



CENCI GOEPEL + JENS WARNECKE

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## A moon of light in the noon of night

“Lightmark,” the body of work by the German artists Cenci Goepel and Jens Warnecke, was created by photographing moving light sources at night. The resultant ethereal images inhabit a dramatic and often eerie landscape. Long exposures, up to an hour in length, are required to allow torchlight to take form and for the very low level of ambient light, usually from the moon, to illuminate the scene<sup>3</sup>. Seen through the viewfinder, the landscape often appears as solidly black. Using a medium-format camera for their photography, Goepel and Warnecke choose not to use any digital manipulation and instead regard physical challenges as part of the creative process. The couple travel all over the world in search of locations whose secret nature they seek to reveal through their “light paintings.”

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“At dusk, when other landscape photographers stow away their equipment, we get ready to work. Whether its in the wind-swept patagonian desert or in the icy northern part of Norway: wherever we travel we explore landscapes that reveal a magic beauty in the dark. A bit of moonlight, a faint glow of northern lights, some modified torches or a carefully placed fire: that is all it takes to uncover what is hidden in the dark. And when the sun comes up the next morning, no trace remains to show that we have ever been there.”

## 2.

### Photographic art: The colours of darkness

*Ruth Hoffmann*

Cenci Goepel and Jens Warnecke travel around the world, turning night into day. With flashlights and torches, the photographic artists set their Lightpaintings in unusual landscapes.

They create images of movement, light and darkness. They work in the pitch dark. Only once a photo has been developed will they know whether their subject is even visible. Cenci Goepel, 35, and Jens Warnecke, 38, take photos of light and darkness. They came up with the idea during their first trip together ten years ago, on a frozen lake in Norway:

“We were sitting in our VW van drinking mulled wine, playing around with candles, lighters and long exposure times,” Cenci recalls. “Suddenly we had the urge to go out into the cold, into this still and sparse mountain landscape. A strange atmosphere!” No light, just the full moon; no sound, just snow crunching underfoot. Warmed by mulled wine and a zest for life, they slide around on the ice and use their flashlights to paint patterns of light in the darkness. The camera stands on the bank, with the exposure time set to “infinite”.

There are three photos of this event: Written in light, one of them says “Cenci”, another “Jens” and the word “Nature” floats in the third. The lake and mountains are in the background, bathed in lush blue moonlight. “We agreed that this was worthy of further experimentation,” says Jens. “But then it took more than six years before we actually got started. Both of us were seized by this idea. Strangely enough, we never talked about it.” But three years ago they finally did. Ever since then, they have been travelling the world: Australia, North



America, three months by bicycle through Patagonia – always searching for unique landscapes where they can paint with light. Good friends at the start, they have become a couple. And the original, awkward products of chance have turned into an art form they call “Lightmark”.

While the principle is simple, implementing it requires practice, hard work and most of all endurance. During the day, Cenci and Jens look for suitable motifs: A cliff jutting out over a river, trees bowed by the wind, a cactus in the desert. Using a computer programme, they calculate when and where the moon is going to rise. They establish the frame and mark the camera location. Later on, when they return in the dark to take the actual picture, they need to rely on their preliminary work: The camera’s viewfinder only shows blackness. Now one of them uses flashlights, LED lamps and sometimes even torches to paint a trail through the darkness while the other stands behind the camera. Anyone watching the two of them at work will only see a point of light. A time exposure is required for their movements to combine into shapes: Spirals, ovals, concentric circles, intertwined lines, Gothic arches, filigree spheres. “We are always experimenting with new shapes and light sources,” says Jens. Sometimes they guide their “light brushes” by hand, at other times they hurl them through the air on a strap. As long as the lamps illuminate the camera from the front, they leave two-dimensional traces. But if they are also moved backwards and to the side, weaker and stronger lines appear on the film to create sculptures with the appearance of depth. The artists have 50 different lamps in their repertoire; some of them are converted to cast light a certain way. “And we each have our favourites,” says Cenci. “It’s no different than an artist with his brushes. The only way to really know what works is to try it.” The aperture on the camera stays open for up to half an hour. First, the lines are painted in just a few minutes. The rest of the exposure time captures moonlight to make the landscape vis-



ible – ghostly or bright as day, depending on the duration. Fixed responsibilities have not been assigned by the couple. They take turns in front of and behind the camera, and both of them are always involved in designing the image: “For example, Jens may be painting his spirals – something he is especially good at – while I spontaneously decide when to cover the viewfinder, thereby interrupting the movement,” Cenci explains. “This results in concentric circles on the photo, although the movement really was a continuous spiral.”

