

A **STEP-BY-STEP** GUIDE TO **MINIATURE WORLDS**



DAVID GILLIVER

MACRO PHOTOGRAPHY



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MINIATURE WORLDS

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No Trespassing.

INTRODUCTION

First things first, a big THANK YOU for buying my eBook. I am truly grateful and I hope you gain a lot of knowledge by reading it and get inspired along the way.

The main purpose of this eBook is to try and save anyone new to this art form a heap of time by highlighting some key considerations. We will take a look at camera settings, techniques that I employ and look at how I create and capture my dioramas.

If you are having any fundamental problems when creating and capturing your miniature scenes after reading my book please feel free to email me with any questions you have and I will do all I can to help: hello@davidgilliver.com.

I aim to write this book in an easy-to-follow style that leaves little room for misinterpretation so that you too can translate your imagination into magical miniature worlds using macro photography.

Friendly request: If you know anyone else out there who you think would benefit from reading my eBook, please forward them the link to my site. I understand the temptation to simply forward them a copy of the eBook you have purchased but please do not do that. I am a full-time professional photographer and my earnings through photography are what pay my mortgage and feed my family so I would massively appreciate it if you keep your copy just for yourself. Thank you so much for understanding.



My tribute to David Levinthal: 'The stick up'.

A MESSAGE OF THANKS

It is important to me that I take this opportunity to voice thanks to a few people who really deserve it:

First up, my Mum. She is responsible in a big way for me taking such an active interest in photography. She has always keenly documented every family occasion I can remember and I guess her passion for photography must have eventually rubbed off on me. I love photography and I have my Mum to thank for sowing that first seed.

I also need to thank the Glasgow School of Art for an awesome 4 years of tuition and inspiration. It was an incredible place to further my photography skills during my Fine Art Photography degree. Special thanks to my tutors, Professors Vaughan Judge and Thomas Joshua Cooper. It was Vaughan who first suggested I take a look at the work of artist [David Levinthal](#) when I was just 18 years of age. I then dedicated a portion of my dissertation to Mr Levinthal's work. He is a genius. Thank you for inspiring a young art student who lacked any real direction in his work at the time.



THE JOURNEY SO FAR

My photographic journey started years ago when I was in my teens, but it wasn't until Art School that I discovered, and started to practice macro photography.

I began shooting with an old Pentax P30t film camera that I unexpectedly inherited from a relative. I was 15 years old and it was at this point my interest in the arts shifted entirely from painting and sculpture to photography. I used this camera for the odd art project during my final years at secondary school, and the portfolio I created using it (thanks Mr McNaught and Mr de Villiers!) helped me gain acceptance to study at the prestigious Glasgow School of Art.

Having spent my first year of Art School grappling with what interested me as a photographer, it was during my second year of studies that I witnessed a dramatic incident taking place outside a dental surgery I was waiting in to receive treatment which turned out to be a defining moment in the context of how my photography journey then evolved:

As I waited to be seen on the 3rd floor, I heard a massive crashing sound in the street below: a huge lorry had come uncoupled from its freight which then landed on an unsuspecting vehicle in the adjacent lane. The car looked badly crushed and I became immediately aware that I was witnessing a dramatic incident in a town that rarely produced any noteworthy news. My parents' house was situated only a few short minutes away so I ran up the hill to grab my camera and came hurtling back to the dentist's waiting room ready to shoot what was unfolding on the street below. I had been trained to always be ready with my camera to document anything interesting that was happening around me. It felt wrong to be photographing what could have turned out to be a tragic event (the driver was recovered unhurt from the wreckage thankfully) but something interesting happened: my unique vantage point meant that I was able to watch (and document) my subject matter as if it was in miniature; people rushing around on the street below as the fire and rescue services worked relentlessly to save a life.

Had I later found out that the person involved in the affected vehicle had perished, I am certain the film from my camera would never have been developed. Once I learned that the person had survived (and incredibly, without serious injury!) I felt strongly compelled to create a series of work based upon this experience. I bought a screw-on macro filter for my camera lens and recreated a miniature diorama of the accident scene. The resulting images were



The Accident.

crude in their execution, but this body of work yielded a fascinating discussion between my fellow students and tutors and from that point on I was hooked on the art of creating and shooting dioramas.



