From Capture to Vision

Episode One

By Nick Melidonis M Photog IV

The essence of what we see and capture often has to be translated through our skills in interpreting the image further to realise the vision we had at the point of capture.

This, and other articles to follow, will focus on simple imaging techniques you can use to bring out the vision and emotions you had when you decided to take the picture. It will include tips on using the tools in Lightroom, Photoshop and some leading third party software.

Preparation

One thing I learned many years ago when shooting film and that I now value more than ever in this digital age, is to get it right in camera at the point of capture. Software will never be a substitute for sloppy technique.

The most important aspect in photography is understanding what great light looks like. The subject is less important than the light that illuminates it. Just as software will not make a fine art piece from a badly seen and composed image, no amount of technique will produce a masterpiece when captured in the wrong light.

So how does one get to understand what great light looks like? I suggest you spend some time looking at images from the great photographers of our time. Why are their images successful and what approaches and techniques did they use to capture the light and create their styles? And don't just look at great photographs, go and see great works of art in galleries and museums. The celebrated painters understood what great light looks like and we can learn a lot from them.

Understanding what great light looks like and having a benchmark of the great images other photographers have taken is the first step. Now you need to shoot lots of photographs until you are satisfied that you can see and capture great light. Success will not happen overnight, but unless you set this as a goal, you may find yourself shooting the same things in the same way over and over again. Get feedback on your work from accomplished photographers whom you admire and you know will give you an honest critique.

Above all, don't get hung-up on technique. Learning to see is more important in becoming a good photographer. The techniques you need can be learnt in bite-sized chunks as they are needed.

There's a difference between capturing a record of a landscape in a literal sense and capturing that landscape so you can express what you felt at the time. Your emotions will also determine what elements you choose to include and how you frame the image. Lots of photographers can put their cameras on auto and click a record of where they've been, but few will aim to connect their viewers emotionally by capturing a sense of place. I have expressed this quote from Ansel Adams before in my articles, however, it is worth repeating:

"If I feel something strongly, I would make a photograph equivalent of what I saw and felt. When I'm ready to make a photograph, I see in my mind's eye something that is not literally there in the true meaning of the word. I'm interested in expressing something which is built up from within rather than extracted from without."

Adams, like many other great photographers of his time, was a master at translating the original negative into an emotive and powerful work of art. The vision he had at the moment of capture was revealed through the techniques of dodging, burning, Farmers Reducer (bleaching), toning and masks, producing something quite different from the literal scene. Realising that vision is what made their images endure.

We have the same opportunities today without spending many hours in a darkroom and using dangerous chemicals. Interpreting their vision through the use of software is part of the craft and skills that some photographers seek to master and there's no doubt that this software would be used by many of the great photographers of yesteryear if they were alive today.

What we see in a powerful photograph is the subject matter transformed by the vision of the artist.

Photoshop or Lightroom?

Assuming you have captured a hero image that you need to prepare to its final stage before printing, would you start with Photoshop or Lightroom? As you guessed, the answer is, 'It all depends'.

If you are seeing where the image may go by comparing different treatments, then Lightroom is the easiest and most intuitive way to go. If you want to work on some sophisticated masking and other refinements with real pixels, then Photoshop is the solution. And you can use both: start in Lightroom to get the global adjustments roughly in place and then continue in Photoshop for more sophisticated refinements.

For photographers starting their journey, Lightroom is the best option. First, with Lightroom, you are not working on or

damaging pixels. Lightroom has parametric editing which means all the changes you are seeing on your monitor take place within Lightroom's catalogue. Your original image, be it a raw file, TIFF or JPEG, remains untouched until you are ready to export the Lightroom rendition as a real image file with pixels.

Lightroom allows you to produce several versions of the same image (virtual copies) and I often find myself making quick changes to an image, trying to reveal what I saw and felt at the time of capture. After working with Lightroom for some years, I can open most of my raw files and have it ready for export to print in around one minute. It's not rocket science, but then exploring the creative possibilities of an image may take a little longer. However, I find I only use Photoshop around twenty per cent of the time.

