

Illuminating the season: How a business professor turns holiday lights into lessons on creativity and sustainability

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News
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On a December night in Chandler, Arizona, [Kevin Dooley's](#) house doesn't just twinkle. It beams like a beacon at the end of the cul-de-sac as the windows shimmer with color, and every corner inside hums with holiday spirit.

Step through the door, and you'll find yourself in a forest of 25 Christmas trees, each with its own personality. One salutes Santa, another honors World War II memorabilia, and a few proudly display what Dooley calls "tacky fast-food ornaments."

"It's something we do as a family," he said, smiling among the glittering branches. "Our house is kind of a Christmas museum. It's full of kitsch, and we lean into that."

Dooley isn't just any holiday enthusiast. By day, he's a professor of supply chain management at Arizona State University's [W. P. Carey School of Business](#). By night, he's an artist of light, turning his family's festive glow into swirling, abstract photographs that look like modern art.

Nearly 20 years ago, Dooley discovered that moving his camera slightly during long exposures could transform ordinary strings of lights into cosmic ribbons of color.

"I use light as the input and camera movement as the variable," Dooley said. "You never know exactly what you'll get, but patterns start to emerge with experience."

Dooley's curiosity runs deep. With a background in dynamic systems (the study of how things change over time) he brings a scientific mindset to his photography. Where most people see tangled wires and blinking bulbs, he sees a living system of motion, color and chance.

"Inside my head, everything's connected," he said. "The shapes I create are based on chaotic systems. I've studied chaotic mathematics and applied it to both social science and photography."

He finds beauty in the chaos. Using exposures that last from half a second to five seconds, he moves his camera (and sometimes himself) while photographing the lights. The results are wondrous: streaks, spirals and glowing webs that feel like a Christmas tree mid-dance.

"When you know what you're doing, you can take a hundred shots and at least one will turn out great," he said with a grin. "It's about finding that one frame where the chaos becomes beautiful."

Dooley compares his approach to lomography, a style of experimental photography that thrives on unpredictability.

"There's no manual for this," he said. "You learn by doing."

Some admirers liken his work to Jackson Pollock's energetic, splattered paint. Dooley smiles at the comparison but insists he has more in common with Bob Ross.

"Ross used to talk about 'happy accidents,'" he said. "That's what I'm doing — using tools in ways they weren't designed for. That's where creativity happens."

Of course, no discussion of Christmas lights is complete without touching on sustainability, a topic central to Dooley's work as a professor. He admits that his artistic side sometimes wins over his eco-friendly instincts.

"LEDs are 10 times more efficient, but they make for more boring photographs," Dooley laughed. "The older incandescent bulbs have richer tones and more interesting effects."

That kind of trade-off fascinates him. It mirrors the dilemmas he studies in his research, where businesses must balance environmental impact with practicality. Even the question of real versus artificial Christmas trees, he said, has no simple answer.

"If you reuse an artificial tree for 10 years, it's more sustainable than cutting a new one each season," he said. "But if you buy a real tree locally and recycle it, that can also be sustainable. It's all about lifecycle thinking."

For Dooley, the holidays are the perfect time to explore those trade-offs, when people reflect on values, traditions and what truly matters.

"Sustainability is really about systems," he said. "Everything is connected — from supply chains to ecosystems to the traditions we keep."

The reach of his light paintings extends far beyond his living room. Dooley shares his work freely on [Flickr](#) under a Creative Commons license, allowing anyone to use his images with credit.

"I probably have at least one source a day using my photos," he said. "I've got about 115 million views on Flickr."

That openness mirrors Dooley's academic philosophy.

"Art and science both advance through sharing," he said. "Whether you're testing an experiment or uploading an image, you're contributing to a larger conversation."

Dooley's creative practice also influences his teaching. In class, he reminds students that sustainability and innovation thrive on curiosity, experimentation and a willingness to be wrong.

"You have to be comfortable with uncertainty," he said. "That's true in research, in art and in life."

Every photo, he says, begins as a hypothesis and ends as a surprise.

"Even passionate photographers tend to stick to one style," Dooley said. "If I'm lucky, I'll make a light painting where people say, 'I have no idea how that was made.' That's success to me."

As December unfolds, the rhythm of his creative cycle begins again. His wife designs the elaborate displays that fill their home, and Dooley captures them in motion.

"It's my way of extending her art," he said. "She creates the trees and decorations, and I translate that into another medium."

For him, photographing light has become a meditation on attention and gratitude. It's also a gentle reminder that creativity begins with seeing differently.

