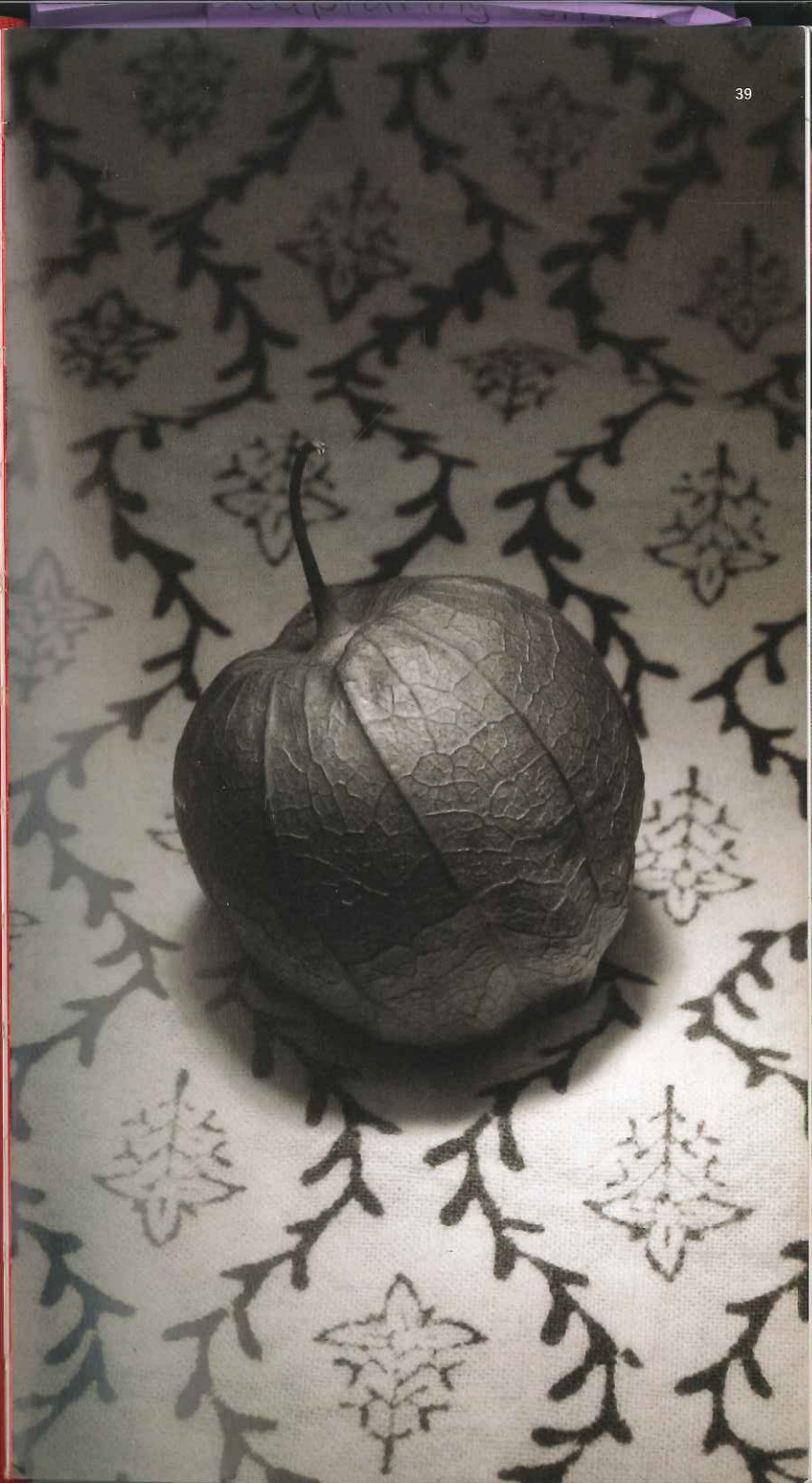


ESTABLISHING ENVIRONMENT

Professional photographers take a great deal of care when establishing an environment for the people and things they are shooting; They know that a subject's backdrop and setting will either add to—or take away from—the visual and thematic impact of the overall image. Before clicking the shutter, take note of the visual elements surrounding your subject(s) and consider their effects. Ask: *Is the backdrop competing for visual dominance with the main subject? Is the backdrop too dark, too light, too busy, too plain, too colorful or too gray to best complement the subject? Could a different point of view remove distracting elements from the composition? Is everything in the scene contributing to the thematic look and feel of the overall image? Should the scene's environment be altered by adding something to it? How about taking something away? Is everything perfect just as it is?* The examples in this section are mostly presented in controlled studio environments. Their lessons, however, can be applied to all kinds of photo opportunities: naturally occurring; staged; controlled; or completely out-of-control.



