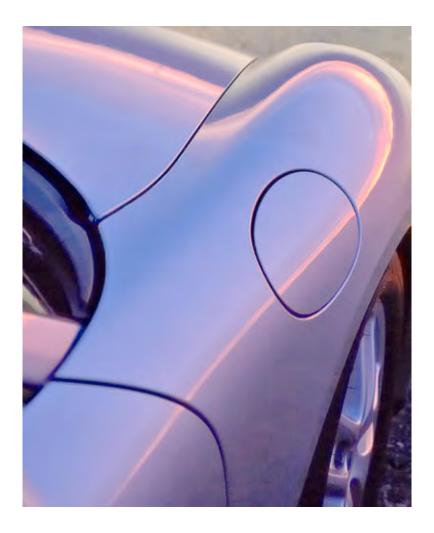# *Photographing Cars*

Alain Briot

Photographing Cars

In November 2006 Natalie and I set out on a sports car shoot. This was 100% new to us because I had never photographed a sports car, at least not with the goal of creating a fine-art photograph.

The only knowledge I had about photographing sports cars came from looking at sports car photographs in magazines and reading sports car reviews. Because some of these reviews discussed aspects of the photographers' work, I thought I was ready to do a car shoot. The problem was that the information presented by these reviews was superficial and did not apply to our specific situation.

For example, one essay I read mentioned the need to wash the car carefully and also mentioned that when rushed the photographer would clean only one side of the car –the side facing the camera—leading to surprised looks on the part of people passing by. The same essay also mentioned shooting one car from another, or shooting while the car was in motion, by standing in the rear trunk or in the back seat in a convertible.

None of this proved very helpful. We did clean the car, on both sides, and made sure it was immaculate. When it came to shooting from a second vehicle this could not be done since it was just Natalie and I and this technique required three people: two drivers plus the photographer. Shooting with the vehicle in motion was equally impossible because the car we wanted to photograph was not a convertible, had no back seats and although it had a rear trunk, this trunk opened via a hatch which, when raised, did not allow someone to stand in it.

We therefore had to scrape all that "knowledge" and start from scratch. The knowledge that I did have was my extensive knowledge of landscape photography. I therefore thought that I could simply apply this knowledge to cars, by simply approaching the car as I would any foreground object in the landscape, except that instead of having say a cactus, or a boulder or a tree I would have a sports car.

The problem is that a car is a car, not a boulder, a cactus or a tree. As such, it has unique requirements that cacti, boulders and trees do not have. For one, a car looks best under a specific angle. In that sense a car is much closer to a person that to trees, boulders, etc. For example, I discovered while I was photographing the car that the three-quarter rule applies very nicely to cars. For those not familiar with portraiture the three-quarter rule is about creating a portrait from the side of a person, not head-on and not at 90 degrees to the face. In such a portrait the nose shows inside the face and both eyes are visible, the furthest eye being just visible on the side of the face.

Applied to car photography the three quarter rule means you want to show both headlights, shooting from the side, with the furthest headlight being just visible on the far side of the vehicle. If we compare this pose to an analog clock, with 12 representing the rear of the car and 6 representing the front of the car, you want to position yourself either at 4:30 or at 7:30 to shoot from a three-quarter position.

We did just that and it worked great in terms of giving a nice presence to the vehicle, in terms of emphasizing the lines of the body and in terms of playing up the relationship between the front and the rear of the car. But this was only part of what we needed to do in order to find the groove.

We had been careful to select an area for the shoot that presented some good possibilities for a nice natural landscape background. We had also been careful to select a road that was little traveled, so we could drive on it without facing the risk of being hit by another vehicle. This much was taken care of. What was not taken care of was the other aspects of the shoot that, at this point, we still ignored.

