

Painting on Black Canvas

Some associate darkness with death. In arts, darkness is not the end of existence but the beginning of life, of infinite possibilities. For Joel Bloch, it's the best way to capture and paint life as it is, to preserve the raw beauty that is caressed only by light

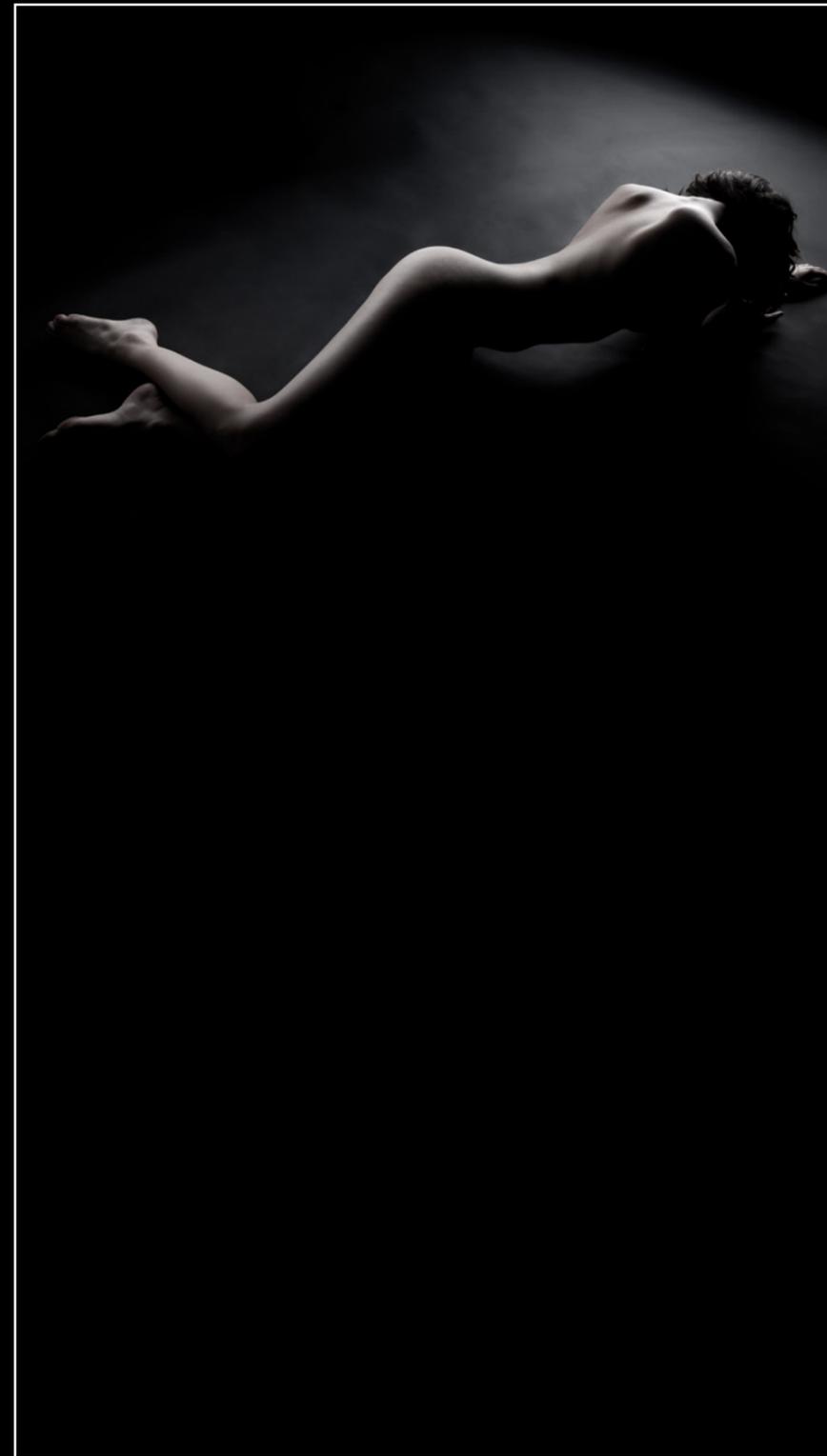
NOTHING COULD DRAW MORE attention than a nude human body. Unlike the earlier pieces of arts like paintings and sculptures, photography is one, if not the most straightforward medium that depicts the human beauty as is.

