



Late Delivery: One of Paiva's workshop students brought this doll to a junkyard shoot and Paiva says he "fell in love with it" and ended up carrying her around as a prop all night. This was shot just after 2AM with a Canon 60D and a Tokina 12-14mm zoom (at 12mm). The exposure (at ISO 200 with the white balance set for 3800K) was 178 sec at f/8. The overall lighting was from the full moon and the warm white, lime and red set lighting was from a ProtoMachines flashlight.

with the ecstasy of creation."

While the technique of light painting has been around since the beginnings of photography, Paiva uses a skillful and experimental combination of moonlight (he works exclusively by the light of the full moon) and handheld lighting tools to reimagine and expand the parameters of light painting and night photography. He has published two books of his work: *Lost America: Night Photography of the Abandoned Roadside West* (Motorbook International, 2003) and *Night Vision: The Art of Urban Exploration* (Chronicle Books, 2008). His images have been used to illustrate countless magazine articles and dozens of book and CD covers—perhaps most notably the iconic images on the cover of Stephen King's books *Christine* and *From a Buick 8*.

#### A CULT OF CULTISTS

Like most innovative artists, Paiva spent much of his early years laboring in total obscurity. In the first 10 years or so of shooting—from 1989 to 1999—he says, the only people that knew about his midnight photo rambles were friends and family (and a boss that let him out early to take off shooting). Things changed in 1999, however, when he launched his Lost America ([www.lostamerica.com](http://www.lostamerica.com)) site. It's that site that is largely credited with almost singlehandedly birthing a new generation of vampirish camera-toting urban explorers. There is, in fact, little argument in the night-photo world that Paiva is more or less the Godfather of modern light painting—a role he seems to accept with a mix of gratitude and curiosity.

"For about 5 years my Lost America site was the first hit in any web search for night photography," he says. "I seem to have popularized a long-lost way of shooting and a strange new aesthetic. Today there are thousands of people (all over the world) essentially trying to copy what I do," he says. "Many of them now have their own cult followings, inspiring even more people. Like the end of *Fight Club*, this strange little experiment I started has now completely spiraled out of my control. It's all very strange."

All photos © Troy Paiva

# TROY PAIVA'S LOST (AND FOUND) AMERICA

## A MODERN LIGHT PAINTING PIONEER

BY JEFF WIGNALL

POKING AROUND IN deserted auto junkyards, pet cemeteries or—heaven forbid—the morgue rooms of decommissioned naval hospitals in the dead of night is probably not where most of us would willingly search out our photographic inspiration. The spooky quotient alone would be enough to send us fleeing to more welcoming (not to mention more brightly lit) venues. And to the uninitiated, the visual possibilities of such places would seem anything but obvious. But it's in these exact locales, and an assortment of similarly creepy repositories of our common past, where California photographer Troy Paiva feels most at home.

For the past 25 years, in fact, Paiva has devoted virtually all of his photographic energy to unearthing the beauty of these rarely recorded places and, like a mad nocturnal alchemist, uses his creativity to turn industrial lead into photographic gold. "There is nothing that can compare with the

feelings you get exploring a pitch dark abandoned mental hospital in the middle of the night. Or the epic scale of a derelict ocean liner or airliner bone yard," says Paiva. "It's a bittersweet melancholia for all this lost history, mixed with the thrill of being in places you're not supposed to be, combined



Boxy But Safe: A Volvo station wagon hangs in the jaws of a massive junkyard-shearing machine. Paiva shot the scene in a California auto graveyard with a Canon 60D and a Tokina 12-24mm zoom (at 12mm). He exposed the scene for 167 sec at f/8 (at ISO 200, with the white balance set at 3800K). The overall light was provided by the full moon and color was added using lime and red set lighting from a ProtoMachines flashlight.

Also, while it's easy to think of this kind of urban art as a purely American obsession, Paiva says the interest is actually stronger elsewhere. "It's actually bigger outside the United States. Europeans have always understood the romance of ruins better than Americans because their backyard is full of them," he says. "The American zeitgeist is obsessed with consumerism and a constant need for shiny new things, but in the 21st Century, as the younger generations obsess over post-apocalyptic zombies and urbex culture, this is changing. Today we are living in a golden age of ruins, worldwide. The common thread is that these are human places and objects, now discarded, and in the process of being consumed by nature."

#### BACK TO THE FUTURE

Paiva says his interest in light painting began as a kind of rebellion against the technology of faster and faster film speeds and higher shutter speeds. "By the time I started shooting, the technique of lighting with hand-held sources during time exposures was mostly lost. Since the very beginning of photography, film, camera and lighting manufacturers were in a race to make exposures as short as possible—to freeze everything in a 250th of a second with



The Blue Space God: The International Car Forest of the Last Church is an art installation on the outskirts of Goldfield, Nevada that includes a series of partially buried and painted autos. Paiva captured this view using his Canon 60D with a Tokina 12-24mm (at 12mm). The exposure was for 399 sec at f/11 (at ISO 200). The scene lighting came from the full moon and the cool white and red set detail lighting was produced using the ProtoMachines flashlight.

a strobe," he says. "I looked back the other way, choosing to make willfully long exposures, and combined the latest flashlight technology with this old-fashioned workflow to create an all new aesthetic."

