



Bella Luce by Jeffrey Curto



Published in *LensWork* and *LensWork Extended* #58

Commentary

Art making is an activity without hard and fast rules, but that doesn't mean it's without *suggestions*. For years, I've said that photography is not about *light*, but rather about *life*. Not surprisingly, there are exceptions and light itself can be the subject of a photograph — as this image by Jeff Curto proves.

Without the angular light casting these interesting shadows, this would be a considerably less compelling photograph. The architectural details would still command our interest, but the shadows and light add an element of time. Let me be more specific, the shadows and light add an element of *the moment*. We intuitively know that viewing this scene an hour earlier or an hour later would likely present us with a completely different experience. In that sense, it could easily be argued that the real subject of this photograph is *the moment of experience* — not the architecture, not the door, not the light, not the shadows. All of these are simply the tools to place us, as viewers, in the scene, in this moment.

Think about that for just a minute. There's a pretty good chance that not a single one of us is standing at this location while viewing this photograph right now. Nonetheless, we have the visual sensation that we are! This is, of course, photography's most powerful attribute: its ability to transport us through time and space to a moment we did not actually experience, but can do so vicariously through the photographers skill. Amazing, and always worth remembering.

In particular, Curto does a marvelous job of presenting us an illusion of three dimensions in his two-dimensional artwork. By choosing the angle that creates a diagonal in the wall of the door, he increases the depth of the photograph. I think, however, the real key to this image that makes that three-dimensional illusion even more believable is the deep, dark shadow on the right edge. We can't see into that shadow, but we intuitively know that this darkness exists because there is space behind that twisted column. I'm often amazed how it is that some small feature of a photograph — like this shadow — creates something so vital to the success of the image, but often only on a subconscious level. That black shadow not only creates the three-dimensional depth that enhances the volume of the building, but it so clearly delineates the curious shape of that decorated, spiraling column. The subject of this photograph may, indeed, be the light itself, but it is the deep shadow on the right and the cast shadows on the door and wall that make that light visible. To push this perhaps a bit too far, pure light cannot be seen because it's pure white; light needs shadow for it to be visible. Talented calligraphers train their eye to see the paper, instead of the ink, as they draw each letter shape. Similarly, photographers need to train themselves to see shadows in order to better manifest a sense of light in their photographs.