: in the era of digital imagery, will there still be a need for those photographers who use their minds and tools to interpret and create art, or will photography as a form of art, and specifically still life, be relegated to the purely mechanical plane where emotion and feeling do not come into play?

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Figure 1.1.1: Thomas Wedgwood — 1782.

Figure 1.1.2: Louis Dageurre — 1821.

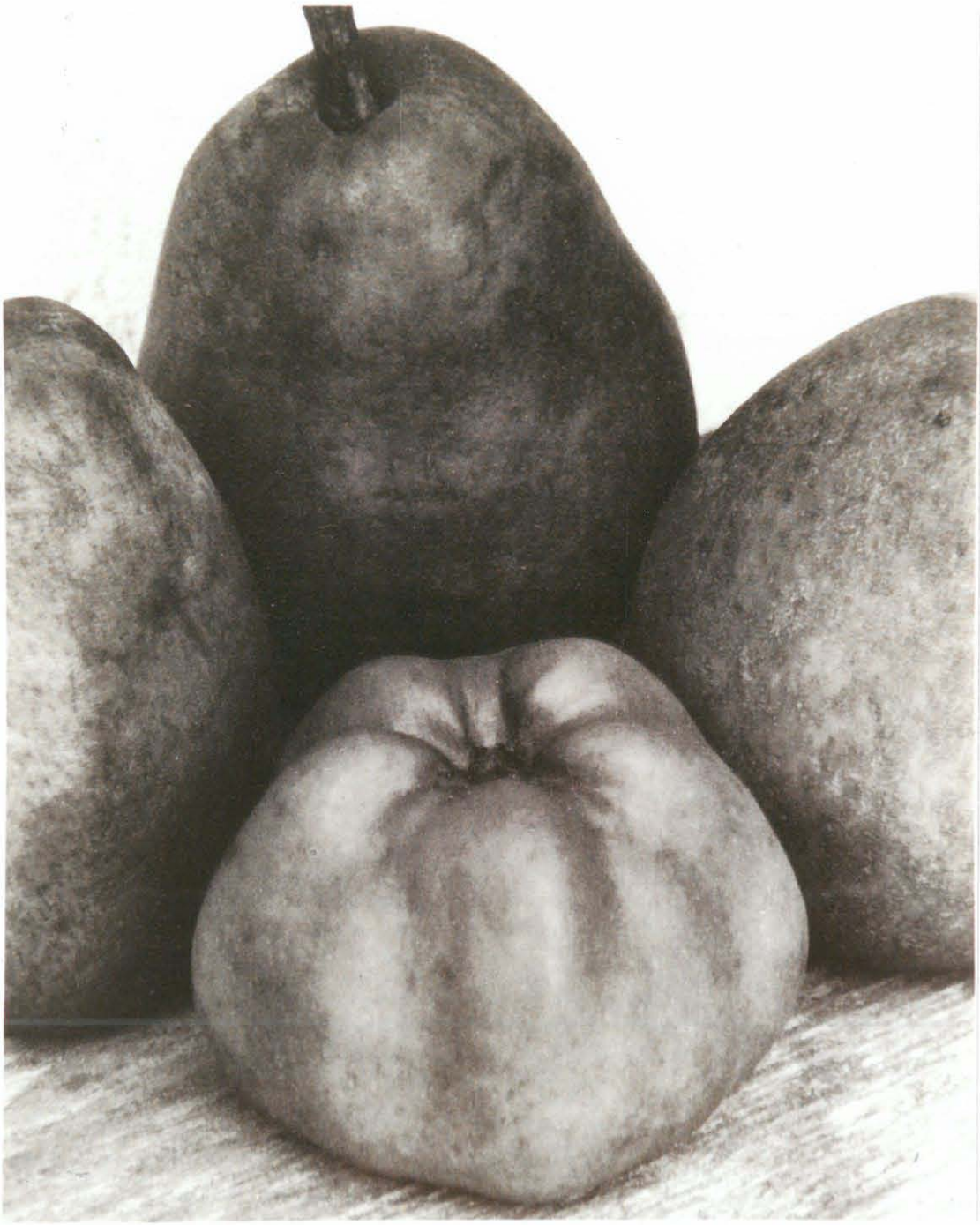


Figure 1.1.3: Edward Steichen — 1921.

