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Photographer captures surreal, even ghostly, visions at night

By Steve Bennett

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San Antonio artist Scott Martin is a leader in the burgeoning field of night photography, which involves what he calls "painting" with light. Photo: Steve Bennett, San Antonio Express-News / SA



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“Point and shoot” is not in Scott Martin's vocabulary. The San Antonio artist's chosen niche of the wide world of photography — the burgeoning segment of night shooting — requires patience, a good pair of boots and, preferably, four-wheel drive.

Take, for instance, an image called “Portal.”

“I was literally driving down a dirt road in the middle of

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the night,” Martin says.

Incongruously, he noticed an old glass telephone booth, the kind with the accordion door and TELEPHONE written up top in all caps, standing in the desert surrounded by scrub. Fifty or so paces away was an old red fire hydrant. This is in the middle of the desert, near Big Bend.

Suddenly, two Border Patrol Suburbans blocked Martin's black Suburu Forrester. He was wearing all black, as he always does when shooting pictures in the middle of night in the middle of nowhere.

“Eight agents jumped out, guns drawn,” Martin recalls. “I nervously rolled down my window.”

After some explanation, the Border Patrol left Martin to his business. The result is an eerie, otherworldly image that could only be captured in the dead of night.

“A lot of these images,” says Martin, “you cannot get during the day.”

Martin, along with Boston photographer Lance Keimig, is showing his night work in a Fotoseptiembre USA exhibition titled “It Might Have Been Midnight Since Last We Talked” at Rendon Photograpy & Fine Art in Southtown. A First Friday opening is set for tonight at 5:30 p.m. while an artists' reception begins at 5:30 p.m. Saturday. The title references the first line of a poem called “Centrifuge” by Austin poet Dean Young. Martin is married to San Antonio poet Jenny Browne. The exhibition runs through Oct. 5.

Not all of Martin's shoots involve possible incarceration.

Most of them — Keimig and Martin lead several nature workshops for serious photographers each year — actually sound kind of dull.

“This whole process is very slow,” Martin says.

Night exposures can take anywhere from 15 minutes to four hours, as the artist sets up his Canon on a tripod, opens up the shutter and “paints” light onto his subject matter with “slow brushstrokes.”

“I carry four flashlights of varying intensities with me,” says Martin, who captures spiraling stars in circular lines of white light in some longer exposures.

But there is nothing flashy about night photography. In fact, Martin's images are all done in-camera; to add “integrity,” he doesn't manipulate them in a program like Photoshop.

“The juxtaposition between the warm incandescent light of the flashlight with the slightly cold moonlight creates a very gentle effect,” he says.

Big Bend and the Sierras are favorite shooting grounds. Landscapes, along with environmental and architectural shots, are common. The clarity of a night-shot photograph — every nuance of rock in an old stone house, the manufacturer's name on a rusty old abandoned boiler — is revelatory.

“What you can get with night photography is an image that cannot be seen by the human eye in real time,” Martin says.

Martin, who turns 40 in a few weeks, grew up in Houston and got his degree from Evergreen State College, a liberal arts school in Olympia, Wash. Although he sometimes misses the rainy Northwest, Martin insists, “I love deserts. I love the people in deserts. For the most part, I love what the people do and leave behind in deserts.”

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He also loves “being up all night outside under the stars.”

The night photography process involves a lot of scouting.

“You can be on a ridge in Big Bend when the sun goes down, watching all the cars leaving, and suddenly it feels like you have the whole park to yourself.”

But you don't. What about critters? Rattlesnakes?

“Well, you do want to wear some pretty sturdy boots,” Martin says. “No shorts. But it's not so much animals that you worry about as cactus. Those big thorns can be painful. So it's the botanical life that is much more dangerous than the animals.”

All those long exposures in the middle of the night can lead to serious philosophical rumination.

Martin's latest series, including “Observation 2,” features a shadowy human figure — Martin himself, illuminated with a single flash, blocked from the camera by his body — in front of an abandoned tin-skinned building in the Old West gold-mining town of Bodie, Calif. They're beautiful images — ghosts in a ghost town.

“You spend a lot of time thinking during these long nights, and I've been thinking a lot about man and the environment — how we change the environment, how we will affect it when were gone,” Martin says. “The figure represents a certain consciousness of that.”

sbennett@express-news.net

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