It is important to consider the value* contrast between your subject and its backdrop. Efficient control of value helps a subject stand apart from its surroundings. Most of the time, it's desirable to ensure that whatever you are taking a picture of is either lighter or darker than the backdrop it is set against.

Bold contrast tends to enforce themes that are themselves strong. Softer contrast can lend notes of quietude and comfort to an image. Ask yourself: *How much contrast is appropriate given the subject-matter being photographed and the stylistic outcome I am aiming for?*

Contrast is affected by the colors and shades of an images's elements, as well as by the way light is striking those elements. Whenever possible, thoroughly explore lighting, setting and arrangement options in search of solutions that provide good value contrasts throughout a scene.

Learn more about the effects of value contrast through observation: noteworthy photographers, cinematographers and painters of all kinds take great care to manage the value contrasts in their images.

*Value = the relative lightness or darkness of a color or shade compared to a scale of white to black.

The kiwi fruit in this arrangement has been given visual prominence by putting it in white bowls that are set against a light backdrop. Good value contrasts (light vs. dark) are essential in helping a subject stand out against its backdrop.



These onions' skins are only slightly darker than their backdrop. Subtle contrasts can be used to bring a note of calm to an image. *The lighting effect in this shot was achieved by aiming a bright quartz bulb through the slats of a crate. Warm light was bounced into the scene from the left using a gold reflector.*



In this contemporary image, light and shadow are the only things separating the un-cut Kiwano fruit from its backdrop. It is usually best to establish decisive contrast between a subject and its backing. Sometimes, however, "rules" such as this can be bent when an intriguing result is being sought.



Great artists are notorious for breaking the “rules” of their craft in order to catch viewers’ attention and deliver thematic messages. The most effective rule-breakers seem to be those who understand a rule’s purpose, and therefore have an idea of what to expect when it is bent or smashed.

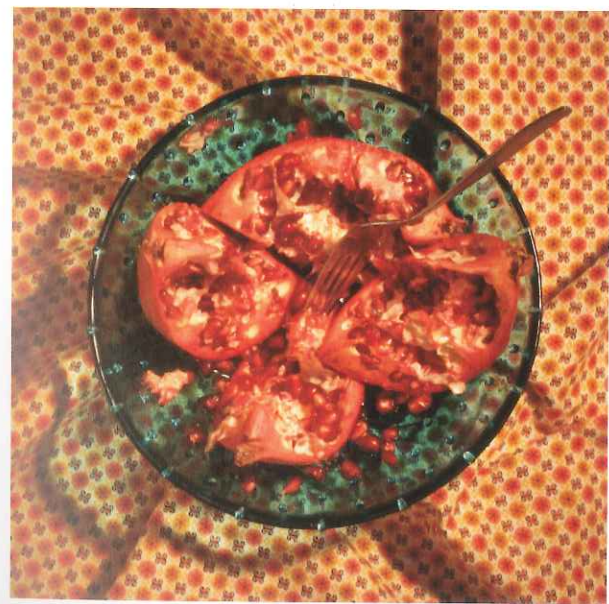
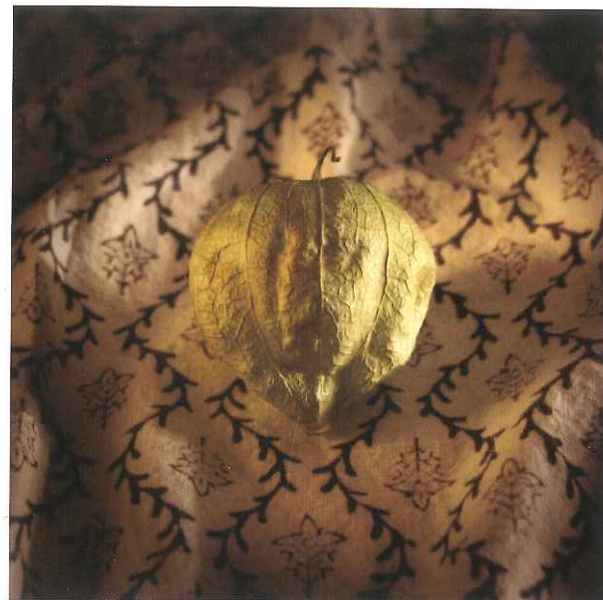
The “busy backdrop rule” goes something like this: *Don’t place a subject against a busy backdrop—especially if the subject itself is visually busy. Why? Because the result can be chaotic and confusing to the eye.*

However, when the thematic result for an image is meant to be active, chaotic or even disturbing, a busy backdrop might be just the thing that is called for...