The three-quarter composition placed the car in the foreground of the image. With the landscape behind it, it was comparable, so I thought, to a near-far composition, a classic of landscape photography. With landscape photography, when doing a near-far composition, I use a wide angle lens, get very close to the foreground element, then use depth of field to guarantee sharpness throughout the image. The distortion of the foreground element by the wide-angle lens at close proximity is rarely objectionable. In fact, this distortion usually enhances the foreground element by increasing its size and making it larger and thus more noticeable than it really is. Usually, I get close enough to this element so that it fills the frame, from right to left, of matches the relative size of more distant objects. In other words I control the size of the foreground element so that this size is in harmony with the specific composition I have in mind.

Careful positioning plus timing and turning the headlights on.

Not so with cars. Why? Because cars have a precise shape that we associate with a particular car. We know that all cars of the same make and model have the same shape. Boulders, trees, cacti and other natural elements, on the other hand, rarely have the same shape even though they are of the exact same specie. Nature offers an enormous amount of variation whenever you look at any given type of plant, rock, etc. Cars on the other hand offer hardly any variation, especially when you are looking at cars coming out of a factory.

What this meant is that the minute I tried to do a near far composition with the car as the foreground element the distortion I applied to the car became immediately objectionable. I quickly became obvious that a short telephoto rather than a wide-angle lens had to be used, in order to avoid this distortion.

Another aspect also surfaced, providing an added advantage to the longer lens: once I stepped away from the car it became easier to see both headlights at once. I did not have to be so much in front of the car to see both headlights and I could therefore move to a more appropriate three-quarter position. Being further away allowed me, in short, to see more of the car.

At sunset Artic Silver turns to purple with pink highlights.
Who would have known?

We were, at that point, still in the very early stages of learning about car photography. We had not yet touched upon lighting, or shooting cars in motion, something that, in both instances, held a lot of surprises for us.

Lighting with cars is entirely different than with natural elements. With a natural element you are almost always dealing with a surface that doe not present reflections. The only exception to this rule is a pond, a pool, a lake or any other water-filled surface. In that case, and because it faces up, this surface either reflects clouds or the sky or it reflects the nearby landscape, such as the walls of a canyon, the trees around the pool, or the vegetation that grows there.

With cars the reflections face outwards, meaning they face you. In this regard a car is like photographing a glass door: the risk of photographing your own reflection is very significant. Also significant is the risk that anything located in front of the car will impart a color cast to the car's surface.

This is only one aspect of the problem created by the shiny body of the car. Another aspect has to deal with the fact that the similarities between a car and a person go much further than the three quarter rule I discussed before. These similarities extend into a car being "alive" in some ways. Let me explain.

A car has to be positioned in relationship to the light source in order to look its best. In our situation, because we were approaching car photography as we would approach landscape photography, our sole source of lighting was the sun. We photographed from late afternoon to sunset, with the sun low in the horizon.

It took me a short time to realize that the sun shining on the back of the car did not place the vehicle in its best light, literally. Turning the car around, so that the sun shone on the front of the car, worked a lot better. It made the car look alive and highlighted what we may consider, metaphorically, the face of the car. This was similar to photographing a person, because in portraiture the face is emphasized, not the rear. The technique was different here because direct lighting upon the face is rarely used in portraiture. However, highlighting the hairs with a backlight is frequently used and has the same effect.

This did a lot to bring life to the car. But it wasn't enough. I then remembered a trick that I had seen used countless times in magazine photographs: turning the car's headlights on in daytime with the engine off. I did so, and immediately life was infused in the vehicle. It now looked alive, looking ahead so to speak.

Yet the problem of lighting wasn't fully resolved. We still had to position the car so that the sun was shining on the front of the car, but we were not shooting straight into the sun, or getting the sun too close to the borders of the frame, because doing so meant that most of the sky was washed out by overexposure. Underexposing the photograph was not an option, because if I did so the side of the car facing me became unpleasantly dark. This side was in full shade, because it faced away from the sun, and it needed extra exposure to show up appropriately in the image.