But the lines between concepts that involve human sexuality are not that clearly drawn. Fine art photography is often labelled as erotic, even pornographic since not all nude photographers think of real artistic visions when dealt with unclothed models.

We have different perceptions about beauty and sexuality, probably because of our cultural differences. Photographers, too, have different views and different representations of it. But what do photographers really think of nude? What fascinates them? And could there be any meanings in their photographs?

From the article written by the Artdaily.org, nude photography is a "process of negotiation between revealing and concealing." In a still position, photographers could depict the form of the human body using light and shadows. In fine art nude, however, it is the human form and not sexuality that was given emphasis. With extreme lighting and shadows, a photographer could disrupt the mind of his viewers. The viewers get past the naked body and start to appreciate art, realizing the real nudity in it – mere patterns, textures, lines, and curves.

Clearly, it is really hard for a photographer to defend his art, much less to defend the art in his nude photographs. It is a rare occasion to find nude photos that are not as offensive or voyeuristic as that of the covers and insides of Playboy and FHM magazines. Like that of Joel Bloch's (BLOCK), whose works have remained true to his artistic visions. Even though photographing nude is a very unusual and uncomfortable activity for him,



his body of works clearly declares a genuine emotional state – of his own misery.

The black (darkness) in his pictures symbolizes space, time, death, and oblivion. The females' perfect bodies, "very opposed"

to Joel's physique, are trapped in the darkness and eventually become part of the story. Black has become the primary subject of Joel's photos. In fact, he spends lots of time finding a good paper for printing, to

get a good render not of the flesh, but the impenetrable black in his photographs.

Joel has been working in the Philippines since 2010 as a software engineer for a French industrial industry. Before he came in the Philippines, his hobbies took a far more space in his life.

He started photography back in 2001 with his first digital camera, a Fuji 1.1MP. Even though the quality was as bad as compared to today's digital SLR cameras, it was still a revolution because he had instant feedback on his images, not to mention that he could take as many photos as he want at no cost. He gives credits to his photographer friend, Olivier Rosenthal, who advised him to buy an SLR. Olivier's intention, perhaps, was to train Joel's eyes, to make him think more when shooting using film, but Joel used it like he did with his digital camera. He used to consume 10 rolls in a span of two weeks. Then he reviewed his outputs and tried to understand what he liked about them. In ten out of twenty, he found something special. The feeling that he gets whenever he looks at his shots intrigued him. And then the question, what makes his photos different among others.

He tried travel photography and street portraits at first. Then when the digital SLR became widespread and became more affordable, Joel eventually tried studio and nude photography. In France, he used to work four days a week as an engineer. In 2007, he created a company that sells prints. One of his famous works is the Obscure series, which are now gracing the pages of this issue.





i-MAG: What kind of subjects do you love photographing?

I was more interested in street photography and portrait probably because both of them tell a story. These two tell stories of the people being shot, a global language that tells about the human condition.

Agota Kristof is a Hungarian writer who said that everybody is meant to write a story. So I created a project on portraits just for fun. I wanted to mix the funny and crazy portraits of my friends and families on the wall of my home. As everybody agreed to participate, I extended the project and created a website mainly for those portraits.

I also liked watching artistic nudes. I am attracted to it because of the pure beauty and graphical aspects of it. I'm also interested to do it because it is somehow forbidden. But when I first attended a nude workshop, I got some mixed emotions, both of excitement and of fear. I didn't tell that to anybody. I just showed the final output to some friends without claiming that they were mine.

I have also tried fashion and beauty portrait when I got my first digital camera. I've attended a few workshops but I did not pursue it because it requires a different kind of mindset, which I lack, confidence.

What is your photography style?

