# CREATIVE FINE ART PORTRAITURE
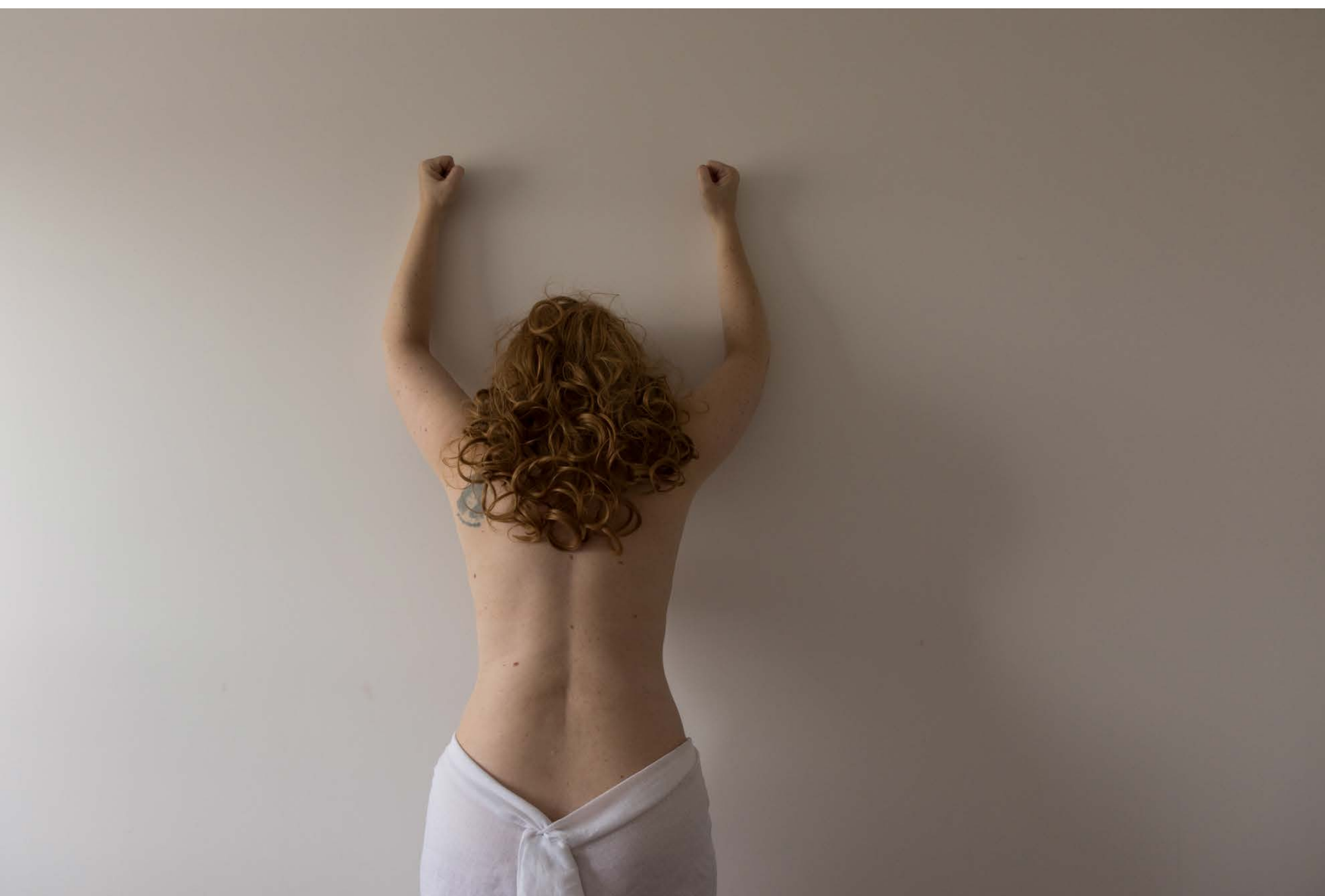
Quick Guide by Stacey Hill

BEFORE SHOT: *me and a white wall.*

A couple of years ago, while recovering from major surgery, I was stuck at home for two months, unable to drive or move much. Eventually I got well enough that boredom with Netflix set in and the creative juices started to flow again.

At the same time I was inspired by Brooke Shaden talking about how she started out with just a white wall in her apartment as the basis for her self-portrait work.

I have a spare room with a white wall, and while my mobility was somewhat compromised, I had plenty of time to experiment. So I began one of the most important learning experiences I have had in photography.

# INTRODUCTION

People have never been a passion of mine as a subject; people are hard to shoot well – they feel uncomfortable in front of the camera and getting the best out of them takes a lot of work.
I fully respect and honor those who shoot people by choice.
I assume that while the challenges are great, the rewards are equally beneficial.