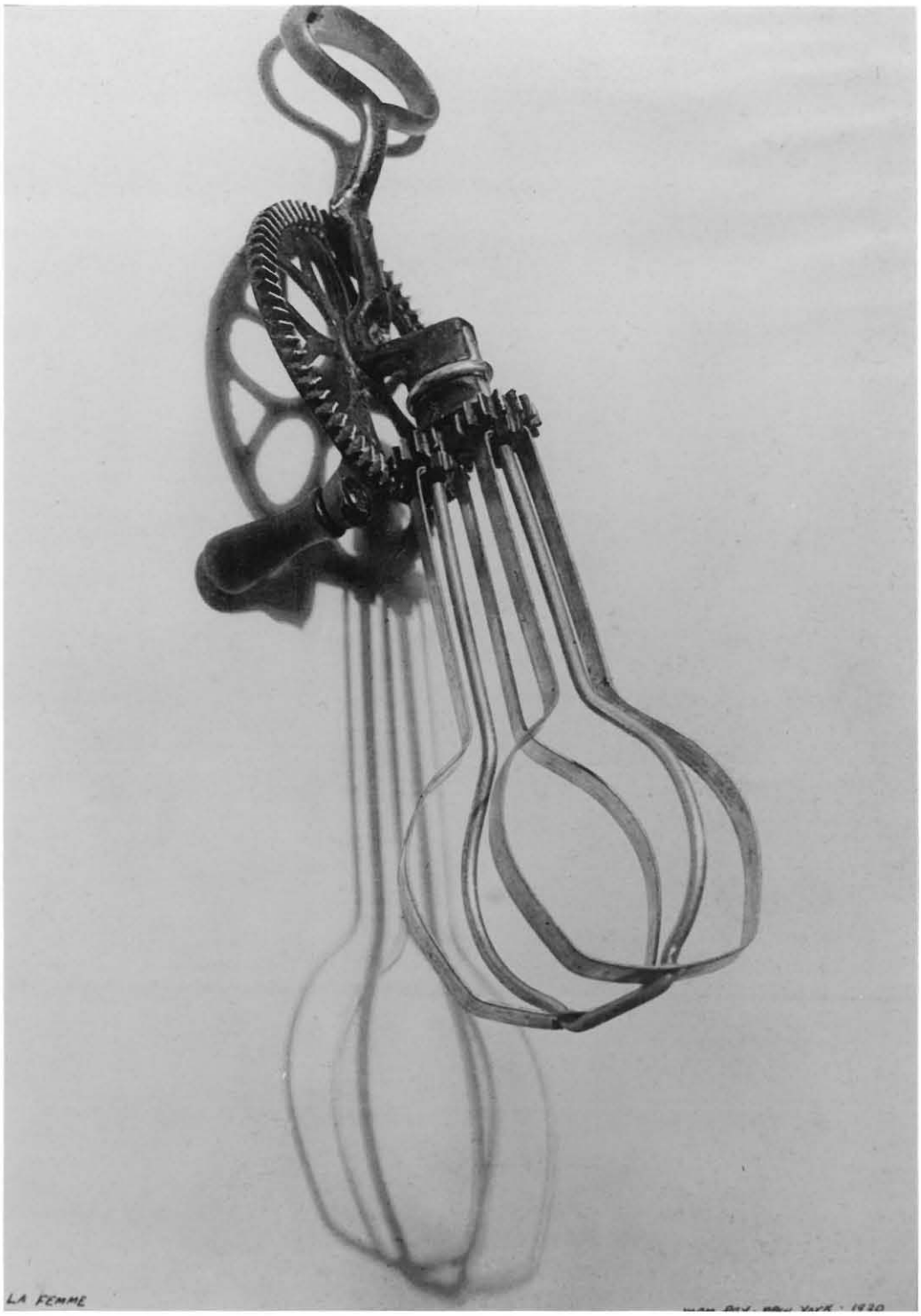


Figure 2.1.1: Man Ray — 1921

Figure 2.1.2: Man Ray — 1921.

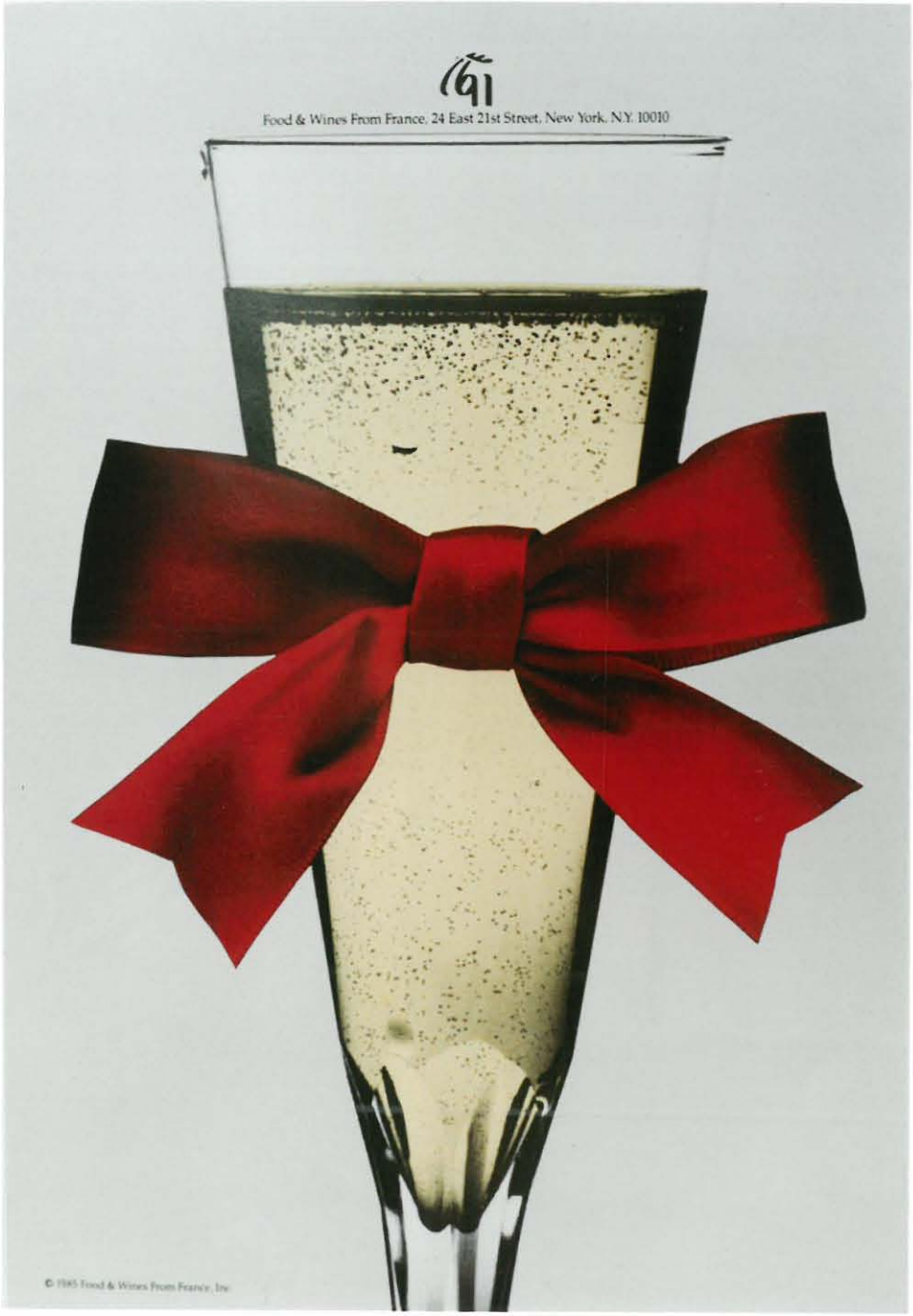


Figure 2.2.1: Seth Joel — 1986.