The Diorama.

DON'T THINK BIG, THINK SMALL

When teaching any photographic technique, whether it be light painting, wedding photography, studio portraiture etc. it is relatively easy to convey the technical knowledge required for each. But it is the creative input that you can add as a photographer and artist that will make a real difference to the images you make. That is definitely the case for macro photography and the art of creating and photographing dioramas. It is therefore important to first consider how I form my initial ideas as this is a crucial part of my overall process.

Admittedly I can't teach you how to have a colourful imagination or how to dream up weird and wonderful ideas, but I can talk you through how I normally form my ideas for the mini-scenes that I photograph. I regularly get asked how I come up with my ideas and I always give two answers to this question:

1. Sometimes I will look at an object and think to myself "that would make a great prop to base a scene around with the Little People" and I will then source figurines that interact well with it, or...
2. I will buy a set of figurines that I like the look of and then spend some time thinking about what objects would work well with them in a scene.

Also, if I ever have an idea materialise in my mind that I feel could work well, I will try to write it down quickly so that I don't forget it (I will send a quick email to myself using my phone!).

Ideas inspired by objects

Here are a few images that I made where I initially looked at an object and thought "Aha! That could look great if I added figurines to the scene...":

Mount Toblerone

This idea felt very simple to execute. I looked at my Toblerone and thought to myself 'Well, the chocolate appears as mountain peaks in the adverts, so that's exactly how I will try to use it'. The Toblerone was then transformed into the Matterhorn.



The World is your Oyster

I looked at an oyster shell and immediately thought of the expression 'The world is your oyster' and then thought it would be fun to flip the words around: 'The oyster is your world', which is certainly the case for the Little People.

DANGER! Gummy Bears

Gummy bears don't exactly look very threatening, so I thought it would be amusing to create a scene where they were up to no good.



Living Green

Who hasn't looked at branches of Broccoli and thought to themselves: "Don't they look just like little trees?!".

Ideas inspired by figurines

Now here are a few images that I made where I first thought the figurine(s) looked great, and then spent some time sourcing objects/props to compliment them:



De-pip

I love this figurine as he looks like he is putting in so much effort and is so dynamically posed. It, therefore, felt easy to shoe-horn him into a scene where he appears to be hard at work.

Dough-jo

The Sumo figures just needed somewhere to do battle, and then I thought a play on words could work well. I LOVE pizza so this idea came to fruition pretty rapidly.

Shark-infested breakfast

I spent a while thinking about how I could fit this figure into a scene and this turned out to be quite a fiddly scene to create. I had to add a large lump of Blu Tack to the cereal bowl so that the water skier was held in place and at the right height. I then filled up the cereal bowl so the milk was covering the Blu Tack but not the water ski. I did the same for the cardboard shark fin and then had to shoot it quickly before the cardboard got too saturated (stop laughing).



Ring Push

All I had to do here was find an object that made an amusing toilet for this little guy to poop into.

Key learning point: The concept of having small figurines interacting with everyday objects is pretty straight forward, but you will need to give some real thought to how the figurines interact with the props you use in each shot. It is surprisingly easy to make the final photograph feel pretty flat if the subject matter doesn't look to be interacting well with the objects in a convincing manner. This will come with time and practice, but always try to bear this in mind when crafting your scenes.



THE STAR OF THE SHOW: THE LITTLE PEOPLE



I regularly receive emails and messages on social media asking me what scale of figurines I use and where I source them from. In short, they are 'HO' scale and I normally buy them online from Amazon.

There are quite a few manufacturers who produce great HO scale figurines. Here are a few that I really like and regularly use in my work: Preiser, Noch, Faller, Bachmann, and Merten.

My favourite manufacturer is Preiser. They produce a great range of figurines and the level of detail they achieve is very impressive.

Tip: Just be careful to double-check the scale of the figurines you are purchasing as I have accidentally purchased the wrong scale on several occasions and ended up with 'N' scale figures which are truly tiny! HO is roughly 1:87 in scale, whereas N is roughly 1:160. The difference in scale is pretty noticeable.

