Light is the very heart of photography. This is no surprise. In a studio setting, the photographer can control light. In other situations, the light you have is what you work with. In figurative work, the most common natural light situation is sunlight through a window. Depending on time of day, compass direction and the nature of the room, sunlight can be bold and stark, or surprisingly delicate—sometimes in the same image.
In most situations, direct sunlight results in levels of contrast ordinarily deemed unacceptable. This image violates that principle. I’d like to think that it conveys the feeling of basking in the sunlight.

The shape of shadows is one of our best clues to the form we are seeing. What we lose in terms of textural subtlety and tonal gradation is made up by an enhanced perception of curve and volume.

Direct sunlight just grazing a surface can exaggerate its texture manyfold.
Laura, 1990

Direct sunlight on a subject is always difficult to deal with. This image was taken in a beam of sunlight coming through a south-facing window. While this photograph has been colored, the tonal values are true to the black and white original. The overall exposure was determined by an incident reading on the near side of the face. This negative is not an easy one to print.

The model’s face is turned almost entirely away from the window. This has two effects. The first is that she’s not squinting in the direct light. The second is this really lovely highlighted profile effect.

As you can see, the "hot" side of the model is almost completely burned out on the negative. Fortunately, most of the model's body is in a shadow of her own making. This is not true of the cat, but as he's not the center of focus this is not a problem.

Another thing to observe is the textural emphasis given to any area struck by "raking" light, such as the model's lower leg.
A bright summer day and a south-facing window. Ordinarily, this would be exclusively a high-contrast situation. The room, however, was fairly small and had light-toned walls and ceiling. The result was fill light wherever sunlight wasn't directly striking the model.

Because the walls of the room are light toned, there is considerable fill light on the side facing away form the window. This results in an even tone on broad areas of the model . . .

. . . at the same time, the uppermost surface is brilliantly illuminated. Both the directly illuminated areas and the filled-in areas have a suppressed surface texture. It is only at the boundary between the two that texture is exaggerated.
"North Light" - the light through windows which face a northern sky is a "classic" lighting for people. The hallmark of this light is smooth, gradual tonal variation. In this case, not only is the window facing north, but the sky is overcast as well, further softening the light.

In light this soft it's sometimes difficult to achieve solidly defined forms. The model has very well defined musculature, but appears as a largely uniform surface with only the subtlest of indications of volume.

Even in the "hottest" areas on the model, tone and texture are preserved.
Photo Notes is a series of short essays on various photographic topics illustrated with examples from my own work. I’m not claiming any great insight into art, photography, perception, or even my own goals and motivations as a photographer. Rather, in the course of reviewing some 25 years of photographs, I noticed some trends in my work and I thought I’d write down a few observations. Recognize that all these observations are strictly post-hoc. I can’t claim to having thought them out before making the photograph or noticed them at the time I was working. It’s only with the luxury of time and distance that I find patterns emerging.

Photo Notes can be found on the web at: www-personal.umich.edu/~mrwizard

The Photo Notes Series

Sunlight Through the Window:
Natural Light and the Figure

On Simple Ground:
Figure and Background

The World is Flat:
Geometry and Abstraction

All text and photography is ©1975-2003, Dale Austin