APPENDIX B

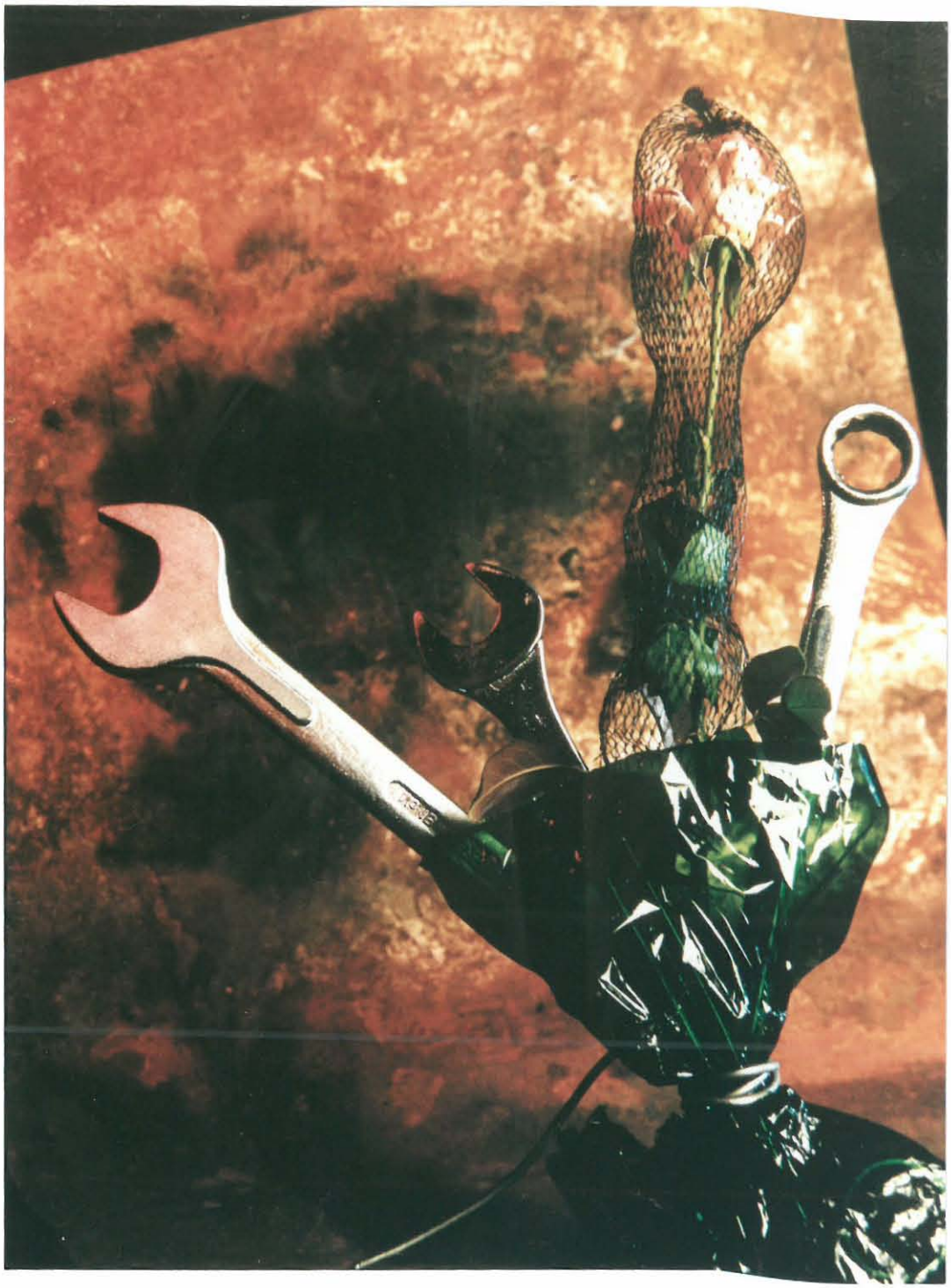


Figure 5.1: "Subdued Beauty"

Figure 5.2: "Space Peppers"

Figure 5.3: "Target Practice"

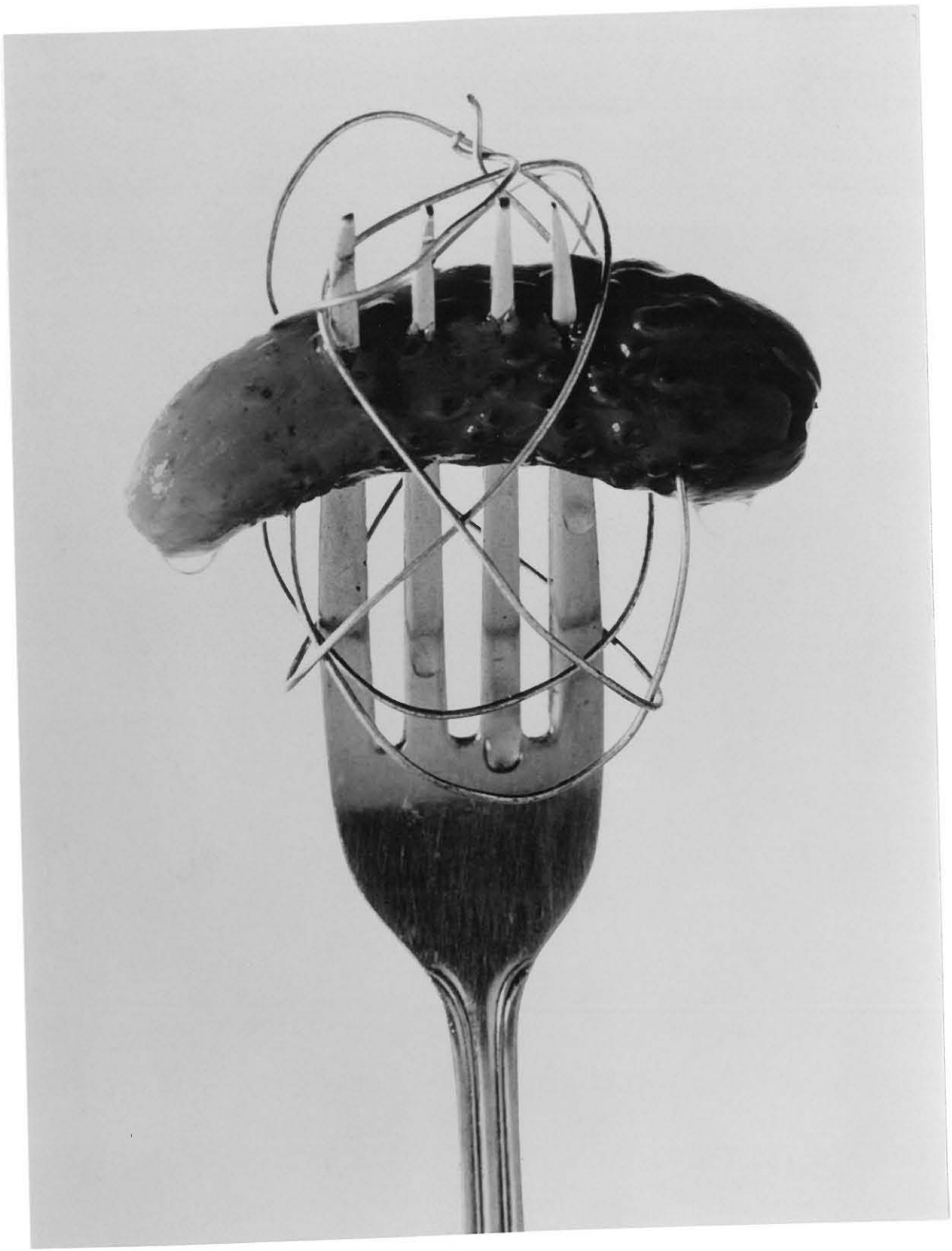


Figure 5.4: "Pickled Green"

