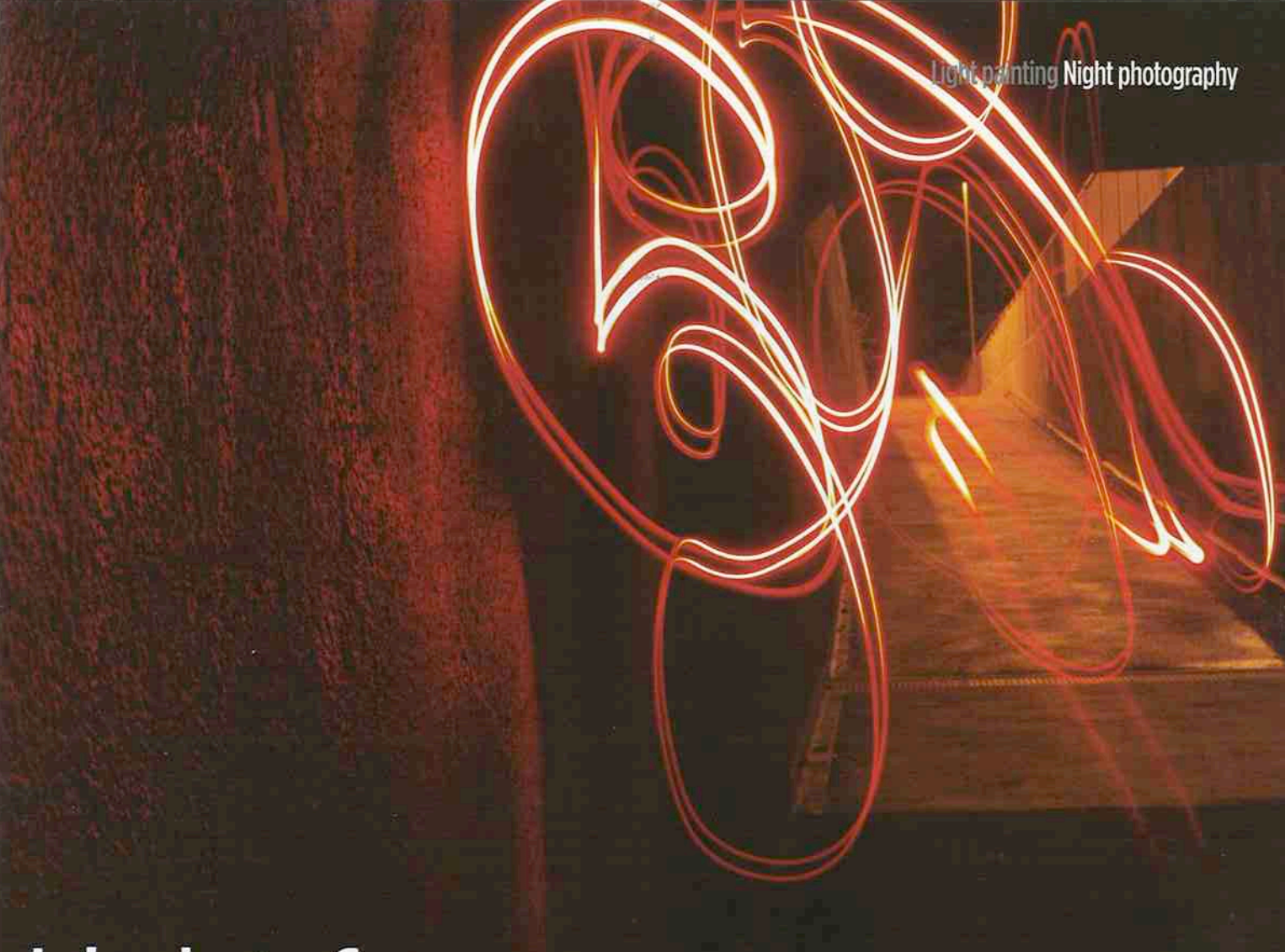


Light fever

For the past few years **Marc BB** has been practising the art of night-time light painting around his home city of Portsmouth. He talks to **Oliver Atwell** about the method behind his vibrant and atmospheric images