I am fond of against-the-light techniques because it highlights the body in a very graphical and dramatic way, as if the body is made of shadows – a block of darkness, accentuated and caressed only by light. My nude photography brings a very subdued, melancholic atmosphere, very minimal in

design. It is what I wanted to showcase on my Obscures website (www.obscures.net). The reason why the models' faces are rarely shown in my photographs is that I want her to stay anonymous, lost in the dark. I don't want to put identity to the model because showing her face or revealing her identity could make it erotic, while it is not my real intent. The formats I use are also unusual. The bodies are far from the center. I leave more room for "darkness".

As for my street photography, I don't care about the rules of composition. For me, it is more about translating what I feel and what I see.

As someone who works as a software engineer, could you tell us what motivated you to take photography?

My strong point has always been my imagination and my desire to achieve something. For me, everything is connected. For arts, you have all the tools. There are the grammars and the rules to follow, to bend

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or to break and all of them play on our five senses to perceive a reality. Beyond that, what interests me the most is the impact of the artist's vision on our emotions. Art brings out emotions, and this is why it is more essential to me than any engineering work that I do.

How did you come up with your Obscure Series? How much preparation did you put into taking those photographs?

I always have a complex relationship with my own body since I had health problems at an early age. Since then, I have always been obsessed with death, with fear of oblivion.

Nude is fascinating, I must say. After a few workshops, I got decent shots that I could present to potential models. I was also member of a photo club where models are also in partnership with and some accepted offers.

I did a few more photo shoots at first to practice the technical aspects of it like lighting. I must admit though that I still lack in practice of studio lighting. Due to time constraints I only do few shoots; a year at best and that gives me little room for improvement. But as I sorted and edited my photos, my project started to take shape.

Preparation is very light. I contact professional models. We meet up and discuss the session until we agree on what we both want to achieve, supported by a written agreement or models' release.

(Joel uses a neutral tone when contacting models. He is straight-to-the-point, and as much as possible, he no giving of compliments. He prefers to shoot during the day to avoid controversies, and to have a fresher mind. For him, nude photograph is a solo activity. He declines having an assistant on set.)



Why didn't you consider photography as a full-time profession?

I was asked several times why I have not switched completely to photography. I was tempted at some point. But my job as an engineer is very interesting, too. It provides me the money and the freedom to pursue the kind of photography that I want.

I know some photographers are running after contracts, dealing with photos they don't particularly like, and they ended up getting tired doing their own projects during their spare time. Photography as a part time activity is a good balance.

When and where do you usually shoot? What's inside your studio?

Most of my photos were shot in Le Bourget, Paris, in the Itis studio owned by the Artis association. Renting is cheap and it is well furnished. They also organize workshops.

I tried to look for photo studios here (Philippines) but I didn't find what I was actually looking for. Because of my work I became indolent in finding one, so I had a few shoots done in my unit in Makati City. However, I find it inconvenient because I will need a black background and a larger room.

I normally place two large soft boxes behind the subject. I am not very familiar with the light meter, so I usually walk around the subject during shoots to move the strobes.

I have been using Canon since the release of the Canon 5D series like the 5D Mark II and Mark III. At first, I used the 24-70mm L 2.8 and 70-200mm L4. Then I purchased fixed lenses little by little, 50mm, 85mm, 100mm, 180mm, all L series. The sharpness and softness of their rendering is amazing.

People have different opinions. I'm sure you get different reactions from different people regarding the nude series. Of all subjects, why

did you choose nude female bodies?

There are two reasons. First, as a man, it is harder for me to recognize, let alone appreciate the beauty of male models. Second, the male body is sharp or less curved as compared to a woman's body that is all about curves and softness. Nude is erotic by essence, but one must know the boundaries between nude and charm so he does not to fall into erotic photography.

On the other hand, I believe that my pictures are not erotic at all because I choose my models. Models can be beautiful without being too sexy. Too much of it could disrupt the emotion, the message for that matter.

Who were your influences? Where do you get your inspiration?

Some of the photographers that I like are Helmut Newton, Lucien Clergue, Guy Bourdin, Patrick Demarchelier, Gérard Rancinan, and Ellen Von Unwerth.



