

Photographing in a Digital World

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Let's face it, we're now photographing in a digital world. Photoshop® is no longer a program that those who have expensive film scanners use, rather it's an assumption that if you're photographing, you're using Adobe Photoshop® and its associated tools.

Some might see this new paradigm as a cause for concern. I hear people on both sides of the discussion - those who completely deny any "manipulation", and those who brag about how many layers they used. I suppose the root of the issue pertains to photography's first use as a documentary medium. Photoshop® has become this "evil" in many minds that has taken the "reality" out of photography.

Without getting deep into the philosophy of photography, I can tell you that photography has never been reality - before or after Photoshop®. Photography is merely a representation of the photographer's reality - be that real or imaginary. It is a small snippet of time, with a very limited view, and will never represent the whole of reality. It is and always has been an interpretation. Photoshop is merely a tool to help photographers share their reality.



As an artist, I am always looking to get my reality across to the viewer - to use the tools that I have available to me to communicate my vision. When I first started out photographing digitally, I treated the photography end and the digital side as two separate parts. I shot just as I would have normally done - though now I could see a histogram instantly. When I got onto the computer, I tried to achieve what my beloved film would have given me in color, tone, and feel. I fought to have the vibrant colors of Fuji Velvia 50, and treated the image as though it were a "digital" slide.

Somewhere along the way, I began photographing with the understanding that I would be bringing my images into Photoshop®. This shift from "digital slides" to "digital originals" brought with it a basic shift in my thinking. Photoshop was no longer an option, it had become an assumption. I began photographing with the knowledge that some things were done more effectively in-camera, and others could be done better with Photoshop®.

I became a digital photographer, not a film photographer with a digital camera.

This article is all about the way being a digital photographer has changed the very way I approach and shoot my pictures. I don't advocate Photoshop® as a "magical bullet"; but rather to use it for what it is best at. I've found that the very way I photograph has changed since I've moved from film to pixels.

There are a couple instances where digital really excels, and I'm going to take you through some of the abilities digital offers, and how I approach these photographically.

High Dynamic Range

These are images that have a wider range between the dark and light tones than the camera can capture. This means that we would either have to sacrifice detail in the lights or darks, or use an in-camera technique to help the camera capture all the tones.

Some in-camera techniques include using a fill-flash, reflector, flashlight, or graduated neutral density filter. All of these techniques can be effective if the situation is right. For instance, a graduated neutral-density filter works best if there is an even, clean, horizon line. Once the horizon line begins to vary in height, or if objects cross from below the line to above, the graduated filter can begin to have unintended consequences. Most commonly it will create a tell-tale dark line across the image. This can be avoided by refining the graduated filter's effect using Photoshop®'s tonal correction tools, like levels or curves.

When I'm in the field, I often shoot images like this in two ways. First, I use the old-school technique of using my graduated neutral density filters. Then I use the new-school technique of shooting multiple images - one exposed for the brighter areas, and one for the darker areas, with the intention to merge the results in Photoshop®. There are many techniques, and even a few software solutions for creating these types of images in Photoshop®. Though you may not be familiar with them yet, it's still a good idea to shoot with the possibility of refining the results later, should you master these techniques in the future.





Low Light

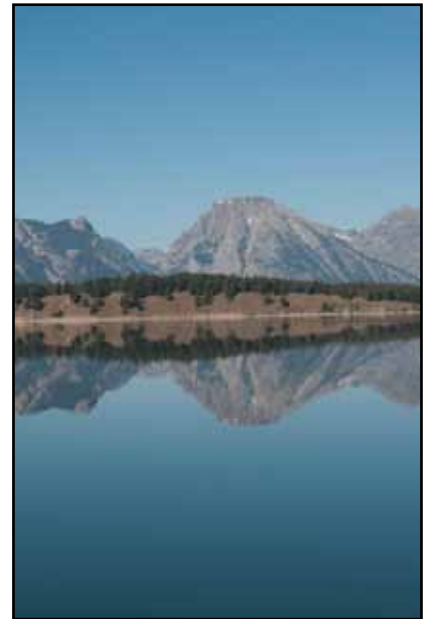
For those of us who shot 35mm film, I know there were more than a few times that I wished I could have switched film types mid-roll. Especially going from an outdoor scene to an indoor one, or to a low-light outdoor scene. With digital, switching your ISO is as easy as selecting it through the camera's menu. It's a simple thing, but just remember that you have the ability to change your ISO to meet the conditions.

Panoramic Pictures

With film, if you wanted a panoramic, there were two basic ways to achieve it. You could either crop out a section from a single frame or use a specially designed panoramic camera. The problem with cropping just the middle from a single frame is that because you're reducing the amount of the frame you're using, and this limits the amount that you can enlarge the result. Special panoramic cameras are great tools for creating these images, but they are often heavy, fragile, and can cost thousands.

The solution here is easier than it sounds, Photoshop® has a very refined tool for creating panoramic images. All you need to do is shoot separate images of the sections of your final

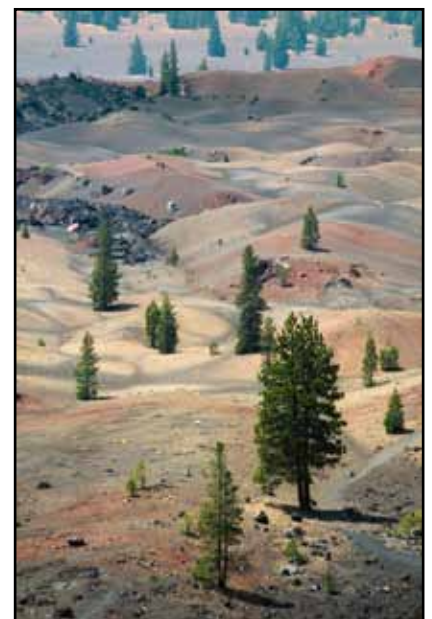
image with the same exposure throughout, and then let Photoshop® do its magic putting the images together into a cohesive panoramic.



Atmospheric Haze

Often when I'm shooting aerial images or images that overlook miles from a high vantage, a haze will be visible as the objects are further from the camera. This is due to poor air quality, and there's really nothing you can do in the original exposure to correct for it.

Once the image goes to the computer, there are several tools that can effectively correct some or all of this effect, depending on how dramatic the original is. The basic



idea here is that any haze will cause a loss in contrast, and so I go back with Photoshop® and pump up the contrast as objects get further from the camera to compensate for this effect.

Warming or Cooling Filters

I used to carry an 81A warming filter with me wherever I went, just in case I needed to warm up the colors a bit. With film, it was always a guessing game - which filter do I use? Now with digital, and especially with shooting RAW, it is much easier and more effective to adjust the warmth of an image using the *color temperature* instead of carrying around a pack of warming filters.

Shooting Black and White

Black and white with a digital is not exactly the same as using black and white film. Film still has the advantage in the dynamic range that it can handle. With this said, digital has the advantage of your being able to choose to convert an original color-capture. It also offers a brand-new conversion tool that has the ability to mimic black and white filters. You can achieve those dark dramatic Ansel Adam's skies with just a few sliders in the *Black and White* conversion tool.



Video

A new and exciting advance in digital cameras has been the ability for them to capture high-definition video in addition to stills. Of course, this was never an ability of the film camera, but none-the-less, it is something to consider when you're in the field.

The important lesson here is to use the tools available to you to achieve your goal. Sometimes a simple lens choice is all that's needed, other times you might want to change how you photograph to enable the use of new digital techniques.