Shooting other people was never a particular goal of mine; yet, having a person in your image helps tell so much more of a story than you otherwise might be able to. Also, models are expensive and friends run out of patience, and neither are available at a moment's notice.

So if I wanted to shoot a series of images exploring different concepts featuring a person, then I was going to have to be that person.

This brings not only the difficulty of being the subject of the shot, but the complexity of doing all the setup work behind the scenes and actually taking the image too. It adds an extra level of difficulty when you need to be in front of and behind the camera at exactly the same point in time.

*Note that while this guide is written from the point of view of doing self-portraits, almost everything also fully applies if you are taking images of someone else as well.*

**Things to Consider:**

1) The environment to be used – inside or outside
2) The pose
3) Setup needed to make the shot happen – props, positioning etc.
4) Light
5) Shooting for compositing
6) Being in two places at once



Photograph by Stacey Hill

*My spare room – neutral walls and dark carpet.*

Photograph by Stacey Hill

*Zombie shot – could have been taken anywhere but was done in my spare room.*

## ENVIRONMENT

Where you shoot the image can have a major impact on the final outcome. Many considerations are involved:

Where will we be shooting this particular image – indoors or outdoors?

Will it be composited?

Will nudity be involved and is it easier to shoot indoors?

Does the weather need to be considered?

What control of the light do we need?

Shooting indoors gives you a lot more control and options. You can opt for natural light or use studio lights if you have them. If nudity is going to be involved, indoors is usually a better option – plus it can be heated as well.

Setting up a shot can take some time, and doing it in sub-zero temperatures is certainly not fun, especially if you aren't properly dressed for the situation. Bad weather is a risk to your gear, and depending on where you are and how long it took you to get there, it could be a concern for you as well.

If you are shooting outside, do you have or need permission to be at the desired site? Are there costs involved or permits that need to be acquired? Are you likely to run into other people who might interrupt you? Will your gear be safe unattended?

If you are shooting outside, how much stuff do you need to take with you? How far can you easily carry it?

Because of these issues – and because I was recovering from surgery – my first experiments were at home in my studio, which had the following benefits:

- No travel required
- Complete privacy
- Able to control temperature etc.
- Allowed me as much time as I needed
- Free

- All my props and equipment were nearby
- If I needed to reshoot anything it was easy to do
- Able to check the shots on my computer and make changes quickly
- Able to use natural light

Keep in mind that you can still find amazing locations inside buildings, warehouses, factories, workshops, and abandoned buildings. Let your imagination have free rein.

◈ **Key Lesson:** The environment sets the stage for the scene and has a lot of impact on how you shoot and what the final image will look like.

▣ **Recommended Reading:** If you'd like to learn how to create amazing portraits, grab a copy of Photzy's premium guide: The Art of Portrait Photography.

Photograph by Stacey Hill

*Partial body shots are entirely valid too.*

## THE POSE

This is not your normal nice, smiling portrait we are talking about here; this is much more creative.  Perhaps it's a new take on a fairytale – Red Riding Hood or Cinderella? Maybe it's a 1950s pinup style? Burlesque with stockings and a corset? Some lingerie and a tasteful Boudoir shot? Cosplay with armor and weapons? Steampunk? Western themed, sport oriented…the possibilities are endless.

There are so many different and interesting ways to create a portrait, be it of yourself or someone else. Think creatively, differently – don't be afraid to try weird and unusual. Be prepared to push some boundaries and you might just do something really amazing.

Who wants to create work that looks just the same as what everyone else does?

Let's think about how the person is going to feature in the image:

·   What is the story you are telling?
·   How are you going to use your body to present it?
·   What does that actually look like in-camera?
·   What costume or clothing is being worn and how can that also be used to your advantage in the shot?
·   How difficult is it for you to pose for the shot, break it to see what it looks like, and then reconfigure again?
·   What props are needed to fully tell the story?

Props are a particularly necessary element. I got myself a wig with long curly hair as my natural hair was not like that, and I liked the slight fairytale effect it adds. I have a long plain white dress that gets worn outside a lot, and different fabric to drape myself in. My best prop is a teddy bear who also has his own adventures too.

Photograph by Stacey Hill

*Teddy on the train tracks.*

One of the things that self-portraiture is most useful for is about teaching the photographer how difficult it is to actually set a pose and hold it. There is a big difference between a static pose and an active pose, and having an intimate understanding of how the body needs to be engaged to achieve an active pose makes it a lot easier to explain to a model or client.

A passive or static pose is where the subject sits or stands still and often looks awkward and artificial. An active pose often has movement involved and is much more dynamic. We are actively using the body to convey an emotion or feeling. Muscles are engaged, tension is present, and we are caught briefly still for a moment in-camera.

You often need to be in what seems like a really unnatural position to achieve a pose that looks good on camera. Often, how we naturally are does not translate well in-camera, so again knowing how awkward it can feel and being able to explain that to others is very helpful.