"What I love about photography is that it forces you to notice," Dooley said. "You start to recognize patterns in light and in life. That's what sustainability is about, too. You start to see connections."

His colleagues see that same creativity reflected in his academic work.

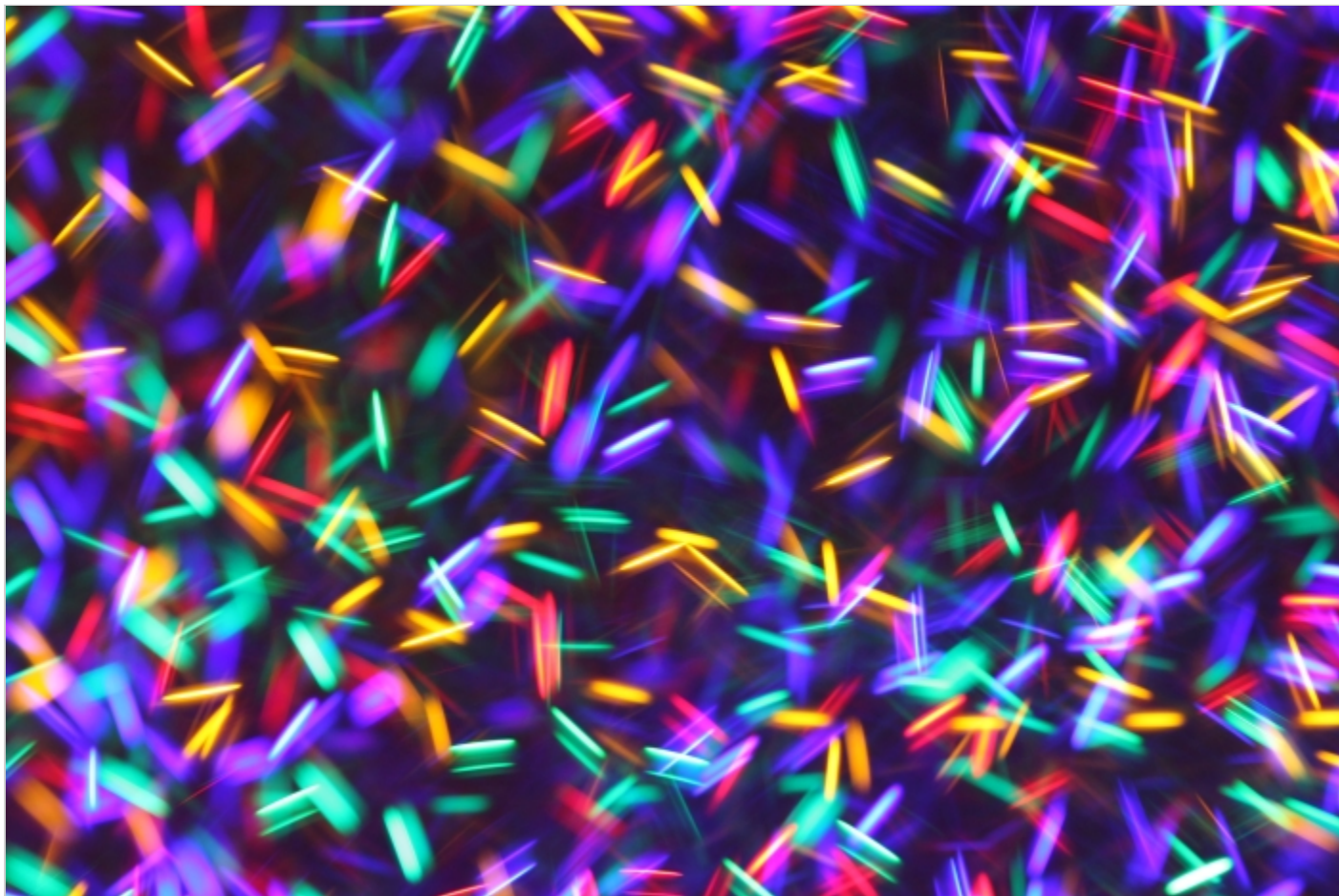
"What I admire most about Professor Dooley is how he transforms something as simple as holiday lights into powerful lessons on creativity and sustainability," said [Adegoke Oke](#), chair of the [NASPO Department of Supply Chain Management](#), [Harold E. Fearon Fellow Committee Chair](#) and professor of supply chain management. "His ability to connect everyday experiences to supply chain challenges inspires our students to think differently about innovation and responsibility."