Global or Local Changes

Global changes relate to overall refinements you make to the whole image. Depending on how you see and feel about your image, these may include contrast, tonal changes and colour balance. Cropping and straightening an image should also be done at this early stage to reveal the design you had in mind. I add that these are guidelines and not rules.

Local changes refer to the changes you make to specific parts of the image to highlight the parts that you feel the viewer's attention should be focused on. For example, you may darken the overall image and then dodge (lighten) a part of it to make that part stand out from the rest. Local changes can include many other things such as burning (darkening part of the image), selective sharpening or blurring; adjusting saturation or hue and so on. I might add that most of these creative imaging techniques were practised for many years in the wet darkroom.

Let's begin with global changes using the new Lightroom 4. Although it doesn't make any difference really where you start in Lightroom because you are not working on pixels, cropping the image (if required) is a good place to start for no other reason than the histogram reflects what is inside the crop. Under the crop icon, you are also given an angle tool which you can run across a horizon to straighten the image. You can do this both as a vertical or a horizontal alignment.

Next you may wish to adjust the colour balance by using the Temp slider (adjusts blues and yellows) and/or the Tint slider (which adjusts the two opposites, magenta and green). If I have captured a sunset and wish to enhance the warmth of the image, I sometimes use the Temp slider towards the yellow and also add a touch of magenta.

The next slider you may wish to use is the Exposure slider which affects the mid tone or gamma. Use this to generally lighten or darken an image. You can always come back to this and re-tweak at any time.

The Contrast slider affects the mid tone contrast. Use this to taste, but be careful you don't make the shadows too dark or blow out the highlights (make them white). Outlined below is a method of checking that this doesn't happen.

The next important sets of sliders are the tone controls and these are now more intuitive than in Lightroom 3. If you hover your mouse over each of the Highlights, Shadows, Whites and Blacks sliders, you can see in the histogram which parts of the tonal range of the image you will be affecting (a lighter column appears in the histogram). While you are tweaking

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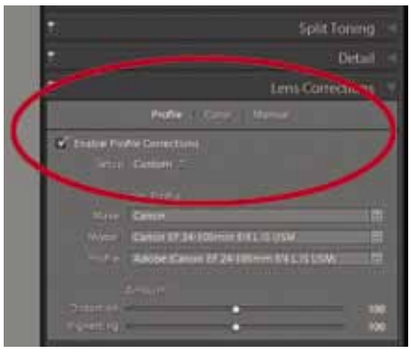

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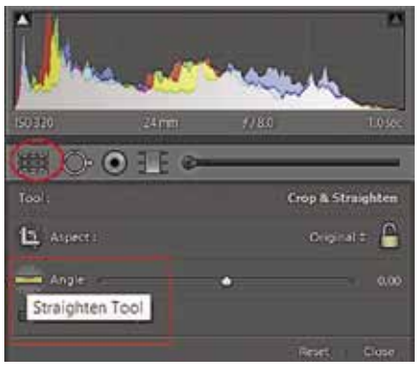

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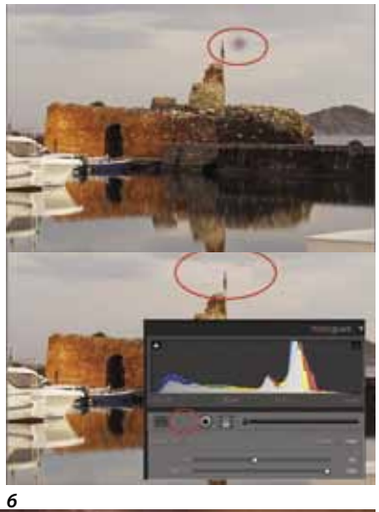

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1. *This is the original raw capture of dawn over the pristine harbour of Nauossa on the Greek Island of Paros, using a Canon 5D Mk II, 24-105mm lens, ISO 320, f8 at 1 second. Even though the light is just starting to touch the little church in the background, the overall light is cold (quite blue) and although I remember the clouds had a warm tinge to them, I can't see that in the sky.*