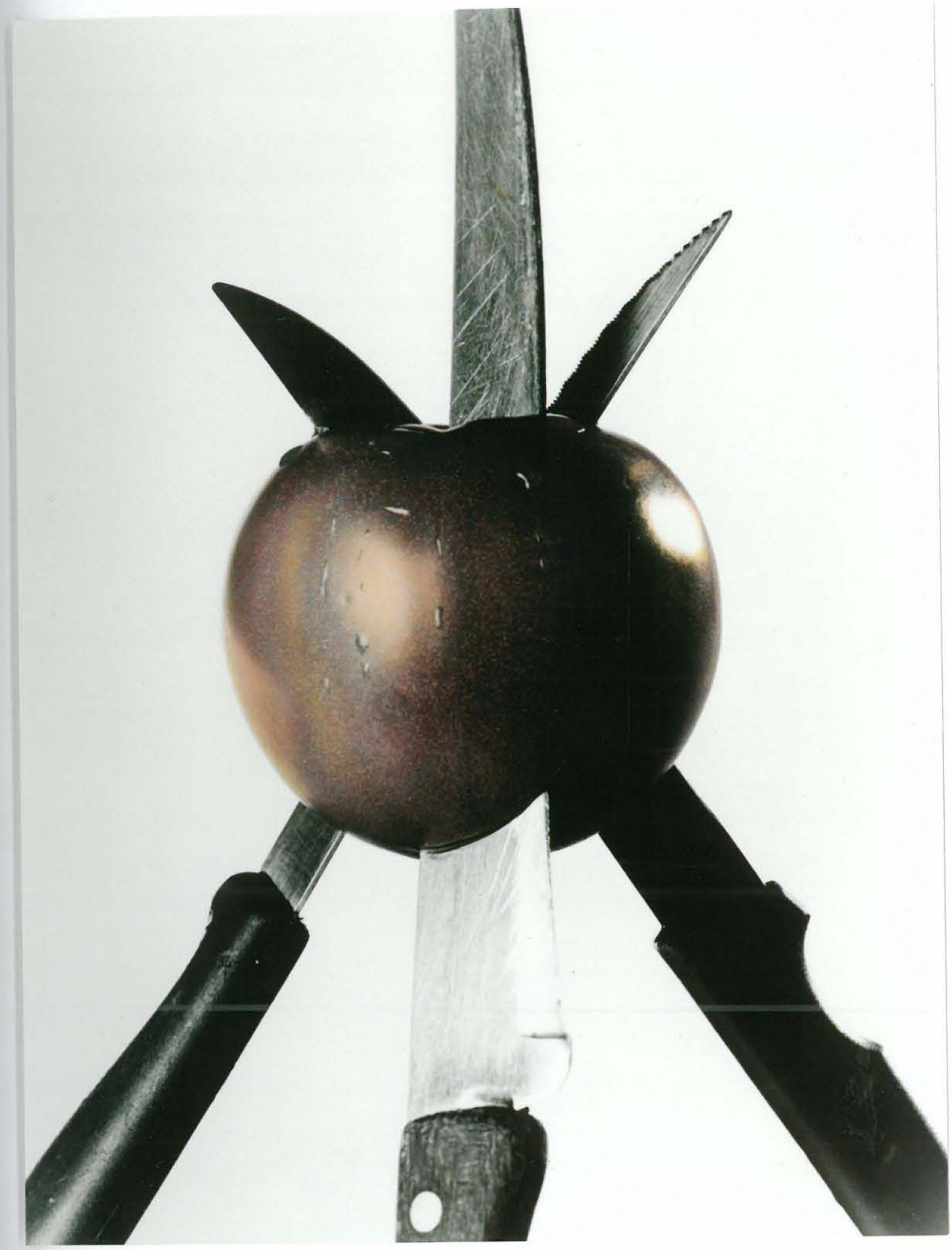


Figure 5.5: "Skewered"

Figure 5.6: "Peel Here to Burn"

Figure 5.7: "Carbonara"

Figure 5.8: "Great-Great-Great……"

Figure 5.9: "Five Roses"

Figure 5.10: "Pokerfaced"

Figure 5.11: "Bent Nail in Tomato"

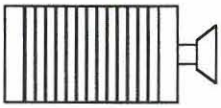
Figure 5.12: "Hangin' Out to Dry"

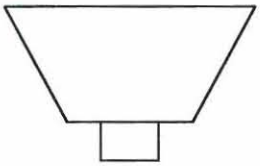
DIAGRAMS

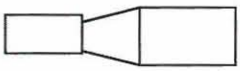
DIAGRAMS

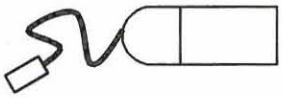
Key to Diagrams

Standard Head: 

4"×5" Camera: 

Soft Box: 

Spotlight: 

Light Brush: 

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Black Card: 

Flag:

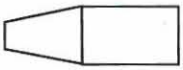
Snooted Spot: 

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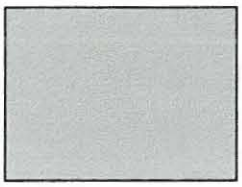
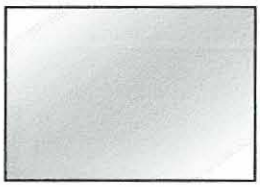
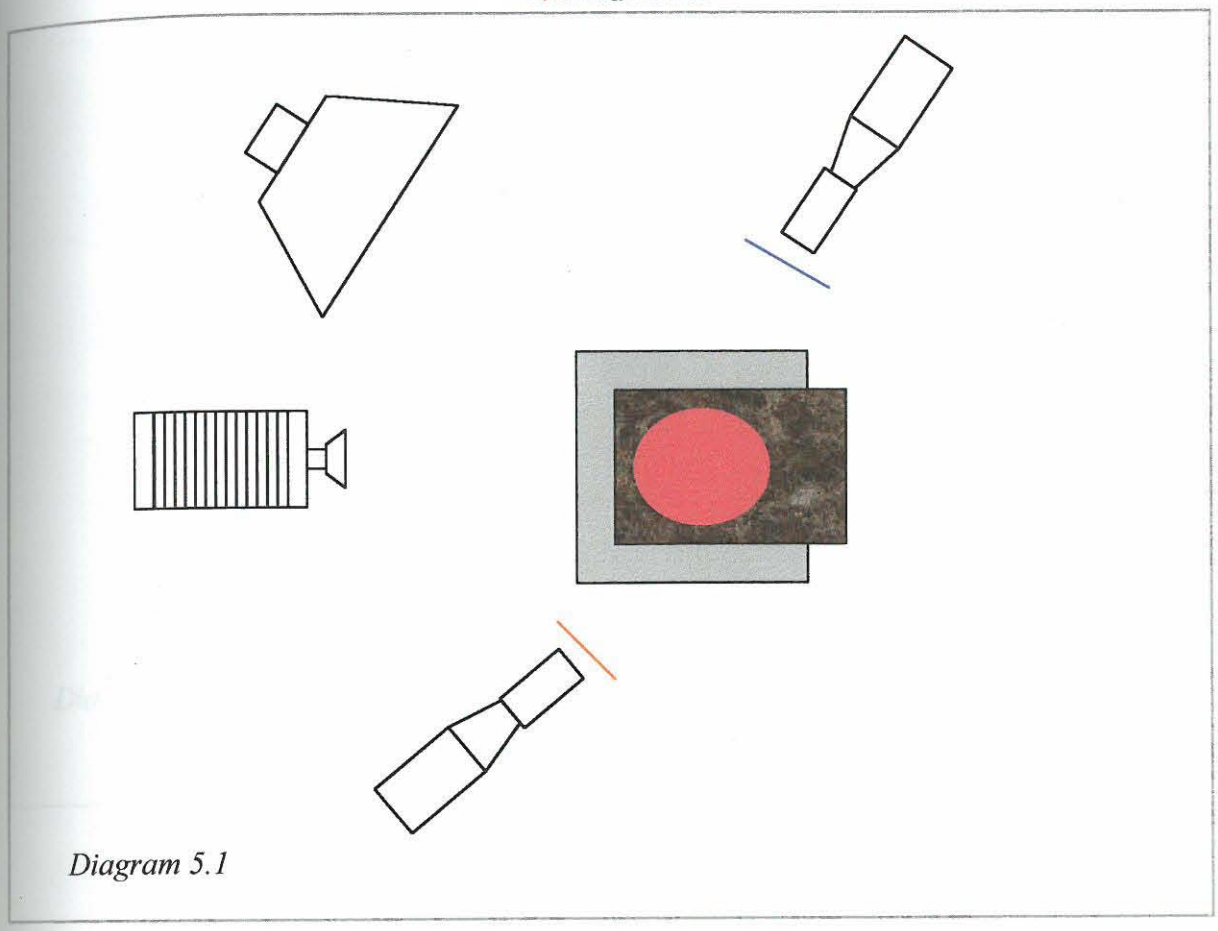
Table: 