What I learned, above many other things, in this shoot is that car photography in a natural setting involves moving the car around a lot. This is because the lighting on the car is very important. The car will not look good unless it is at a precise angle to the sun. However, the photographer also needs to be at a precise angle to the car to make it look its best. When combined, these two factors mean that a lot of positioning and re-positioning of the vehicle becomes necessary.

At Speed…
Well, not really but it sure looks like it. The car is actually parked on the road, positioned carefully between the yellow line on one side and the white line on the other side.

Another thing I learned has to do with showing cars "at speed". In short, and to go straight to the point, showing a car at speed does not necessarily mean that the car is moving.

One could, of course, and expectably, believe that to be at speed a car would have to be, well, at speed. The fact is that we are working towards creating a still image that shows the car at speed. We are not working towards creating a video. In that sense we only need to create the illusion of speed. As long as this is achieved, our job is done, regardless of how fast the car was actually moving when the photograph was taken.

In our situation we found that the speed at which the vehicle needed to move to achieve the impression of speed in a still image was precisely zero miles per hour. You read it right. It is with the vehicle at a standstill that we were able to create our best photographs of the car "at speed" or rather create the impression that the car was at speed.

We first tried the way anyone would expect to do this: by having the car travel at speed on a section of road with a nice natural background, shooting away in burst mode while the car was passing by. This did not work well at all because we got blurred image and could not control the relationship between the car and the background. I wanted the car in a specific location on the road where the background looked best, and I could never get it precisely where I wanted.

We then tried by slowing down to a crawl, but even then controlling camera motion and the relationship car-background was challenging. We still did not get the photograph I had in my mind. At this point, with the car crawling on the road, I told Natalie to just stop the car, that I would photograph it at a standstill.

I then became aware that to give the illusion of speed the car had to be positioned very carefully on the roadway. For one, the wheels had to be straight and for two the car had to be in the middle of the road, parallel to the yellow line. With that taken care of, and working as I mentioned previously in a section of road with no traffic, we were able to take our best photographs of the car "at speed", with me and Natalie taking turns behind the wheel, and with each of us shooting the car from different distances.

Interestingly enough, in this situation shooting with a wide-angle lens while being close to the vehicle worked quite well. Doing so introduced a slight amount of distortion to the front of the car, but that distortion emphasized the feeling of speed, as if the car was being pulled towards us, slightly stretched by its forward motion towards the camera. Because we were looking at a car "in motion" this stretching became acceptable. It was no longer seen as a distortion but rather as a normal consequence of shooting a car at speed from a short distance.

This photograph makes me think of "The Last Drive In" except there is no Drive In, just the Arizona Desert. It looks as if the car is admiring the Sunset, with or without someone behind the wheel

We photographed from late afternoon to sunset. Sunset light held further surprises for us when compared to photographing landscapes.

In landscape photography, as the sun goes down and eventually sets, the colors of natural objects change in a predictable fashion. Essentially, they get darker, but their original color continues to be present. As the sunlight gets warmer and warmer, as the sun goes down, so does the color of the rocks, trees, water and other natural objects. The saturation of these colors increases as well. This knowledge, combined with the knowledge of how film and digital capture alters these colors, allows me to predict how the colors of natural object will be rendered in the final image.

Not so with cars, essentially because of the reflective nature of the car's body. The paint used on cars also differs considerably from make to make, with each paint having its own unique reflectance, luminosity, and chromatic qualities. If one shoots several cars of different colors, then the problem becomes even greater, since each color will react differently to the colors of the sunset. In short, the only way to predict the exact color that the car will take at sunset may be to wait until sunset and see what happens to the car color-wise.

This is what happened to us as the sun went down the day of our car-shoot. The sky was filled with clouds that turned yellows and reds. At that time the car body, which is naturally grey, turned deep blue and purple with almost-red reflection lines and bright highlights. The complexity of the colors surprised me. If asked earlier in the day what colors the car would be that evening, I would have been at a loss to predict what actually happened. My years of photographing nature and of studying natural light were rather inconsequent in helping me predict this color changes.

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