



■ [Main] Frolicking The Precipice: "Whenever I closed my eyes, I saw the image of a scrawny boy walking on warheads"  
Shot details: Canon EOS 1V with Tamron SP 24-135mm lens at f5.6, 1/15sec, ISO 400. Polarising filter and natural light

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# Still life

## with Steve Chong

► Sometimes, it's just not viable to get outside with your camera during the winter months. If it's blowing a gale and the heavy rain spattering your windows makes you feel disinclined to venture out, you can still create some stunning images in the comfort of your own home.

Although the words 'still life' may not sound enthralling to some, don't be put off: simply open your mind. Surrealism began as a cultural movement in the Twenties, originating from a group of writers and artists that gathered in Paris, France, to express their ideas about the dangers posed to society by bourgeois ideology, referred to as Dadaism. The First World War saw the group temporarily disbanded, but the Surrealist movement continued to gather momentum nonetheless, with André Breton emerging as a major spokesperson. He published *The Surrealist Manifesto* in 1924 and, drawing upon many of Sigmund Freud's theories, placed great importance on the subconscious and its role in human imagination. He inspired painters and poets of that era to tap into their subconscious, to take their dreams and make them into a 'surreality' on paper.

Surrealism is all about freethinking and self-expression: something that lends itself to most artistic disciplines. In terms of visual artistry, the movement has its roots firmly planted on canvas, but the birth of film opened up new avenues for surrealists to explore, with the digital era making it easier than ever to emulate the creative vision shown by the great surrealists that started the revolution.

Steve Chong is one such photographer who has found great inspiration from the images projected by his subconscious, turning many of his dreams into works of art. He began by exploring the possibilities created with still-life photography before opening his mind further and branching out into the realms of conceptual photography.

Chong began his photographic journey with a keen interest in the work of landscape photographers: "I aspired to be like them, however I realised that to produce impeccable landscape photographs like theirs, I'd have to travel all over the world. I had to admit to myself that I didn't have the time or the budget to travel frequently. I started to look for alternatives to satisfy my smouldering passion for creating good photographs. Of all the photographic genres,

still life seemed to be the logical choice. I wouldn't have to travel much, I could afford to do it at my own leisure and I'd have absolute control over everything."

That's not to say that Chong looked upon still-life photography as an easy option: "The journey into still-life photography made me realise that it takes more than just juxtaposing subjects against one another, changing the background or employing different lighting setups. You really have to see beyond the subject itself." What he means by this is that, to create something truly sensational, you have to go beyond merely creating a 'record' shot of the object in front of you: "The secret is to turn something lifeless into art. That's a challenge not only to your photographic skill, but also to your ability to incorporate aesthetical and sometimes philosophical values. All these challenges have, in a way, helped me to build a solid foundation for my photography."

The beauty of still-life photography is, contrary to popular belief, you don't need complicated studio lighting or expensive props. Chong prefers to explore his own environment when looking for the right objects to create his works of art: "I have a set of tools: brushes, wires, glue, scissors, knives, alcohol, cotton, velvet, etc. I also have tripods and some thick books to help me to set up the scene. In short, I use whatever tools I can lay my hands on; there are really no restrictions."

Following the win of his first major title, Chong used the prize money to purchase a softbox and strobes, although he prefers to work with natural light wherever possible: "When I first started, most of my shots were created using natural light from windows. The artificial light I occasionally used came from a Canon EX420 and a cheap 'made-in-China' \$5 external flash. To obtain a certain colour tone, I always use filters, ranging from warm to cold and polarising filters." Even if you don't own coloured filters, you can still make your own gels from household objects, including translucent paper or coloured glass objects, to create the right mood.

As well as creating beautiful straight still-life images, Chong makes the most of his creative streak with his conceptual images. Whichever path you choose to follow, he stresses that planning is paramount: "The pre-visualisation process is of utmost importance in still-life

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■ [Main] Illusion: "I found these hook-like stems at a park the other day. That night I had a dream. The stems emerged from water like octopus tentacles. The dream was vague, but it made an impression"  
Shot details: Canon EOS 1V with Tamron SP 90mm lens at f16, 1sec, ISO 100. Polarising filter and natural light from window



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and conceptual photography. Prior to the creation of the photo, the photographer should be able to see the image in his/her mind. The stronger and more vivid the impression, the better the output." Chong also advises looking to our forefathers for inspiration: "I read widely and enjoy looking at art pieces that are contemporary, surrealistic and conceptual. Anything at all could be a source of inspiration: as far as I'm concerned, observation and contemplation are the two key elements that go towards making an exceptional image."

In order to open your mind to greater creative possibilities, Chong advises carrying a notebook at all times: "Organising your thoughts is vital. To begin with, you have to find the time of day when you feel most creative, then maximise that period by writing down your ideas. Let your creative juices flow at that time, and keep polishing and developing the ideas whenever possible. Reading as well as looking at the work of others, be it photographs or paintings, will undoubtedly help and, of course, you have to be utterly passionate about your work."

Chong's amazing creations are all the more awe-inspiring once you learn about how he has created them. Browse the Conceptual gallery on his website and you'll find stacks of stunning images, all created using objects he's found out on walks, or using everyday household items. Each image carries a description of precisely how he produced the shot, from camera settings down to the individual objects in each scene: an invaluable resource for beginners in need of some guidance. Take *Illusion*, for example: what looks like a hazy sunset seascape – albeit with some surreal tentacle-like protrusions emerging from the sea – is in fact a tank of inky water, some stems Chong found in his local park, a homemade paper boat and a lot of Blu-Tack. It just goes to show what you can do with a little imagination.

## Meet the expert



Malaysian photographer and contributing editor at *Photo Creator*, Steve Chong held little interest in photography until 2001, when he became acquainted with his first point-and-shoot camera.

This sparked a passion that developed quickly, leading to his purchase of the professional 35mm Canon EOS 1V, rapidly

followed by a Mamiya RZ Pro II and, to quench his thirst for more immediate results, the digital Sigma SD9.

Armed with this arsenal, Chong regularly produces exceptional and often surreal works of art with his cameras. He takes inspiration from the world around him – and the world that he sees in his dreams – bringing his incredible ideas to life using whatever comes to hand. As Chong describes: "Creating an idea and seeing it materialise is such an exciting process. It's like pointing the camera into the real world but shooting my subconscious."

- 1 Use natural light**  
It is real and, best of all, it is free.
- 2 Get your exposure right**  
Understanding the Zone System devised by Ansel Adams is of great help.
- 3 Take sharp images**  
Always buy the best lens possible that your budget allows.
- 4 Invoke a reaction**  
A good photograph should convey a message, stir some feelings from the viewer and make them think.