LIKE many photographers, Marc BB (as he is known in the photography world) leads a double life. By day he is a quality manager for a plastics firm, but by night Marc's imagination takes hold and he descends into the shadowy realms of the city of Portsmouth, Hampshire, armed with a camera, tripod and a host of tools and contraptions that he employs to bring the images in his head to life. Marc is a practitioner of light painting, a night-time photographic technique in which exposures are made by using handheld light sources, such as torches and pen lights.

The term light painting should be taken literally. Using long exposures, Marc is able to position himself in front of the camera and sweep and rotate his lights, employing the tools in much the same way as an artist would commit broad brushstrokes of primary colour to a blank canvas. Marc's images are a fine example of the genre. The effervescent colours and ghostly shapes seem to pop and flare from the image.

Yet despite his current commitment to the medium, Marc's first encounter with photography was a low-key affair.

'There was no lightning bolt of divine inspiration,' admits Marc. 'My first dabblings with photography occurred a few years ago through a team sport I like to play called airsoft. It's basically paintball without the paint. I would always take my little point-and-shoot camera along with me and document the event. Then, when I got home, I would load the images into Photoshop and fool around with the settings.'

Some time later, a friend and fellow airsoft enthusiast brought along a DSLR to an airsoft event. Marc was captivated by the settings and level of control that his friend was able to achieve over the final image.

'I'd never seen anything like it,' says Marc. 'It was this amazing thing that held my attention and I was overwhelmed with the need to find out what everything did. That inspired me to go out and buy my own.'

Above: 'Irreversible Subway' Olympus E-420, 17-45mm, 25secs at f/11, ISO 100

Crucially, Marc's purchase of his first DSLR coincided with his first exposure to light painting. One day, while trawling the internet, Marc happened upon the Cologne-based art collective Lichtfaktor (www.lichtfaktor.eu), a group of light-painting practitioners. Looking at these otherworldy images motivated Marc to go out and try something new.

Marc's first image, called 'Irreversible Subway' (above), was a simple image made using a small LED flashlight.

'I learned very quickly that there is a lot of trial and error in light painting,' says Marc. 'All lights have different colour casts. If you use an LED torch, it will produce a different colour to, for example, a Maglite. A Maglite will be yellow, whereas an LED light will be white. You have to go through the process of learning what each light is capable of and what it will look like in-camera. That's very important to know.'

THE RIGHT LOCATION

The first stage in putting together a light painting involves finding the right location. However, Marc admits there is no set precedent that he looks for in an area – he is constantly on the lookout for something interesting and new.

'I always carry my light tools around in the boot of my car,' he says. 'Every Wednesday night I go out with a group called Portsmouth at Night, a collective that explores the photographic possibilities of the city in the nocturnal hours. Once we've scouted out a potentially interesting location, we separate and do our own thing. But something I want to make clear is that we always know where everyone else is at all times. There's safety in numbers, especially at that time of night in the city.'

Once at the location, Marc begins to consider what he can achieve. Sometimes he is able to create something on the spot, perhaps using a brand-new contraption that he wants to experiment with. At other times he already has a clear idea what he wants to do and what his equipment is capable of. However, Marc says that anyone looking to create their own images should look for ways that their light painting can potentially engage with the environment.

'The shapes and lines you create can potentially act as an element of the environment,' says Marc. 'Don't just look for a big black space because that kind of work can be done in a darkened room at home. If you're in the city you have all sorts of "props" and features lying around that you can use to create interesting images. I'm thinking of things like benches, statues and underpasses.'

PAINTING THE TOWN

One such example of using light to engage with an environment is Marc's atmospheric image of an underpass lit with vivid strips of blue and green light (below).

