

Lessons under a sun so high up

by Malcolm McElvaney

I went out for about two hours on Saturday May 21, 2022 to downtown Odessa in the afternoon sun, not ideal but I wanted to see what I could capture while the dust was still in the sky and sun was higher up. It is from these random sessions I can learn something unexpected and on this days adventure I found another reason to like the sunlight found at high noon. I doubt this hour has any nicknames like the more pleasant blue hour or golden hour but absent one I would suspect the vexing hour would apply to this hour. While challenging and it does wash out color, causes shorter shadows, etc these are only negatives if looked at in that way; there is a silver lining, shoot for black and white for example or using a wider focal length to capture a subject with its complete shadow. I go out with an open mind and let the scenes find me and try to use the processes I know to pull off some pictures, the advantage of working on your skill sets to handle any conditions presented.



This will be the first example to cover. By converting this to black and white and using a bracketed set to deepen the contrast I created a decent image. This is a towing companies yard and I finally found a composition I liked from it, the sunlight coming straight down made it work finally. There are no shadows for the most part and the elements in the scene are top lit and almost isolated from each other. In general the direction and angle of

the light source will effect the contrast overall; in this case, the sun is directly above and the contrast is less obvious but is present. The other important factor to remember is where the camera is placed; in this case at eye level looking across the street while zoomed in.

From the camera's point of view the trees in the foreground go out of frame but play an important part in creating contrast and framing the cars in the back; however, they are darker because at this point of view that is all that can be seen and not the light from above unable to penetrate the leaves and in the process creating the shadow cast below. The cars and ground in the background are in the full light but contrast to the foreground elements of the trees. The trees being close together and the density of leaves create a

small pocket of relative darkness in the areas overpowered by the sunlight, contrast is found in this small area when seen from straight on.

Where to begin

One of the key observations up to this point has been lack of distinct shadows being cast and the lack there of being a condition of the light source present, so for a given a light source then what qualities of composition are present for use by the photographer might be a good place to start.

- Direction of the light
- Shadows being cast
- Highlights on the elements in the scene
- Color range of the light
- Cloud conditions

A little sparse but these are what the light source contribute to the scene and make the lines, shapes, and textures come to life. In addition to the time of day and year, perhaps even luck, the complexity of it all is something to truly appreciate.

The sun rises and sets all year round but it is only in the summer time that it gets so high up and offers this unique opportunity, here is where the direction of the light comes into play. The noon day sun creates constraints like little to no shadows, washed out colors, and with a clear sky the full harsh quality of the noon day sun but this was the time of day I chose to go out and photograph in. This is only a sample of one session out and the constraints it had but I want to cover this list in more general terms.

The sun as the primary light source isn't fixed in the sky but its noon day position doesn't reach that peak angle all year round either, so most times of the year I can get out later and achieve good results. The angle of the sun in the morning and late evening produce the longer shadows, the color of that light traveling through the atmosphere casting a different hue unlike the more washed out midday light. That light can hide behind the clouds being diffused or even helping to cast a shadow of the cloud on the ground; perhaps, we are in one of those shadows of a cloud and unaware of it as it is a matter of scale. Many more elements effect your final image so it is a matter of observation and study in the end as the craft of photography is "perfected" one photograph at a time.

In conclusion

The constants I can control are few and far in between but for this session at least I could see the ground was the brightest area within my scenes and the lines, shapes, and

textures form the objects I could place from a top down view point. I say a top down point of view because the sun is essentially spotlighting from above everything in the scene so this game board idea has merit as a mindset for composing given this set of conditions. “The light is always right, you just have to figure out what it is right for” is a concept I came across recently and it is definitely true, I think this is good place to end at and share some extra images I took that day.



Taken at 12:22pm – How much is that Yeti in the window.

The decision to convert this image to black and white was because the color in the walls attracted my eyes first so as black and white the focal point became the yeti and cast shadow. These two make for an odd pair and a story could be told for sure.

The direction of the light is helping to make that unique shadow and preserve the dark corner the yeti is in. One interesting thought that comes to mind is if a shadow is seen isolated from its source does it become its own unique object within the scene.



Taken at 12:48pm – Noel Plaza by the Ector County Library

The mass of trees created a large area of darker space with little pockets of light within but the statue being spotlighted is what caught my eye. The path and patterns projected from above leads you to the same subject of interest. An ideal scene can be found if looked for.



Taken at 12:59pm – Centennial Plaza at the library.

The plaza is built externally onto the library and once entered into isn't really that well maintained or used but this scene presented itself. The tree is spotlighted from above and the reflection in the windows untouched by the light above making for an unique situation captured here.