The scale of the figurine(s) you are purchasing will be stated on the box, and the website you are purchasing them from should also state what scale the figurines are in the item description.



A Box of HO Scale Figurines.

THE MINIATURE STUDIO

I tend to create and photograph most of my miniature scenes in my home-studio. That's not to say that I can't and don't make my work on the move sometimes too, but I enjoy the practical aspects that accompany working at home. I keep a stack of drawers next to where I work so I can quickly access the figurines.



The best thing about this type of photography is that you don't need much space to make the work as the sets are so tiny! I just use the back area of my studio where I have a table and good light from the window. You will notice that I keep the blinds drawn so the light is nice and diffused.



Tip: If I ever feel like I need to add a little more light to my photographs I do so by using a torch. You can tell that I am also a professional light painter! I like the control a torch offers in situations where additional lighting is required. I might use the torch to brighten the backdrop slightly or illuminate the figurines depending on how the initial shots turn out.

CAMERA GEAR



I currently use the following photography gear for my macro photography:

- Camera: Canon 5D Mark III
- Lens: Canon Macro Lens EF 100mm f/2.8 L
- Tripod: Manfrotto 055CXPRO4 & Manfrotto 322RC2 Heavy Duty Grip Ball Head

I used much more basic equipment when I first started macro photography (namely my old Pentax P30t film camera with a screw-on macro lens filter). Here is a list of other digital cameras and lenses I have owned / own and have used for my macro photography:

Cameras:

- Canon 1000D
- Canon 500D
- Canon 5D Mark II

Lenses:

- General kit lenses (normally 18-55mm)
- Canon 85mm f/1.8
- Canon EF 100mm f/2.8 Macro USM Lens
- Canon EF 24-105 mm f/4 L IS II USM Lens

An expensive camera is absolutely not a necessity for making work like this. An active imagination is the most important ingredient. You can even use your mobile phone if it has a decent lens.

What I will say though is a good macro lens will make all the difference (I love the Canon 100mm macro lens that I use!) and I nearly always use a tripod. I find that using a tripod helps me to consider the framing of the shot better and I will always take several versions of the same diorama before choosing which image I like the best. Also, I hate using a flashgun to add light to my shots. I prefer to make use of what ambient light is available - the tripod helps here because I can take longer exposures if needed without worrying about camera shake.



Shotgun (shot using my iPhone).

CAMERA SETTINGS

Note: I always shoot using Manual Mode.

ISO: I always use a low ISO when shooting my macro work (normally ISO 100).

Aperture: Anything between f/2.8 – f/5 is a pretty good range for the kind of work that I make. I like to use a shallow depth of field (low 'f' number) as this helps to keep the focus on the action within each scene. The figures are tiny so you want them to be the sharpest focal point within the image.

AF / MF: I will always use the camera's Auto Focus function to set the focus for each shot. If your camera has a 'live-view' function (where the subject you are photographing appears on your camera's LCD screen) this can be used not only to help you compose your shot but also to help you set the focal point accurately by zooming in.

White Balance: I always shoot my work using AWB (Auto White Balance). Note: if you are shooting in RAW format then the white balance can be altered in post-production if required.

Image Stabiliser (IS): If you are using a tripod and your lens has an Image Stabiliser mode on it, switch this 'off' as it will not be needed. However, if you are shooting your work hand-held (which I do from time to time) then it is useful to keep this switched on as it will help to minimise camera shake.

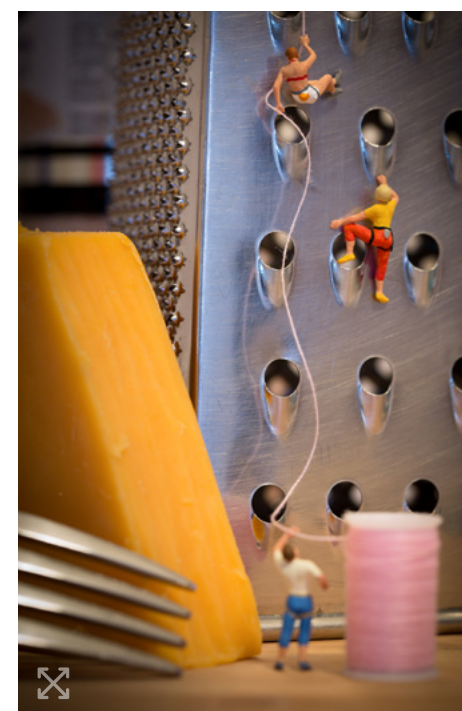
Format: Shoot in RAW if you can, especially if you intend on doing any post-editing. This