The camera also needs to be covered from time to time in order to create several sculptures in a single setting; this gives the other person time to start over at a different spot. “It often takes a lot of yelling for us to communicate,” Jens tells us. “Sometimes we are standing so far away from each other that we need to use light signals.” Most of the time, they can barely sense their partner’s presence: To remain invisible on the photos, both of them are dressed in black and often have ski masks covering their faces.

“We look rather daring in our outfits, heading into the night carrying cases of gear,” Cenci laughs. “Like burglars.” A photo shoot usually takes all night, since the exposure time turns each attempt into a protracted procedure. If clouds or fog appear in the meantime, their efforts are often in vain. This is how it was at the Perito-Moreno glacier in the Andes, Argentina: For nearly two weeks, the two of them crept into the national park night after night and waited for hours in a landscape of fissured ice, hoping for better weather. To no avail. They continued their journey with heavy hearts. Loaded down with 80 kilograms of luggage: Provisions, tripod and camera, computer, lamps and climbing gear - just the bare necessities. Why all this drudgery in the age of digital photography and image processing? “It just wouldn’t be the same,” they both say at the same time. “The unpredictable creative process is the most fascinating part,”



says Jens. “Going places that are difficult to reach in the middle of the night is part of the fun,” Cenci adds. “Working with the landscape but not leaving any traces behind. Creating something, yet everything remains untouched. When morning comes, it’s like we were never there at all.” It is fun to listen to these two. They seem so genuine and humble. No artistic extravagance, no pomposity. They simply enjoy what they do. Even their techniques are freely discussed. If anyone wants to do the same – go ahead, it would be great if everyone can be creative! So it only seems natural that they turned down a lucrative offer from an advertising agency.

“They wanted to recreate one of our images with actors in a studio,” Jens tells us. “We thought about it for a long time, and there was a lot of money involved. But in the end, we decided it was too far removed from our concept.” In exchange for the freedom of not having to be commercially viable, the two of them also work as an independent graphic designer and filmmaker.

They have been living on an old farm in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern with some friends for the last two years. This is an ideal base for their work. When they were still living in Hamburg, they often had to drive long distances in order to get away from the harbour lights. “Now we can practice anytime, with starry skies and dark woods right outside our door,” says Jens. “We created some of our most beautiful pictures here. Of course we do have to travel further for spectacular natural phenomena. But we are both addicted to travelling anyway.” And then they rave about the northern lights in Finland, the spooky cracking noises of Norwegian glaciers, the narrow strip of moonlight above the salt flats in Death Valley, California. They are heading to Greenland next, and then perhaps to Namibia. Generally speaking, anything that flows and steams - from volcanoes to geysers - could be exciting. “We are always coming up with new ideas we would like to use right away,” Cenci sighs. “We just



can't keep up!" Both photographers agree that "Lightmarks" have changed their point of view. "We have learned how colours appear in the dark," Jens says while Cenci nods. "For me, darkness is no longer dark. How long it takes to make it light is just a matter of exposure time."

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## 3.

### Interview

**Briefly introduce yourself and describe your artistic union.**

Cenci Goepel was born in 1972 in Lübeck, Germany. In 2000, she graduated from the Hamburg University of Applied Sciences, Faculty of Communication Design. In the years that followed, she worked as a painter and photographer in Germany, Norway and Korea. She has been working on the Lightmark project with filmmaker and photographer Jens Warnecke since 2006.

Jens Warnecke was born in 1969 in Hamburg, Germany. He studied philosophy and contemporary literature at the University of Hamburg. In 1997, he started to work as a filmmaker and photographer. He has been working on the Lightmark project with painter and photographer Cenci Goepel since 2006. “We are a couple, two people who like to be outdoors. That’s where we met, that’s where we started to work together and that’s where we’ll continue to be. When we met, Cenci was a painter and Jens was engaged in filming, editing and animation: Maybe photography was somehow in between.”

