



Each issue, Luke White shares his extensive studio expertise as operations and education manager at Auckland's Kingsize Studios.

He holds a first-class honours degree in photography and has worked as a commercial photographer in England and New Zealand. Luke is passionate about photographic and film-making technologies new and old, and his conceptual photographs and videos have been exhibited across Europe.

Kingsize Studios is the New Zealand distributor for many top photographic brands, including Mola, Chimera, Matthews, and Westcott; it also runs a whole range of workshops on photography, film-making, lighting, and more.

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BRINGING THE 1850S TO THE 21ST CENTURY

Luke White spends two days shooting with Paul Alsop, adopting collodion wet-plate photography processes



A while ago, I received an email from an English doctor living in Thames. Paul Alsop had read my article on the history of photographic lighting in these very pages and got in touch to ask if I knew about the collodion wet-plate process, which preceded gelatine film. Indeed I did — it turned out that we had both been introduced to wet-plate photography by the venerable Brian Scadden, in Wellington. Over the past year or so, Alsop and I have become friends and have done several tests shooting tintypes and ambrotypes with flash lighting.

Collaboration is a wonderful thing. While I know the basics when it comes to wet-plate photography, Alsop is in another league altogether. Over the past few years, he has completely embraced the craft. His chemistry and technique are meticulous, and I can't imagine there are many people in the world more adept at pouring a plate. I'm more of a physics guy — shaping light is what fascinates me. While wet-plate photography is enjoying somewhat of a resurgence, I have not seen many examples of photographers crafting light to make interesting portraits. Combining our complementary skills, we hoped to produce images greater than the sum of their parts.

Basically, wet-plate photography involves you making your own gelatinous light-sensitive 'film' in a darkroom, then pouring it over a plate of glass or blackened aluminium. This plate is then loaded into a large-format camera, and you make a photograph the same as if you were using film. You then take the plate back to the darkroom and develop it straight away. Location shoots mean you need a portable darkroom and quite a lot of gear and chemicals — you may have seen photographs of Roger Fenton's horse-drawn darkroom caravan as he documented the Crimean War in the 1850s. In my opinion, the collodion process produces some of the most beautiful photographs I've seen.

These plates are relatively insensitive to light, generally requiring exposure times in the tens of seconds. Photography history books show images of the head braces that were required to ensure that the sitters remained motionless for the duration of the long exposure. The ISO would have been somewhere around two. I love the look of tintypes but not the blur that usually results from the requisite long exposures. I'm a huge fan of the beautifully crafted lighting of the portrait masters such as Yousuf Karsh, Platon, and Dan Winters. After some experimentation, we realized that around 12,000W of flash lighting was enough



Drew from 62 Models



Damian Alexander from Blacklistt



Damian Alexander from Blacklistt



Lee Howell



Elise from 62 Models



Elise from 62 Models

to make an exposure. Luckily, I manage Kingsize Studios, so access to high-end Broncolor power packs is no problem.

As we were going to all this effort, we wanted to ensure we'd have a good range of sitters. We scheduled 20 people across two days, exposing 40 plates. When a single plate takes 10 minutes to prepare and five minutes to develop, this is no mean feat. It was nice to work this way, ensuring the lighting was as perfect as could be before making the photograph. With digital, there is a tendency to overshoot to ensure you 'get the shot'. Our slow and precise method also led to good results, and I'd say we had a 90-per-cent hit rate of creating successful portraits.

The people we photographed were all different and required varied lighting depending on the look we wanted to convey. We shot 40-something rock stars followed by 16-year-old models. Fortunately, we were ably assisted by commercial photographer Lee Howell, who helped to make sure the lighting changes happened speedily between each sitter. For each image, we used a very large and relatively powerful fill in the form of either a Broncolor Para 220 or seven-inch Chimera Octopus with diffuser removed. Most of the images were shot with rim or hair lights — for the softer portraits, we used a strip soft box with fabric grids to control spill, while for the harder rim lights, we used silver reflector dishes with

grids. Key light modifiers and their positions were changed to suit the sitter, the pose, and the feel. A large centrally located Mola beauty dish, with a white poly under the chin, gave a soft 'beauty' look when shooting some of the professional models. A hard, silver Broncolor P-Soft dish to one side, accompanied by black flags located close to the sitters' shoulders, was perfect for the more dramatic images of musicians. The Broncolor Para 88 defocused was an efficient and directional key for window-light-type portraits.

Combining the best of 1850s technology with the best the 21st century has to offer certainly led to some challenges, but, in the end, the images were worth the effort.