I started doing workshops with Jean Turco and his approach of lighting was probably a strong inspiration, in a sense that lighting is everything.

However, from a graphical perspective, my primary source of inspiration was Franck Miller's Sin City comic book. Each drawing on that book looks like a painting, as if he was working on a real black paper and white pen. All the characters are black. The shades of lights sculpt the characters out from darkness, as if black was its raw material. I also admire Pierre Soulages, whose paintings are variations of black.

If I have to choose my inspirations for street photography, those would be Steve Mc Curry and Saul Leiter. I saw an exhibition of Saul Leiter in Paris and bought his book. Little by little I started to adopt his technique, to break the rules of composition. I cared less about framing and depth-of-field (at least in the street photography). Now I put more focus in my inner vision.

I believe that inspiration is a form of transformation. We are channelling what we are receiving. I have always been involved with artistic activities since childhood: writing, reading, drawing, and some courses in acting and piano. I also read lots of photo magazines. I go to photo galleries. I travel. And whenever I see something that I like, whether it is a piece of art or of real life, I always try to analyse why I like it.

Has your work been published or used commercially? Are you willing to sell your photos to publishers and potential clients?

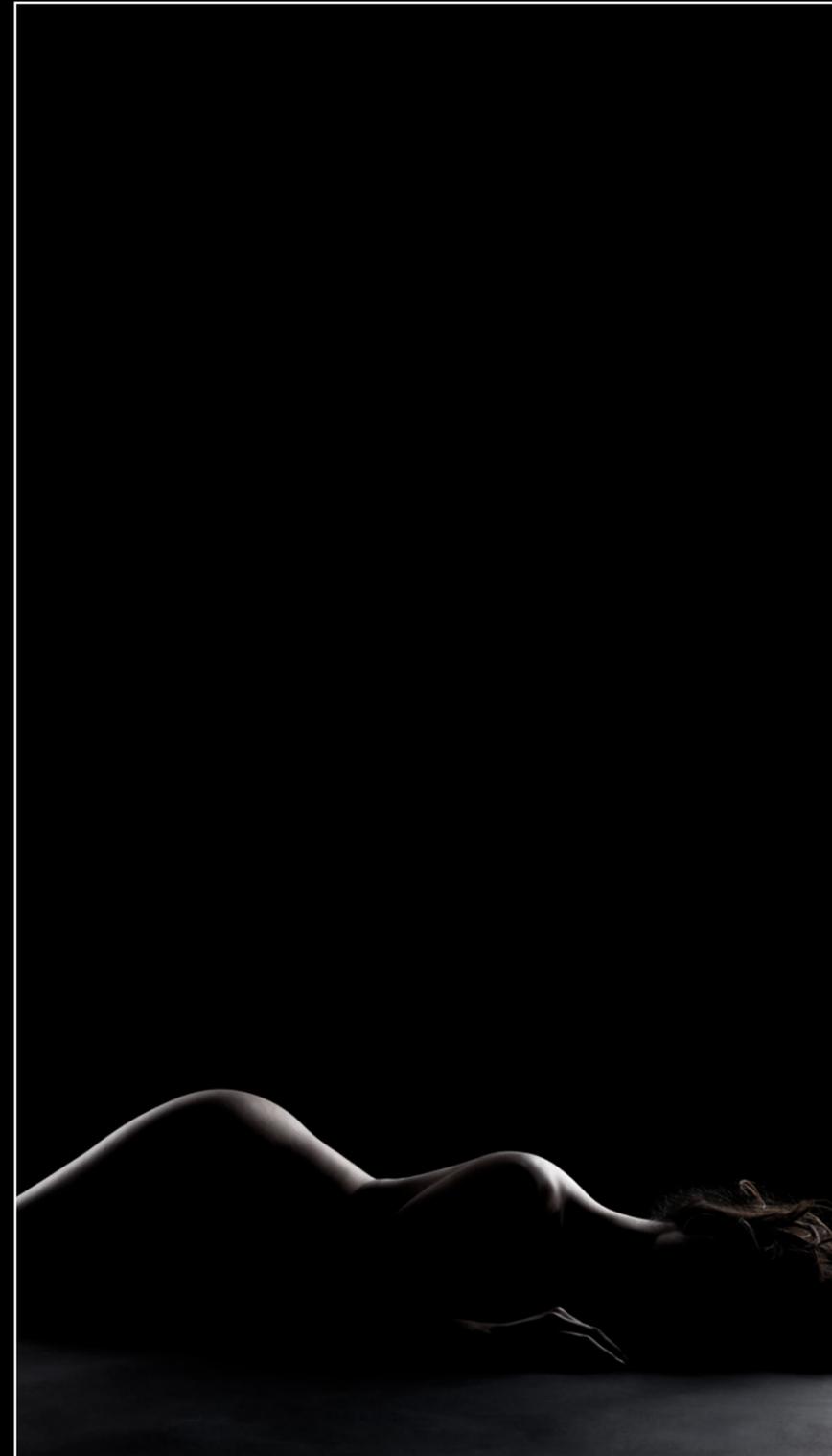
My works have never been published for I have not been that persistent contacting magazines and art galleries. I am busy with my day job, making it even harder for me to manage and market my photography.