**How did you come up with the concept for this type of photography?**

The first experiments in this series were more or less created by chance. We were travelling through the Norwegian winter in an old VW van at the end of the nineties. During a cold, clear, moonlit night, we started making simple shapes in the air with

flashlights and a lighter on the bank of a frozen lake while taking photos with long exposure times. Since we had consumed considerable amounts of mulled wine, the results were not particularly sophisticated. But behind the scribbles of light, the lake and mountain landscape appeared bathed in lush blue moonlight. So we thought “Wow, we definitely have to experiment with this some more!”

### What does photography mean to you?

For us, photography is a means to combine several things. When we develop a motif, we always start with the landscape. However, we show these landscapes in light that is much too weak for the human eye. Extremely long exposure times are needed to show the light that is there, even when it appears to be completely dark. Long exposure times also change the landscapes themselves: Stars become lines, clouds are smeared across the sky and waves on the water melt into a surface that looks like metal. We then accent these surreal landscapes with light. But instead of introducing foreign objects, we try to enhance and comment on what is already there. Our work with light is really based on movement. Once again, long exposure times are needed to create the three-dimensional shapes. Anyone watching us work at night won't see anything but a point of light in the darkness.

We like the idea that the next morning when we are gone, there are no traces that we have ever been there - except on our photographs.



How do you choose the locations for your photo shoots? Do you plan in advance where, how and what to shoot?

Our images require a certain amount of preparation. We usually search for the right settings during the day, try out frames, mark camera locations and try to estimate the effects of moonlight and other sources of light based on tables. We then stay at the site or return later at night. Photographing a scene usually takes all night. The composition as a whole is the deciding factor. We use some type of ambient lighting so the setting is visible in the night. There are usually plenty of lights in the city and the moon is nature's illuminator. While the light painting is usually complete in a relatively short amount of time, the environment takes a lot longer to become visible. Once the drawing is finished, we allow the photo to expose for a few minutes after, sometimes even up to an hour. We first test the lighting conditions and experiment with different light sources and shapes. The camera is also used to find the frame, since long exposure times are needed to make the landscape visible. All you see in the viewfinder is black. Sometimes our light paintings turn out better and sometimes not so well. The lighting may change imperceptibly. This is why we always shoot a scene several times.



### What is the division of responsibilities when you create your pictures?

We have no fixed responsibilities when we take our photos. Both of us are able to operate the camera. Sometimes one of us has a clear concept of a particular motif and assumes the role of “director”. But most of the time, we develop our ideas together so that we both contribute to the final result. Only when it comes to painting with light do we each have our specialties: Cenci makes more beautiful spheres, Jens better spirals.

### Tell us about your techniques. How do you shoot and what device do you use?

We use a Phase One 645 AFDIII medium format camera with a p45+ digital back. The digital back offers the best quality of all digital camera systems that allow for exposure times exceeding 32 seconds.

We use many different lamps for the light paintings; some of them have been modified to adapt their lighting characteristics to our needs. But everything else that emits light is also very interesting to us: At the moment, we are experimenting with fire a lot.

### Why isn't the light painter visible in the photographs?

The most frequently asked question about our photos is why the person behind the painting isn't visible. We need not review the fundamental concept behind extended exposure in order to answer this question. For the most part, it's really simple to avoid leaving unwanted traces in your photo. First of all, we

dress in all black for photographing and cover up any reflective object that might create light tracers, making black electrical tape part of every get up.

In order to darken our hands and face we wear black gloves and a black motorcycle mask. But when wearing this outfit, you have to be absolutely aware that encounters with other people or the police can easily lead to uncomfortable misunderstandings. However, even in black clothes, it's possible that the light painter will show up as a shadow in the foreground of the photo. The only things that help avoid this are quick movements and leaving the scene while exposing the background.

### Do you face any particular challenges when creating your photos?

Since we always take pictures outside, sometimes at remote locations, we often encounter factors that are not foreseeable and that we cannot influence. The weather in particular has caused us some problems in the past: In the Andes, we once tried photographing a scene at a glacier-fed lake. After six nights of fog, freezing rain and stormy weather, we were forced to give up and leave. Keeping our equipment portable, travelling with a backpack, bicycle or canoe, and staying on site as long as possible without needing additional supplies is important to us.

### Isn't all of this ultimately assembled on the computer?

We only use classic photography techniques to create our pictures. Retouching in order to remove flaws was only used with a few select images. We are both familiar with digital image manipulation techniques – and made a conscious decision not to

use them. For us, the creative process used to make these pictures is part of the excitement: At night, frequently in remote locations, in wind and weather, usually over many hours and sometimes even days...

