Sharper studio shots

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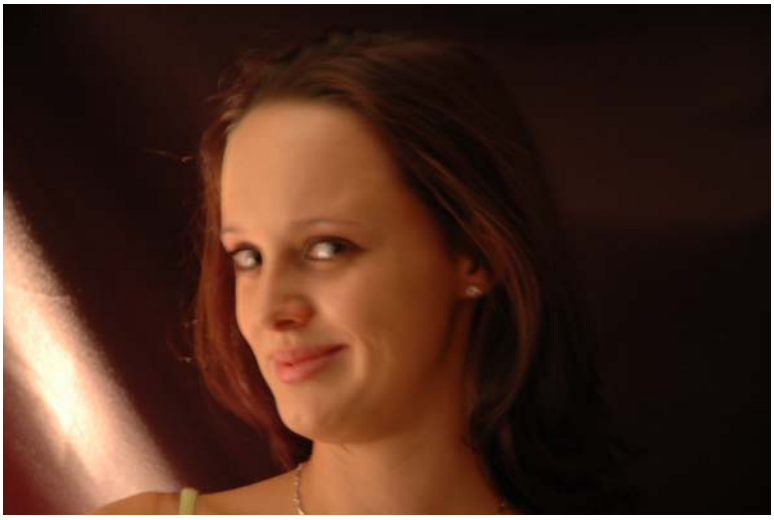
One of my photocourse students sent in her assignments this week, one of which was to photograph someone in her DIY studio. She used a set of normal tungsten lights reflected off white poly boards, as I instructed. The results, however, must have been very disappointing for her - virtually every shot was slightly blurred. A clear case of camera shake, and one that I see so often in students' studio assignments.



The good news is that there is a relatively easy solution to this. But let's take a step back and analyse the problem first.

Camera shake is caused by shooting hand-held in low light, which forces a slow shutter speed (one that cannot freeze action or movements of the camera). There is no ways, given the lack of strong lights in your DIY studio, that you can eliminate this. A set of tungsten lights or household bulbs burning at 100 watts will only give around 1/8th of a second at f5.6, for instance. Any shutter speed lower than a 60th of a second is likely to cause problems.

So you can either use stronger lights (and risk frying everything in the intense heat they give off), or use a tripod to stop camera shake. The latter option is fine for most still life shots, but what if you are taking portrait shots? What if the sitter blinks? You're going to see it in your images!

An easier solution is to increase the ISO rating on your camera. Most digital cameras default to ISO100 or 200. This is the same as using film rated at ISO 100 or 200.

Turn your ISO button to 800 or even higher, to 1600, and see the improvement. Because of the higher sensitivity to light youvre dialled into the camera, you're increasing the effective shutter speed you can shoot at for the amount of light available in your studio. By turning the ISO from 100 to 200 (double as sensitive), you can increase the useable shutter speed from 1/8 to 1/16 (half the speed). If you change from ISO 200 to 400 your shutter speed will get even faster - a 30th of a second. One more turn on the ISO dial to 1600 and you'll be able to shoot at a 60th of a second, which should stop most of the movement in a portrait setting.

The same applies to film - you can use a "faster" film like 800 or 1600, and even "rate" this film to a higher ISO: if, for instance, you're using an 800 ISO film, you can set your camera to 1600, expose for that sensitivity of film, and then tell the lab to process the film as a 1600.

Remember, however, that by increasing the ISO or sensitivity on a digital camera, you also increase electronic noise to your images. If using film, you're liable to get more grain from the faster film. So use sparingly.