

The Next Step: Surrealistic HDR Techniques

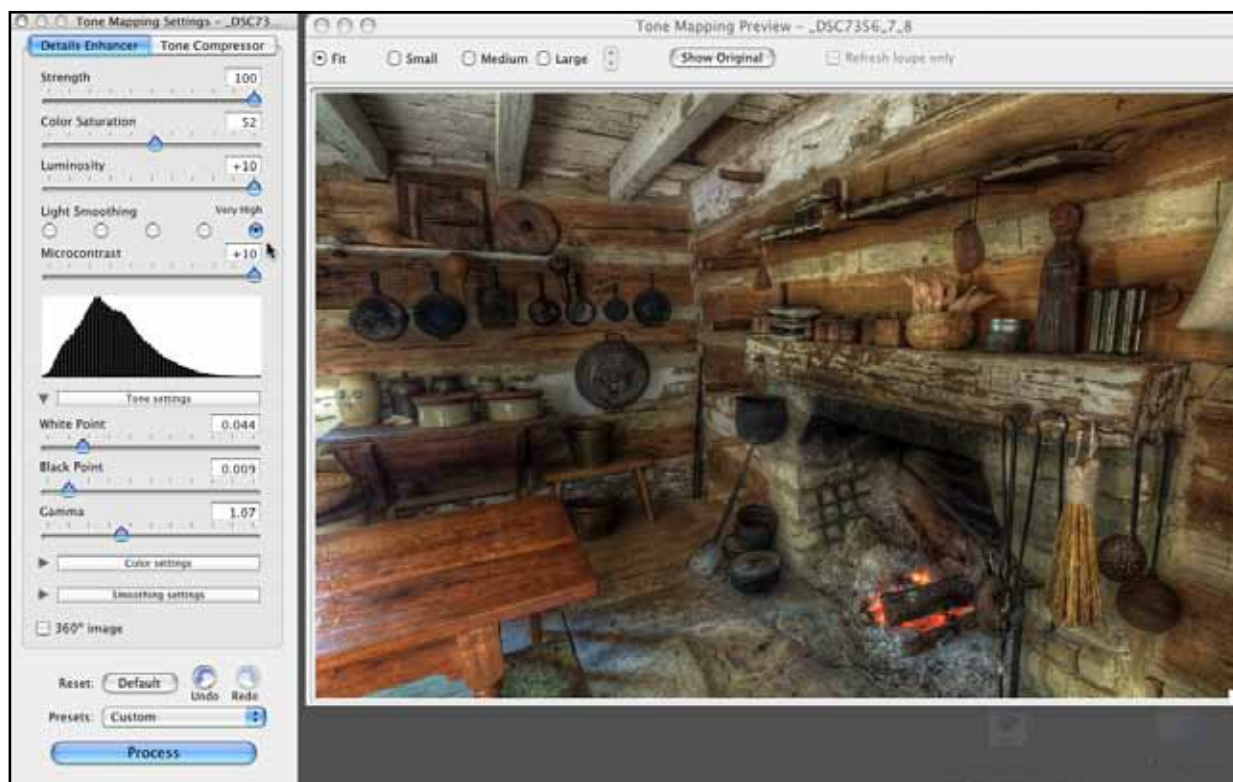
by Photographer Raymond Klass

Creating surrealistic images with Photomatix makes use of the software's ability to make objects "glow". This can give an illustrative appearance to the overall image that can resemble a cartoon or drawing. This article builds upon the basic HDR technique article from my July 2009 Newsletter. That article can be found here:

<http://www.klassphoto.com/newsletter/200907>

In this article, I will concentrate on the techniques, both with Photomatix, and to a lesser degree, Photoshop, that will enable you to achieve the refined surrealistic image. We start the process after the base images have been selected and Photomatix's automatic calculations are finished. At this point, we click "Tone Mapping", and begin to work with how the software blends the differently exposed images into a final composite.

It is important to note that the set of three images I'll be working with was exposed using the same technique as for the basic HDR image. One image was exposed at the camera's recommended setting, another was exposed one stop over, and the last was exposed at one stop under. The surrealistic feel of the final image has everything to do with how the picture is finished off in Photomatix, and not through some special exposure technique.