Glass: 



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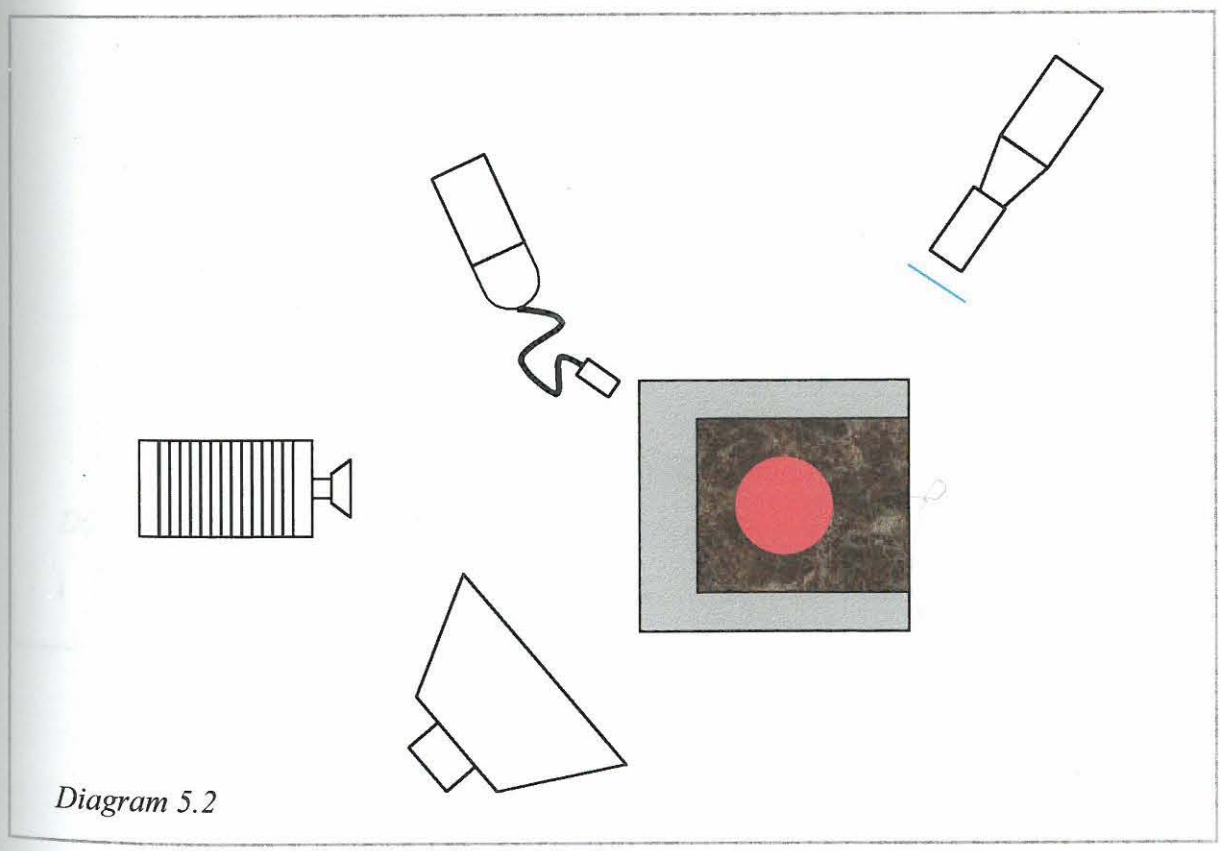