will not only produce the highest quality image file possible but will mean that if you edit your images afterwards (e.g. I use Lightroom), you will have so much more detail to work with before converting your RAW file to a high-quality JPG. More on Lightroom later...

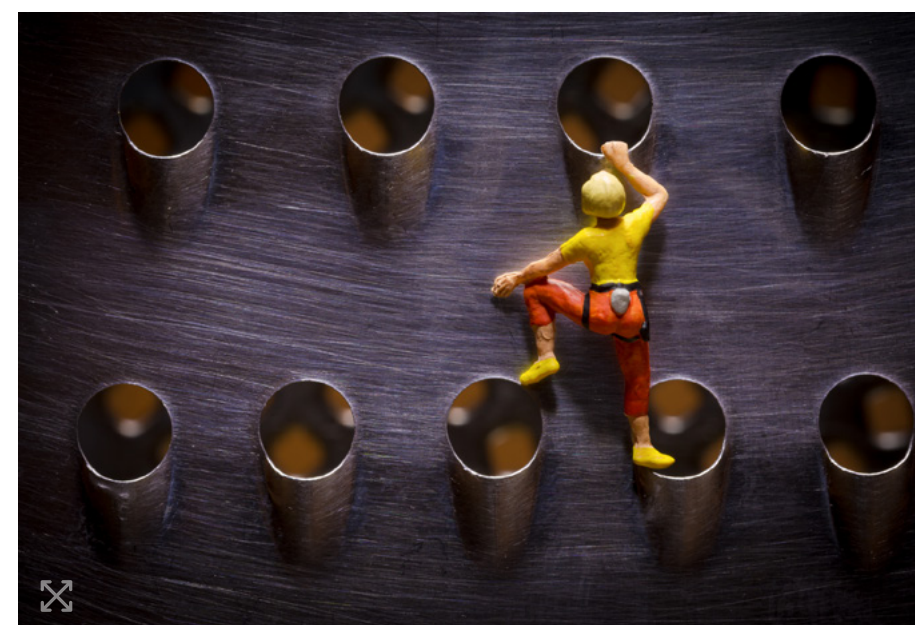
Tip: I will set my camera's timer for triggering each shot when using a tripod. I set it to 2 seconds – this helps me avoid touching my camera which could, in turn, create vibration leading to a blurry shot. You can also use a cable release for triggering your exposures.

PROPS



The Grate Escape.

The Little People are definitely the star of the show but if you don't give due consideration to the surrounding scene in which you are placing them, your subject matter and the final shot will lack direction and impact. The most successful images I have made tend to be the ones where the Little People are at their most convincing. The resulting photograph is only funny and clever if the overall scene is believable, even if just for a split second. N.B. How the figurines interact with whatever else is in the scene is crucial. Momentarily suspending disbelief is the key to the works' success and how it is perceived by those who view it.



The Grate Escape II.

Therefore, deciding on what objects to use in your scenes, and the scene constructs themselves (e.g. backdrops, foregrounds) are important factors.

The quirky nature of the photographs is partly down to the fact the Little People are interacting with objects that we can all relate to in our daily lives. That said, I do sometimes also like to buy model railway props to help embellish the scenes a little, and I particularly enjoy adding model railway trees to some of my scenes.



BACKDROPS AND FOREGROUNDS

The materials that I use for my backdrops and foregrounds are incredibly basic. This is what makes the resulting photographs all the more appealing and satisfying to me; I love the fact they have been created using very simple materials.



Backdrops

When working in my studio, my backdrops will nearly always be an A4 picture of a cloudy sky, or simply a coloured piece of A4 paper/card. Because the scenes are so small a sheet of A4 is more than large enough.