Let your artistic instinct tell you when to break the busy backdrop rule. And, once you’ve decided to defy this axiom, it’s up to you to decide how far to go. Experiment with backdrop, lighting and point of view options that either amplify or subdue the sense of visual tension between your subject and its setting.

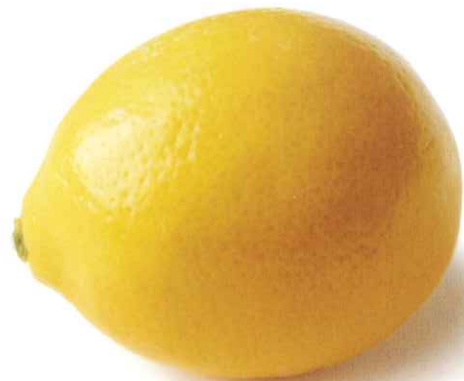
The backdrops behind these subjects are hardly passive. In the top image, the result could be described as visually active; in the lower photo, the effect is nearly chaotic. Note, however, how each image is infused with certain harmonious characteristics to keep it from overwhelming the viewer’s eye: The fabric’s pattern in the top photo echoes the shape of the main subject; in the lower photo, the tablecloth’s colors echo the hues of the half-eaten pomegranate.

Sometimes the unsightly can be just what you are looking for. SEE UGLY IS BEAUTIFUL, PAGE 192.



SECTION 1: YOU: ESTABLISHING ENVIRONMENT

...and speaking of backdrops, there are times when a subject is best displayed with none at all. The digital era makes backdrop-removal easier than ever. SEE **CLIPPING PATHS**, PAGE 346.



In addition to considering the *visual* relationship between your subject and backdrop, be sure to consider *thematic* aspects as well.

Whether capturing images in a studio or on the go, ask yourself, *Should the subject complement—or contrast with—its backdrop?*

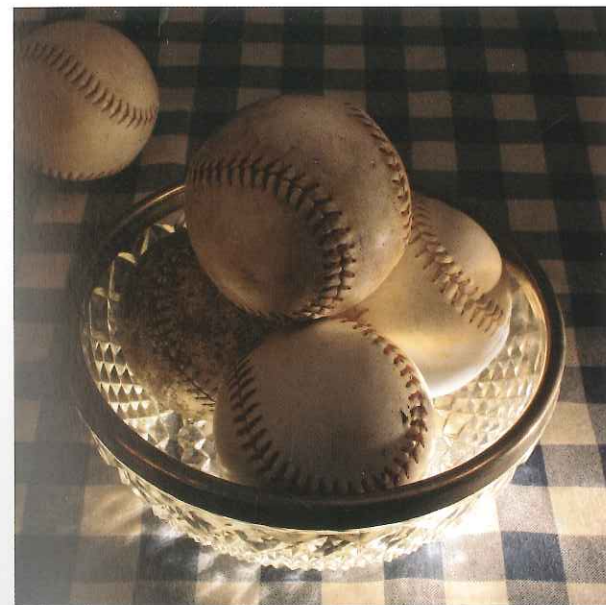
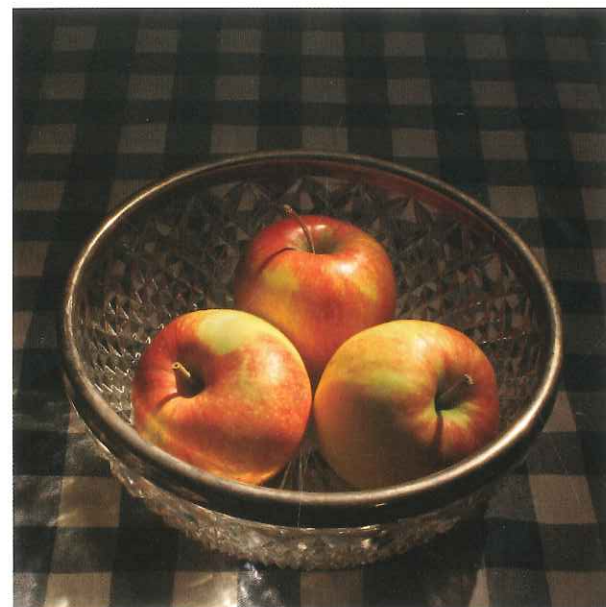
► Most times, photographers look for settings and props that complement their main subject(s).



► But what about mixing things up in order to add a note of humor, intrigue or even confusion to the image? Images used in fine arts, advertising and design often deliver their messages through unexpected juxtapositions. SEE **METAPHOR**, PAGE 246, AND **JUXTAPOSITION**, PAGE 248.