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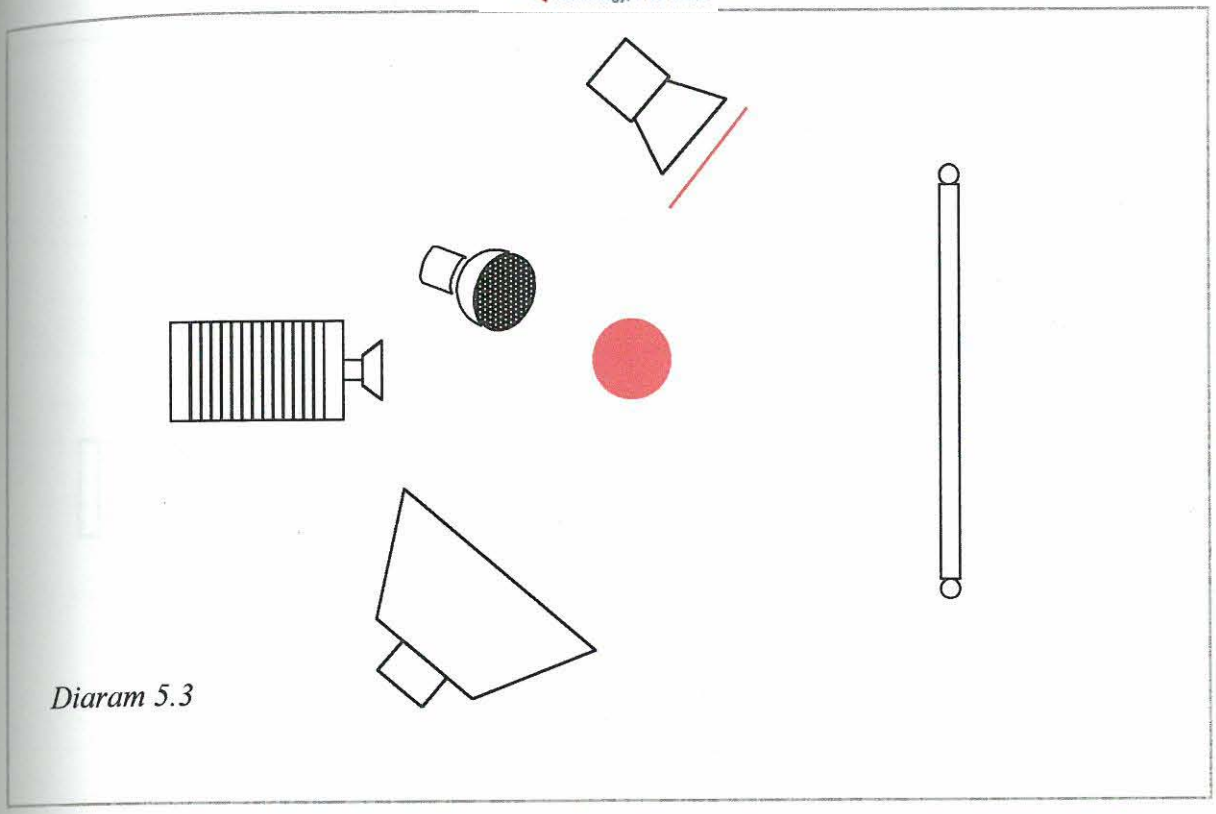

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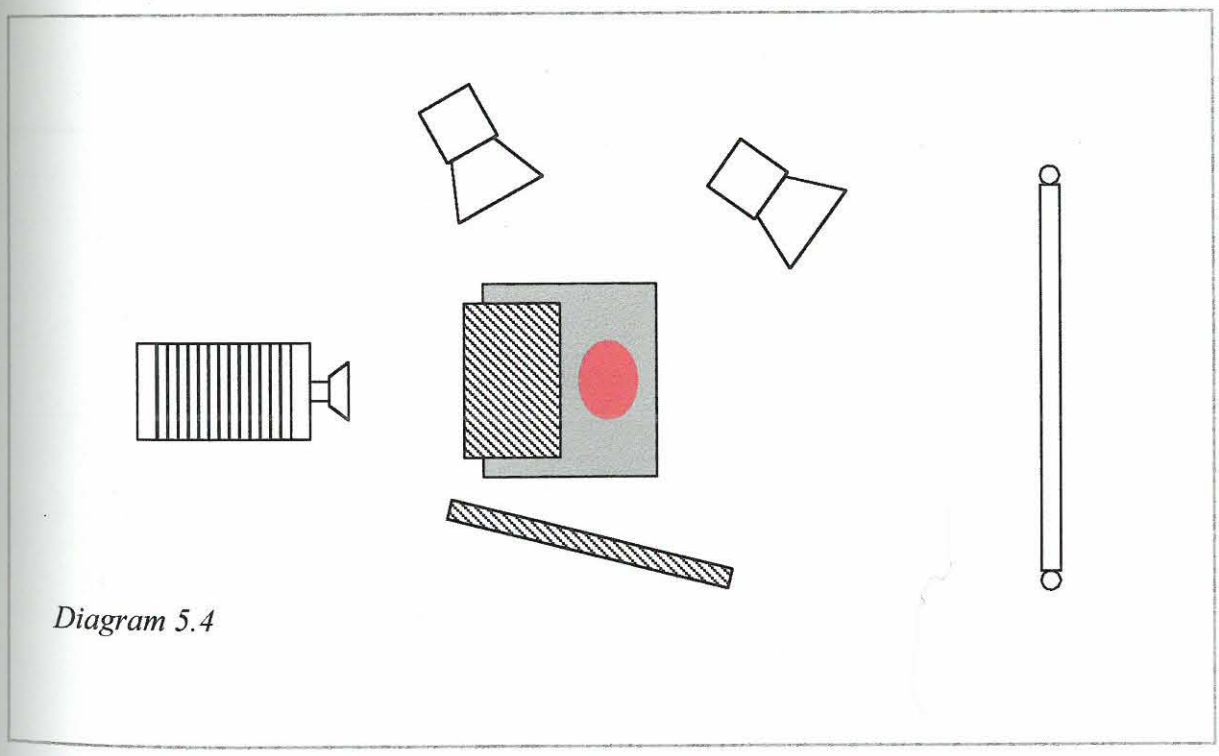
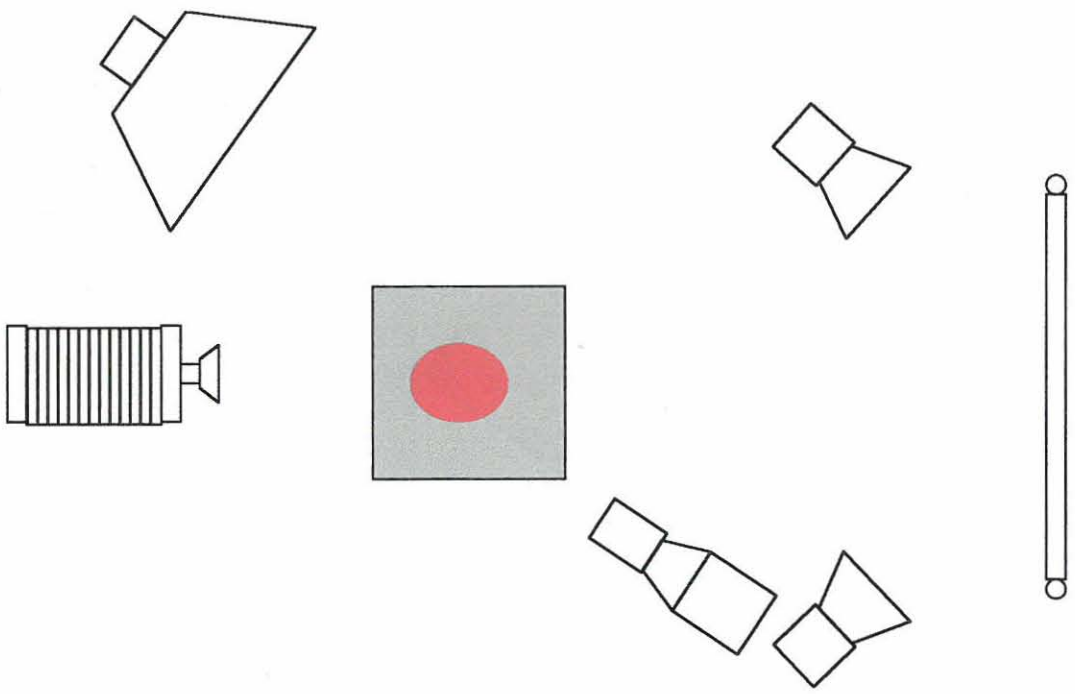


