

Selective Saturation: A Better Approach to Color

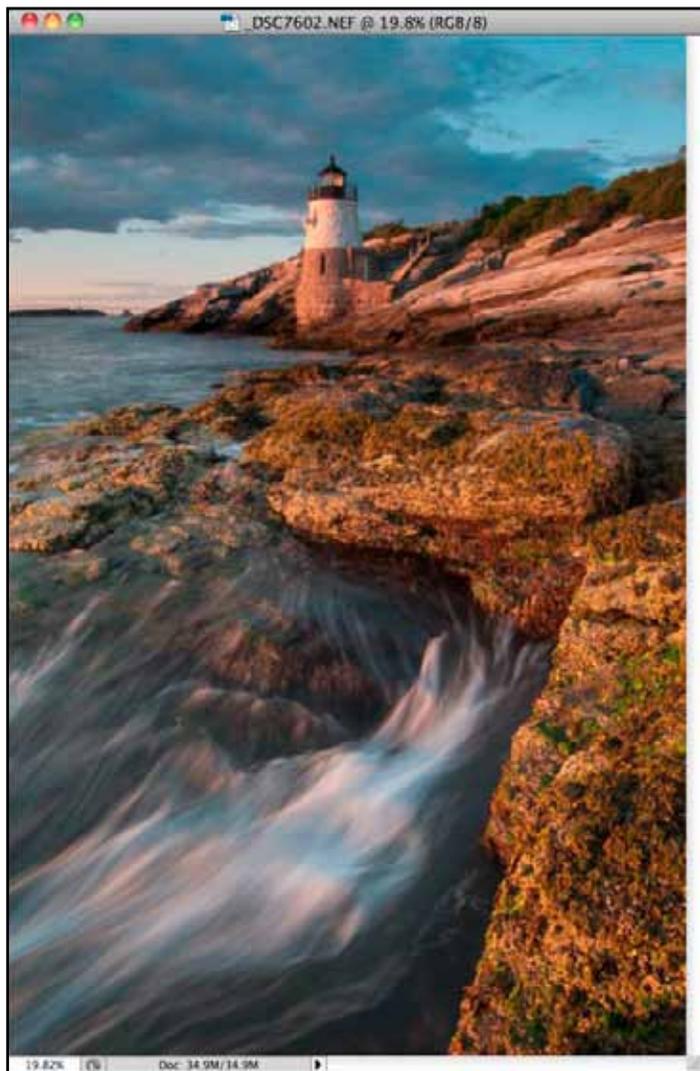
by Photographer Raymond Klass

Perhaps one of the best and worst aspects of the digital photography revolution has been the ability for us as photographers to precisely control the color and saturation of our final images. In the days of film, the control a chrome shooter had was limited to their selection of film type – Fuji Velvia for greens or Kodak for blues – and the occasional warming filter to pump up the fall foliage color.

With the advent of Photoshop, I've seen some beautifully enhanced images, but I've also seen far too many overly saturated ones. With the amazing control we're provided by software, there needs to be an equal amount of restraint employed to insure that the results of our efforts best reflect our personal vision for the image. The saying – "Less is more" couldn't be more appropriate when it comes to adding saturation to your image.

It might be tempting to adjust the saturation and or vibrance of your image in camera raw – whether this be through Photoshop, Bridge, Lightroom, Aperture, or another software that allows access and manipulation of the RAW information. I would advise against this for the time being for 2 main reasons. First, it's much easier to selectively saturate colors in certain areas, while leaving others alone using Photoshop's much more mature tools. Secondly, the HSL sliders in RAW, which allow you to selective saturate only the blues or reds for instance, are fundamentally flawed – they often don't do a good job at deciphering the difference between colors, and the transition areas between what is saturated, and what is not saturated can end up looking "choppy". For these reasons, I greatly prefer to adjust the overall tonality and color temperature in RAW, and then bring the image into to Photoshop to adjust the saturation of individual areas.

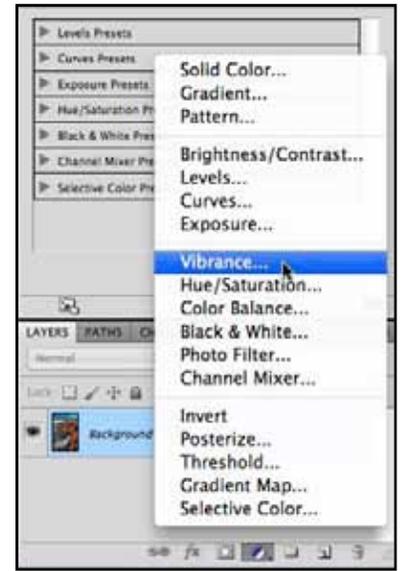
To begin, I've opened an image into Photoshop that I've already adjusted the color temperature and general tonality of. Taking a look at the image, I know that I want the color to "Pop" a bit more, but I don't want to



