Create a Surreal Miniature Portrait: The Shoot

by Nathan Colantonio*17 Mar 2014*

In this tutorial, you will be learning how to create a surrealistic portrait with extreme proportions. I'll run you through how to setup and capture the images you need to create this kind of photo, so you can then apply this knowledge for your own creations! I'll then show you how to composite the images together in Photoshop.

Let's get started! For this composition, we will need a total of three images: the piano, a pressed piano key and the model.

The Post Production

To learn how the images are composited in Photoshop, see Nathan's [tutorial](#) in the Tuts+ Photoshop section.

Lighting the Piano

To be able to make this photo work, the lighting needs to be consistent for each photo we take. Because we are merging them all together, the light source needs to be from the exact same angle. These photos were taken using only one light, pretty simple right? The beautiful thing about photography is that you can create some pretty awesome results with the most basic setups and tight budgets!

Let's start with the shot of the piano. Using the modeling lamp from my strobe, I started to experiment with different angles to find an interesting way to light the piano keys. A regular flash without a modeling lamp works just fine as well, but it may take a bit more trial and error to find the right lighting for you. Place the light on one end of the keys and the camera on the other side.

I recommend shooting in manual. although you might be unfamiliar with it, it truly offers the most flexibility and allows you to control exactly how you want your image to look. For a photo like this, I recommend an aperture that is between f/11 and f/22. Because we're essentially shooting a macro photo, the depth of field of our image will be greatly reduced. Shooting with a small aperture still allows there to be out of focus areas the of image. If we shot at f/2.8 or something like that, the foreground and background would completely lack detail.

This is how I arranged my lighting.

Camera Setup

Now that we have the lighting set up, we need to focus on the angle or point of view of the images. Similar to the lighting, it is crucial to keep the perspective consistent across all photos in order for this image to work. The piano shot has a very centered point of view. You can see the top and front of the keys, space above the keys, and space below them. Be sure to capture your model with this exact same angle. If you are unsure about getting this part right, take a few shots at various angles and heights until you get one that looks and feels right.

An easy thing that helps is remembering is to keep your camera level, no tilting to the side or front to back. Matching this same tilt with your model would be very difficult.

Shooting the Pressed Key
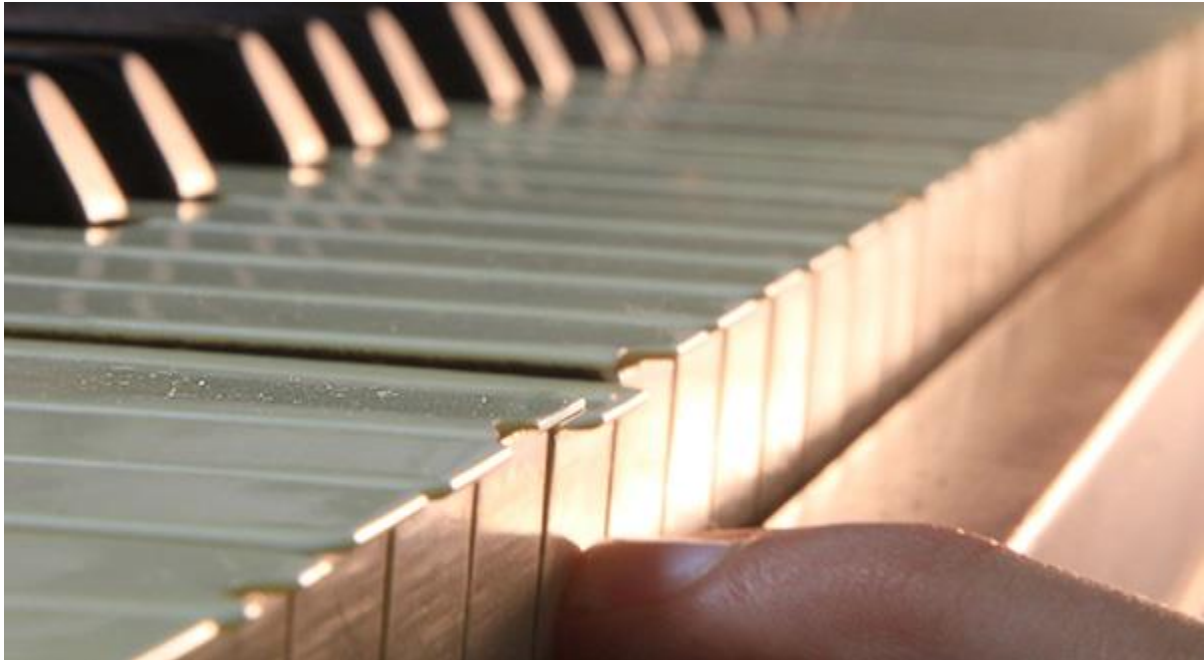
When it comes to surrealistic photography, the details are the key sellers for the piece, no pun intended. For this image, we are showing the viewer that the little man has some weight to him by depressing a piano key. You could very well have him sitting on a key without it being pressed down, but having the key pressed only slightly disrupts the pattern of the keys in a row, creating a much more interesting image. It also makes him stand out.