Diagram 5.4



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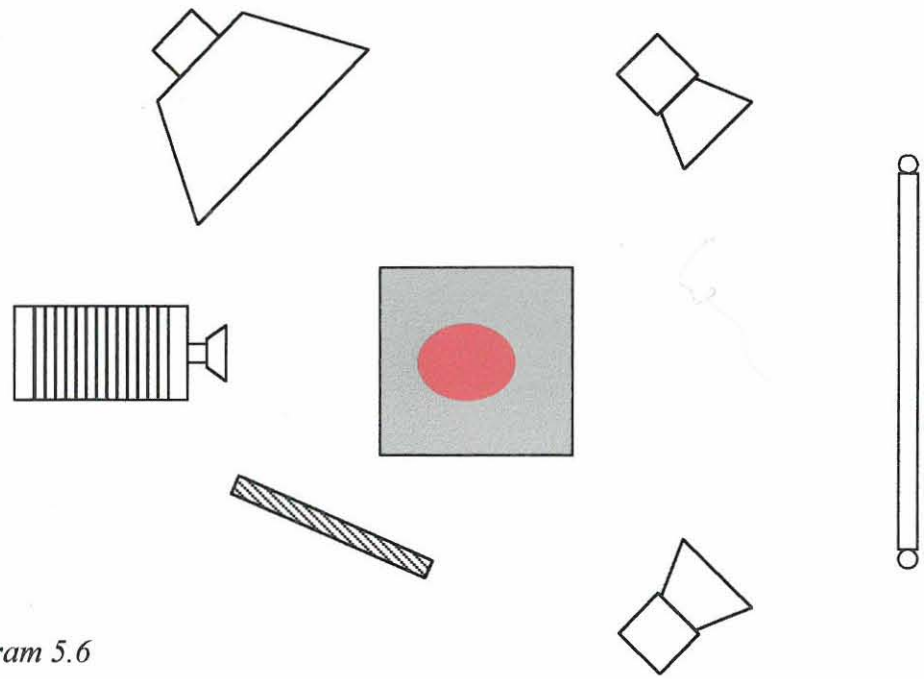