I've created a company in France to sell prints. I started selling prints though with the help of my website and social networking site like Facebook. What I was aiming for is to get recognition, not to sell or make money

from what I do. Besides, it will not even cover my expenses. In France, you have to limit the number of prints of one photo to gain the label "Art". So I did, but not for commercial use (like a CD cover) but rather to make it available only to those who are appreciative and willing to purchase my works. I want to have a book or an art exhibition in a gallery. Being regarded as a fine art artist would be such a great achievement.

With your busy schedule how do you find time for photography? How do you keep yourself creative?

It has been very difficult for me because my work as an engineer leaves me exhausted during weekends. Aside from that, nude models are hard to come by (and sometimes if they do, they are "erotic" or too sexy, which Joel does not prefer – editors). Another thing is that I am having a hard time finding the right studio that would fit my requirements, like the long strip soft boxes. Lastly, finding



a good printing lab that uses the same paper and inks that I am used to having is hard. I admit, I am very demanding especially in printing. I use German papers and print my nude photographs on metal plates.

But on the brighter side of it, I was able to focus more on street photography. If I'm not very busy, I try to find time on weekends to sort and edit my photos. I also read books and articles on photo lighting and image editing.

What makes a good photograph?

I don't look at the technical aspects or the quality of the photograph to like it. The question is, does it move me or not? Does it trigger the senses or deliver a sense of desire?

Nude for me needs to be somehow glamorous. I am attracted to the skin's soft texture. I don't prefer a harsh rendering. And I really don't like the plastic or rubbery skin editing that we tend to do nowadays with photo retouching. I prefer something more realistic, given that nude is not like fashion or beauty photography.

I personally love contrasty photos, where forms are well shaped by soft lights and shadows. Like the works of Eric Marrian, Lucien Clergue, Helmut Newton, Ellen Von Unwerth, and Lilyrose. All of them have mastered lighting. They perfectly trace and emphasize the curves of a woman's body with light.

Can you share us something about your post-processing workflow. How is digital photography helping you today?

I shoot raw formats in Adobe RGB. Then I create a folder and label it with a title, subject, and date. I also create a PSD folder for later use.

I use Adobe Lightroom for global adjustments and for sorting and rating pictures. I rate them iteratively. I'll have the first pass by rating photos with one star. I keep the rated photos aside, rate them over again and filter, until I reach the 5 star rating. It's a very long but effective process. I also use color tags to distinguish different types of photos (like the different positions and lighting I used for the session).