'The shot of the underpass was created using what I like to term "traditional" methods,' says Marc. 'Traditional methods include processes like using a simple light source like a little LED light to create shapes and lines. But in this case the process was done using torches and gels.'

The photograph was achieved with basic bits of kit, comprising two torches, one green gel and one red gel.

'The underpass was divided into sections,' says Marc. 'Each one was lit up independently by my friend and myself. We both had torches – his had a red gel on the front and mine had a green gel. We both stood with our backs to the camera and held the torches to our chests to ensure that the beams of light didn't shine into the lens and therefore create light trails as we moved. We gradually advanced our way through the underpass and painted the ceiling, walls and floor in strips with the coloured light. As we kept moving, our figures didn't appear in the image. All that remained of us was the light that we'd painted into the scene.'

Marc maintains that images such as this can be created using any kind of torch, ranging from the common household torch to 1.5-million-candlepower hand torches.

'The important thing to consider is how strong the beam of light is because that will largely dictate the aperture that you're working with,' says Marc. 'This principle actually applies to all light sources. If you have a weaker torch, you're going to need a wider aperture such as f/5.6 that will allow more light through to the sensor. This ensures that you can capture more light, even though the source itself is relatively weak. With a stronger source you'll need to use at least f/11.'

With regards to gels, Marc points out that there are no special requirements.

'Coloured gels can be picked up from a number of places,' says Marc. 'There are a number of dealers on the internet that provide all sorts of colours. Gels are very popular in the light-painting world. You can use any kind of gel, but I should point out that if you're using a particularly powerful torch then you may find that you'll have to double-up on the gels.'

Of course, the shutter speed is also a crucial factor in all light-painting images, and while the speeds will likely vary from shot to shot, Marc finds himself primarily working with his camera's bulb setting.

'Working with the bulb setting means that I can control how long the shutter is open and therefore how much light is hitting the sensor,' says Marc. 'But that's not to say that you can't make excellent light paintings with a fixed shutter speed of, say, 15secs. It all depends on the scene and what you want to do. Having the camera on the bulb setting just means that I have as much time to work with as I need.'

PLAYING WITH FIRE

One of Marc's most interesting – and striking – methods of working finds him using super-fine wire wool. While the material may look like nothing special, once it encounters a naked flame or an electric current it can be used to create images that are both alluring and unnerving in their chaos.

'Super-fine wire wool is very thin,' says Marc. 'The thicker stuff doesn't burn so well, but its thinner counterpart is perfect. You should be able to find wire wool in any good DIY store. The shots created with wire wool – which are very much in vogue in the light-painting world – are created by lighting the end of the wool with a match or by rubbing it against a 9-volt battery.'

Marc explains that there are even some photographers who use a fire poi, a traditional tool of performance art from the Maori people of New Zealand. The tool is constructed from a chain with a basket attachment on the end. The photographer is then able to place the wire wool in the end, ignite it and spin it. However, Marc's method is a little more makeshift: he uses an extended coat hanger with wire wool wedged on the end.

'Once you set fire to the wire wool, you stand there and spin it at great speed,' says Marc. 'The speed at which it spins sends little molten shards flying off in all directions creating something akin to a Catherine wheel. You must always be aware of health and safety concerns because of the burning metal flying everywhere. You should always wear goggles, gloves and some kind of hood. And make sure that anyone assisting you keeps their distance.'