For this shot, I aimed a flashlight ► upward from near the base of the bowl to add to the scene's feeling of faux drama. This lighting technique also took advantage of the interesting ways that the cut glass reflected and refracted the flashlight's beam. SEE **FLASHLIGHTS**, PAGE 284, AND **MINI-SPOT**, PAGE 286.



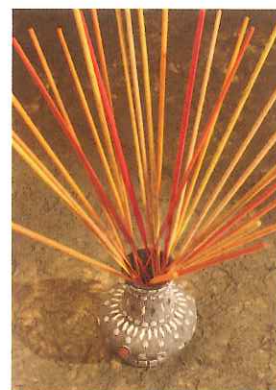
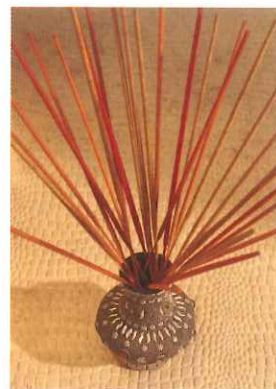
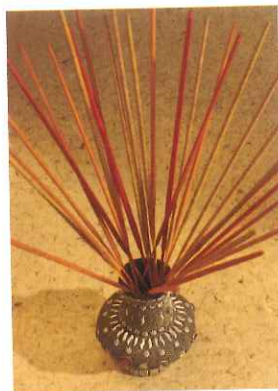
When it comes to studio backdrops, paper is probably the most varied and easily accessible material there is.

Have you visited your local paper or art store lately and taken a look at what's available?

If you plan on shooting pictures of people or things for commercial or personal projects, consider accumulating a stockpile of different papers that could be used as backdrops.

And even though certain art papers can be pricey, don't forget that there are plenty of budget options such as newsprint, butcher paper (far image, lower right) and cardboard.

Some of the backdrops featured on this spread provide an unobtrusive, supportive setting for the subject. Others compete with the subject for attention. Choose a backdrop that emphasizes the overall look and feel you are after.





Fabric, like paper, is endlessly varied and easily attainable. Scour the aisles at second-hand outlets and the sale racks at fabric stores for cheap backdrops.

A “natural” setting is a visual context in which the featured subject(s) would normally be seen. A natural setting might also be considered one where materials such as wood, soil, stone, plants, or natural fabrics or papers are used to create a scene’s environment. In the samples at right, both of these definitions have been applied in various ways.

Natural materials can be used to add notes of warmth and comfort to user-friendly items such as the bars of soap featured on the opposite page.

Natural materials can be contrasted against mechanical or hi-tech subjects to add a sense of thematic tension or irony.

When deciding how to establish a setting around your subject(s), ask: *What sort of environment would best support the look and feel being sought? Am I going for a complementary—or contrasting—association between subject and setting? What specific background materials could be used to achieve this effect? Where can I find these materials? In addition to a backdrop, should the shot be accessorized with items that further enforce the overall theme? What kind of lighting should be used to enhance all of these considerations?*

Handmade paper and dried flowers echo the user-friendly conveyances of the bars of soap featured here. A sculpted glass block serves as a physical pedestal for the soap while providing visual separation between the main subject and its backdrop.

The light in this photo was cast by a quartz bulb aimed from the right of the subjects.

Warm light was returned to the setting by a gold reflector, out of frame to the left. The spotlight patch of light behind the glass block was added using a handheld flashlight. SEE AFFORDABLE LIGHT, PAGE 258, DIFFUSED LIGHT, PAGE 272, AND FLASH-LIGHTS, PAGE 284.

Consider the obvious: Here, tile, wood and washcloths create a likely environment for the featured subject.

...What about using natural backdrop material, collected straight from nature?



Here's another category to consider when deciding on a setting for your subject: *Industrial*.

Industrial settings are, of course, well-suited for subjects that are themselves mechanical in nature.

Industrial settings can also be employed to broadcast feelings of distress, discomfort, danger or alienation—especially when they are juxtaposed against more “innocent” subjects (three examples, opposite).

Secondhand stores, junk yards and hardware outlets are great places to search for industrial-looking props and backdrops for your images.

If feasible, also consider bringing your subject to an industrial environment and taking its picture there.

A jack's head on a saw blade? In a drawer of plumbing fixtures? Superimposed over the digitally-altered image of an electrical substation? What's going on here? Who knows? Photographs such as these can gain an added degree of notice precisely because of the obscurity of their message. These kinds of images are often used to draw attention to a poster, book cover, advertisement, or story whose textual content explains their message. SEE **IMPLYING STORY**, PAGE 244.