Foregrounds

Once again, my foregrounds are normally either just my white desk, or I will shoot the scene on top of a coloured piece of A4 card that best suits the scene e.g. for a scene representing the sea/water, I will place the figures on top of a blue piece of card, and if I want it to look like people sunbathing in a park on the grass, I will use a piece of green card. It really is that straight forward. The shallow depth of field in my photographs means that blanket colours help give the feel of a typical setting such as the sea, a beach or grass.



ADHESIVES



This is quite an interesting topic as using the right kind of adhesive in your shots can make a world of difference. I have been sent images in the past made by other photographers asking for my opinion on their work, and in some of these images, you can clearly see big chunks of Blu Tack under the feet of the figurines. Remember, if you want the work to really 'speak' to those who are viewing it, you have to suspend disbelief momentarily. So you don't want anything to seem too forced or out of place in the image.



I will only use Blu Tack if, for example, I have a figure sitting down on something and I want them to stay in place. I will place a tiny blob of Blu Tack on their butt to hold them in place. For nearly every other situation I will use a tiny amount of super glue, normally on the figurine's feet so they stick firmly to the surface.

Double warning – you do not want to get super glue on your skin or on any other kind of delicate material so be really careful when using it. Also, because super glue is so strong it can sometimes mean that the feet on the figurines can snap off (!!) when trying to remove them from a hard surface. Obviously, if you glue them to card or paper then they will detach unharmed. If you are nervous about using super glue, please find a suitable alternative.

Note: I like to use the 'medium' or 'thick' Vitalbond glue on my figurines. It cures pretty quickly and is transparent. I will always make sure that I also buy a bottle of 'Debondler' which can help make removing the figurines from a hard surface easier.

When I am making some of my cloudy-sky backdrops, I will use Pritt Stick to attach cotton wool to a sheet of blue card.



TAKING THE WORK OUTDOORS



One Bedroom Flat for Sale.

Every so often I will be involved in a project, or have a strong desire that leads to me making a series of images outside. This can add a really exciting new dynamic to the work as we get to see the Little People interacting in the world we (giants!) inhabit.

Armed with an active imagination and a few props, the world is your oyster.





Bridge to Nowhere.



In The Rough.



On a Roll.

THEMED WORK

Global events often inspire me to create a new series of work and this has certainly been the case over the past few years. Your work is only as strong as the concept sometimes, so it is important if you are trying to make impactful work the core theme is strong.

Most recently I have created several series of work inspired by Plastic Pollution, Brexit and the dreaded Coronavirus. Because the work is figurative in nature and therefore visually engaging, the figurines can be used to powerful effect when providing commentary on all kinds of subjects. Here are a few example images that I have taken from each of these series:

Brexit



Disunited.



Little Britain.

Life In Plastic



Life in Plastic #9.



Life in Plastic #2.



Barrier to a Barrier.

Coronavirus



Stay at Home.



Guarding the Stash.

COMMISSIONS

As my work has gained broader recognition, this has allowed me to be involved with some really exciting projects for companies all over the world.

A great example of this is a commission I recently completed for AIDA Cruises. AIDA asked me to create a series of bespoke miniature scenes to be hung as large-format prints in the restaurants on board their newest cruise ship. I can't go into the project brief in great detail, but all commissions of this nature normally follow a similar



Surf and Turf.



Rice Island.

workflow: The client provides a brief (normally through an art broker or a design company), the artist submits a pitch/presentation, and the work either gets the green light or doesn't. I was so excited to land this project as I knew it would be a huge amount of fun making the work as I LOVE creating scenes that involve food and the Little People as you have probably guessed by now! Here are a few of the images I made for AIDA.



Asparagus Garden.



Pepperoni Tan.



Helter Skelter.

THE FULL MONTY

Creating and photographing dioramas – the process, from start to finish

So by now, you will have a pretty decent idea about what needs to be taken into consideration, both in terms of camera settings and creating the diorama itself. It is now time to take a look at the process I work through as a whole when I am creating and shooting a macro scene. Feel free to work through the following steps with me:

1. Organise your figurines/props/backdrops etc.

Have an idea in mind of what you are going to be creating and photographing. For the purposes of this example, let's say we are aiming to replicate my photograph 'Incubation'. You will need: A carton of eggs, a cloudy sky backdrop image, model trees, and a set of HO scale figurines on loungers.



