Shooting Ghostly Images

To shoot ghostly images, the primary technique is long-exposure photography, which captures a subject as a semi-transparent or blurred apparition against a static background. A single-frame, long-exposure photo can be achieved by having a subject move out of the frame mid-shot. Another method is to create a composite using double exposure, either in-camera or in post-processing.

Essential gear

- A camera with manual settings: A DSLR or mirrorless camera is ideal, as it provides full control over shutter speed, aperture, and ISO.

- Tripod: Necessary for keeping your camera perfectly still during the long exposure. Any unwanted camera movement will create motion blur throughout the entire image instead of just on your subject.

- Remote shutter release: Reduces the risk of camera shake from pressing the shutter button. You can also use your camera's self-timer to achieve the same effect.

- Neutral density (ND) filter: Useful for creating long exposures during the daytime by limiting the amount of light entering the lens.

Long exposure single-frame ghost

This is the most common and straightforward technique for creating a ghostly image in a single photograph.

1. Set up the camera. Mount your camera on a tripod and frame your shot. Choose a low-light environment, such as a dim room, early evening, or a location with a light fog.

2. Adjust the settings.
   a. Shoot in manual mode to control your exposure.
   b. Set a slow shutter speed, typically between 10 and 30 seconds. The longer the shutter is open, the more transparent your subject will appear.
   c. Use a low aperture, like f/16, to increase your depth of field and darken the shot.
   d. Keep your ISO low to avoid a grainy image. If the photo is too dark, increase the ISO or lengthen your shutter speed.

3. Take a test shot. Capture the scene without your "ghost" to ensure the background is properly exposed and in focus. Lock the focus to prevent it from shifting.

4. Capture the ghost. Have your subject—wearing light-colored clothing for better visibility—walk into the frame and stand still for about one-third to one-half of the total exposure time. For a 15-second exposure, they would stand still for 5 to 7 seconds.

5. Have your subject exit the frame quickly and silently for the remainder of the exposure. The stationary background will appear sharp, while the subject will be semi-transparent.

Double exposure ghost

This technique merges two images into one to create the ghost effect, and many modern cameras have a built-in multiple exposure mode.

1. Take the first image. Capture the background shot without your subject. Your camera will record a properly exposed image of your location.

2. Take the second image. With the camera still on the tripod, have your subject enter the frame. They can be stationary or move slightly to create a blur. The camera will overlay this image on top of the first.

3. Use post-processing (optional). If your camera lacks a multiple-exposure setting, you can blend two separate images using editing software like Adobe Photoshop.
   a. Place the image of your ghost over the background photo as a new layer.
   b. Adjust the transparency of the ghost layer until it appears semi-transparent.

Other techniques for spectral effects

● Orbs and mist: Use an off-camera flash and kick up some dust or dry ice during a long exposure. The flash will illuminate the particles, creating bright, ethereal "orbs" or "mist".

● Infrared (IR) photography: Use a camera specially modified for IR or an IR filter on your lens. Infrared light can reveal details and effects not visible to the naked eye, producing a surreal, otherworldly look.

● Light painting: Set your camera to a long exposure in a dark environment. While the shutter is open, use a flashlight to selectively "paint" areas of your scene or subject, creating mysterious streaks and highlights.

● Black and white conversion: Converting your final images to black and white or adding a sepia filter can enhance the vintage, spooky feel.