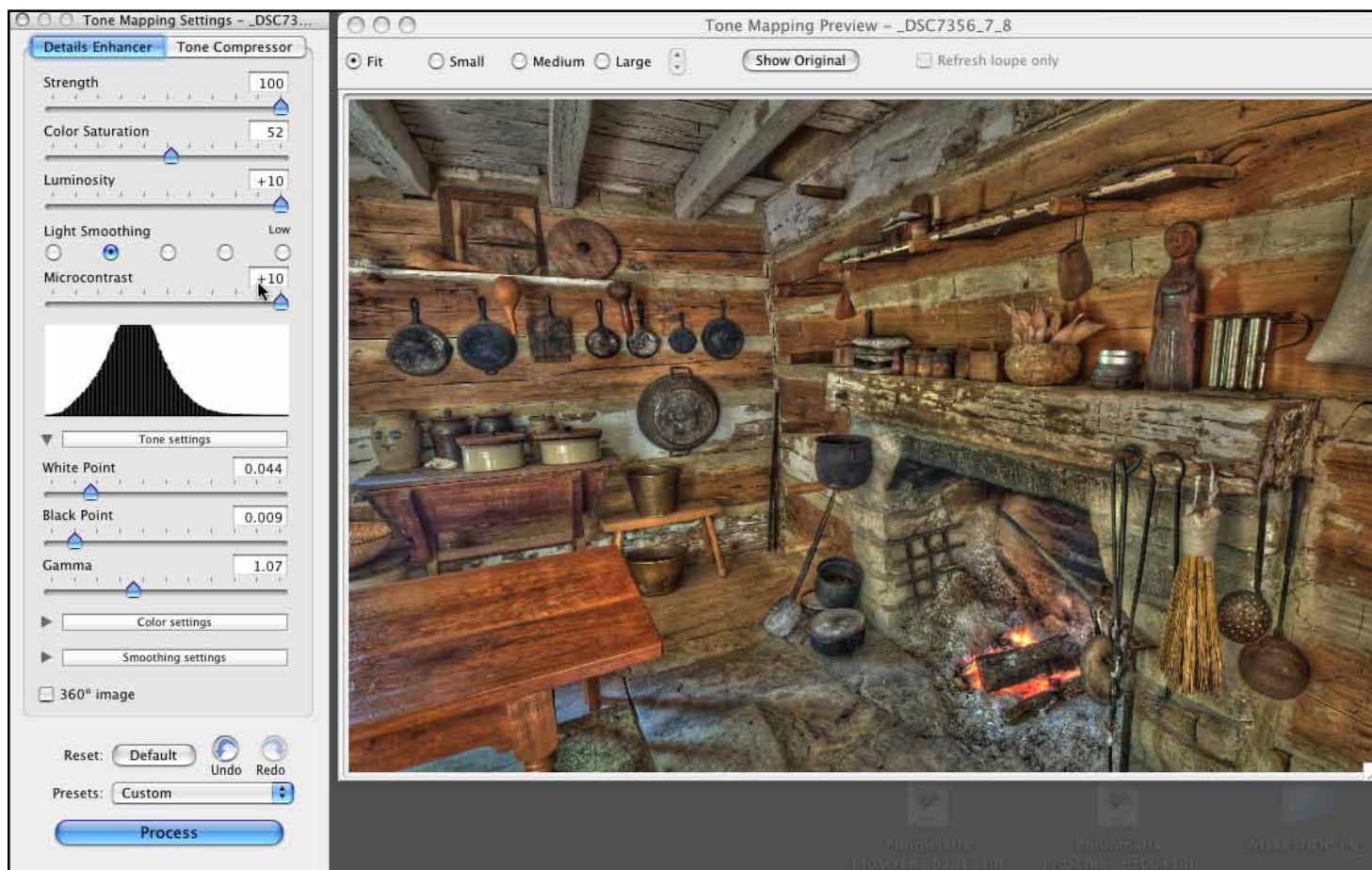


Raymond Klass Photography Newsletter

Before I dive into the controls and settings we will manipulate, I think it's important to note that some images work better for this technique than others. I find that pictures with a large amount of small details or small objects tend to have more impact than images that feature a broad sky met by a broad foreground. The various kitchen objects in this image, with the right settings, will glow and separate from the background.