2. Carefully set up the scene on your table

I normally first set up my backdrop (and foreground if required). To do this I lean my backdrop against something heavy to keep it upright (e.g. a bottle of water). I then add Blu Tack to the bottom of the card at the sides where it meets the table to hold it securely in place.

Slide the open egg-box into the scene and select your figurines. Now carefully balance (or glue) them to the tops of the eggs. I sometimes use a pair of tweezers to pick them up and place them into the scene.



If you are using glue, use it very sparingly as you don't want it to be visible in the final shot. Note: I used Blu Tack to stick the miniature trees to the back of the egg carton.

3. Set up your camera gear

I will always check my camera battery is charged and that my SD card is in my camera. This is good practice before any photography shoot. As always, I am using my macro lens (100mm) for this shoot as it is my favourite lens. I then attach the camera to my tripod and move it into place.

4. Camera settings

I always shoot in Manual Mode. If my lens has an Image Stabiliser mode (IS) I turn this off when using my tripod. I set my White Balance to Auto White Balance (AWB) and I will always ensure that I am shooting in RAW format. I now set my aperture to f/4 (which is what I am using for this demonstration) and my ISO to 100. The exposure length of your shot will depend on how much ambient light you have available.

5. Set your composition and focal point

I will turn on the live-view function on the back of my camera and adjust my composition and focus as necessary. Once I am happy with the focal point and also with the composition of the scene, I am ready to take a test shot.

6. Test shot(s)

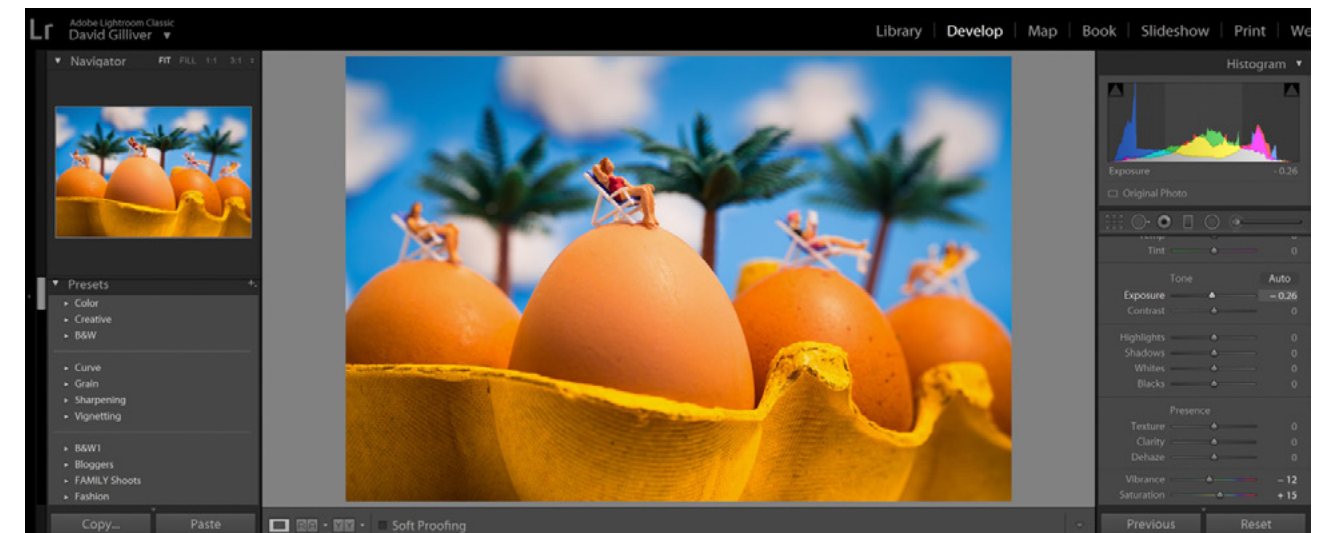
Once I have taken a few test shots and I am happy with the composition, depth of field, lighting and exposure, I take several more shots. I will always shoot the scene from a few different angles, resetting the focal point each time. I always find this gives me a few images to choose from before deciding on which one I like the best.

