A study in decision making – part 1

by Malcolm McElvaney

As the photographer we choose the composition, work the camera to produce the final image or produce the raw ingredients to make it match our vision in post processing, and present the results hoping the viewer appreciates the effort put into it. What is really in our control and what is not though? I see it as working within the limits presented to me as I make those decisions but some factors are very subtle and will stay hit or miss for the most part. The one factor this particular study is addressing is where is the focal point of the image that the viewer is drawn into intially. Color versus the tonal values is the primary way the focal point can slip out of our control since these two systems conflict with each other.

The image is composed and captured in color so that is how we judge the results but if converted to black and white in post processing your focal point may shift as well. Whether judged in your head before your eyes ever wonder toward the camera or based on the optics through the camera nothing is totally predictable. This is a question of perception and and at what stage of the photograph's cycle they become visible, so keeping this in mind and knowing some of the factors of what attracts or draws us into that same said photograph less surprises might present themselves.

Factor one is two combined here since they are related. Upon initial inspection we are drawn to the brightest part of the scene or we may be drawn to the areas with high contrast. Mostly based on the conditions of the scene it can be out of our control; yet, these are exposure related issues and need to be dealt with anyway. I like bracketing as an option but even as a single image we can expose to the right (ETTR) and push all that potential to be brighter. Brighter may mean revisiting the composition and "entry" point. The opposite extreme is expose to the left (ETTL) and surely pulling all the potential into the darker areas will create more contrast. Keeping with instinct and preserving the midtones is more reasonable but still alters these factors as well. Even when I use bracketing the exposure of the neutral image is at my whim and the other exposures augment that "single" image.

The second factor that could draw our eyes in is the sharpest areas in the scene. Touching on the area that photographers may be controlling and composing for on purpose anyway by playing with the f/stop (aperture) to control the depth of field (DOF).

The third factor is we recognize faces and figures but it is built into us to do that. The fourth factor is shapes, lines, and textures and those are the building blocks of the scene.

In truth faces and figures are made of shapes, lines, and textures so the same but the pattern is given a higher priority. Where is the conflict and unpredictability you may be asking? Break something down far enough and a common unit emerges. The underlying values in the scene and as recontextualized in the cameras histogram define where the lines and shapes are perceived and finalized in our own vision. Consider a generic scenario where a solid mass of color stands out against the other colors but in the world of black and white doesn't stand out at all but a brighter pattern elsewhere will instead.

Testing the premise

I approached the challenge by selecting random scenes and taking three exposures at best exposure possible, one exposed to the left (darker), and one exposed to the right (brighter). Those images when left in color and desaturated produced six views of that same scene. I included one set that can be seen all at once so gain a different perspective than trying to keep a mental image between viewing them individually. The random trial and error nature of the approach will hopefully reduce any bias had I composed the scene intentionally and with multiple sets taken and yet to be taken some new insights will be gained as well.

Because the set needs to be kept together you will find it on the next page to look over. Perception of where the differences are will be unique to each viewer but so will the information and references to put the new details into context. There will be a part two to this article as I need time to build up more samples and frame the insights in my own unique world view of photography. This is an exercise in just seeing what happens but after you get that one shot you really wanted who is to say that you yourself can't do the most unimaginable camera don'ts just to see what happens. Whatever "rules" you set to explore and learn from the exercise can be of value.

Where do my ideas come from?

This article sprang from a very random source and trying to put what I knew into a new system. Salvidor Dali isn't a photographer but his eccentric personality and being a painter makes him well known and this particular documentary I watched mentioned the "paranoiac-critical method". I have yet to really study his method but a quick search indictated it paired opposites so the color versus tonal values for contrast was noted in my daily notes. Combined with a more recent look at the processing I do with bracketing I wondered what ETTR (expose to the right) does to the focal point as well.



ISO-100, 1/50, F/9



ISO-100, 1/125, F/9



ISO-100, 1/25, F/9

A study in decision making – part 2

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I left off with the series of side-by-side comparisons and the premise for the approach, I had two scenarios I could see as subtle possibilities I wanted to share in this part. Both are based on how you expose your image and what is more important as there are trade offs to some aspects of the image. Ideally we expose an image in the histogram for a balance of shadows and highlights to the midtones but there is concept of exposing to the right (ETTR) and adjusting the image in post so the maximum amount of data is captured. It is this concept I have combined with bracketing to develop my system.

My system - The hard part of writing about any process that one clearly sees in full detail is translating that for the reader and "my system" could fall into that category. I discovered HDR (bracketing) and have found it an useful tool beyond the black and white photographs I was initially aiming to produce. I appreciate the extra scene data I can play with in multiple ways as I layer them and try to blend them in Gimp. My approach is more manually oriented but that is how I work in my post processing. A bracketed set has at least three images of offset exposures; for example, I tend to stick with plus or minus two stops from the neutral exposure. In the ideal usage the neutral image is close to the exposed image capturing more details in the shadows to be combined for the higher dynamic range (HDR).

Exposing to the (x) is the other concept that I also include into the system but the original idea of maximizing the data captured isn't so critical if you include the bracketed set. I can compose the image with the base image I use to be underexposed and ETTL (left) to bring out highlights with the other two images to restore and enhance the image in post. I could conversely make the base image overexposed and ETTR (right) to bring out the shadows more. In either case I have extra information to augment that base image, the thing I have to remember is to modify the setting up or down so I have the neutral image and set I need.

How you do your post processing and try to implement the idea is up to you. I have a concept and each image has a process of its own so I enjoy the method I have chosen.



Tonal values – I'm using a black and white image because the color in the image is also altered when I underexposed on purpose to pick up detail in the clouds. I shifted that exposure setting to be 2 stops brighter and took my +/- 2 EV bracketed set. I got the highlights I wanted and augmented back in some of the shadows lost in the original underexposed image. The overcast sky and 9:02am time I took it at didn't require the adjustment I made but did have the effect I desired. The pattern I found was if you underexpose more the highlights come out more at the determent of the shadows, overexpose more and the shadows are more visible at the cost of highlights. I took the example image as far left as possible on the histogram but one could apply the technique with more finesse.

Color – In the context of color as the dominate feature to emphasize it may help to understand a little bit about how color works based on a color wheel. My knowledge of this subject has been gleamed from random sources on drawing and painting and is limited but I will share what I have learned.



The key is the balance between what is called cooler colors (greens, blues, and magenta) and the warmer colors (reds, yellows, and oranges) given the existing the light levels and what colors are present in your scene. The color wheel illustrated here has a dividing line between the broadly defined color groupings but the observation from part one of the study showed me an interesting effect between

underexposing an image versus overexposing it. Instead of shadows and highlights this deals with cooler vs warmer colors instead, so underexposing seems to emphasize the warmer colors and overexposing seems to equalize or bring out the cooler colors better.

Take the image on this page taken at 12:16pm at the Fort Davis Historic Site where I found some color to test on, I underexposed to compensate for the washed out light present and it did seem to help. "It looks better for an afternoon" was one comment I got on it and I likely over processed it a little but the test set did show improvements are possible. In this case the lack of shadows might be an advantage if the image is going to be altered for a painterly look and the colors achieved would fit into that artistic style. A photographs raw input doesn't have to come from ideal images in my opinion but help in the post processing you have in mind.



Conclusion – Ideally one wants to shoot in the best light conditions and plans for it if possible but in less favorable conditions I see these experiments as a way to have some fun and work within those limits. For those who are not early risers or maybe that afternoon light is the first chance to take some pictures then one of two choices exist. Option one is sit it out and maybe relax but I prefer option two which is see what I can find and adapt how and what I shoot.