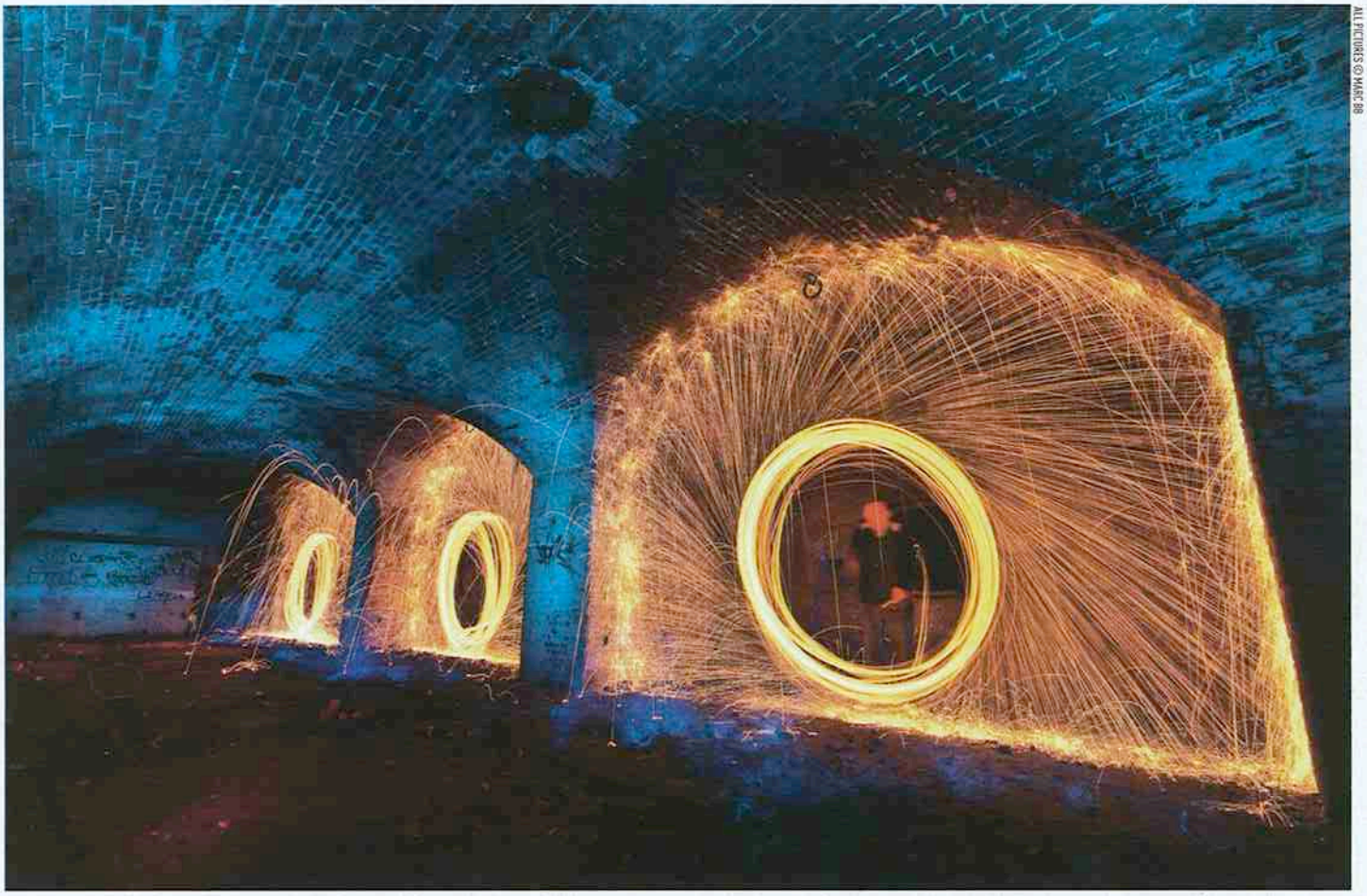
Using a light source such as this raises the question of focus. As Marc is working in pitch-black conditions, how is he able to select his focal point?

