

This article started with a visit to the supermarket. I saw this rough terrain remote control car in the 'Toys for boys' section and knew my little girl would like it...

And once I got it home I had to take it out of the box to charge up the battery. Then I noticed the product shot on the box – horrible! It had obviously been taken with the 'help' of a light tent, which got me wondering whether a short article might help to answer some of the forum questions about light tents.

Let's start off with a shot of the car using a light tent. As most of us probably know, light tents are simply translucent enclosures which spread and diffuse light, effectively killing or reducing shadows. Light tents have their uses for high volume, repetitive shots where economy of time is more important than pzazz.
They do a competent job of *illustrating products* but I'm not convinced that they do as well at producing shots that *sell* them.

In this shot I used a 'proper' light tent, measuring 1 metre diameter but it wasn't big enough for this car, hence the join between floor and walls.



Of course, the joins could be removed on the computer but all the shots in this article are 'as shot' to show the effect of the lighting.

This type of light tent generally produces much better results than the various varieties of cubes and similar designs. I used 3 lights to get the most even illumination possible and the one at the front was set at a very low height.

As you can see, the lack of shadows in this shot shows all the details that might otherwise be hidden and the diffusion has dealt with the specular highlights (reflections of the light source) very well. Apart from the poor angle and the inclusion of the base/sides caused by using a light tent that was simply too small, the tent has done its job – if you're looking for a bland effect.

I thought about a suitable background but decided to use a standard product shooting table, to fully show the shadows and reflections.

Now let's try with studio lighting. I started with an overhead softbox for fill, pointing slightly forwards. This is a good starting point for many still life subjects. I placed it about 18" above the car roof. The type of lighting is capable of producing diffused specular highlights, where you can see though the reflections to the subject beneath. With the light angled forward the semi-backlighting produces a degree of separation between subject and background and can also be used to graduate the background. The downside is that it leaves the elevation facing the camera in shadow.



But the light was too harsh, at least for a fill light. The problem is that the car has complex convex shapes and the only type of light that can even out the specular highlights is a massive one (at least 3 times the size of the subject and preferably bigger) and almost touching it. I compromised by reducing the height of the softbox as much as I could without damaging the antenna, lowering it to about 7" above the roof.



**Overhead softbox,
7" above car roof**

If this had been a commercial shoot I would have used a larger softbox or a large silk. Or a large bounce surface such as a low white ceiling or, better still, a large angled reflector could have been used instead.

Well, the overhead softbox is OK for fill but we need a key light. So I added a rim light off to the left, to pick up the left side tyre and suspension unit.



**Honeycomb grid rim light
added left front**

Not bright enough, so I doubled it



Still not enough, so I doubled it again



Still not enough, so I increased the light by another $\frac{1}{2}$ stop (50%). This is the point where I'm glad that I'm not using a very low powered light, because even with such a small subject this light had reached 800 Joules...



I could have added even more light but I don't really want to show all the detail, I just want to show that it exists and I want the lighting to look natural.

I used a 5 degree honeycomb over the rim light because I wanted to pick up the detail on the bull bars, the tyres and the suspension without spilling light where it wasn't wanted. I then tried a 20 degree honeycomb in the pic below, but you can see that the light spilled onto the bodywork.



That's as far as I got. I could have used tiny mirrors to fill in hard-to-reach areas, and reflectors to lighten shadows – but I didn't, because I wanted to show the full effect of these two simple lights.

What I did do though was to take a shot from below subject level. We call this camera angle 'Heroic' for obvious reasons – jargon terms impress the clients... It seems to me that there isn't much point in taking a shot of a muscle car from a high viewpoint that makes it look like a wimp!



All that remains now is for me to test the car, very thoroughly, in my studio before giving it to my daughter to play with

For the record, these photos are as shot, no computer work except for re-sizing. All exposures were identical, f/11 on a DSLR

This article is a (very) small extract from the [Photolearn Still Life Tutorial](#)