Photograph by Stacey Hill

*The tightly closed eyes, the tension in the face and forehead, the fingers pressing into the jaw; this is a very active pose.*

Consider things like poking your head really far forward to reduce the double chin and get good jawline separation, and elongating the neck and spine for more elegance and reducing slouch and slimming the waist line. Knowing exactly how to describe what it feels like is extremely valuable to getting rapport with your model or subject.

Being in front of the camera yourself is so valuable for learning about positioning the human form, especially when you are trying to tell a story and evoke emotion. It is also pretty scary as well, because often we see a reality of ourselves through the camera that we weren't expecting.

◇ **Key Lesson:** The pose is important as it helps tell the story in the image. Props help add to the story and the mood of the image.

Photograph by Stacey Hill

*This is the base image used. Several different poses were shot, but I liked how the hands looked in this one.*

## SETUP NEEDED

Preparation is key for this kind of shoot – everything needs to be planned in advance, and if you have already considered Steps 1 and 2 then the hardest stuff is done.

Once you know where you will shoot and what the pose will be, then it's a matter of planning how that will happen and what you need to have on hand to bring it about.

A major advantage of shooting indoors is that it minimizes most of the challenges you have.

Photograph by Stacey Hill

*Then I decided a strand of hair needed to be added into the shot.*

The biggest requirement is usually time. When doing a self-portrait, finding the right position and angle to set the camera up is the first challenge. Then you need to set the pose and shoot some frames to fine tune. Once the hardware is correctly set up, then the costume needs to be put on and any other props assembled with the scene.

It can take a lot longer than you anticipate to get to the stage where you are ready to shoot the actual shots. Often you need to pose, shoot, check the shot, adjust the pose, and keep doing that several times before you are even properly positioned.

Photograph by Stacey Hill

*Final image composited out of eight different shots.*

So make sure you allow yourself heaps of time. Feeling rushed generally doesn't allow you to be at your creative best and be properly present in the moment. I have probably spent a good couple of hours doing the setup and shooting for any one of my images.

◆ **Key Lesson:** Preparation helps you fine tune your final setup, but both will take a lot longer than anticipated, especially for your first go.

👤 **Recommended Reading:** If you'd like to learn how to create amazing portraits, grab a copy of Photzy's premium guide: The Art of Portrait Photography.

# LIGHT

I only ever use natural light, so it limits me to shooting during the day when the light is sufficient. A professional would probably want to invest in studio lights to have more control of the light, but as a beginner at this kind of thing I have found natural light sufficient.

I also prefer the more natural shadows it gives as well.

- Are you using natural light either inside or outside?

- If you are using natural light, will you have time to get to your location on a good day?

- What other lighting options might be available?

- Can you modify the light in any way if necessary?

◇ **Key Lesson:** Natural light is readily available and free, which suits most of us who have a limited budget.

# SHOOTING FOR COMPOSITING

Compositing images is very involved and could easily justify an article or three on that subject alone. If you are planning on compositing your images, remember a few key points:

- · Will you need to composite the image (i.e. shoot the subject away from background and then blend later)?

- · How will you set up both shoots to ensure consistency (i.e. lens choices, aperture, focal length, height/angle of camera)?

The more you can do in-camera to achieve consistency means that the final image will be much more believable. I see a lot of images where they have purchased a high resolution background scene which has been shot on a very wide angle lens. When you shoot your subject with a different lens/focal length and then try and blend them, it doesn't naturally fit. Some photographers will be able to pick the reason why, but for everyone else it will just be oddly not right.

Another fault I often see is when the different images being blended have been shot with completely different lighting angles, so the subject is lit from one side at one angle and the background from another side at a different angle, and any other elements could be lit completely differently. Again, it isn't always obvious to the viewer what the problem is, just that their brain says there is something not quite 'right' about the image.

Compositing is a really powerful tool which allows you a lot of options when working with your images. You can often have real physical elements present, but you might want a ship or a bicycle flying through the air, or to have it raining flowers. Levitation shots are an excellent example of where compositing really makes the magic happen. Or maybe you have access to a location to shoot it but you cannot set up to do the full shoot on site, so get the background and then shoot the rest in studio and composite.

Photograph by Stacey Hill

*Original base image – you can see the tripod legs in frame to the right.*

Photograph by Stacey Hill

*Final image with many more fabric shots composited into the scene around the edges.*

It also takes a LOT of time in post-processing to composite and blend multiple images; my first multiple composite image was eight different images and it took me about 10 hours over two days to finally complete.

So if you are shooting with the intention of compositing and you are also charging for the service, make sure you fully account for the editing time.

