

# Invitation to a Deception

*Jim Dow's unnatural light*

When Jim Dow asked one of Argentina's patrician families to let him photograph its stately home, the answer was yes, but be out by noon. That's not so easy when you're shooting with an 8×10 Deardorff. But for Dow, a Guggenheim-winning documentary photographer for whom operating a view camera has become second nature, the request was less of a problem than the mansion's transitory light. When he arrived early in the morning, bright sun was pouring into its well-appointed rooms, and he was able to make several pictures by the existing daylight. But when he got to the ornate French doors shown on the facing page, the sun was too high to throw long rays through the windows. "What was spectacular when I arrived was suddenly dead in pictorial terms," Dow remembers of the light. "The directional quality that had animated all the details was gone."

Dow had to resort to artificial means—his Norman 200B portable strobe—to duplicate the quality of light he had recorded in his earlier pictures. His immediate solution was to use flash to balance the dimly lighted hallway he was shooting from with the brighter, naturally lighted room beyond. First, Dow adjusted the left-hand mirrored door so that it reflected the vase and figurine in the adjoining room's far corner (the only area in direct sun). Then he took an ambient-light reading near

the upholstered chairs. Despite the brighter light there, the required exposure was a long three minutes at f/32—the small aperture needed for adequate depth of field with Dow's 165mm lens, wide angle for the 8×10 format.

As it turned out, the exposure was just right—long enough to let Dow fire his handheld strobe some 20 times as he moved around the hallway. In "painting" his subject with light, Dow achieved a naturalistic quality both by controlling the angle of the strobe and the number of "pops" a given area received. The suggestion of a window to the right of the subject, for example, was created by flashing the right side more times than the left. Details like the table leg and the ceramic grapes were also highlighted with an extra pop or two. The texture of the parquet floor was emphasized, just as it would have been by directional daylight, by placing the strobe head close to the floor and "skimming" the light across it.

Dow has no qualms about such manipulation. "Sometimes you have to fabricate," he argues, "to match original insight or intent." In simpler terms, seeing is believing. —RUSSELL HART

*"Dining room entrance, Sans Souci, Victoria, Argentina." Dow's suffused light comes not from a window off camera but from repeated bursts of a portable strobe.*