Much of what he did in pre-digital days was largely experimental and

the percentage of "keepers" he shot was entirely related to how much time he spent in the field shooting. "In the film era, night photography was much harder. Without an LCD to review you had no idea if you were even getting anything, let alone something good. Add reciprocity failure and difficult lighting



**Cockpit Heater:** Aircraft “bone yards” are among Paiva’s favorite late-night haunts. He shot this photo of a 737 nose “in storage” at a California airplane cemetery. He shot it with a Canon 60D, a Tokina 12-24mm lens, exposed (at ISO 200 with the white balance at 5000K) for 147 sec at f/8. In addition to the light of the full moon, purple, lime and red lighting came from a ProtoMachines flashlight.



**DC-8 And 880:** One of Paiva’s older aviation graveyard scenes, this one was shot on film (Kodak 160T) in 1990 at the Airplane Graveyard in Mojave, California. Shot in the light of the full moon and colored with a Vivitar 285 strobe and pink gels. It was shot with a Canon FX camera with a 28mm Canon lens. The exposure was for 8 minutes at f/5.6.



**Staircase:** Paiva used light painting to add an odd and somewhat ironic twist of glamor to the once luxurious vestibule of the Byron Hot Springs Hotel. He made the shot with a Canon 20D, a Tokina 12-24mm (12mm) exposed for 261 seconds at f/5.6 (at ISO 200, at 5000K). The lighting is a combination of full moon, total darkness and a blue and red gelled LED flashlight.

to the mix and that failure rate explodes. Shooting 36 8-minute exposures over the weekend, you were lucky to get 1 or 2 images worth looking at. Few attempted it and even fewer stuck with it,” he explains.

“I think the one thing that improved my work the most is the same thing that opened up night work and experimental lighting to the masses: the LCD on the back of the camera. Now that you can chimp the shot, you can keep honing and refining it until you get exactly what you’re trying for,” says Paiva. “There’s really no reason to not get the shot. Just relax and keep working it until you get something on the LCD you like.”

#### LIGHT PAINTING TODAY

Paiva says that his lighting methodology has also evolved with the technology. “In the ‘90s it was mostly open-strobe, masked with swatches of theatrical lighting gels, for color. I also used a couple of Maglites for soft fills and tight spaces,” he says. “By the turn of the century, the first LED flashlights—with their uniquely pure, cool white cast—began to hit the market. In the ‘00s I switched to working with flashlights almost exclusively. I used LED and Xenon lights, taking advantage of their different color-cast reactions to each gel color.”

A few years ago Paiva began experimenting with a new generation of light-painting tool: the ProtoMachines flashlight ([www.protomachines.com](http://www.protomachines.com)). “It was developed by a light painter, for light painters. It’s fully HSB controllable: it can literally make millions of colors and the operator can make any color 1 of 8 presets,” he explains. “The brightness is also fully controllable: dim enough to light a screw head from 6” away, or bright enough to light an object 100 yards away. And it fits in your pocket. It’s the only light source I use now.”

#### SHOOT NOW, ASK LATER

Like a lot of urban explorers, Paiva often finds himself crossing somewhat invisible lines to enter interesting sites. “At this point in my career it’s about 50/50, trespassing versus permission. For many years I didn’t really understand that I could ask for and actually be granted permission to shoot some of these places. Many sites are wrapped in bureaucratic red tape, yet easily accessed through Swiss-cheese fences and unlocked doors,” he says. “In those cases it’s easier to ask forgiveness

than permission, should the need arise.” A lot of his shooting is done in salvage and junkyards and, he says, those sites are usually well guarded, so he tries to get permission from someone during the day. “You’d be surprised how well some night images look on your phone, or a few inexpensive 8x10s to pass around can lubricate the locks,” he says. “It’s all about human engineering with property owners and caretakers, striking a balance between serious professional and oddball artist, interlaced with an undercurrent of obviously harmless friendliness.”

