Photographing Models

My favorite camera for model photography is a single-lens reflex with a 28mm wide-angle lens that stops down to f22 (f32 is even better). The bigger the f-stop number, the smaller the aperture. Smaller apertures increase depth of field – the area in front of and behind the subject that is in acceptable focus. A camera that isn't totally automatic will allow control of the f-stop, shutter speed, and focus.

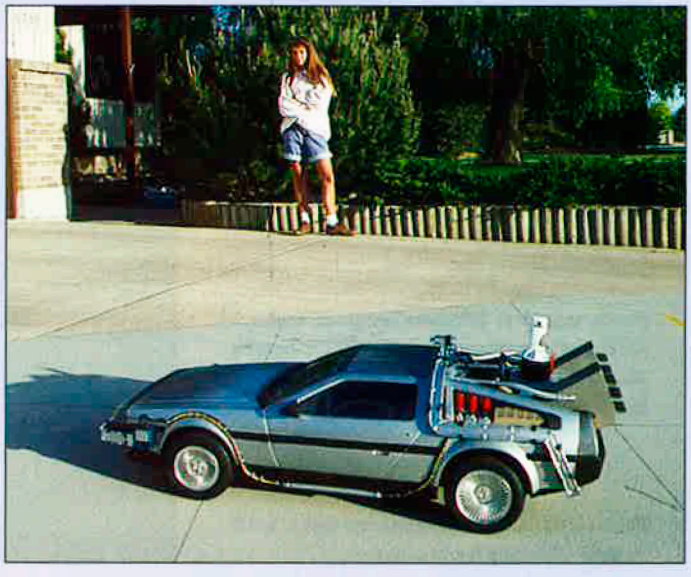
I like the 28mm wide-angle lens because it creates a realistic perspective between the model and a full-size backdrop.

A good base for the model to rest on is essential. I built a 3' x 4' frame with 1" x 2" wood strips, then glued and screwed Masonite on one side. This was painted with latex wall paint mixed to match a sample of concrete. I drew black lines to simulate expansion joints, then painted on yellow taxi guides.

This surface works great for modern aircraft, but for World War II and earlier subjects I have another base covered with model-railroad ground turf to simulate a grass field.

For ship models I use a surface made from textured clear acrylic sheet; the texture pattern is called "slate." I cut a hole to match the ship, paint the bottom surface sea blue, and dry-brush the wake white. For the *Nautilus* shot, I taped photos of two islands cut from a travel magazine to the back of the frame.

I shoot most models outdoors in sunlight. The strong light from above and the sharp shadows enhance realism.



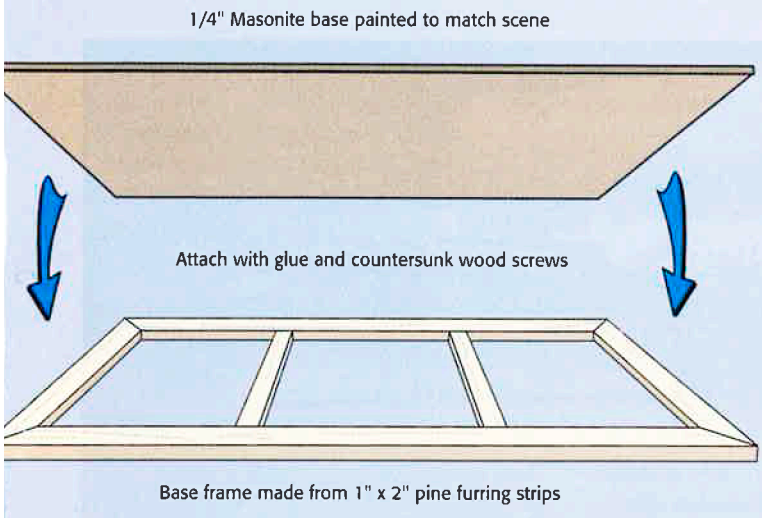
It's all a matter of perspective. This is obviously a 1/24 scale model of the DeLorean from the film "Back to the Future" with Pete's daughter Kellie standing in the background.

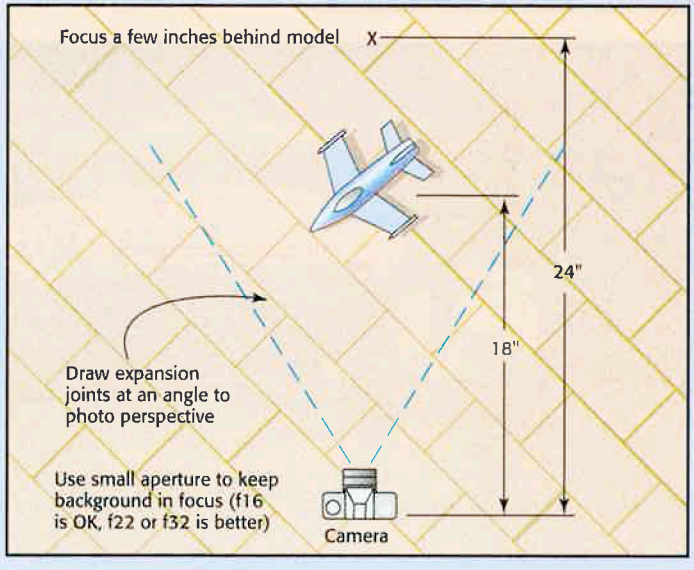
Backdrop. What better backdrop for model aircraft than an airfield? You can manipulate angles so an airfield hangar or a distant horizon appears to rest on the edge of your base.

Make friends with airport staff who allow you to shoot pictures. Show them your results, and hand them an extra print or two. That way, when you return for another shoot, you won't have to plead to walk out on the parking apron. Obey all restrictions, and you'll be welcome when you return.

Don't have an airport nearby? Find a large field or parking lot with a "far horizon" and tilt your camera and base so the horizon

Lowering the camera to "scale eye level" and moving in a little closer make the model look full size – and it looks like Kellie could climb in for a ride!





sinks in your viewfinder. Be careful not to tilt too much; you don't want the model to slide off the base. You don't want large trees and shrubs or out-of-place buildings spoiling your shot.

Perspective is everything. With the right combination of lens, backdrop, base, and subject, you can make any model look real in a photo. Study the arrangement in the viewfinder, and move the model around until it blends realistically with the backdrop.

When I use a 28mm wide-angle lens, I don't focus on the model, but a few inches behind it. The small f-stop and the wide-angle lens keep the model and the backdrop in realistic focus. When I use a 50mm or 55mm macro lens, I focus on the middle of the model for best depth of field.

Here's a way to make aircraft models look as though they are airborne. String two two-pound-test monofilament lines horizontally between two frames. Place the lines 6" to 8" apart, then lower the model onto the lines. With care, you can position the camera so the monofilament disappears against the sky. The larger grain of high-speed film also helps hide the strands. Suspend models on lines only on calm days; even a slight breeze could flip your model onto the ground.

Pete Bave

Meet Pete Bave

Pete built his first model (a Revell H-19 helicopter) and shot and developed his first photos when he was 7. That was nearly 40 years ago. Today, photography is his profession – he is an instructor and lecturer for a large photo company.

Pete lives in West Jordan, Utah, with his wife and four daughters. He prefers modeling in 1/48 scale, but doesn't shy away from other scales.