Images that feature a large expanse - think of a sunset or sunrise with a mountain and sky - tend to have one strong transition between dark and light. These images glow only along that line, and don't tend to have as much impact as illustrative interpretations. I also prefer images of "older" looking content - these old kitchen tools are the perfect subject for a technique that can make the image look older than it is.

When we looked at Photomatix before, we experimented with both the Details Enhancer method, and the Tone Compressor method. For creating these images, we will stick with the Details Enhancer method. We will rely heavily on the "local adjustments" it makes to create that signature "glow".



The big difference between this image and the one on the last page is that the Light Smoothing has been turned down almost to its lowest setting. This has the effect of exaggerating the local glow, rather than "smoothing" it. I use the second to lowest setting because the lowest tend to make the image too flat.

Raymond Klass Photography Newsletter

Below the Light Smoothing control is the control for Micro Contrast. This controls the amount of contrast to be used in the “glow” effect, I typically use 10, the full amount.

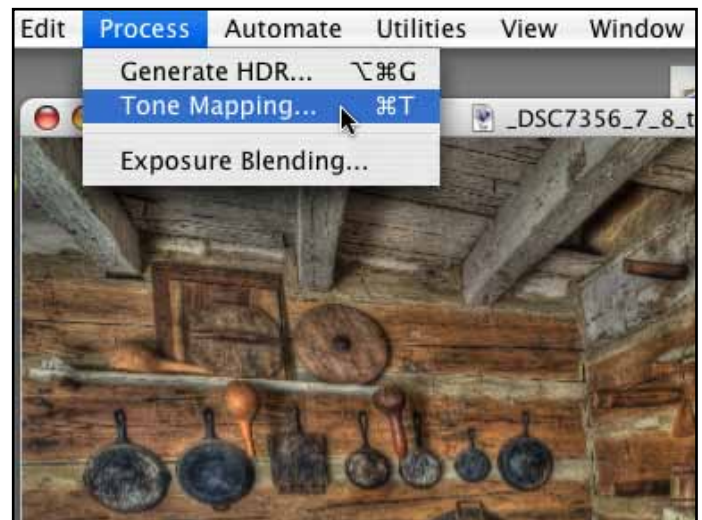
The only other control that affects the surrealistic look is the Strength slider, and typically I use between 100 and 90. This control will make the overall HDR effect more pronounced, and that’s what we’re looking for.

I also use the Luminosity slider to achieve the desired tonality level. It works much the same as the middle slider in Photoshop’s levels command. I also use the Color Saturation slider to achieve the desired saturation in the image - sliding it to the right increases it, while going left decreases it.

The image on the previous page has these settings applied to it, and you might be saying to yourself that it doesn’t quite have that surrealistic look yet. I would agree. I find that it’s often necessary to process an image two or even three times to achieve the look I want. So, for this image, I click the Process button for now.

Photomatix will process the image. I then click Save As to save the resulting picture - we’ll use it in a later step. Don’t close the file yet, it’s time to start round number 2 of processing. Photomatix grays out the Tone Mapping button on the left control panel, but there is a work-around for this.

Click the Process menu, and choose the Tone Mapping option. This is equivalent to clicking the button on the left, and frankly I don’t know why that one is grayed out, while the other is active.