Note that the bottom image features a different sort of backdrop—one that has been added digitally. These days, it's important to remember that a backdrop need not be part of an original set-up; it can be added later using software such as Photoshop. SEE **CLIPPING PATHS**, PAGE 346, AND **IMAGE LAYERING DEMO**, PAGE 348.



Have you considered a pseudo-cyber environment for your subject? Would this connect well with the visual and thematic goals you are after?

Hi-tech is a look that changes constantly (as does the technology that inspires it). If you wish to establish a hi-tech setting for an image, take care to do it in a way that fits today's concept of that genre. Either that, or come up with something that appears hi-tech in a non-specific way. (The backdrop in the lower photograph, opposite, is actually a rubber non-skid carpet pad.)

Consider all kinds of backdrops when thinking about how to best portray a subject. Natural, industrial, hi-tech, realistic, mythical, plain, busy, colorful, monochromatic, etc. Brainstorm: Come up with a large list of ideas before narrowing the possibilities and deciding on specifics. Look through magazines, catalogs, books and web sites for environment inspiration. Judge each potential idea in terms of its relation to the subject and the impression you are aiming for in your final image.

This image—like its predecessor on the previous page—is made up of layered photos. The circuit board and the 8-ball were photographed separately and digitally combined using Photoshop. A DEMONSTRATION OF HOW THIS IMAGE WAS CREATED IS FEATURED ON PAGE 348.

ALSO SEE **HUE AND SATURATION**, PAGE 336, AND **COLLECTING BACKDROPS** ON THE NEXT SPREAD.

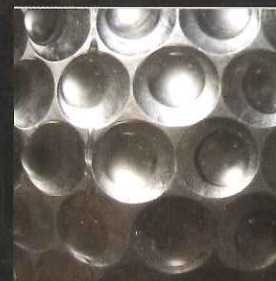
Hi-tech on a low budget: A textured rubber carpet pad has been lit with a simple flashlight to achieve an ambiguously techie-looking surface. The word inside the 8-ball and the image's blue tint were added in Photoshop. SEE **TINTING**, PAGE 342.



Capture and organize your own stockpile of images that could be used as digital backdrops within layered compositions.

Collect shots that are both realistic and abstract; colorful and plain; natural and manufactured; comforting and menacing. Organize them on your computer according to content and theme—a well-organized collection of such images is an invaluable resource for anyone who creates digital composites for personal or professional projects.

SEE **CLOSE-UP**, PAGES 26-29; **LIGHTPLAY**, PAGE 226; **ABSTRACTION**, PAGES 230-233, AND **PLAY WITH FIRE**, PAGES 236-239.

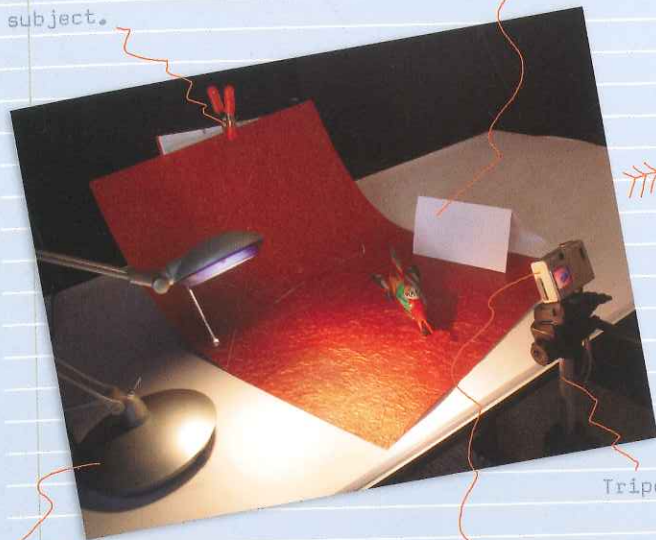


Instant studio.

Your pocket digital camera, a tripod and ordinary lights can be used to take studio-like shots. Here's a look at an improvised table-top "studio" in action:

A sheet of colored paper is clipped to a book and curled upward to seamlessly fill the entire background behind the subject.

A folded piece of typing paper reflects light into shadow areas of the scene.

