Creating Eerie Battery

By Joel Styer

Introduction

It is always fun to create something new and a little different. I doubt too many people have photographed the ruins of a military gun battery at night, and likely very few have seen such an image, so it seemed like a good idea. Different is good, it stands out from the crowd if done reasonably well.

Eerie Battery was created using a technique called painting with light and some sleight of hand in post processing. Painting with light, or light painting is a process where you begin with a mostly dark scene and add light selectively to areas you want to illuminate. Flash Painting was also used, the same basic technique but done with a speed light. Each have different strengths and weaknesses and can easily be mixed together to form the final image.

Normally, it is best to scout the location in the daylight and carefully note any obstacles that may be in your way once moving around in the dark. Safety is very important. My preference is to find my preferred composition just before dark and lock the camera down on a sturdy tripod. Unfortunately for *Eerie Battery*, I didn't arrive to the location until after dark, but I adapted. Luckily, I was quite familiar with the area since I had photographed there several times before. On the night this was shot, I didn't know if we would make it to this location or not. It is always helpful to have a second person which makes this kind of shoot go much smoother, and for safety reasons as well. Luckily, I had someone with me who knew the techniques quite well.

What's in a Name

Several people have been curious about my title for this image. It is an abandoned gun battery in an abandoned military fort that was actively used up until around World War II. It is quite eerie at night, in the dark woods away from civilization. Hence the name *Eerie Battery*.

Camera Settings

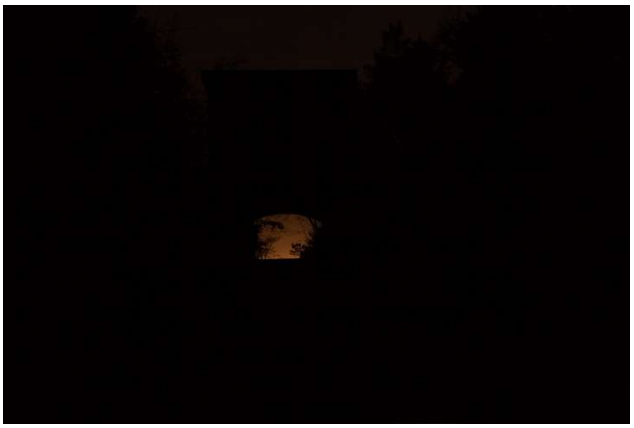
In all, 12 frames were captured. All at an aperture of f/5.6 and ISO 100 with the camera on a tripod and not moved. It is imperative that the camera not move for the images to align correctly in post processing. I generally prefer to work at ISO 50 but needed a little extra boost for this series. Exposures ranged from about 9 seconds to 73 seconds, most were 40 to 60 seconds. The camera was set to bulb mode and the remote was locked on for the duration of each exposure. It is usually not possible to capture a large scene like this in one image since some areas need to be lit from different angles or vantage points, and a long exposure of several minutes would cause too much ambient light to brighten the image. Thankfully my camera handles very long exposures quite well (some don't) without generating a lot of noise. Also keep in mind that I walked through the frame in many of these photos, wearing dark clothing in a dark environment makes that possible.

An additional frame was added for the stars since I couldn't capture many that night. The thin cloud cover that evening was enough to hide the stars but not enough to create a great rushing cloud effect. So, I improvised. It is about the art after all and I felt it still maintained the integrity of the scene.

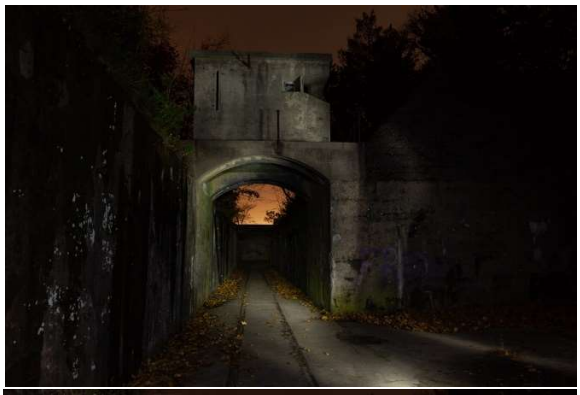
One thing I mention very often when teaching photography is to know your camera. Being able to change commonly used settings in the dark is vitally important in a shoot like this. If using flash, same thing. I can adjust the camera or the flash quickly by feel if needed. If you need to make a camera setting change while waiting for the next shot, you don't want to be fumbling around which can cause registration loss between consecutive images. Thinking too much about how to change the camera settings can take away from the creative process and affect the mood of the photos.