By January, the trees will come down and the house will return to its normal rhythm. But the glow of the season lingers in Dooley's work, a cheerful reminder that curiosity never burns out.

"Creativity keeps you curious," he said. "It keeps you humble, too, because you're always learning from what doesn't work."

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



An abstract photo titled "Christmas No. 33" by ASU Professor Kevin Dooley.

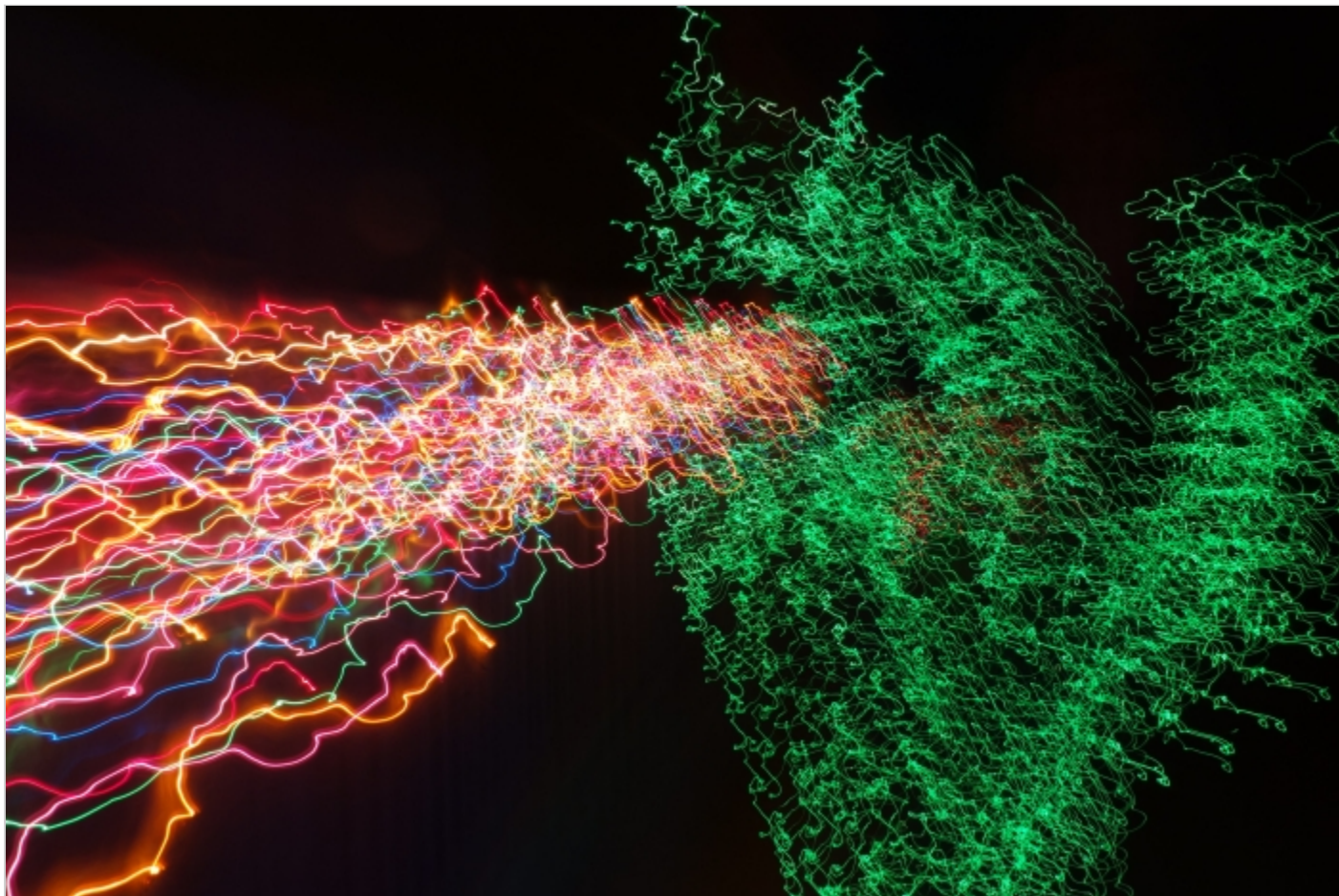
Text image(s)



Kevin Dooley



"Flower Bokeh" by Kevin Dooley.



"Christmas No. 40: Fire Breathing Light Monster" by Kevin Dooley.