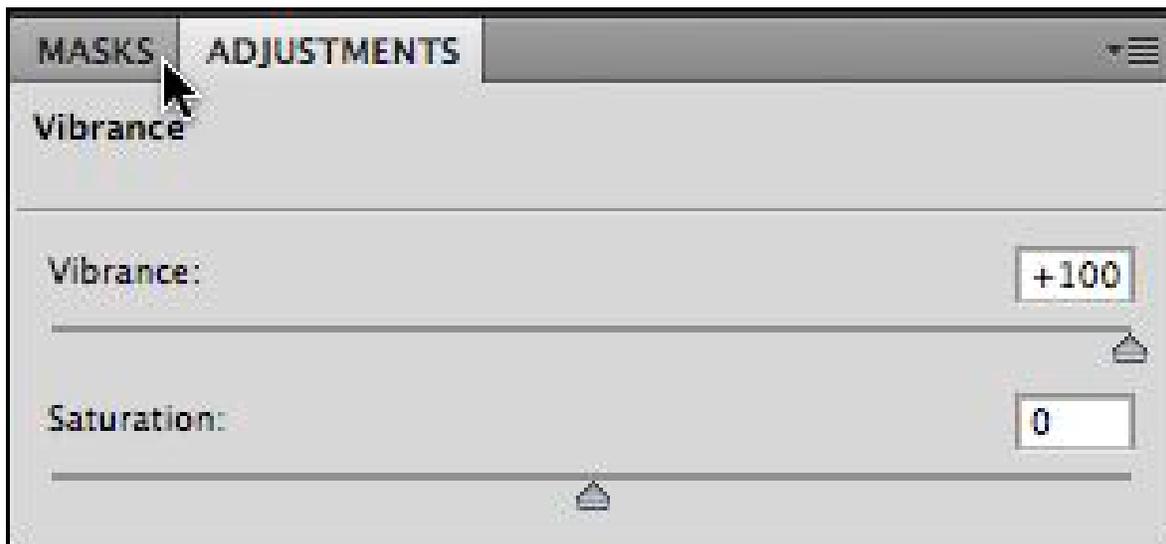
saturate all of color the same amount. I want to really highlight the areas where the sunset light is hitting the rocks, saturating it the most. I'd also like to saturate the color in the sky, but only a little bit, as I think the blue that's there now is pretty good. To do this we'll be using a tool called Vibrance.

1. Open the Layers Palette if it's not already visible. Click on the half-black, half-white circle in the bottom center of the panel to reveal a menu. Select the Vibrance option from the menu.

2. You'll notice that the tool consists of 2 sliders – one for Vibrance, and one for Saturation. Both sliders have the ability to increase or decrease the Saturation of colors throughout the image. The difference between the two is that the Vibrance slider tries to increase the saturation of colors within reasonable limits, and Saturation allows you to increase the saturation without any constraints. I generally find using the Vibrance slider gives enough "Pop" without overly increasing the saturation, but if you find the Vibrance slider slides all the way to +100, and you still don't have enough "pop", then you should switch to the saturation slider.



For this image, I have a particular challenge in that I want to saturate the foreground rocks and seaweed more than I want to saturate the already blue sky (which become cyan as I slide the Vibrance to its maximum). The solution here is to slide the Vibrance to where the area that needs more Vibrance looks good, and then use Photoshop's masking palette to allow different amounts of Vibrance to be applied to different areas of the image.





3. With the Vibrance slider pushed across to where the foreground rocks look good, go ahead and select the Edit menu from the top, and choose Fill. In the Use box, select the option for Black. This will effectively hide the Vibrance adjustment that we applied earlier, but don't worry, it also gives us the ability to selectively apply the Vibrance in different amount, to different areas of the image.

4. Select the paintbrush from the tool palette – we'll be "painting" in the area we want to apply the Vibrance adjustment to. On the top options for the paintbrush, click on the Opacity slider, and adjust the amount to 20%. This means that with each subsequent stroke of the brush, you'll be applying more and more vibrance to that particular section of the image. Press the "D" key on the jeyboard to set the foreground and background colors to their defaults. This will mean that you'll be painting with white – the front color, and in this case, the color that will reveal the Vibrance adjustment we made earlier.

5. The method here will be to paint over the areas until they look the way you intend. In this image I painted over the foreground rocks several time until they were a nice golden, and then painted over the sky just a single time, giving it a nice enhancement, but not nearly as much of a change as I did to the foreground.

The basic idea here is that by controlling the Vibrance adjustment with a simple mask, we can enhance those areas that could benefit from a little extra "Pop", and leave those areas of subtle color that don't need any adjustment alone. By selectively controlling the color enhancement, it become easy to achieve a well balanced image, and avoid unnecessarily over-saturated areas. Digital photography has brought us great control over the final image we create – the important thing is for us never to lose sight of the goal, representing our vision in the final product of our art.