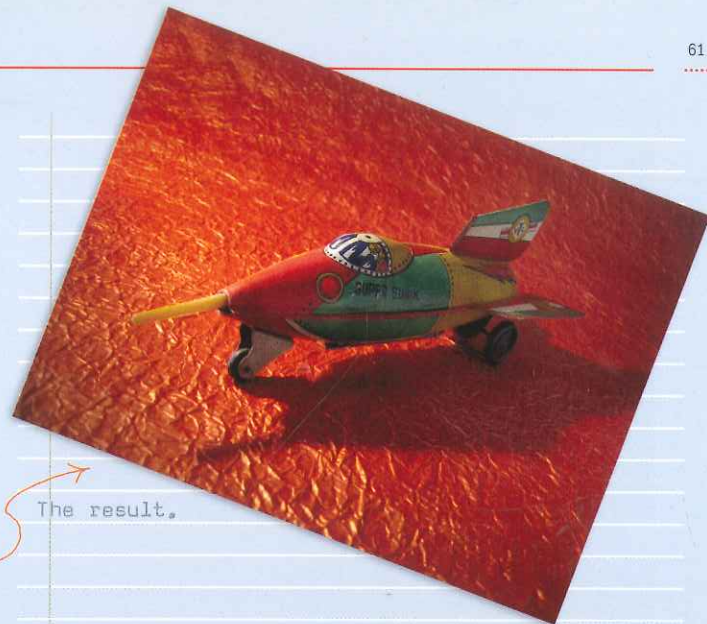


Tripod.

Pocket digi-cam.

Halogen desk lamp.

Naturally, a studio shot can be a lot more complicated than this—but that doesn't mean it has to be. Graphic designers and illustrators who use photos can use a set-up like the one shown above to quickly and conveniently capture images for their projects.



The result.

Become a collector.

If you enjoy taking studio-type shots, how about starting a collection of props? (Below is a snapshot of one corner of the workspace where objects were stored for use in this book. Some were used, others will be saved for future projects...)



When taking pictures of see-through subjects, investigate a variety of lighting and background options. Search for solutions that take advantage of these subjects' unique ability to both reflect and transmit light. SEE BACKLIGHTING, PAGES 278-281.

Even if your interests lie outside studio photography, you can benefit from studio-like exploration of transparent and translucent subject matter. A suggestion: Take a series of pictures using bottles, vases or eyeglasses as subjects. Use whatever light sources are available; try out different backdrops; strive for a wide range of outcomes. *Much can be learned from studio-like exploration such as this—knowledge that can be applied to all kinds of real world photo opportunities.*

Take advantage of transparency. Here, a light has been aimed at the backdrop instead of the subject. ▶ ◻

Activity amplified: Here, ◻ ▶ the scene's visually busy backdrop is reflected in the bottle's transparent form, along with colors from the orange candies inside.



Colored glass bottles, a reflective surface, and a bright, out-of-focus background culminate in a scene that is full of light and visual energy. ▶ ◻

Note: The table top was misted with water so that the bottles' colorful forms would be carried into the foreground by their reflections.

