

Gel Filters for Light Painting

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Digital After Dark Blog: www.kadamsphoto.com/nightphotography

If there's such a thing as addictive photography, light painting photography would be at the top of the list. If you've tried it, you know what I mean. If you haven't done it yet, you are now warned. Once you shine a flashlight on something at night and see how it looks in the photo, you'll be running around all over the place looking for things to light up.

At first, you'll be happy just using the white light that comes out of the flashlight, but after a while, you'll want to explore using different colors of light. Before long, you'll be combining multiple colors in a single photo. There are a number of ways you can alter the color of the light on a flashlight. Any colored translucent material that you put over the flashlight head will work. You probably have a number of items in your house that would work fine: cellophane, gift wrapping paper, even product packaging. A quick and dirty method is to stick a piece of transparent tape on the flashlight and use a Sharpie pen to color it.



Gel filters come in a huge assortment of colors. The swatchbook size is what you want for light painting with a flash of flashlight. Lee and Rosco are two companies that offer them.

Pretty soon, though, you'll be looking for a better method of adding color to the light. Using gel filters is by far the easiest and fastest method, and it provides an unlimited range of colors to choose from. The traditional use of gel filters is in the theatrical industry for coloring stage lights, but they are used for a wide range of lighting applications where colored light is needed. The filters are thin plastic sheets that come in variety of sizes, with a typical size being 20x24 inches. They are available in a bewildering array of colors, literally every possible color you could ever want.



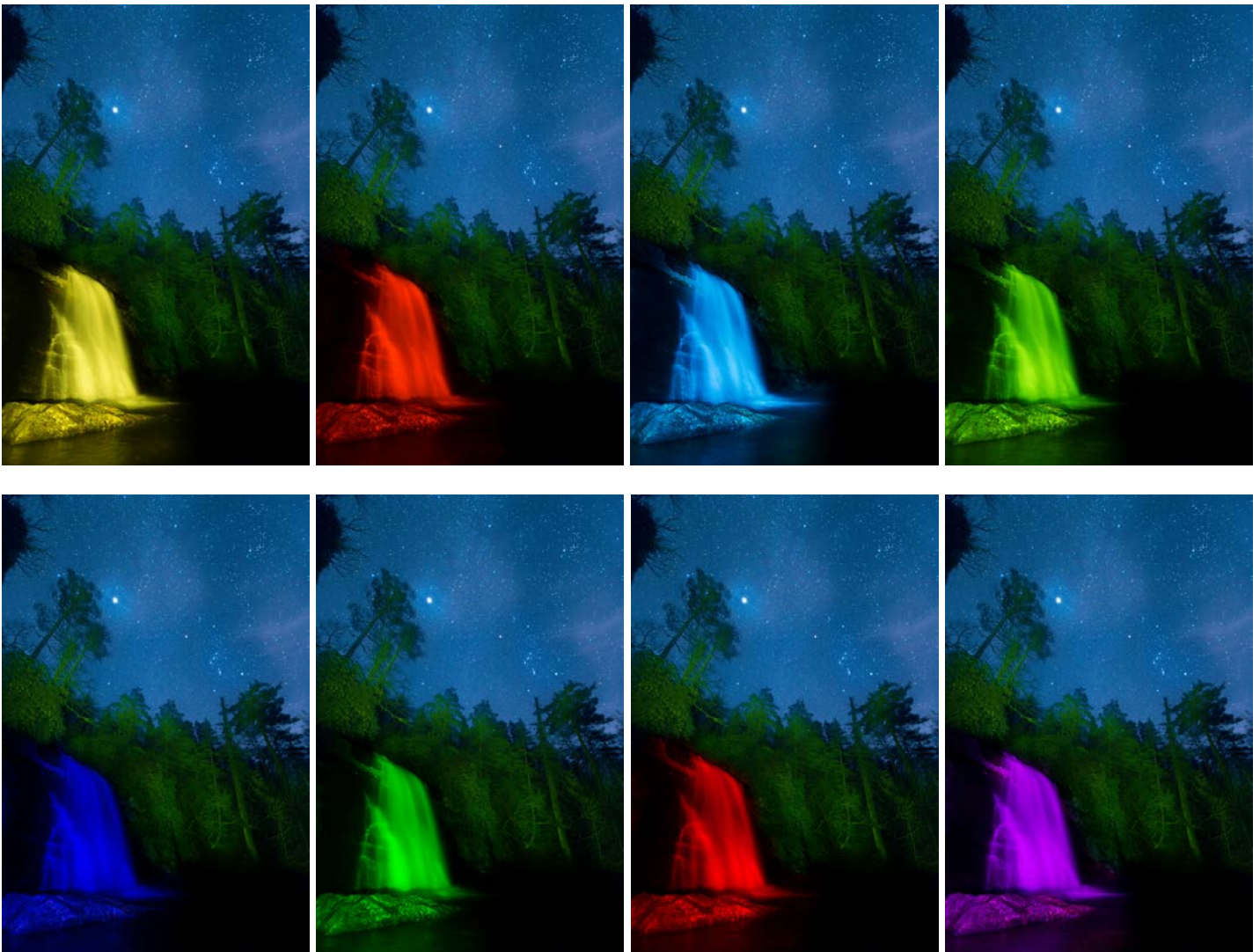
A green gel filter is mounted in a GelGrip™ that is attached to a flashlight for light painting.

While there are some applications in which a light painter might want to use large filter sizes, nearly everything you do with a flashlight or camera flash will be with the swatch size of about 1.5 x 3.25 inches. All filter manufacturers offer swatchbooks of this size for all the filters in their lineup. I use filters from Rosco. Lee Filters is another company that has them. You can order a swatchbook from Rosco at <http://rosco.com/sbregs/index.cfm>. Get the Roscolux swatchbook, which has every filter you'll ever need.

If you live in large city, you can probably get a free swatchbook from a local dealer. Most theatrical supply stores carry Rosco filters and will have swatchbooks on hand as giveaways. Commercial photography supply dealers should also have them.

The swatchbook size of these gel filters is perfect for mounting in front of a flashlight or camera flash. For occasional use, you can simply hold them by hand or attach them with a rubber band, but after a few outings, you'll be searching for a better way. You can make a very simple and lightweight holder from a thin clear acrylic sheet. Cut it to size and bend it back onto itself to create a slot for the filter. Then bend an angle off the holder onto which you can glue a piece of hook Velcro. (Heat the plastic sheet with a torch or grill lighter to make it soft enough to bend.) Glue a strip of loop Velcro onto your flashlights and electronic flashes. With this system you can quickly set up and switch out gels even while wearing gloves.

If you're not the do-it-yourself type or you want to save some time, you can buy a ready-made gel holder from me. I became frustrated at the lack of a really good system for holding gel filters, so I designed one myself. You can buy the GelGrip™ for \$15 from my [online store](#).



By simply changing gel filters, you can alter the color of your light paintings however you like.