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Creating Fine Art Black & White Images With Photoshop

There are often many ways to accomplish the same thing in Photoshop. Each technique involves some kind of compromise. Those compromises might include issues such as memory usage, file size, how precise the "adjustment" is to the image, the ability to go back & easily make changes to the image, the speed of applying the change, and how the technique might affect other aspects of the image. What is important is that you understand how specific techniques and workflow affect the image as you pursue your photographic vision. Having made these statements, I am going to share with you my workflow and some of the tools that I use in Photoshop in the hope that you will be motivated to pursue your photographic craft, develop your personal style, and make better images.

- Image Capture via Scanning or Digital RAW
  - Make major adjustments to the image at this point
    - Levels adjustment - setting the black & white points for the image
    - Color adjustment – setting the color balance that you want for the image
    - Contrast adjustment – setting the overall image contrast that you want for the image
  - I scan my transparencies and black & white negatives using an Imacon scanner
    - I do all three of the above adjustments using the scanner software
    - I also use the scanner to sharpen the file at this time
- Spotting the image
  - I will use the clone stamp or the spot healing brush tools to touch up the image after the scan
  - I use the Zoom tool to set the print to "actual pixel" size which allows me to view the image at 100%
  - If I need do make major spot removal, or make complex changes, I create a new layer
    - I will then work on the blank layer with the Clone stamp set to "sample all layers"

- This makes the changes on the blank layer & allows me to go back & eliminate them without having to rescan the image.
- You can use multiple blank layers if you have significant changes to make.
- o Most of the time, I use the clone stamp or spot healing brush on the background layer as I can use the History palette to reverse recent changes that I don't like
- Making Adjustments Using Adjustment Layers Vs Image Adjustments
  - o Adjustment Layers
    - Layer ➔ New Adjustment Layer
    - Allows you to make non-destructive adjustments to the image without altering the original pixels
    - Gives you the ability to go back & change your changes
    - Uses more memory & creates greater file sizes
  - o Image Adjustments
    - Image ➔ Adjustments
    - Must be done on the background layer & alters the image pixels
    - You cannot go back & reverse the changes except to the extent you can go through the History palette
    - Uses less memory & creates small file sizes
  - o I always use adjustment layers as I want greater control and the ability to go back later & tweak the adjustment as needed
- Converting to Black & White
  - o Channel Mixer
    - Layer ➔ New Adjustment Layer ➔ Channel Mixer
      - Check the Monochrome box
    - Uses more memory & greater file size
    - Gives you the most control over the conversion
      - Allows you to get the exact filtration of red, green, & blue combination that you want
      - Allows you to use filtration between +200 and -200 for each channel
      - The total of the three channels must add to +100 or you will lighten or darken the image
      - You can go back & make changes to the filtration
      - Using a layer mask, you can filter parts of your image using different filtration to get the precise tonal relationships that you want
  - o Photo Filter Adjustment Layer
    - Layer ➔ New Adjustment Layer ➔ Photo Filter
      - Uses more memory & greater file size
      - Gives you good control over the conversion
      - Allows you to choose from standard black & white and color filters used in film image capture

