The DIY photographer: how to build flood lights

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Studio lights are prohibitively expensive. For the DIY enthusiast, however, there are alternatives – but they require longer exposures, filters and a well-ventilated studio!

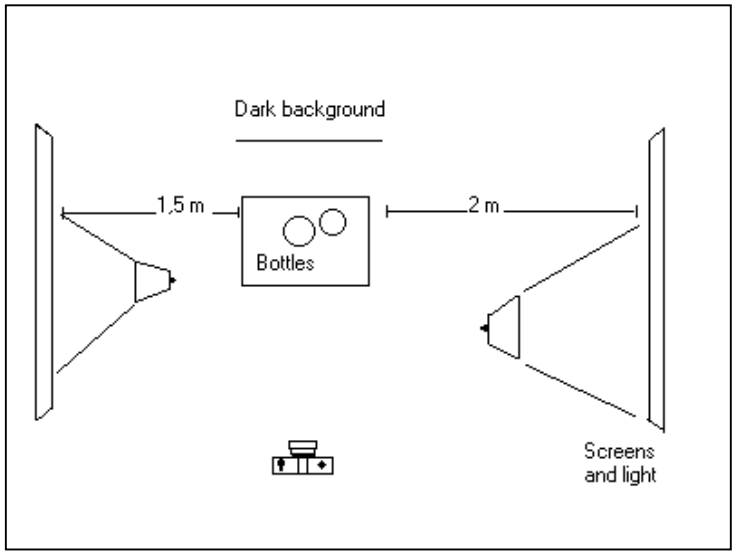
I'm talking about building your own continuous light sources (as opposed to flash light sources, which give a momentary burst of light) and reflecting these off white reflectors or firing them through diffuser screens.

After shopping around a while, a photographer friend of mine settled on this particular light and showed me some examples of what he'd shot using this setup. It was simply great. Grant used normal security flood lights. Typically, they'd be 100W and get as hot as hell and are unflatteringly sharp. But, reflected or diffused by screens, they give really nice, warm (coloured) light.

The ones I got came with mounting brackets with a hole in the centre. Stick this onto a stand and you've got good light. Use two and you've got a studio setup.

Grant went so far as to build two wooden frames with swivel arms, and bolted his lights onto these. He could then swivel one head further away from the setup he was photographing, to allow more or less light striking the object, and hence give a bit of modelling effect.

This is one of his shots. He put one light slightly further away for more modelling like, almost like in this setup, but fired the lights through ripstop nylon screens rather than reflect them off white boards:



I tried the same on a pro job for a client of mine, and was stunned by the results: being able to see immediately what the effect would be on my subject, I could move the lights around and check until I was perfectly happy.

In this case, I used a light close by the body builder (he was Mr South Africa that year, I'll have you know!) and set to the light to his left side, slightly behind his body so that the light would wrap around and cast a bit of a shadow down the middle of his stomach. This defined his stomach muscles nicely. The light on his right side was slightly further away, and set at 90 degrees to his body to fill in just a bit of light in the shadow detail that I created with the other light. Both lights were fired through large ripstop nylon screens stretched over plastic frames.

What's the upside? These lights are inexpensive and can be made from parts purchased at most hardware stores, they're quite strong and thus allow you to shoot at a reasonable depth of field.

The downside is that they are hot and will melt anything you put too close to them. Also they are tungsten, and when you use daylight-balanced film, you need to compensate for this by adding an 80A filter. You can use the same filter on a digital camera.

Until next time!

Cheers
Jaco Wolmarans

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