Capture this photo the exact same way you did for the piano shot and be sure not to touch your tripod, lights or adjust any settings. The tripod must remain perfectly still between shots so that we can smoothly mask out anything you use to press the key down.

The way I chose to do this was to gently slide my finger down the front of the key, lowering it slightly while staying out of the way of the photo the best I can. There may be various ways to do this, but I found this route to be an easy one. Feel free to experiment!

Photographing the Model

Perhaps the easiest part of this tutorial is capturing the model. Have him or her sit in front of a blank background. If you do not own a backdrop, use a background with very little on it, such as a blank wall. When you look at this photo it does not seem to be the kind of shot you would expect out of a proper photo studio, and that's ok! I want to show how much you can do with so little.

Photo studios aren't affordable to everyone and space can be extremely limited at times. You can see that the backdrop doesn't quite cover my subject entirely, and the background isn't that perfect bright white. This is ok since we will be removing him

completely from this image. Don't be afraid to improvise with what you have, amazing results can be achieved with simple work-arounds!
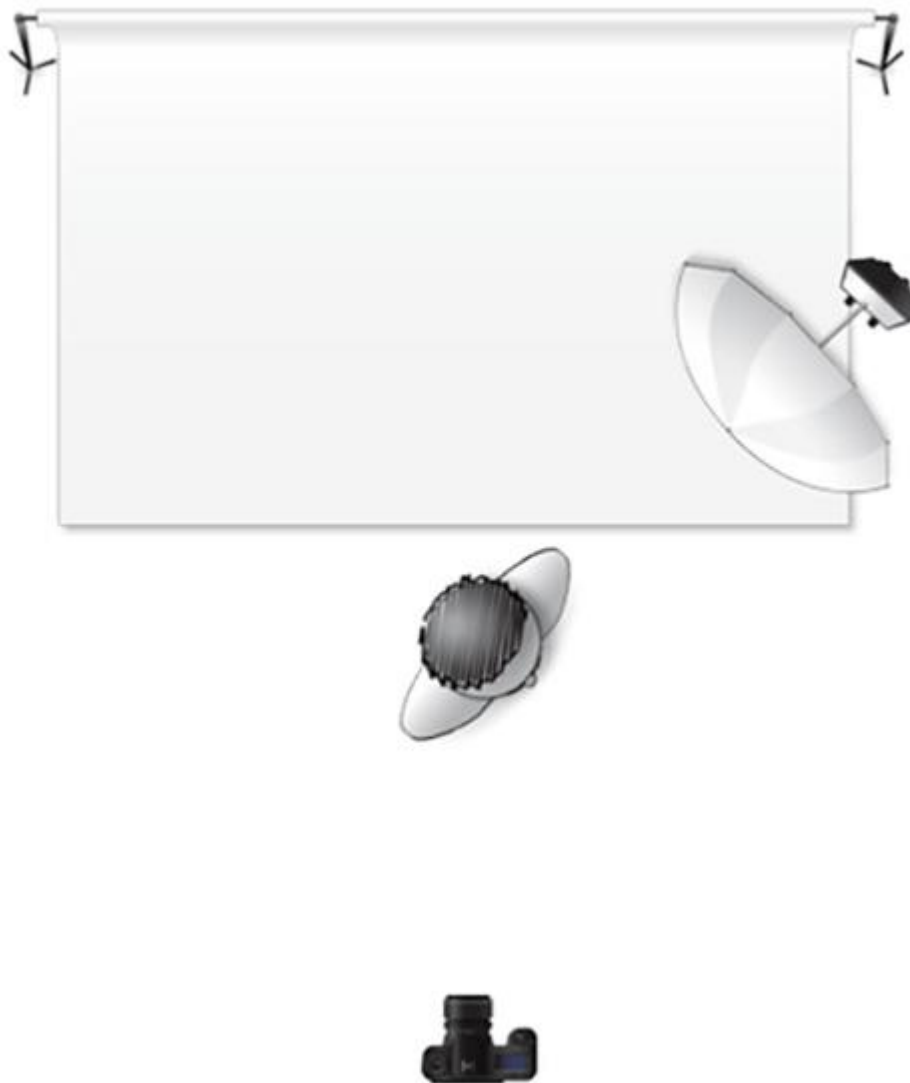
Applying the previous tips about camera height and light placement, begin setting up your subject. Exactly like the keys, the main light source must come from the top right of the image. Using a modeling lamp makes lighting your subject a lot easier as "what you see is what you get" for shadows. Make sure to choose an F-stop that gets the model completely in focus. I recommend using at least f/8 to do this. Make sure the model is facing the same direction as the keys.

There You Have It!

You should now be ready to move to the post-processing phase using Photoshop! This is a great photo technique to learn as it can be applied to just about any surface. The *key* is to remember to always keep your light sources and your camera's point of view consistent. Check out some other versions of this concept!

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