

LIGHTING TECHNIQUES

ON LIGHTING STYLES: THE VOORHES SHARE WHAT'S BEHIND THEIR GRAPHIC, CONCEPTUAL STILL LIFES

November 14, 2017

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For a recent cover of *The Atlantic*, The Voorhes photographed a model of the White House.

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The Voorhes—the husband-and-wife team of [Adam Voorhes](#) and [Robin Finlay](#)—are known for their graphic, conceptual still lifes for *Popular Science*, *Fortune*, *WIRED* and *The Atlantic*. Before they became a team, Finlay was an art director, and hired Voorhes for his pinpoint control of lighting. “There was no other person I could work with and say, ‘This looks good, but I wish I could have this little sliver of information here,’ or ‘Could I have more fill here?’” she recalls. “I could pinpoint spots—‘I want this here and that there’—and he could do it.” These days, they work together to conceive their compositions, with Finlay art directing and making props, and Voorhes devising lighting to execute their vision. “We can both analyze a screen, and I’ll furrow my brow and say, ‘I think it needs something else,’” Finlay says, “And he can do it.”

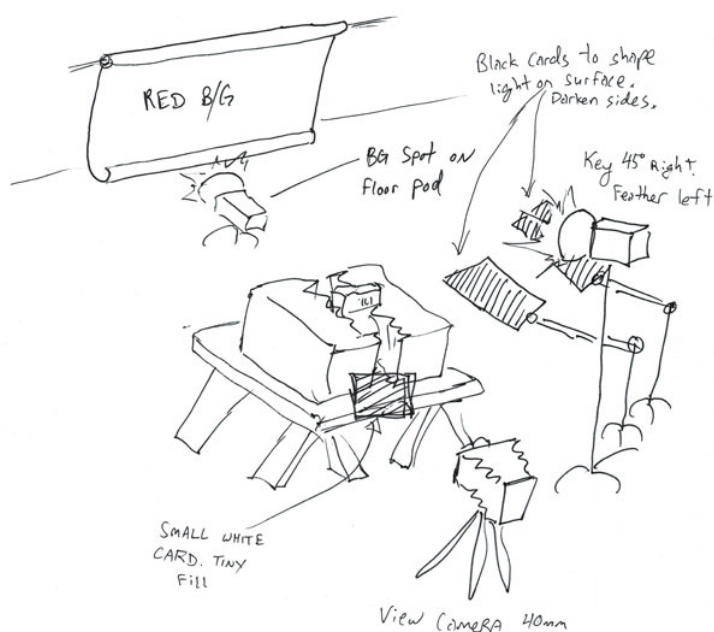


Robin Finlay and Adam Voorhes.

“They know exactly what highlights to hit in camera to make their work so recognizable and branded as ‘a Voorhes,’” says Anna Alexander, director of photography at *WIRED*, a frequent client of The Voorhes’. While their graphic style of still-life imagery has stopping power in a magazine, commercial clients such as Michelob, Captain Morgan, Chase, Jell-o and Fed Ex come to them for their ability to adapt their techniques to suit a brand’s message. “They know we can tailor a certain style to their needs and the mood they want to set or the story they want to tell,” Voorhes says. Says Finlay, “I don’t know how many beer bottles and cups of beer we’ve shot together, but if it’s a new client, Adam will work to make it a little bit different and special for that client.” That can mean adding edge lights to emphasize the bottle’s shape, or changing the direction of shadows on condensation. Says Voorhes, “We could come up with a dozen radically different ways to do that, and subtle differences within those.”

The hallmarks of a classic image by The Voorhes are crisp shadows, rich color and a touch of the surreal. “There are images that some people look at it and think it could be an illustration—it doesn’t feel real,” says Voorhes. “In those scenarios, the shadows are part of the composition.”

The couple’s 6,000-square-foot studio in Austin, Texas, has two small windows that are covered with blackout shades, a workshop where Finlay creates sets and props, and a shooting space that can accommodate three tabletop setups at a time. Voorhes estimates they have about 28 hot lights and 32 strobe heads—many of them White Lightning heads from Paul C. Buff, a brand he first used when he was beginning his career. “I really like the freedom of monoblocks,” he notes. He has also customized flashtubes, and he and first assistant Nick Cabrera are constantly experimenting and testing new gear. “We’ll be home at night and he’ll be drawing lighting diagrams,” Finlay says of her husband.



A diagram of the lighting of a White House model for a recent cover of *The Atlantic*. “They know exactly what highlights to hit in camera to make their work so recognizable,” says Anna Alexander, director of photography at *WIRED*, a regular client.

Voorhes sets himself certain guidelines. “He wants to see layering of tone—light to dark, dark to light—controlled flare, and make sure everything’s crisp,” Finlay says. For a recent cover of *The Atlantic*, The Voorhes had to create an image of the White House poised over a widening chasm. Finlay worked with a model of the building, created its craggy base in her workshop and set up a red tabletop surface that resembles a yawning crevasse. A strobe with a reflector placed to camera right raked across the model to emphasize its texture. The light was feathered using black cards to create shadows on the left and right of the model. The red backdrop was placed several feet behind the tabletop on which the model house was placed. “That lets you light the background and subject independently,” Voorhes notes. He lit the backdrop using a strobe with a reflector, placed low. This created a circle of light on the backdrop that frames the model building. To create more separation between the base of the White House and the surface, he used a small card to bounce light at the corner.

The red surface cast a reddish hue onto the white model. As they do whenever they shoot on a colored surface, they locked down the camera and made two captures: They first shot the scene, then placed black cards around the white model to block the colored reflections, and shot it again. “It saves time in Photoshop,” Voorhes notes.



The Voorhes specialize in giving beverage clients a distinct look. “If it’s a new client, Adam will work to make [the lighting] a little bit different and special,” says Finlay. © The Voorhes

For most shoots, he relies on a few go-to setups. “It’s either going to be with a strobe and no reflector, or a strobe with a reflector that has a harder quality.” For food or other subjects that call for diffused light, he uses a 3×4-foot diffusion panel and a strobe with a reflector on it. “Then we aim the light at that diffusion. We can move [the light] to one side to create a gradient. We can move it closer and it’ll be harder or we can move it further away and it’ll be softer.” This setup offers more control than a softbox, which looks like “just a block of light.”

Once the basic setup is in place, Voorhes begins tweaking and adding lights. He recalls a shoot for Cazadores tequila, whose logo featured a stag. The photographers shot a stuffed deer on black seamless. Voorhes placed the key light at a 45-degree angle, “emphasizing texture and shape,” he says, “but the AD wanted edge light on the leg and the hoof and the muscles here and there.” He added more lights—snooted to control spill—and more flags and cards, and eventually ran out of c-stands. “So we had strobes on the floor propped up on apple boxes and secured by sandbags to project light up at the right angles,” Voorhes recalls. “I love doing that stuff.”

With more clients asking for video, Voorhes and Cabrera are now looking for lights that will recreate The Voorhes’ signature style while capturing high-speed splashes and pours. Fresnels “look nothing like strobe,” Voorhes says, and a typical LED is “a big soft source. That’s the exact opposite of what I want. We want a tiny, sharp source.” Voorhes has liked working with tungsten PAR Can “Open Face lights.” Cabrera has made some custom 1K monoblocks, fitting them with the reflectors and modifiers they use on strobes. Says Voorhes, “Right now we’re trying to make them brighter by grouping them into a cluster, but that makes a larger light source and that’s not good for the quality of light we want. So what we really need is brighter LEDs.”

Voorhes says they’ll approach their videos with the same care that they bring to their editorial illustrations and simple product shots: “Making it something special is rewarding.”

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