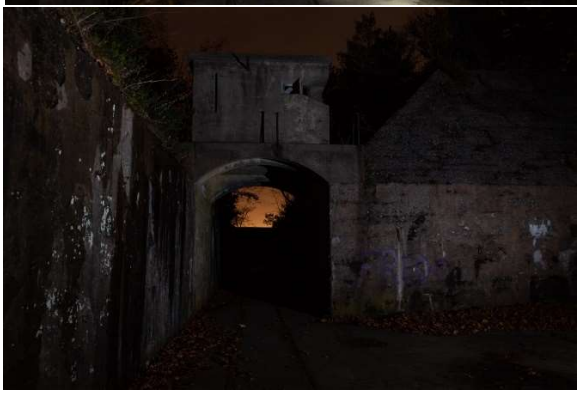
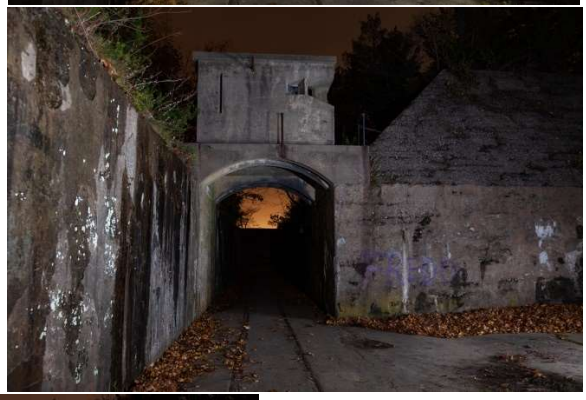
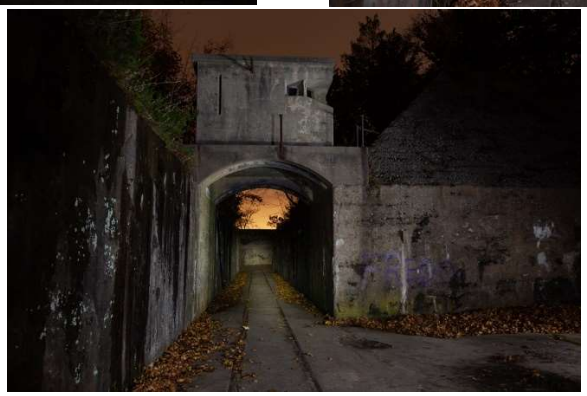
Shooting the Frames

Once the camera was set up, I shot a "dark frame". This is a long exposure with no added lighting. It will confirm that the image is dark enough to light paint but will usually show a brighter sky. I knew I likely wanted the sky in the photos, and this worked well. The test would confirm that I could easily go to a one-minute exposure without the ambient light interfering, so now it was time to start.



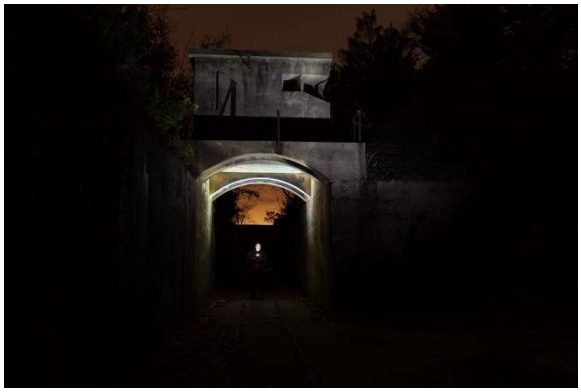
The first lit frame or two I shoot is usually a broad lit frame, meaning almost everything is lit with semi-flat light. This is used for emergencies in case I miss something in another frame, a good backup plan just in case. This is also an exposure test to see if I have my timing close or not. Remember, the exposure is the time that the light is illuminating any given point in the scene and how far away the light is. For these frames, I usually move around a lot on both sides of the camera to get softer light, moving the flashlight up and down as needed. I shot several frames with varying light levels and angles to cover all the bases for fill light. The last frame was done with a speed light, all others with a large Maglite flashlight.