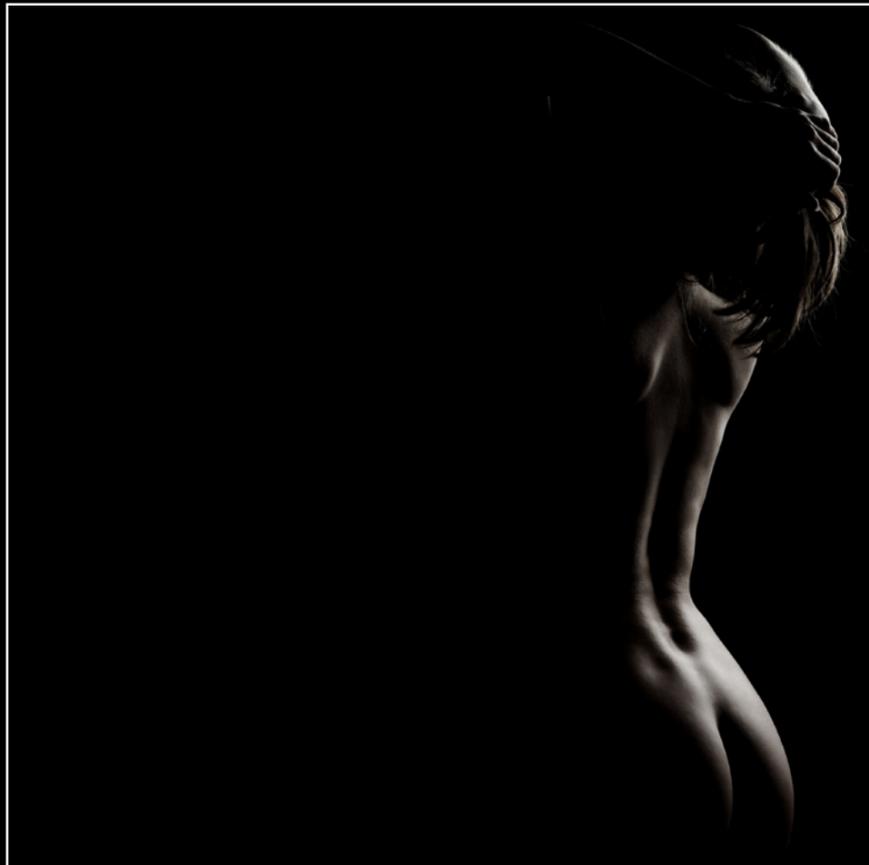
For local adjustments, I further develop my photos in Photoshop. I clean the skins, adjust the background, and use mostly curves with masks. If I don't edit with Photoshop, I would still export the photo as a psd file to store everything in a consistent format; thus, the PSD folder.

As for printing, I download the color profile of the paper for my printer from the paper manufacturer's website. I use Photoshop for soft proofing, and then add corrective layers on top of the photos. I use the "compositions" to easily switch from a standard file to a printable file.

Certainly, digital photography has made it all possible. You don't have to wait longer for your prints. You do not confuse other photographs with the others. Everything is embedded in the files. And of course, editing is far more flexible than the traditional darkroom. But the greatest invention of this century would be the "Ctrl + Z"!

What has been the one tool or piece of advice that you feel has really benefited you most in photography?

One of my first workshops I attended was with Jean Turco. He demonstrated various lightings on a nude female model. That was fascinating. His last piece of advice for his students is to rent a studio and try things on our own, which I did.



Do you have any advice to fellow photographers who want to try this kind of photography?

I suggest that photographers should attend some workshops first. Not only it will hone their skills but it will also make things a lot easier in terms of getting models (workshop attendees don't have to shoulder the models).

Use a neutral when approaching models. Talk straightforwardly and discuss your intent. I usually say, "I have seen your portfolio, and I am working on a nude project, which you can see here (mention the location or website). Would you be interested to collaborate with me?"

Technically, against-the-light nude photography (like mine) is easy and difficult at the same time; easy, because the strobes already give you a preview of the scene; difficult, since the model's positions and movements are not as controllable as the lights. An inch of a movement could make or break the scene. It really requires precision and good direction.

Lastly, control everything before taking the shot. Do not look at the model because it could cloud your judgement. Look at him or her as an object that you need to shape with light. 

I believe workshops are interesting at the start, but not until you start by yourself. You need to experiment and work things on your own. Workshops can be interesting the second

time around, as you start to push yourself further, to develop a particular technique. And of course, we also have to keep ourselves informed and updated all the time.