'The easiest way to focus is to use a torch to illuminate your subject,' says Marc. 'Set your camera to

Top right: 'The Last Bastion'
Nikon D300, 10-20mm, bulb setting at f/8, ISO 200

Bottom right: 'Reventon Orba'
Nikon D300, 10-20mm, bulb setting at f/8, ISO 200

Below: 'Underpass'
Nikon D300, 10-20mm, bulb setting at f/5.6, ISO 200



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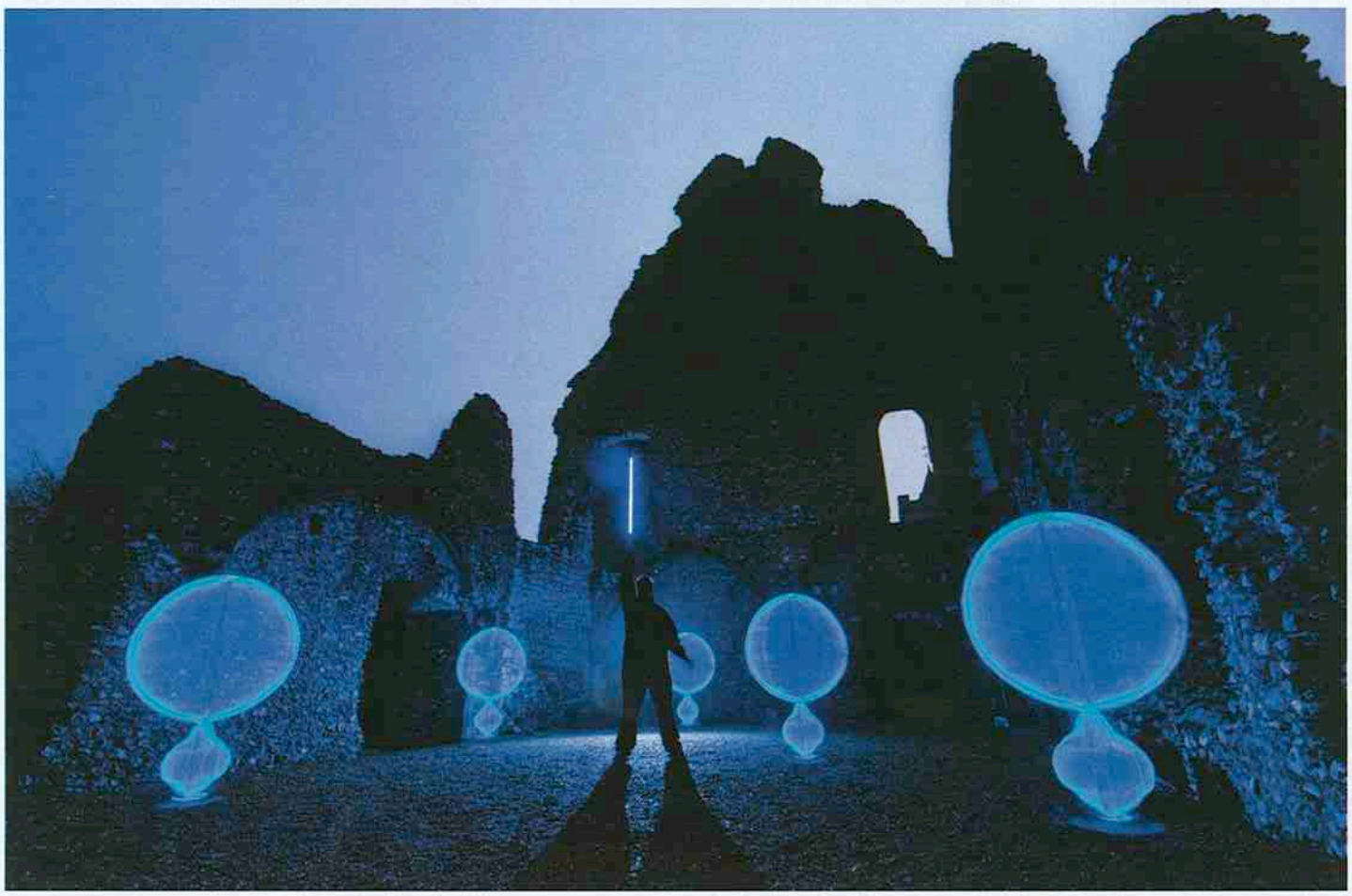

the spot-focus setting (check your camera's manual) and then select the exact area that you want using autofocus. Once your lens has settled on the focal point, switch to manual focus so there's no risk of you pressing your shutter and shifting the focus.'