- You can go back & make changes to the filtration
  - Using the Channels Palette to select one channel (red, green, or blue) and eliminating the other channels
    - Uses less memory & smaller file size
    - Gives you less control over the conversion
      - Uses one of the three channels (red, green, or blue)
      - Once done, it can be changed as long as the image is still an RGB image
    - Doesn't allow you to do precise filtration as you have just 3 choices
  - Converting the Image to Grayscale
    - Image ➔ Mode ➔ Grayscale
    - Uses less memory & smaller file size
    - Gives you less control over the conversion
      - Uses Photoshop's default grayscale conversion algorithm
      - Once done, it cannot be changed as pixels are altered
  - I always use Channel Mixer as I want the precise control & the ability to go back & make changes to the image as I work (which I will often do)
- Layer Masks
  - Allow you to make local adjustments to the image
  - Rules of Layer Masks
    - Black hides the adjustment 100%
    - White reveals the adjustment 100%
    - Shades of gray partially reveal (hide) adjustments depending on how light or dark the area is
  - Pick the area of the image you want to adjust
  - Make a new Adjustment Layer (curves, channel mixer, levels, brightness contrast, color balance, hue saturation, photo filter)
  - Set the adjustment so that the image area is what you want
  - On the Layers Palette, fill in the layer with black
    - Make white the foreground color
    - Use the paint bucket tool set on black fill the layer OR
    - Use the hot key Control ➔ Delete to fill with black
    - The Layer Mask Thumbnail then turns black
  - Using a brush to make the adjustment
    - Make white the foreground color
    - Select a soft feathered brush
    - Set the opacity between 15% and 40%
    - Using the brush, paint from black towards white selectively on the area you want the adjustment to be visible
    - With a low opacity (15% to 30%), the adjustment will slowly become visible.
    - As you continue "painting" over the area, the mask becomes lighter and more of the adjustment is revealed

- Because of the "feathering" effect of the soft brush, the adjustment will often appear to be invisible to the viewer
  - Using Selections Vs Layer Masks and soft feathered brushes at low opacity
    - I prefer using the brush technique as it gives me greater control over the edges of area that I want to adjust
    - I find making selections too time consuming
    - This is a personal choice – what matters is that you get your image to look the way you want it to and that any image adjustments not be obvious to the viewer
- Curves Adjustment Layer
  - I use the curves adjustment layer for most of my adjustment layers
  - Tonal Curves allow me to make precise adjustments to the image
    - Lighten local areas or the entire image
    - Darken local areas of the entire image
    - Raise local area or entire image contrast
    - Lower local area or entire image contrast
    - Adjust color balance locally or on the entire image
      - Using individual red, green, & blue curves
  - Adjusting the tonal curve
    - Use one or two points to adjust the tonal curve
    - Contrast rules
      - 45 degree angle is "normal contrast"
      - Sections of the curve with greater than a 45 degree angle will have more contrast
      - Sections of the curve with less than a 45 degree angle will have less contrast
    - Blacks are to the left bottom of the graph
    - Whites are to the right top of the graph
    - Raising the curve lightens the image
      - Similar to a levels adjustment
    - Lowering the curve darkens the image
      - Similar to a levels adjustment
    - Raising image contrast
      - Lower the black left side of the curve
      - Raise the white right side of the curve
      - The center of the curve is now greater than 45 degrees & the image has more contrast
    - Lowering image contrast
      - Raise the black left side of the curve
      - Lower the white right side of the curve
      - The center of the curve is now shallower than 45 degrees & the image has less contrast
- Image Sharpening
  - I sharpen the film using my scanner

- - - Sometimes, I will create a duplicate of the background layer right above the background and sharpen the duplicate layer
        - If I want to change it, I can always create another duplicate of the background & do it again
  - o Many people prefer sharpening an image at the end of their work by saving a flattened copy of the image & sharpening the copy image
- Mastering your tools and develop your craft as a photographer
  - o Photoshop is only a tool, nothing more
    - I look at Photoshop and use it in a similar way to how I would work on an image in the darkroom
  - o There are many more controls in Photoshop than you will ever need to know or use
    - Find a workflow and Photoshop tools that work for you and learn how to use them well.
    - Just because it can be done in Photoshop, doesn't mean it should be done to the image
  - o If your image looks like it has been adjusted using Photoshop, it probably won't work (but not always)
- As a photographer, you need to develop your own personal style or photographic vision
  - o One of my friends in the gallery I am a member of recently commented that she could tell who the photographer was in our group shows just by looking at the image. That is what "personal style" is
  - o To develop your personal style
    - Know what you like & photograph it
    - Look at photographs in galleries, books, magazines
    - Read books and watch DVD's by famous photographers on how and why they work
    - Talk to your fellow photographers about your work and their work
    - Have your images critiqued by a photographer you admire
    - Keep photographing