

HOW

EXPERT TIPS AND TECHNIQUES FOR BETTER PHOTOS

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YOU CAN DO IT

BUILD YOUR SUBJECT

Feeling ambitious? Create a photo from scratch

MARGEUX WALTER, a Brooklyn-based photographer and artist, wanted this picture to depict the disorder of a typical family kitchen. From her *Sign Language* series of conceptual photos that “collapse everyday life into a form of abstraction,” it looks simple on the surface, but was actually in production for a month.

To take on a conceptual project like this, you have to previsualize a photo and then marshal the skills to realize it. It requires you to build and prop a set, as well as light, shoot, and composite your images. Sound like too much work? Consider enlisting aid from friends with skills that complement yours. For artists who want complete control over the creation of a photo that conforms to their vision and expectations, concept-based projects are worth the effort.

For Walter, the image she calls “Patchwork” represents a domestic scene that balances chaos and order through busy activity and a sense of structure created visually by pattern and color. She constructed the set from scratch and photographed it from above with a Hasselblad H1 medium-format digital camera mounted on Gitzo’s once tallest tripod, the G1504 Tele Studex Giant.

Before shooting, she divided the set into four quadrants, and then styled and photographed each separately, compositing them later in Adobe Photoshop CC. This allowed her to minimize distortion by using a lens with a longer focal length, a Hasselblad HC 50mm f/3.5 II lens (32.6mm full-frame 35mm equivalent). Capturing the

entire set in one frame would have required a much wider focal length. Compositing also allowed her to cast herself as three of the four figures in the compiled image.

In shooting, Walter faced a number of challenges:

- **Stabilizing the tripod.** To make composites that fit together seamlessly, she positioned the tripod meticulously over a quadrant and could not let it budge between shots. She secured it with “a lot” of sandbags and was careful not to bump it while working.
- **Mounting the camera at ceiling height.** This also let her use a longer lens to minimize distortion.
- **Working with a baby.** “If you’re shooting babies or animals, budget lots of time and be open to different ideas. You’ll find you may have to alter your original concept when working with unpredictable subjects. Also, make sure you have treats,” Walter advises. —Peter Kolonia

Step 1

Conceive the image.

“I start each image by sketching in my notebook, planning the composition, pattern, characters, and color scheme,” says Walter. “For this shot, I chose to portray a family in the kitchen with everyone engaged in something completely separate from one another.”

Step 2

Source your materials.

Once Walter had a rough sketch, she combed retailers such as Home Depot and Ikea looking for flooring,

furniture, and props that would harmonize. “After I’d selected the props, I shopped for costumes and wigs in styles and colors that matched the furniture and colors of the scene I was about to bring to life,” she says. For this photograph, she also needed a baby model and found one—on Craigslist.

Step 3

Build and light the set.

Walter spent several days putting the set together and then propping it with food and tableware. “I wanted the lighting to be very flat to enhance the pattern and create an illusion of two-dimensionality,” she says. “To do it, I used three Profoto flash heads evenly positioned around the set and bounced their output off the ceiling.” The strobe output was bright enough that she could use a shutter speed that could freeze movement (1/90 sec) and a small aperture (f/16) for adequate depth of field.

Step 4

Mount the camera and fire away.

“I shot this piece in four sections in order to minimize distortion and achieve the highest resolution. I placed the camera about 10 feet above each section, photographed the scene and characters, and then moved on to the next section,” she says. She carefully aligned each section in order to assure a seamless composite later. Once she’d placed the camera, she took about 100 bracketed shots for each section to nail poses she could use.

Final Step

Create the composite.

Walter did this in Photoshop by tiling the four images into a single photograph.

THE GEAR

1 **HASSELBLAD H4D-40** The current version of Walter’s H1 Hasselblad includes the 40MP digital back and 50mm f/2.8 HC lens shown. \$13,995, [street](#)

2 **GITZO G-535 LATERAL ARM** This geared arm (shown at the bottom of the center column) is a shorter version of the discontinued G526 Walters used to suspend her camera over the set. \$370, [street](#)

3 **GITZO G1504 TELE STUDEX GIANT TRIPOD** Discontinued in 2011, this 99.6-inch tall monster hasn’t been replaced by Gitzo.

