

Magic with Photoshop

by David Bigwood

I didn't really abandon my darkroom. It was just that I couldn't take it with me when I moved house. Darkrooms, from the early makeshift in the family bathroom to my purpose built palace under the house with permanent blackout and two enlargers, had been part of my life since at fourteen I first watched a photograph come to life in a tray of developer. It was then that I felt the magic of a darkroom and was hooked. I knew then that I wanted to learn how to conjure images from a negative onto a piece of paper.

For many years I did that and enjoyed many happy hours — and some frustrating ones — sloshing papers around in chemicals in the dark or at least in the red glow of my safelight.

But, without my darkroom I had to confine myself to transparency film. As a freelance writer and photographer that was fine as publishers and photo libraries required images to be on that medium. But then came computers and scanners and CDs and Photoshop and thoughts of how to set up another darkroom faded as my enlargers lay untouched in the garage. Publishers stopped wanting transparencies but now asked for digital files on a CD — most publishers anyway — so by stealth, digital began taking over my life. I still shot on film but even that was on the slippery slide and, after a period of resistance, I invested in a DSLR and Photoshop became even more important to me.



But, does Photoshop give me the same thrill, the same magic that I experienced in the darkroom? In many ways it does. My concern is with the finished product and I'm not overly concerned how it is achieved. I still feel excited when an image that I have created begins to look like the scene that I saw when I lifted the camera to my eye. The fact that it is appearing on a monitor rather than in a tray of developer is immaterial to me.

And, some exciting things can happen with Photoshop just as they did in the conventional darkroom.

Nearly all of my work with Photoshop just replicates what I had previously done in a darkroom and I therefore use only a fraction of the many possibilities that the program provides. However, I do spend some of my spare time fiddling with the less familiar aspects of Photoshop for my own enjoyment. A bit like my Sunday afternoon sessions in the darkroom when I experimented with various techniques and sometimes produced some unexpected results. In fact, several versions of Photoshop ago I made a mistake while fiddling which led

me to an unexpected sale and showed me some of the magic of the new technology. That is if you can call a mistake magic.

I was scanning some black and white negatives and all had gone well until I came to one that had produced prints that had been successful in several exhibitions around Australia with a couple of Highly Commended awards. Onto the scanner it went (a Microtek flatbed) and eventually the image appeared on the computer screen. I scanned at the highest resolution (on that scanner it is 2400dpi) in RGB mode even though the negative was monochrome as I find that this generally gives the best results. I then use the various controls to adjust the image.

On this occasion I was using the Curves control and obviously wasn't concentrating as all of a sudden my monochrome image started appearing with colour. It didn't look bad so I began experimenting and ended up producing an image that looked as if it had been shot on transparency film and then developed in colour negative chemicals. I was so taken with the result that I submitted it to a digital photography magazine and it was published under the heading 'Who needs cross processing?'.

Later, I decided to see how the mistake had occurred so I took another monochrome negative and scanned it. I opened the Curves control and started adjusting but nothing produced any colour. Of course it wouldn't because I was working with all the RGB channels together. As soon as I switched to the Red channel alone things began to happen. Then I played with the Green and the Blue and back to the Red and so on. This is not a scientific process — at least the way I do it isn't. It's all trial and error but, to me, it's as good as messing about in the darkroom.



For this article I took another black and white negative to demonstrate the technique. Having scanned the negative I went to Photoshop CS2 where I navigated to Image/Adjustments/Curves and adjusted the three colour channels to my satisfaction. These adjustments were not done in one hit but in several visits to the individual colours until I got an image that I liked.

For those of you using Photoshop Elements, you can achieve the same sort of results by going to Enhance/Adjust brightness/contrast/Levels and then using the individual colour controls until you are satisfied with the result.

To recap, when using the full Photoshop program, if using film, scan in RGB mode or open an existing scan and make sure it is in RGB mode (you can also use CMYK mode) or open a digital file. Go to Image/Adjustments/Curves (you can also use Levels but I find Curves better). Open the Red channel and start playing, then move to the Green and the Blue (the order doesn't matter). Keep adjusting the separate channels until you get what you want and save it.

In Photoshop Elements, start as I have outlined above and then go to Enhance/Adjust brightness/contrast/Levels. Open each channel and adjust until you are happy with the result.

And, what use is this technique? To begin with it enables you to produce some different results from your negatives (or, of course, from your digitally captured images). In my case as a freelance, it enables me to produce some strikingly different images that can be used by publishers as generic illustrations to draw a reader's attention to an article.

Whether you use this technique is neither here nor there but I hope that you can see that there are untold opportunities to experiment on the computer just as there are in the darkroom.