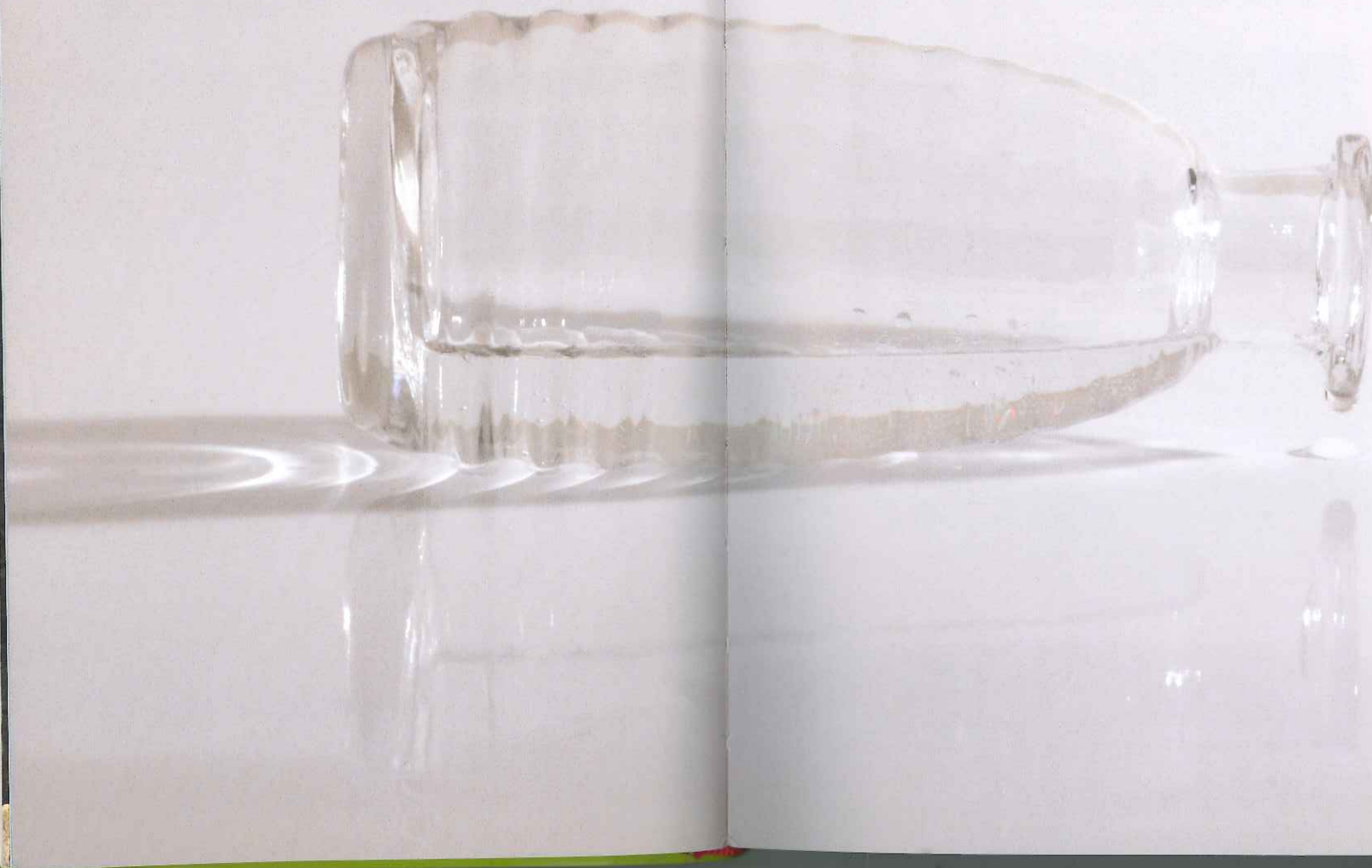
I used a digital SLR to take this photo since it allowed precise control over the lens's range of focus. Here, the depth of field is shallow enough to restrict the focus to the main subjects alone.

SEE DEPTH OF FIELD, PAGE 306.



Under the right conditions, subject and backdrop can be made to nearly meld into one.

As a continuation of the exercise suggested on the previous spread, how about trying out a shot like this to see what you can discover about light, reflection and shadow? Strive for images that are both subtle and stark in their presentation. Explore lighting and point of view variations.



Whether you are taking pictures of ceramic bowls in a studio or salt shakers on a deli countertop, consider including reflections of your subject in the shot. *Reflection can add visual richness and interest to an image.*

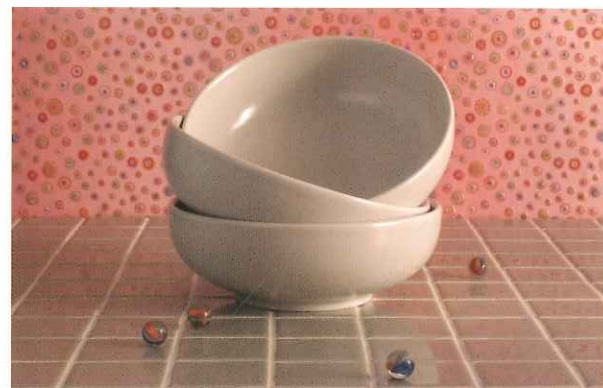
There are many kinds of tile, marble, linoleum, metal, foil, glass and coated paper that can be used as a reflective surface in the studio.

Reflective materials abound in everyday life as well; look for opportunities to incorporate their effects in the photos you take.

Water can be added to many dull surfaces to make them reflective (AS IN THE IMAGE OF THE COLORED BOTTLES AT THE BOTTOM OF PAGE 63).

When taking pictures of a scene that includes interesting reflections, be sure to experiment with different points of view—the angle from which you are aiming the camera can have a big effect on the reflections occurring in the shot.

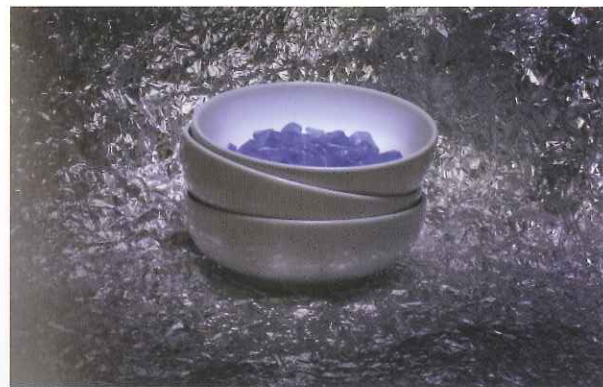
Colors from the backdrop and hints of the subjects' forms are transmitted throughout this image by a glossy tile surface. Reflections dramatically enhance this scene's conveyances of energy and depth.