2. *There is a curved horizon due to barrelling distortion in the lens. Lightroom has an excellent lens distortion correction tool. It picks up the camera and lens through the metadata and uses the data to correct lens faults such as barrelling and colour fringing at the edges. In this case, it straightened the curved horizon when I ticked 'Enable Profile Correction'.*

3. *The next step was to crop and straighten the image. The crop tool (outlined in red), will also reveal the Straighten tool (outlined as a red rectangle).*

4. *In this enlarged section of the image, I selected the Straighten Tool and ran a straight line along the horizon and then released the mouse.*

5. *Lightroom then straightened the image and very cleverly, it cropped the image to provide the maximum 'real estate' or image dimensions within the now straightened crop. I still have the option to crop the image further by dragging the handles on each of the four sides of the crop.*

6. *I noticed a large sensor dust spot just above the Greek Flag on the ruins of the castle (outlined in red in the above photo). I chose the Spot Removal tool located to the left of the Crop Tool and selected the Heal option within the Spot Removal Tool. The Healing Brush will replace the area chosen by the brush with a blend of the area surrounding the brush. When I clicked on the dust spot, it showed my selection in a white circle and where it chose to sample a part of the image to replace it by a brighter white circle. If I didn't like Lightroom's choice, I could grab the brighter circle with my mouse and select a different spot to sample from. In this case I chose a bit of cloud I thought would blend quite well and 'hey presto' the dust spot disappeared.*

7. *As outlined in the article, I now used the sliders to adjust colour, contrast and tones. I tweaked the yellow and magenta sliders to provide some warmth to the image as I remembered that magic dawn. The tone sliders were then adjusted to provide a pleasing balance of tones to the image. A little bit of Clarity provided some edge contrast and highlighted the detail in the image. I also added a touch of Vibrance to enhance the colours. The settings were: Temp 9765, Tint +3, Exposure +0.48, Contrast +19, Highlights -24, Shadows +48, Whites +33, Blacks -14, Clarity +23, Vibrance +19. Saturation untouched.*

8. *Compared to the original file, this is a lot closer to what I wanted to show.*

9. *This is the same image with a couple of local enhancements to bring out detail in the clouds with a touch of red and vignetting around the edges which we will describe in later articles.*

the sliders, keep watching the histogram to ensure you are not blowing out the highlights or blocking the shadows. If you click on the little arrows at the top left and right of the histogram, it will reveal blown out highlights in red and blocked up shadows in blue. This may be useful when using the sliders as you can adjust tones until the red and blue bits disappear.

Mind you, having the odd part of an image pure black or white may be what you intended, so don't fret over this. If you don't want the red and blue areas showing up in the image, click the little arrows again.

The order of using the tone sliders is not important. I usually start with the highlights after the mid tone adjustments and 'bump up' the bright areas. For example, in sunsets with nice clouds, pulling down the highlight slider will often bring back the detail.

If the shadows need opening up, for example shadows under people's eyes or deep shadows in a landscape, I now adjust the Shadows slider to the right to recover these. Opening up shadows to reveal lost detail can be quite amazing, but don't overuse this slider.

The Whites and Blacks sliders are adjusting the white point and black point of the image. This final tweak can give you a boost in contrast. Again, be careful about blowing out highlights.

The next set of sliders (presence) includes the Clarity, Vibrance and Saturation tools. The Clarity tool adjusts edge contrast and in photographs such as landscapes containing fine detail, moving the Clarity slider to the right will 'pop' the image quite nicely. If you move the Clarity Slider to the left, you can produce a nice soft, blurry effect which is good for softening skin in portraits. When you do this, it also softens eyes, lips and hair when used globally, so this is often best done as a local adjustment.

The Saturation slider affects all colours equally (it is linear), while the Vibrance slider will selectively saturate the colours, beginning with the least saturated first. Vibrance is often a better choice to avoid an over-saturated, garish look. The last colour in order that Vibrance will saturate is orange and this is because all faces contain orange. This allows portrait and wedding photographers to saturate colours generally without affecting skin tones.

Global enhancement changes are a good first step to bring out the vision you had when you captured your image.

In the next article, I will continue with more global corrections and then show some of the excellent tools Lightroom has for local enhancements.

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