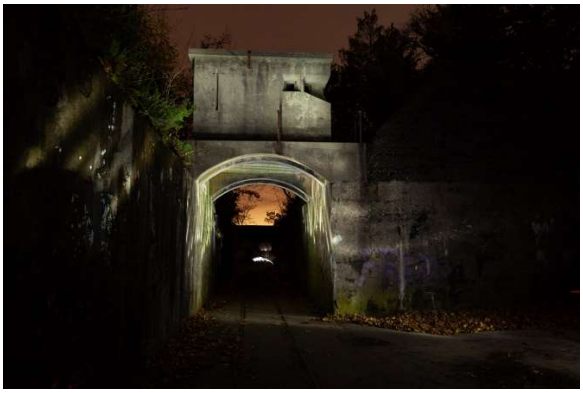




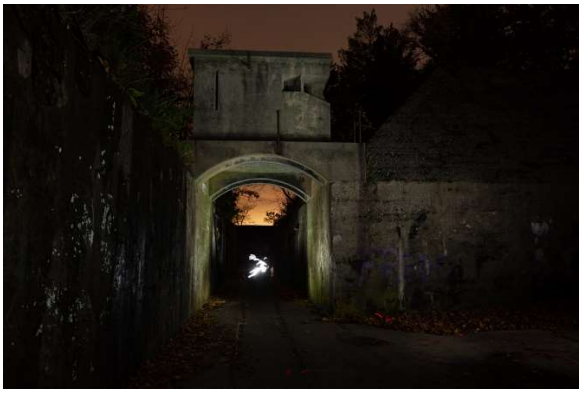
One problem became apparent, there was water leaking down the walls from recently melted snow. Wet areas will normally show up much darker than dry areas or they will create hot spots depending on the lighting angle. Not much can be done about it, so I would have to handle it in post processing. But it is good to be aware of it when shooting.

The next three frames were to light the archway from underneath. The first I did with a speed light. The red dots (probably not visible in the small image below) are the indicators on the speed light which I unfortunately had turned the wrong way. But that portion of the frame won't be used anyway. The bare speed light generates hard light and I thought it might be good for emphasizing edges. Note that the zoom on the speed light was set to wide angle, about 24mm for a wide light pattern. A little diffusion may have helped but wasn't handy at the time. I popped the flash twice, once in the archway and once off to camera right, you can see the hard shadow from it on the lookout building above the arch.

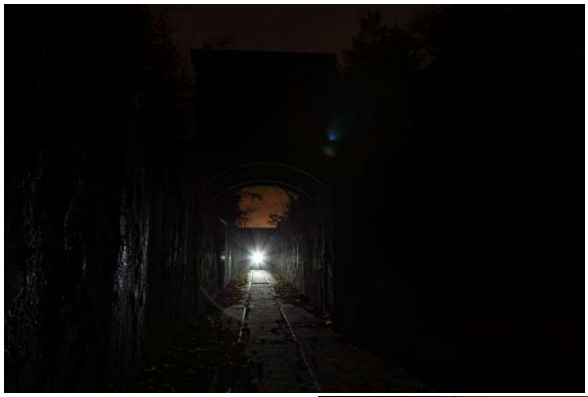


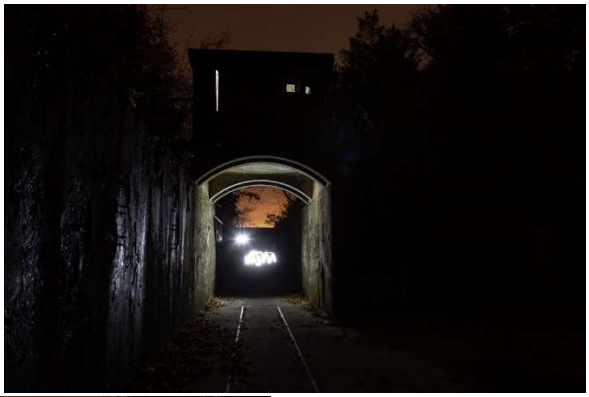
The second two frames were lit with a Maglite flashlight. The first had the zoom set too tight which made streaks. The second has the light defocused for more even light. You will notice these frames are much softer than the speed light although I kept the light close to one position, so the light would be a little harder and defined. In addition to lighting under the arch, I also lit from camera right as well.