7. The final shot

Having gone through the above stage, it may well be that I have already captured what will be my final image. What I normally do once I have decided on the best angle for shooting the scene, is I then take a handful more shots to make sure everything is exactly how I want it e.g. I might move the figures around a bit, or change the height of the trees etc.

And that should be it. If you are like me and are keen on post-editing, then it is now time to import your image files from your camera for further tweaking.

POST-EDITING PROCESS



Adobe Lightroom (LR)

I use LR for all of my post-editing work. There are countless LR tutorials online and I have listed below a few of the key features I like in LR. I never over-edit my work, but LR helps me refine each image before I decide I am completely happy with it.

Straightening

Although I have a spirit level built into my tripod-head to help me keep my horizon lines straight in my photographs, I sometimes get it ever so slightly wrong. LR has a straightening tool that makes this very easy to rectify.

Saturation

LR allows you to subtly modify the saturation levels in your images to a level of your choosing.

Contrast

LR also allows you to increase or decrease the contrast levels in your photographs.

Cropping

Even though I try my best to frame the image as best I can when looking at the camera's LCD screen in live-view, it's always nice to have this option available. The cropping tool is again very easy and quick to use and allows you to crop any unwanted details from the edges of your photographs if required.

Spot Removal

This is a really important tool for me, especially for my macro photography. Because I am shooting tiny figurines through a macro lens, even spots of dust and small debris in the resulting images can look HUGE! The spot removal tool allows you to easily select the area in the photograph you want to remove and cleverly replaces the dust/debris/hair (or whatever it is you are removing) with an area of the photograph that most closely resembles the colour in this part of the image. It is something I use all the time in post-editing and is great for tidying up my images before exporting the final version.

LR Presets

LR has a decent selection of inbuilt 'Presets'. Presets allow you to make more radical changes to your photographs at the click of a button. Things like converting your images into B&W, adding a vignette, or maybe altering hues and contrast levels are just a click away and any unwanted changes that you make can be easily reversed. There are plenty of Presets to choose from that are already installed in LR when you start using it and they can come in very useful for all kinds of photography. More Presets can be downloaded for free online (or purchased) at the following site: presetsheaven.com

Although LR has so much more functionality to offer than what I have mentioned above, these are the main editing tools I use to tweak my images. It is essentially a digital darkroom that allows the user to make alterations to their photographs. I also add my photography logo to my images in LR. You can download a 7-day free trial of LR if you fancy using it. Just search for it in Google and look for the Adobe.com link.

ROUNDING THINGS UP

Well, I hope you have enjoyed making your way through my eBook and feel like you have gained lots of knowledge on the subject and that it helps you approach your miniature shoots in a more organised and creative way.

After 20+ years of practising macro photography, I have yet to lose any of my passion and drive for this wonderful art form and I hope that you too can get as much enjoyment out of it as I have over the years. I look forward to hopefully seeing some of your work online in the months and years ahead. It is always fascinating to see where these miniature worlds take each individual as the range of work that can be created using this magical and imaginative process is so incredibly diverse.

As promised, here is a selection of helpful links to pages, websites and books I have gained much knowledge and inspiration from over the past 20+ years. I hope they inspire you too:

Flickr:

[Miniature Worlds](#), [Art Toys](#), [Mini Me](#), [Toy Art](#).

Video:

[Conversation with Artist David Levinthal](#).

Commissions [video]:

My London Project for the [Canary Islands Tourism Board](#).

Books on my hero, David Levinthal:

- [Work from 1975-1996](#).
- [The Wild West: Photographs](#).
- [David Levinthal: American Scene Small Wonder World in a Box](#).
- [David Levinthal: Baseball](#).

More books:

- [Cement Eclipses – Small interventions in the big city.](#)
- [Microworlds.](#)
- [Impossible Photography.](#)
- [Big Bad City – Slinkachu.](#)

Thanks again for buying my eBook, and the very best of luck for all your future macro shoots.

