

MUD, SWEAT & GEARS

As I sit in my studio, I contemplate on where my photography has taken me in the last year. Just two days ago, I found myself just outside of Chihuahua Mexico, preparing a shoot for a local Exploration drilling company. Not two weeks earlier I was in West Virginia documenting a story on their local drill team, and four weeks before that I was in Utah, Nevada, and Minneapolis. Now this might not sound as grandeur as you think, but coming from a small Northern Ontario City its something to brag about. Shooting big rig machinery with greased up muddy workers is a far cry from my other photographic passion (Wedding Photography) but there is a real sense of accomplishment when you get that perfect, crisp, clean, high impact image of something cold, lifeless, and well...boring.



Some people ask me why I would want to shoot Mining equipment thousands of feet underground where it's practically raining, damp, musty, and everything your equipment touches leaves it's permanently residual signature, or why I would walk through fields of man hungry cacti to get that environmental shot of a drill rig. I have one simply answer. Money! Well that, and because I find myself in environments I would not normally be in.

The Majority of my commercial photography experiences has been with exploration drilling. This involves the machinery, the people working the machinery, and the products that work with the machinery. 98% of the time these shoots take place in the middle of nowhere, or underground all across the US. These particular environments have their pitfalls. For instance, underground is, well, dirty. Very dirty. Throw in humidity, mud, water, and darkness and you have a recipe for hard shooting conditions. The above ground sessions usually take place miles from anything rural, surrounded by bush, rock or desert cacti. I really had to be selective when it came to my equipment, and how much I brought with me. The first time I flew to the States for an assignment, I was denied access at the US border because I had too much equipment with me to go on the plane. Now I pack light. VERY light. Camera, lenses, and a few vivitar 285 flashes. Vivitar 285 Flashes? Yup, I break out the big guns don't I! Really, these small flashes are all I will ever need.

My choice of lighting all comes down to what I'm trying to achieve, and that is IMPACT. I want harsh shadows, crisp detail, and colourful images.

If I'm above ground I'll use the sun to my advantage instead of cowering in the corner sucking my thumb because it's too bright out. See that's the good thing about industrial images, the sun is my friend. It's the most powerful, cheapest lightsource I could ask for on a shoot. Usually I will be told by the Company Rep or their graphic designer just what type of image they are looking for, so I always take a few steps before I will actually make the shot. My thought process is basically the same:

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1. Find out what the image is supposed to portray to the viewer (what the client wants the readers to think)
2. Try to find a position where the sun can be used as a "kicker" light on the subject, or where it can make the most shadows
3. Position 1 vivitar flash for a mainlight so that the subject is illuminated. I usually have the output at about 1 stop more than the sun
4. Make a few test shots to verify quality of lighting, once I am satisfied, I bring in the subjects. Take the shot.

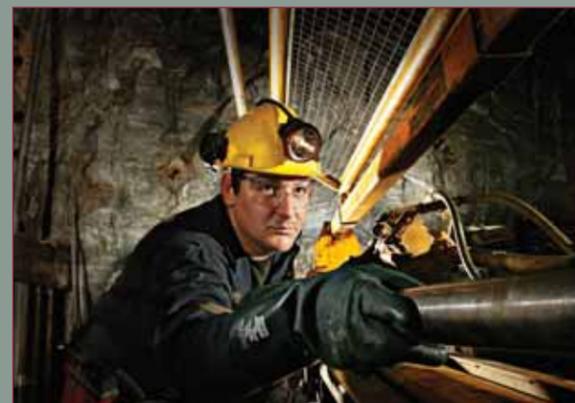
Most of the time I am on a site that is actually in production, so I need to be as unobtrusive as I possibly can. Time is money for these workers and they do not want to stop working for anything especially some artsy fartsy Canadian photographer. A lot of the times, I treat these shoots just like a wedding, get in, get the shot, get out. It's all very very quick. Some shots take 20-30 minutes and some take less than 1, it all depends on how much time they will allow me to do my job. This is another reason why I like to travel light. 95% of the shots I do not even use a tripod, as my shutter speeds are faster than 1/125 of a second (because I am trying to underexpose the sun). I use my Canon 20d body with a 17-40 F4 or my 10-22 F2.8. If the shot calls for it, I will also use my 85mm F1.8 but a lot of these images require a large field of range, so the wide angle lenses are utilized the most.



In Chihuahua Mexico I created this image to show the helper setting the bit with the drill rig in the background. The sun was full force at about F11, so I positioned the sun 90 degrees to my right, just as I would if I had a kicker light. This adds a bit of shine and detail to the back of my subject, and gives more detail to clothes, and drill rig. I then brought in a vivitar flash to my left, down low. This illuminated my subjects face and also added some light to the pipes where the sun was causing shadow.

The reason I shoot one stop over the ambient is because I like to have my sky go dark blue, and underexposing the sky by one stop does just that.

Heavy Metal Man was created a few hundred feet underground with 2 vivitars only. I placed one vivitar to my right 45 degrees as a main light on my subject. The second flash was placed behind the subject on the floor pointed up. This served 3 purposes. 1) it added a pinstripe to the back of my subject, 2) it add light to the back wall and 3) created shadows in the drill that the camera can see.



Again with this image I used one vivitar flash and the sun. I wanted the sky darker blue, so I set the flash output 1 stop more than the sun underexposing the ambient light, and thus making my vivitar flash (which was placed to the left on the floor beside me aiming upwards at the drill bit and hand).

I love the contrast of shooting a wedding on Saturday and being underground on Monday. Both fields are on the total opposites of the board. I think of myself fortunate to have stumbled upon this field. Most of the time people go through life without even setting foot out of their city. They work a 9-5, Monday to Fridays and on the Weekends they sit on the couch watching tube. Traveling, meeting new people, experiencing new situations, and creating kickass images gives me a feeling of accomplishment and self worth. I'm always in a bit of a fog when I return North, anxious to be on my next adventure, in a place I have never been, with camera in hand.

Photography by: James Hodgins