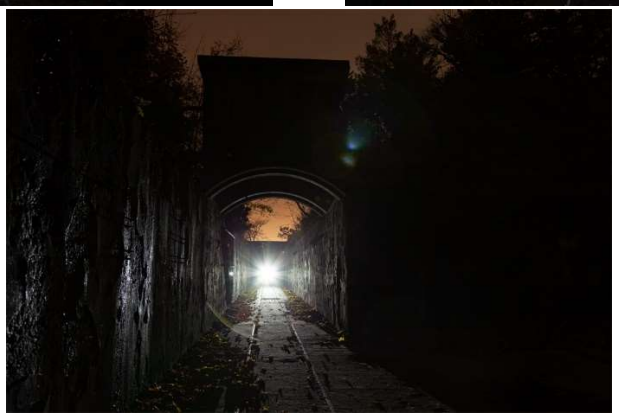




Next up was to make some frames with different lighting angles to emphasize texture. Shooting toward the camera is a great way to do this. A friend suggested I shoot the angle in the first shot (below) toward the camera, which was a pop from a speed light (maybe two pops, I don't remember now). The second was to gain more texture on the walls and was done with the flashlight. I had also remembered that there were three windows on the camera side of the lookout building and then I noticed an open door on the far side. I also noted that the interior was painted white, so I spent a few seconds shining light into the door which would in turn would cause the interior to appear illuminated, showing through the windows. A small detail that helps make the image. The third shot is also a speed light popped two or three times. I love the lens flare on this one and how it mirrors the arch. I initially had no real intention of keeping the light source in the image until I saw the pattern of it on the computer.







Now, confident that I had enough “pieces” to assemble a final image, this shooting position was finished, and the camera was moved to a new location. In all, it took about a half hour for this simple shot and the actual photography portion was just under 21 minutes.

One disappointment was that I didn’t have any lighting that was perpendicular to the camera angle inside the “tunnel” area. The tight space made this impossible with the equipment I had with me at the time. This meant that the textures were either flat (light form the camera direction) or very textured (light pointing toward the camera). My preference is generally perpendicular lighting.

Post Processing

All of the images were pre-processed in Lightroom (which are the images you see above). This takes care of things like chromatic aberration and lens distortion automatically. I can also adjust perspective distortion, crop, etc. and synchronize those to all images very quickly and precisely. I tweaked a few of the images slightly for blacks and exposure and then exported all 12 frames as 16-bit TIFF files.