Here, the sensation of luxury is amplified by the mirror-like surface beneath the subjects. For this effect, an inexpensive sheet of chrome-coated paper was used—curled upward behind the subjects to create a seamless transition into a vertical backdrop.



Low in cost, high in visual impact: Aluminum foil can be used as an intriguing on-the-cheap backdrop. Though highly reflective, foil is easy to work with when crumpled like this since it does not reflect images of studio equipment in its scattered surfaces.



Arrange first, then add lights.

Many of the previous pages feature studio shots of arranged objects. Here's a demo of how a typical studio shot might come together. As a rule of thumb, it's usually best to **start** by looking through your camera's lens at the arrangement of your subjects. After you come up with a pleasing composition from the camera's point of view, it's time to explore lighting options. If you arrange the lighting before the composition is set, you will probably have to re-aim the lights after your subjects or camera angle have been moved. See the chapter on light beginning on page 256.

Start simple. An initial viewpoint is explored using minimal elements. Here, a bad tangent (defined on page 77) between the loaf and the table's edge will need to be fixed by lowering the camera's viewpoint. Window light is used to illuminate the scene at this stage.



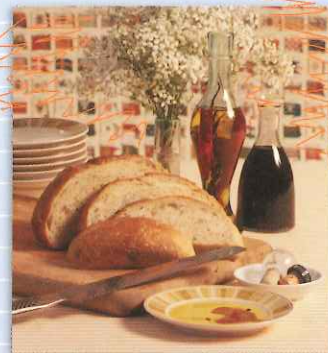
Add. Props are loosely fitted to the scene. Problems: items seem too spread out; the tops of the props form a line that slants out of the scene (this could be fixed by adding something along the left edge); backdrop is too blurred.



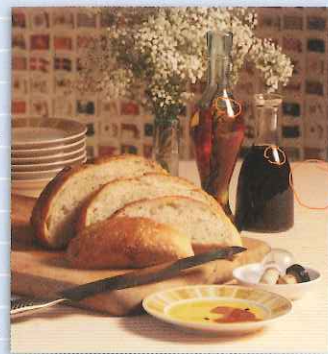
Coming together. Dishes have been added to the left to bring the overall composition into a strong triangular arrangement. The back-drop has been brought into sharper focus by closing down the camera's aperture (see Depth of field, page 306).



Light it. A quartz bulb is used to warmly light the scene from the right. A reflector has been placed to the left of the frame to return light into the scene. The background will need to be darkened since it seems to be competing with the subjects for attention.



Fine-tune. The light has been re-aimed to darken the background. Now the subjects stand out better than before. The rear half of the table still seems a bit bright and the reflections on the bottles are too stark. (Continued on next page.)





(Continued from previous page.)

The finale.

A piece of cardboard was placed out-of-frame to the right to shield the rear of the table from direct light. A diffusion panel was used to soften the reflections on the bottles (see Diffused light, page 272). Now the main subjects stand out well in the midst of their surroundings and the scene has a warm, comforting look that seems appropriate given the subject matter. Take your time when setting up a shot like this. Begin simple and add props, lights and reflectors as you go.

Use a checklist such as the one shown on the opposite page to help ensure that your studio work goes as smoothly and efficiently as possible.

Before you start:

- Decide on the stylistic result that you will be aiming for (maybe collect some sample images ahead of time to use as reference).
- If this is a commercial shot, make sure that you have a clear idea of what the client wants from the image. Consider inviting the client to take part in the photoshoot.
- Make sure your camera's battery is charged and that you have all the necessary photographic equipment. Have all props on hand.

As you arrange elements and during shooting:

- Strive for the strongest compositional arrangement for your scene. (See the chapter on composition beginning on page 74.)
- Be on the alert for bad tangents between elements.
- Make whatever changes are necessary to give clear dominance to the important elements of the shot (see Visual hierarchy, page 94). See to it that elements such as props and backdrops are supporting, rather than competing with, your main subject(s) for attention!
- Explore lighting options thoroughly.* Use reflectors or secondary lights to fill in "dead" shadow areas. Watch out for subjects that are casting unsightly shadows on others.
- Dim, diffuse, re-aim or reflect lights that are casting too much harsh light.
- Take pictures as you go and inspect your images carefully. Fix whatever needs fixing and keep checking your shots until everything is as it should be.
- Bracket your shots to improve your chances of success (see Bracketing, page 310).

* If you are using a flash unit, you will also want to take its effects into account.