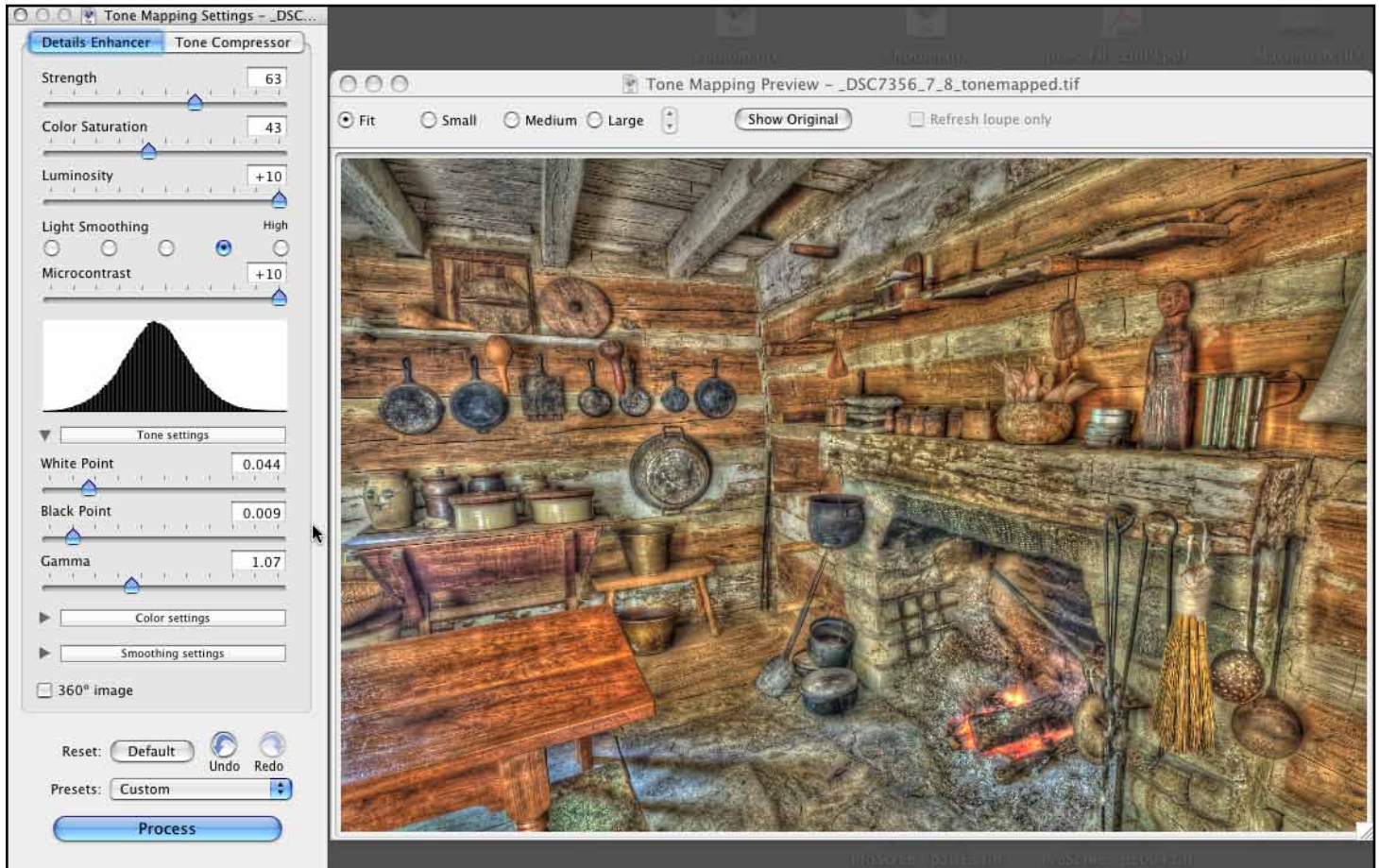
This brings the processed image back into the Details Enhancer method and allows us to “double process” the HDR.

If this is the first time you’re trying this, the results are likely to surprise you. The default for Photomatix it to start out with the last settings you used as a base for the next adjustment. For this image’s second round of processing, these settings are far to intense.

For the second round, I typically turn down the Strength - for this image I’ll be using 63. I also increase the Light Smoothing drastically. I find that the first round of HDR treatment gives objects their sharper glow, while subsequent rounds are better creating a more diffuse glow. By turning down the Light Smoothing, the objects glow is spread out.

Once again, the Luminosity and Color Saturation sliders can be adjusted by eye so the color and tone looks the way you want it to. Typically I leave the Micro Contrast at 10.

Raymond Klass Photography Newsletter



The above image is likely closer to what you expected as an illustrative image. The objects now glow, and the interpretation has thoroughly departed from reality.