And remember, think SMALL!

David



Think Small.

ABOUT DAVID

I graduated from the Fine Art Photography (BA Hons) course at the Glasgow School of Art in 2001 and have been working hard to establish myself as a respected professional photographer and artist ever since. I specialise in macro photography (the 'Little People' / TOYS) and long-exposure photography (the art of 'light painting').



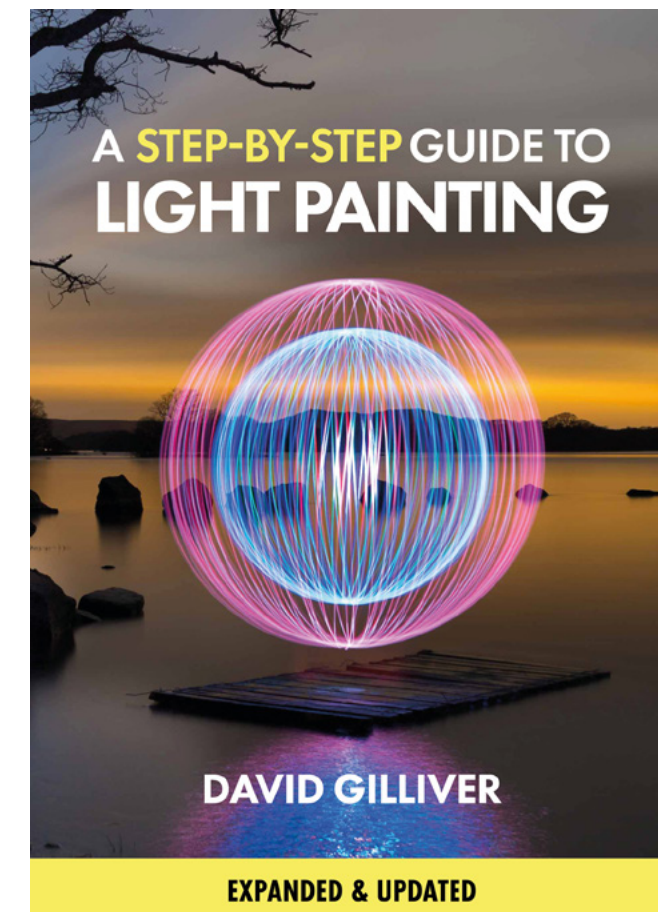
My work has received some very welcome attention over the years which has led to me becoming involved in some very exciting projects all over the world. Highlights of the past couple of years include having some of my macro photography stocked by John Lewis, Art Pistol Gallery and the Made In Stirling store, as well as now having some of my work sailing around the world on the amazing AIDA cruise ships. I also frequently exhibit my work and regularly teach Workshops. After working in an office for the first 15 years of my professional life, I decided in 2018 to become a full-time professional photographer and to follow my true passion.

Contacting me

As mentioned several times throughout this book I am more than happy for you to contact me should you have any questions you feel I can help you with.

You can contact me through my website: davidgilliver.com. I am also on Instagram, Facebook, 500PX, Flickr and LinkedIn (you can find all my links at the top of my website page).

Friendly request: If you know anyone else who you think might benefit from reading my eBooks, please forward them the link to my site.



Also from David Gilliver

[A Step-by-Step Guide to Light Painting](#)

Available from David's online shop:

davidgilliver.com

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO MINIATURE WORLDS

GET READY TO THINK SMALL.

Prepare to enter a world where stems of broccoli appear as large as trees, and watermelon pips are as big as boulders. This eBook will help you to translate your imagination into fantastical miniature worlds through the magic of macro photography.

WWW.DAVIDGILLIVER.COM

"The generous sharing of knowledge and creative thought process within this book befit the minute attention to detail found in David's macro images. This is a highly engaging resource which will spark new ways of seeing and thinking to give endless hours of possibilities. I will now never look at pasta without seeing the fun of a helter skelter!"

Claire Bell, Faculty Leader of Creativity and Enterprise, St Matthew's Academy.



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MACRO PHOTOGRAPHY