LIGHT ORBS

Despite the apparent simplicity of many of Marc's methods, he is not averse to putting some more elaborate contraptions to the test.

'A good example of a shot that required a little more innovation than something like my underpass shot is 'Reventon Orba' (see page 29),' says Marc. 'It was created using a contraption that a friend of mine had put together. It consisted of half a Hula Hoop with electroluminescent wire wrapped around it.'

The Hula Hoop was then attached to a stick and the stick was erected in the middle of a revolving platter – the kind you sometimes see in a shop window.

'As the Hula Hoop rotates, it creates this vivid blue orb,' explains Marc. 'If I recall rightly, it took five revolutions of the turntable to achieve the effect I wanted. The smaller ones at the bottom were created using the same method but smaller. By the way, that silhouette you see striking the Thundercat pose in the middle is me.'

But despite the elaborate method and visual style that Marc generates with his images, his choice of photographic equipment is straightforward.

'My weapons of choice are a sturdy tripod, a Nikon D300 with a Sigma 10-20mm lens and a cable release,' says Marc. 'There's no need for anything fancy or expensive. I like working with a wideangle lens and shooting at the wider end, at around 10mm. Just as the bulb setting gives me all the time I need, a wideangle lens gives me all the space I need to create my images. There's so much more room to move around in. If I were to use a telephoto lens, then my movements would be a lot more restricted.'

Above: 'Fluro'
Nikon D300. 10-20mm, 20secs at f/13, ISO 160

PHOTOSHOP

A question that Marc is often asked is why hasn't he attempted to put together a show displaying his images. His answer is one that suggests he is almost a victim of his own success in realising his images.

'The images I create are very graphic,' says Marc. 'But that means I always anticipate people coming up to me and asking me how I created them in Photoshop. The truth is, I'm actually rubbish at using Photoshop. But more than that, there's an ethos in the world of light painting that says everything should be done in-camera. It's an unspoken code, but one that is, by and large, adhered to with absolute commitment. There's nothing wrong with balancing the Levels and colours of your

'IN A ROUNDABOUT WAY'
'This shot was taken using the same cathode tube that I used for Fluro (see right),' says Marc. 'I placed it on the bottom of the roundabout and then spun the ride. That produced a nice circle on the bottom. I then shone a torch on the yellow handlebars.'

image because that's just basic post-processing to get the image to look as it did live. But if you find that you're adding and subtracting whole elements using post-processing methods, then you're moving away from the ethics that make up the practice of light painting.'

As a result, it can often mean that the process of getting Marc's photographs exactly right can be a lengthy affair.

'I can sometimes find myself having to repeat a shot 30 times until I get it right,' says Marc. 'It's all part of the process of creating honest images. The whole journey is a thrilling ride. You keep trying until you get it. It's so much more satisfying knowing that you got it in-camera. That's when you can utter the three greatest words in the English language: "I did that."' **AP**

To see more of Marc's work, visit his website at **www.marcbb.co.uk**

'FLURO'
'The location for this shot was a beach in Portsmouth,' says Marc. 'The light source was a cold cathode tube – the kind of thing that will light up a PC monitor. It runs off of 12 volts and I modified the power lead so I could attach an on/off switch. I then attached the switch to an eight-cell holder for eight AA batteries.

'Once that was done, I attached the cathode tube to a dog-lead and let it hang in front of me. Once the shot was ready to be taken, I began rotating the cathode in a slow circular motion that created a cone effect. Then I started gradually moving sideways and as I did so it created a series of cone shapes as well as a series of wavy lines.'