### Do you have any tips for people who would like to create similar photographs?

Light painting has experienced a massive boom in the last couple decades largely due to digital photography, which allows photographers to see instantly what they have just photographed. It's an excellent tool for experimentation. To paint with light, all you really need is something that shines and can be moved. Classic objects are LED flashlights or light bulbs, but the imagination certainly knows no limits. People juggle with Star Wars light sabers, develop their own pyrotechnics and program blinking LED arrays in order to make complex designs using extended exposure to capture constant motion. Others throw fluorescent boomerangs, send boats carrying candles over water, or tag tiny lights on herds of sheep. Do you have some ideas of your own? Just try it!

Ingredients:

- A camera that allows all automated features to be deactivated
- A sturdy tripod
- Flashlights, torches or other sources of light
- The desire to roam around at night

It has to be possible to adjust all camera settings manually – this is important. Auto focus and light meters do not work reliably



in the required lighting conditions and using a flash is not helpful. Even with long exposure times, a small amount of ambient light is required so that the landscape will show up. Moonlight is best, but the last light at dusk or scattered light from brightly lit settlements can also act as a light source. We usually start with a simple test exposure: Put the camera on the tripod, open the aperture all the way and let a few minutes of exposure time elapse. Now you can evaluate the brightness and temperature of the light as well as the focus and frame, making adjustments to the settings as required. We usually close the aperture a bit in order to achieve a greater depth of field. As a rule of thumb, each aperture increment doubles the exposure time. Once you have found suitable settings by following this process, you can start painting motifs with light. Dark clothing helps ensure you do not appear in the picture as a “ghost”. It is best to work in pairs for more complex shapes: One person with a light source in front of the camera, and one behind the camera to temporarily cover it when you do not want exposure. Have fun experimenting!

### What Lamps do you use for your Lightpainting?

We’ve experimented with a lot of complex, colorful, blinking lights, but in the end we always turn back to bright yet simple light sources. Most of our photos are painted with LED lamps, which make all the difference in the world when it comes to detail. Finding the perfect lamp isn’t exactly a quick task, since seeing the results in the photograph is the only way to truly tell if a light is good for the task. Besides their light color and brightness, lamps vary greatly in how they emit light. The design of LEDs, reflectors, lenses and even safety glasses influences the internal configuration of the light and, therefore, the dynamics



of the light drawing. With a brush and paint, the line thickness is influenced by the amount of pressure applied, but a stroke with the flashlight becomes more intense the more directly it is captured by the camera. If the light is pointed directly at the camera, the result is a bright and glimmering spot, yet as it turns away, the stroke becomes thinner and thinner until it disappears. Very few lamps are able to actually create a continuously subtle transition between bright light and darkness. We had to make some slight adjustments to most of our lamps: we filed back the protruding plastic casing on some, taped diffusion foil over lenses, or altered the reflectors using aluminum foil.

**What should one avoid? What mistakes did you make before perfecting this look? How long did it take for you to succeed?**

First we thought: “OK, its dark out there so we need highspeed material and high-speed settings on the DSLR.” The result was lots of grain and digital noise. So the opposite is true: try the lowest speed possible and be patient while exposing the shot. Might take minutes, might take hours. There are a few core rules that help our photography:

Know your equipment and what it can do for you, especially your lamps. Wear black, move fast when you’re in the frame and avoid shining light on yourself. Find good sources of ambient light and use them to add depth to your shot. Don’t be so engrossed with your ingenious light painting that you forget to consider the overall composition of your photograph. Collaboration helps to achieve better results. Keep your ISO low to avoid noise.



### Why do you create?

We like the process and we like the results. It's as simple as that. Once we started to figure out that there is more light in the dark than we thought, we wanted to see more of it. So we continued to take pictures at night.

Each image is named for its location, numerical coordinates followed by a geographic description. You say this is a “lack of phantasy” [sic] on your part. Am I wrong to think there's more to it than that?

You are right, there is a little more to it. We consider the names to be an invitation. Since the landscape at the location where the pictures are taken is the most important component of the final result, we would like to invite people to visit these places. What is more: we hope to encourage some people to visit these places at night, for that can be a very special experience. Take Lightmark No 57, for instance. It is taken close to Badwater in Death Valley — a horrible place most of the time, packed with busloads of tourists. But in the night it's deserted. We started to walk towards the middle of the lake about one hour before moonrise. At first it was completely dark, but soon the moon came up and illuminated the surrounding mountains. Then the light swept very fast over the salt crust and flooded the whole valley. It appeared very bright because our eyes were adapted to the darkness and the salt was reflecting much of it: an extremely beautiful scene and a very impressive experience both of us won't forget.