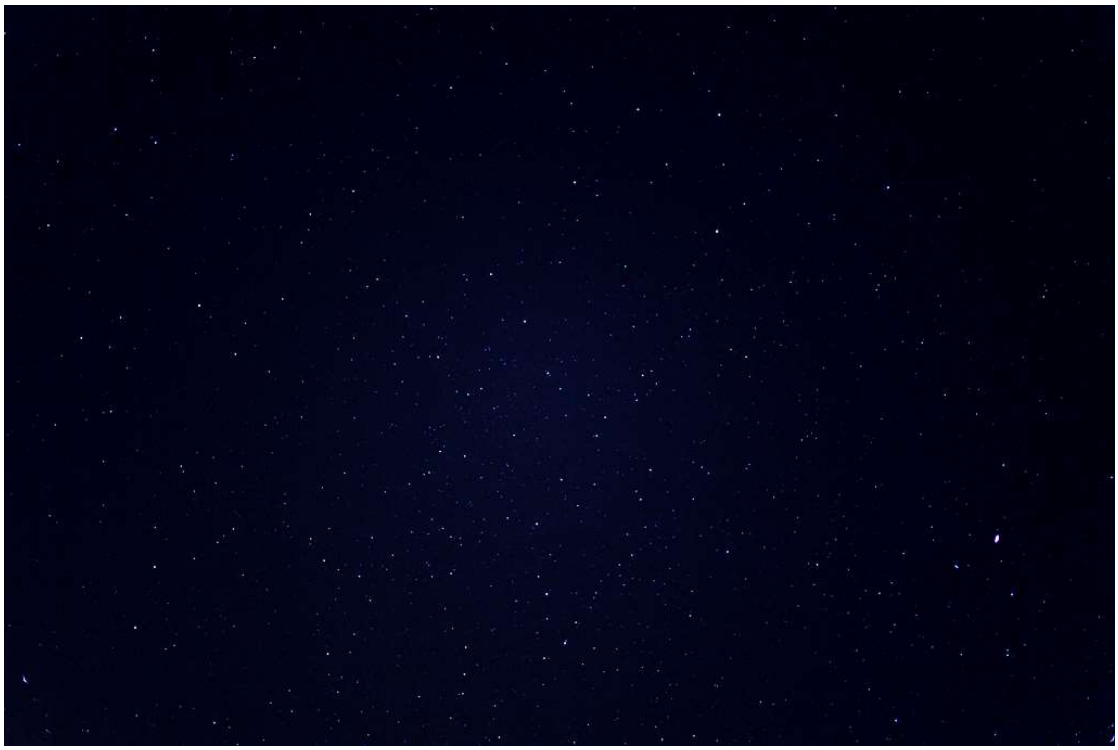
Merging the Images

Now for the most creative part, deciding which images would be combined to produce the final image. After reviewing all 14 images for sharpness and registration, I chose to load 11 of the frames into a layer stack in Photoshop CC, one image was largely redundant, so I excluded it. I also deleted two more from the layer stack after realizing they were redundant as well. I always place the darkest image at the bottom of the layer stack and usually work upward to brighter images unless a certain image must be located lower. That way I am building the light to create the final image merge. Most layers were set to the Lighter Color blending mode, then masked so I could paint in only the elements I wanted from each

(or paint out the ones I didn't want). This takes a good deal of time to achieve just what you are looking for. Every so often I sit back, scan the image and find portions I don't care for and others I want to emphasize more, then adjust from there. I not only paint black or white on the layer mask, usually I will use a brush with a flow of 5-20% and slowly build up what I want or dull down what I don't, so many masks have shades of gray for partial blending.

Adjustments

Once the layers were mixed, I started on adjustments. I use a non-destructive workflow, never merging layers, so I can go back and adjust something later if needed. The first change was the sky. While the orange was kind of cool looking and a fiery sky fit the historic location, it didn't set the mood I wanted. I ended up with a blue sky which was kind of dull and boring. Later I would go back and add a star layer just to give it some texture and mood. Making the sky dark blue first made this much easier. The photo below was added, set to the Lighter Color blending mode and masked in. Using Lighter Color enables me to use a simpler layer mask. I also added an adjustment layer with a clipping mask to target only the stars layer, offering some control over the mix a bit more.



Localized Adjustment Layers

A barrage of localized adjustments followed to bring out more details in the tunnel, hide some of the texture on the wall to the left (from the wet and dry areas), emphasize the vintage painting on the right, etc. I also changed the color tone of the window light as well as the tone where they would light up the wall just outside the window. It is a small detail such as this that make the effect fully believable. I removed many specular highlights which I felt made the image feel too gritty. Of the 40 layers in the final photo, about half were local adjustments to target specific areas. Most were minor other than the sky color change.

Since nothing is straight and level in this scene, the image appears tilted depending how you look at it. And since it was shot with the camera pointing slightly to the right, that adds to the problem as does the number of angles in the image. I also had the camera slightly tilted to the right (clockwise) when shooting (it is a challenge to get it level in the dark sometimes when you don't have a level handy). I did rectify some of it but decided not to make it fully sterile by bending different areas.

Final Image

Retrospect

After creating this photo, which was shot without any preplanning, I see things I could improve on. Even with a good bit of experience using these techniques, I always see things that could be done differently, especially once I see the images on the large computer screen. It is a creative process with many variables. Normally I would have preferred to light smaller areas in each frame, making many more exposures, but time was short, and we needed to move on. I am relatively happy with the final image and look forward to the next time I get to do something this unique and fun. I hope you enjoyed this quick behind the scenes view of *Eerie Battery.*

Joel Styer

joelstyer.com

November 2018