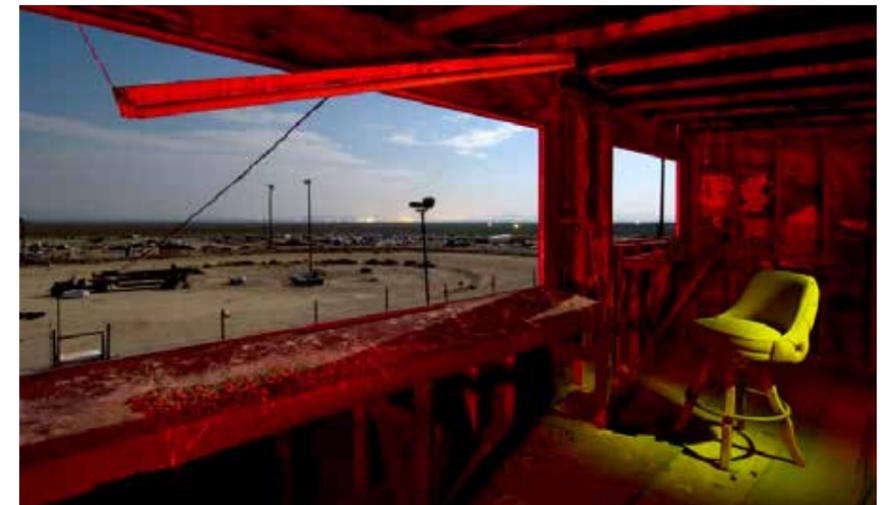
Another somewhat less obvious problem of shooting in the urban underworld that has gotten worse since he began shooting is that a lot of the most interesting locales have a half-life of only weeks, if not days. “The ‘shootable’ life of an abandoned site is usually short. The actual time frame depends on how far from the rest of civilization it is. More urbanized sites may only last a matter of months or even weeks. Taggers and metal scrappers can ruin a site in one night,” he says.

#### JUST THE BEGINNING

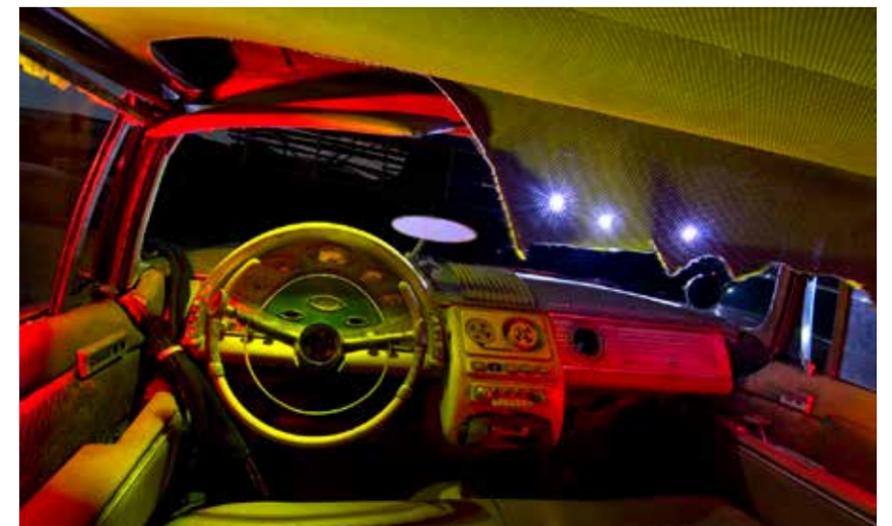
Today Paiva spends as much time as possible teaching workshops and sharing his knowledge via eBooks and says that his workshops are as much fun for him as they are a learning experience for his students. “My workshops are unlike any other. We rent a site, usually a remote junkyard, and lock ourselves in there, with 6 to 8 hours of night shooting time (and some daylight scouting hours) for 3 nights. No time wasted driving from site to site, no disturbing the locals or run ins with the sheriff.” More than half of his workshopers are repeat offenders, returning over and over again, he says.

Does he think the current popularity of light painting will fade into the night? “It’s actually ramping up very quickly. Night photography and light painting is the final frontier of amateur photography,” he says. “I think it’s really only just beginning.” ■

To see more of Troy Paiva’s work, visit: [www.lostamerica.com](http://www.lostamerica.com).



**Race Control:** While the outdoor portions of the scene of the collapsing press box of the abandoned Pearsonville Raceway in Pearsonville, California have a daylight quality, that look is entirely produced by the long exposure under the light of the full moon. Look in the distance and you can see the city lights along the horizon. The interior colors were painted using a lime and red gelled LED flashlight. The image was made using a Canon 20D, a Tokina 12-24mm (at 12mm), exposed at ISO 100 (3950K) for 120 sec at f/5.6.



**Count Olaf’s Eyes:** This is actually the prop car (a custom-built Chrysler limousine) from the film “Lemony Snicket’s A Series of Unfortunate Events”. The shot was made with a Canon 60D, a Tokina 12-24mm (at 12mm), exposed for 109 sec at f/8, ISO 200 with the white balance set to 3800K. Here’s Paiva’s diary entry on how the shot was made: “This custom dashboard is utterly unlike anything I’ve ever seen in a junkyard before. This was an intensely complex set up. Because the passenger area is huge in a limo I had plenty of room to set the tripod up there and point the camera over the seat to get the driver’s perspective. A lime gelled LED pointed straight down on the steering wheel, seat and dash as well as on the ceiling from camera left. There’s also a red LED from the left and right onto various areas of the interior. From the front of the car I shined an LED flashlight through the torn and hanging headliner 3 times, careful to space them well and get the right amount of light through the perforations. I used my 60D’s swivel screen to remain outside of the car during the entire shooting/previewing process. It took quite a few tries to get everything balanced and placed properly.”