There is another reason for naming the pictures in this way: it



doesn't provide too much of an interpretation. People tend to see different things when they watch our pictures. Things that range from technological to spiritual. We like to keep it that way.

You travel broadly for your images: Tierra del Fuego, Greenland, and Australia are just a few of the places you've produced your art. How often and for how long do you typically travel? How do you select the locations? How do you conceive the light patterns you create?

We travel as often as we can afford — typically around three times a year. Sometimes we take it slow: in Argentina we cycled from Buenos Aires to Ushuaia, which took us about three months. On other occasions we visit the places where we want to work straight away. We always watch out for places with interesting landscapes. The list of places we would like to visit is pretty long already and growing with the speed of light!

But that's only part of the story: one great aspect of the kind of photography we engage in is that one can do it almost everywhere. We took some very nice pictures in the forest just around the corner and even small things like a tuft of grass and some patches of moss can make up a great setting. We experiment quite a lot with different light-sources ranging from LED lights to various kinds of fire.

How do love and creativity coexist between collaborating artists?

People can collaborate in creative work without being in love - we did so for a couple of years. And people can be in love without being creative at all. But if both come together, it's like an explosion!



Two heads are better than one.

We find working as a team to be a great advantage. This way, one person can remain with the camera while the other is active in front. The person on the camera has two important tasks. First, they direct the light painter to the right spot because it's easy for the painter to lose orientation in the dark. He isn't able to see the camera and gains no sense of where he is in the photo. Secondly, they're able to "take a break" by holding a black piece of cardboard in front of the lens to temporarily stop the camera from recording the light. This is a tremendous help when it comes to making designs with numerous parts and it also allows the light painter to find new positions. It's also easier to find the right focus in the dark with two people. One person stands in the focal plane with an illuminated lamp while the other finds the focus.

**What are the most important qualities for a creator?**

In addition to curiosity and the desire to experiment there is one thing that is most important for the kind of photography we engage in: patience. It sometimes takes days experimenting on the spot in order to get things just right and pretty often the weather changes or something else goes wrong and we are forced to let go on a motive.

**What kind of message do you want to give the people whom see your photo's?**

Well, we want to pass the message that there is something fundamentally wrong with the way we live and organise our societies. That we have to work hard to overcome greed as the basis of our economy and that we have to distribute wealth, education, health and culture much more even within our societies as well as globally. But we are not quite sure, how to find all this in our pictures.



## 4.

### Reviews (Selection)

- 2010            Night Photography: Finding your way in the dark,  
Lance Keimig, Focal Press  
Tourner en video avec les reflex Canon,  
Sébastien Devaud, Eyrolles  
International Light Design Index 2010, Helmut M. Bien, AV Edition
- 2009            Tangible, R.Klanten, Die Gestalten Verlag, Berlin  
China Photo Press, Beijing, China  
光的轨迹 光, Japan  
Azart Photographie, La vitrine internationale  
de la Photographie contemporaine, Paris, France
- 2008            インタヴュー Parks Magazine, Washington, USA  
Aperçus, National Geographic, Washington, USA  
"You can do it", Popular Photography, New York, USA  
China Photo Press, Beijing, China  
"Die Farbe der Dunkelheit", Geo, Hamburg  
"Light", Gallerymagazine, Kiev, Ukraine  
"КРУГОСВЕТНЫЕ ПУТЕШЕСТВИЯ", Magazin, Moskau, Russia  
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3lux:letters, Das Architektur - Magazin, Arnsberg  
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D magazine, la Repubblica, Italy  
Design + Licht, Siteco, München
- 2007            "Lichtgestalten", 4-Season Magazin, Augsburg  
"Mit Licht Malen", fotoforum, Münster  
"La Patagonia vista desde una bicicleta",  
Rio Turbio, Argentina
- 2005            Frankfurter Allgemeine  
"Schrille Mutationen - überlebensgrosse Ikonen"



## 5.

Weblinks, Interviews, Portfolio:

[lightmark.de](http://lightmark.de)

[geo.de](http://geo.de)

[nikonnext.com](http://nikonnext.com)