⬥ **Key Lesson:** Compositing is a powerful tool, but care has to be taken that the images are shot consistently so that the final blended image is believable

# BEING IN TWO PLACES AT ONCE

My secret weapon for being able to pull off these kinds of self-portraits is a wireless remote. It makes the process much easier as I can pose in front of the camera and shoot, and keep changing the pose and shooting and have a much better chance of getting some keepers

The ideal option is to shoot tethered. There are many devices out there that allow you to connect your camera to a laptop or a tablet and view the shot that way, and even change the settings and take the shot.

I intend to purchase a device to allow me to do this in the future but for someone starting out, the most cost-effective option is to get a wireless remote.

◆ **Key Lesson:** A wireless remote is a necessity for shooting self-portraits.

■ **Recommended Reading:** If you'd like to learn how to create amazing portraits, grab a copy of Photzy's premium guide: The Art of Portrait Photography.

Photograph by Stacey Hill

*A difficult shot to take when your hands are in the scene.*

# SUMMARY

Getting myself in front of the camera was one of the most valuable learning experiences I have had in photography. It taught me many things, including:

· how to plan a concept shoot,
· how to shoot indoors and outdoors,
· what it's like to have to pose in front of the camera,
· the value of props in telling a story,
· all the different technical considerations needed when compositing an image, and
· advanced post-processing techniques.

Even though I was initially recovering from surgery and had limited mobility and options, and was working in a small space (my spare room is long and narrow), there were many creative options available to me.

I've draped myself in thin see-through fabric, covered myself in fake blood, posed with a teddy bear, pretended to be monsters in a closet, worn lingerie and a wig, slumped over the edge of the bath, was a zombie, and never even left the house!

Hopefully this guide will inspire you to spend some time in front of the camera. There is a certain freedom in donning a costume and becoming someone else in front of the camera – let your inner Stormtrooper or burlesque queen come out to play.

There is much to learn and much fun to be had by doing creative portraits, either of yourself or someone else. I found it much easier to interact with a model after I had done my own scenes; being able to direct them in a way that they understood saved us both time and there were less communication frustrations.

Plus, the difficulty in actually designing a concept shoot and bringing it to fruition teaches you so much, like logistics, time management, efficiencies in packing gear for a shoot, how to pose, and how to best position the body.

Shooting self-portraits offers many benefits that easily transition to shooting portraits of other people. Expanding your portfolio to offer something creative and different from everyone else is always an advantage.

Finally, I had so much fun doing all these shots. Every image offered new challenges and was a new experience, and the satisfaction in knowing that I did *everything* involved to make that image happen is very real.

## Self-Check Quiz:

1) What are the two key elements to be considered?

2) Does the whole person need to be in the shot?

3) Why are props important?

4) Does this take a lot of time to do?

5) Is it fun?

**Answers:**

1) Environment and pose are the most important elements.

2) No, partial body shots are perfectly acceptable.

3) Props help tell more of the story and set the mood.

4) Yes it takes a lot of time. Preparation helps, but allow plenty of shooting time.

5) YES!

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Stacey Hill invested in her first DSLR back in 2007. While having many adventures out and about in the South Island of New Zealand, Stacey took to blogging about her experiences learning photography. Eventually she discovered the fun and creative possibilities to be had with Photoshop. Stacey can be found having an opinion all over the place:

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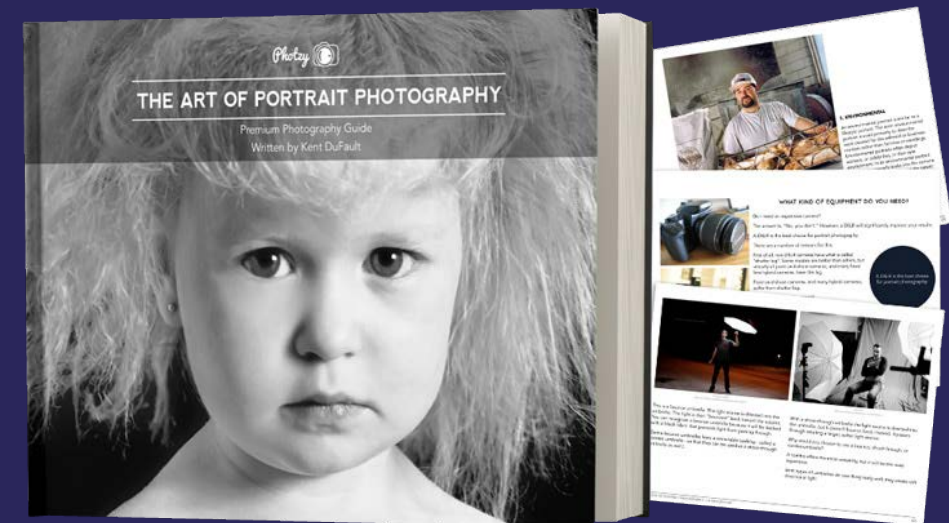


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