Diagram 5.6

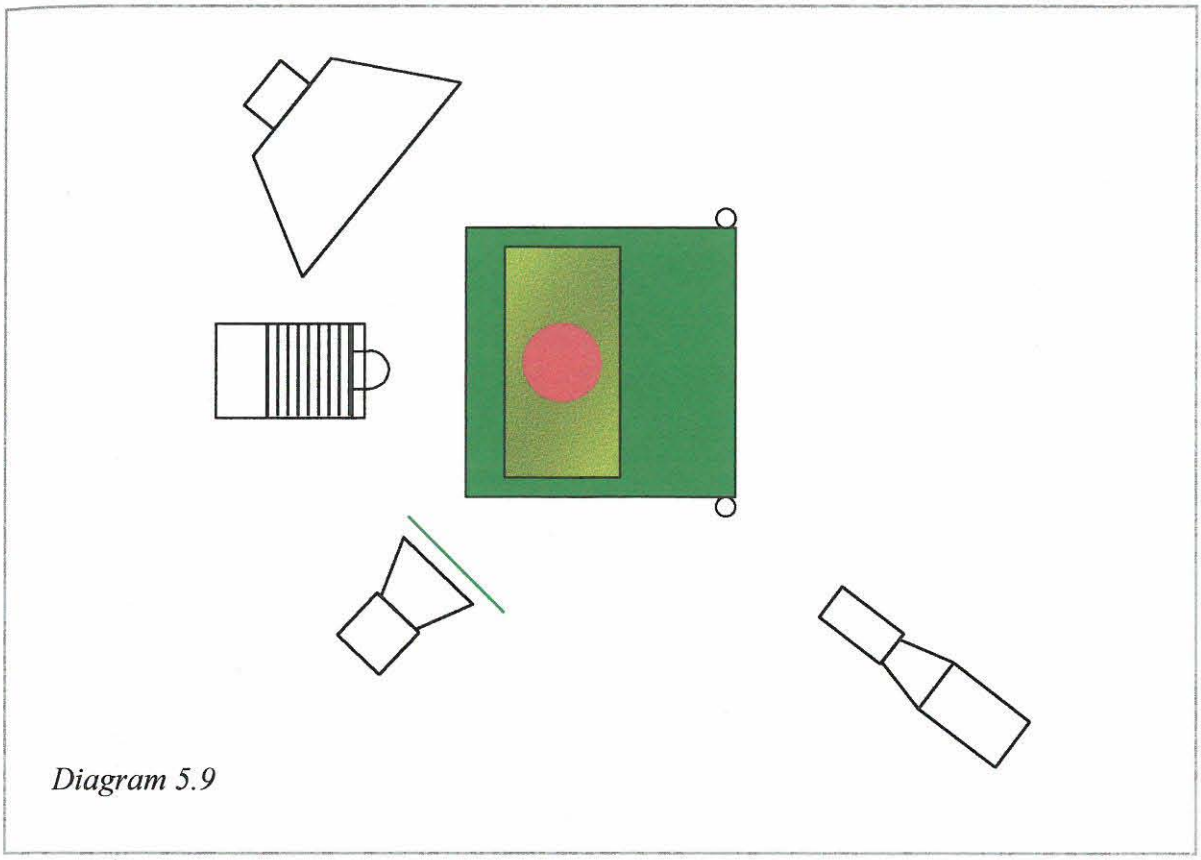

Diagram 5.9

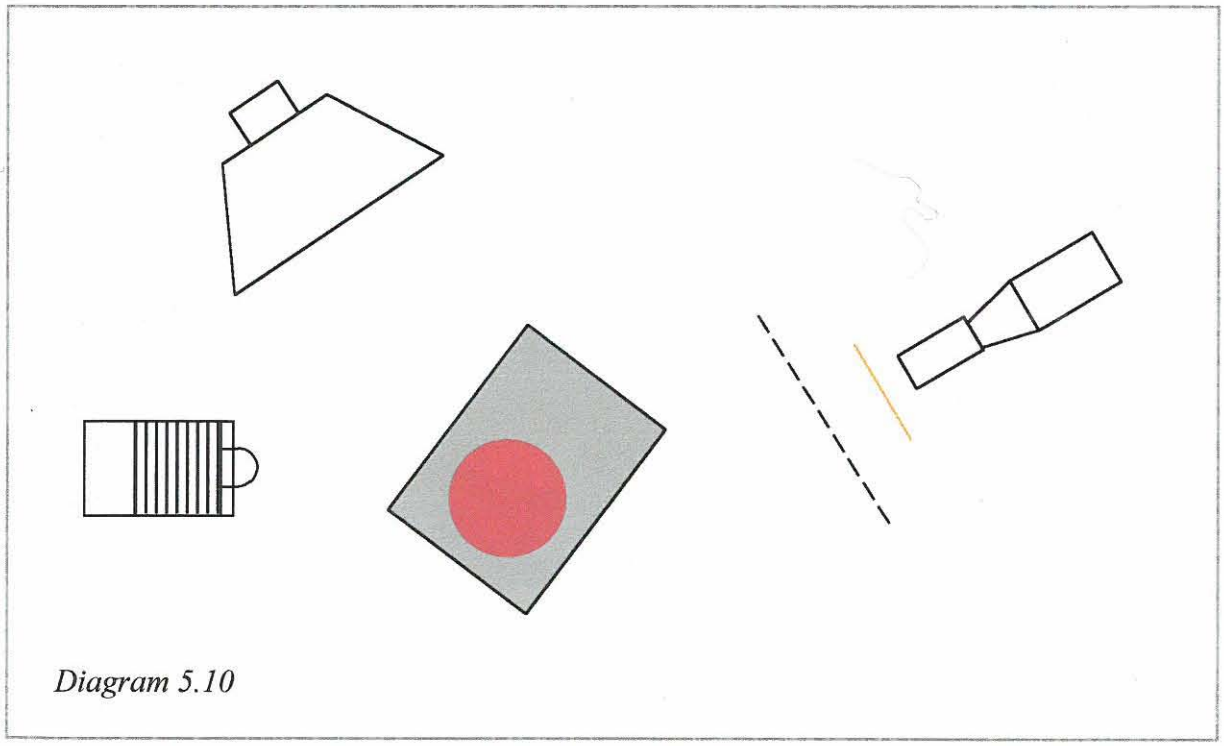

Diagram 5.10

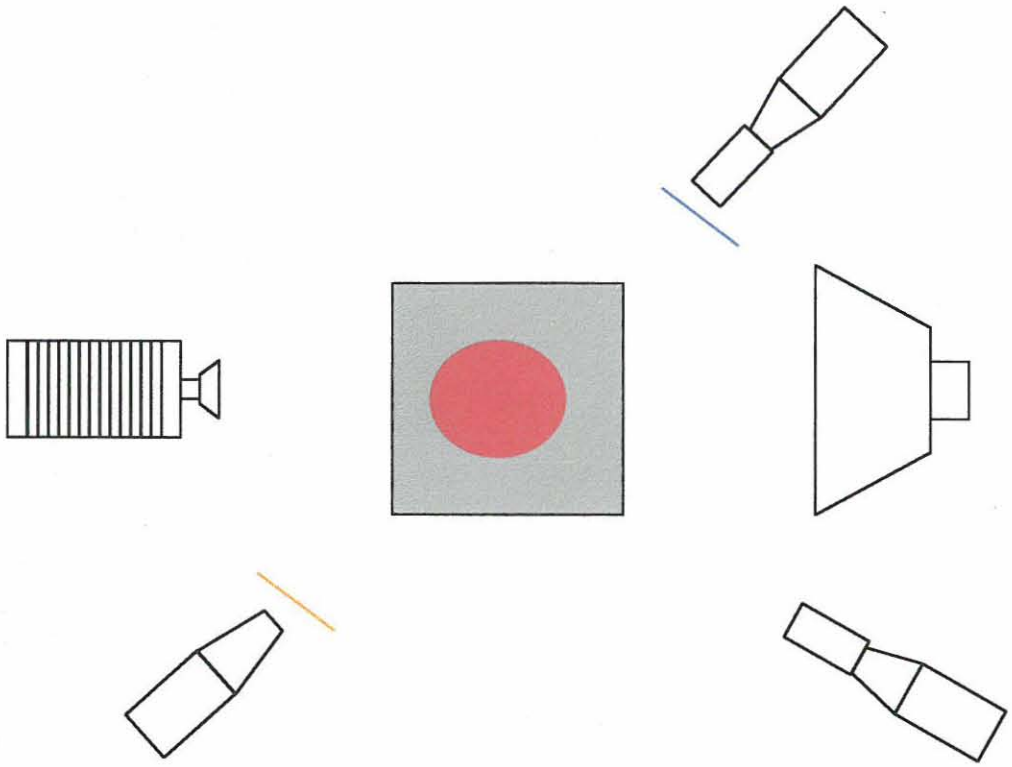

Diagram 5.11

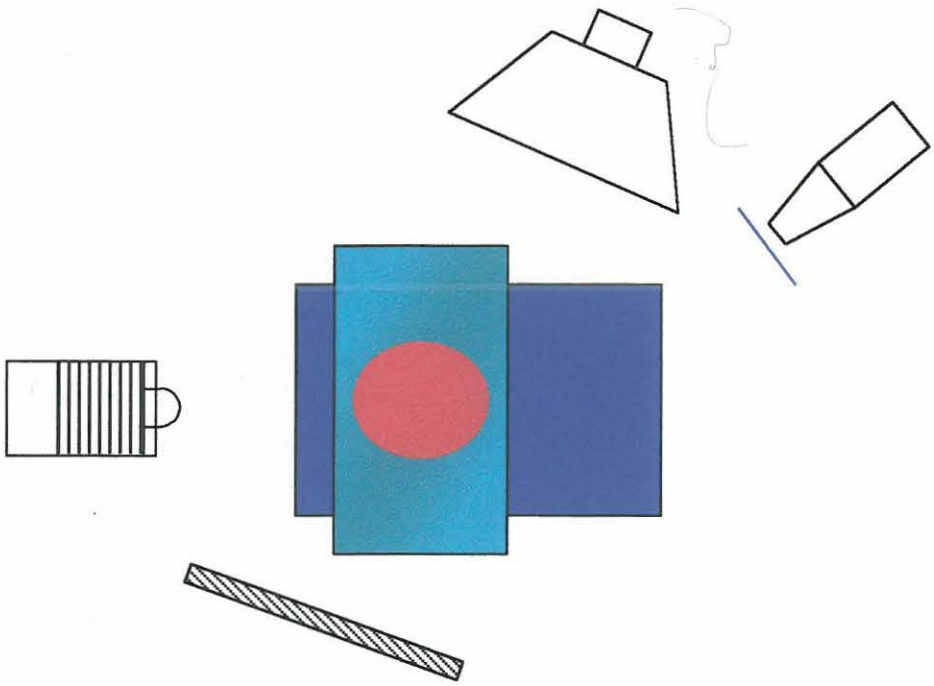

Diagram 5.12