Just like the first time we processed the image, I click Process to keep my adjustments and have Photomatix process the image. When finished, I once again save the image using the Save As command. For this technique, I prefer to have one image under-processed (that was our first round), one image that approximates the look I want (this image), and one image processed more than I'll anticipate needing. For this, I repeat the steps to re-process the image.

To do this, I again select Tone Mapping from the Process menu, and repeat the steps while further tuning back the sliders. I then process and save this, the third version of the image.

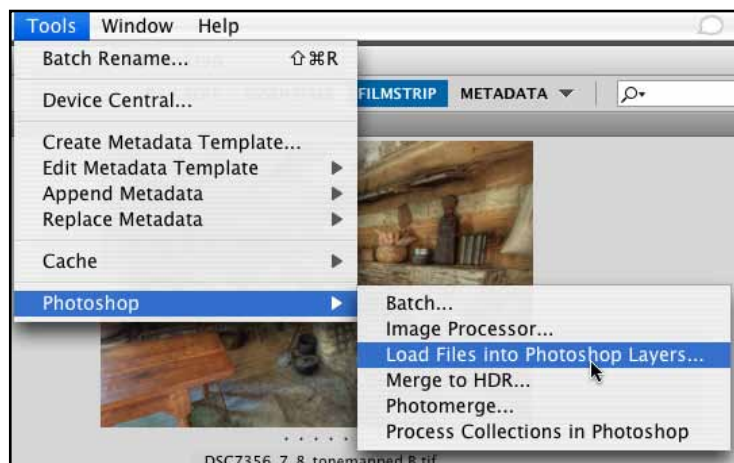
With the three images created, I close the image and Photomatix, and turn my attention to fine turning the result. We will do this through Photoshop by blending the three images using the opacity controls.

First, open Adobe Bridge and find the three images. Select the three images holding down the command button (mac), or control button (PC).

Raymond Klass Photography Newsletter

With the three selected, click the Tools menu, and select the Photoshop sub-menu, finally clicking the option to Load Files into Photoshop Layers.

For those using Adobe CS4, this skips the step of having to bring all three documents into one composite document. If you're not using Adobe CS4, you'll want to simply double click to open the image individually, and drag from one to another to create a single document with all three layers in it.



From here, you'll want to turn your attention to the Layer Palette, where the three images should be showing as three distinct layers. I placed my most realistic image on the bottom - the one I processed once, then placed the one I processed twice above it, and finally placed the image I processed three times on the top. I reordered these layers by dragging and dropping them above or below their neighbors.

After the layers have been ordered, it's time to use the opacity to blend the three together.

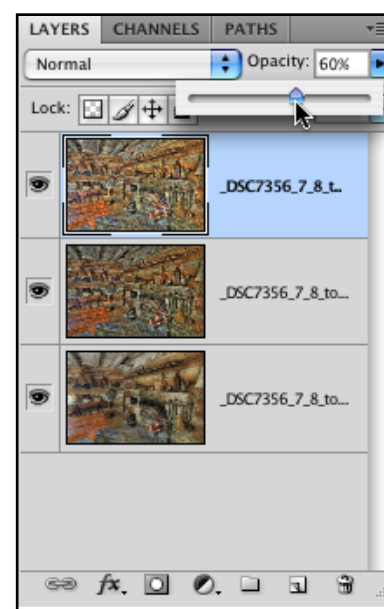
I start at the top, clicking once on the top layer to highlight it blue. I then select the slider in the upper right of the palette labeled Opacity to control the opacity of the layer.

Opacity controls how much of the layer is visible. At right, the box shows the upper-most layer as being at 60% opacity. This means that the final result will be made up of 60% of the top layer (the most pronounced illustrative one), and 40% from the layers below.

I adjust the opacity of both the top and middle layer to achieve the right "blend" of the differently illustrative images created in Photomatix. You can also use any of the other tools you're familiar with in Photoshop to this composite. Often I use masking to hide or reveal certain parts of the more illustrative layers.

The other control that I often find useful is the Hue / Saturation adjustment, as the composite can sometimes become a bit over-saturated for my taste.

This final step is really a by-eye adjustment to get just the right balance for you particular image. On the next page is my final image.



Raymond Klass Photography Newsletter

