Max Ferguson's Creative Digital Darkroom

Dedicated to Henry Fox Talbot, Aida Lovelace and Charles Babbage.
They have a lot to answer for.

Max Ferguson's Creative Digital Darkroom

An illustrated guide to digital photographic post production

Max Ferguson

A PowerMAX production

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Introduction

This is not a book about equipment or technology it is a book about how we use it. As with the first version, this book is not a Photoshop manual. It's a darkroom book.

My background is the traditional darkroom. Most of the ideas presented here are from years of splashing about in a small dark room with a low level safelight creating pictures by hand. It's just that I now can sit at my Apple Mac. with a window open.

The processes presented here spring from that tradition. The interesting thing with computers is that I have a lot more control and don't get my hands wet.

I am not particularly interested in style over substance. The younger breed of software jockeys can go for that. When the new breed have a little experience under their collective belts what is now 'hot' will have mellowed a little and the good bits will remain. It seems to be the same every few years.

For some people this might seem a little old fashioned. It is interesting to note that the photographs that stand the test of time are well conceived and well executed images. I find very little from the world of advertising looks good ten years after the campaign ran out. Though often beautifully crafted they are of their time and tend to date.

As with the first book I'm not going to get into the PC vs Mac. debate. It is obvious I have a Mac. preference. It's what I'm used to. I started with Nikon cameras and that's what I'm used to. I actually use a pinhole camera these days.

I assume that you will have a modest knowledge of how to drive your own machines and have a system of good house keeping. If not, start now. Computer cleanliness is next to Godliness. Again I assume that you have at least played with Photoshop or have a copy of Photoshop Elements that came with a reasonable desktop scanner. If not download a demo version. It contains many of Photoshop's tools and palettes. Unfortunately it doesn't have the Curves tool, which in my opinion is a serious omission. Photoshop Elements does have lots of 'How to' tips. It presents a cheap, user friendly, high-end introduction to digital post-production. A great starting point for the un-initiated. It's a good way to use all those Gee Whiz filters, get sick of them and seek a more meaningful relationship with good pictures.

This book was always designed to be on your desk next to Martin Evening's

Photoshop for Photographers. If you're a professional or amateur photographer interested in how to drive the program, Martin's book is a must. Martin describes the mechanics of the system and program better than most. His book comes with a very useful CD, loaded with tips and techniques. My copy is rarely more than arms length from my workstation. A very useful source for things Photoshop.

The American Photoshop guru Katrin Eisman presents several books on photo restoration. I was fortunate enough to have Katrin as a tutor when I visited The Center for Creative imaging in the US some years ago. Katrin had more Photoshop 'chops' than anyone I've met.

For the 'pro' Photoshop user, I would recommend Bruce Fraser's *Realworld Photoshop.* Bruce along with his co-authors field of expertise is in color management. When I have built my studio in Australia, I won't be able to rely on Simon Perfect and the other lovely members of the Visualeyes team to take care of my color issues. Though I have a 'better than a lot' knowledge of color management, there is still much to know. Bruce Fraser is my color management guide. There are many more books, so check them out before you part with your hard earned.

Since I wrote the first edition the world has changed a great deal. The information super highway turned out not to be so super for the billionaires who saw even more money to be made. The highway is in place though and now gives us more avenues to get our work 'out there'. As a result new editions of Photoshop have a facility for making web pages with repeating slide shows. The new browser first seen in Photoshop 7 allows us to download our images from our digital cameras and access them rapidly.

For the purpose of imaging this has marked the biggest shift. Digital cameras are now outselling traditional film cameras. Certainly in currency shifted. Soon it will be actual units shifted. As with most photographic trends, more than professionals and artists, would like to admit, this is amateur led. It might be professionally inspired but the ground swell is amateur. It's not the mega bucks Hasselblad or Sinar with a digital back. It is the cheap 3 megapixel camera that comes from the 'box shifter' type companies. The ones you see in the weekend papers that sell packages of computers with scanners a modest printer and a little low end Casio, Nikon, Fuji etc.. camera. Though they come with a lot of superfluous software and games these are now genuinely useful systems. The cameras and scanners won't give much quality above 10x8 or at a squeeze A4 prints. For a lot of people this is good enough. A quick print on a modest home printer, or emailed to friend or relative is what most people want. That's where the money is.

Though the technology is of secondary importance within the realms of this book I will look at digital cameras and scanners a little more than last time round as this does change the way we work.

For now a few reminders from my first introduction to remind us why we're here.

As with all books, start at the beginning and work through it. I would suggest that

even in the easy sections there is something for the well-versed Photoshop user, even if it just gives another way of looking at something that you do as a matter of course. When you are familiar, dip into the section you need.

As someone who has worked in the 'imaging' business for a long time I have come to the conclusion that very little is original. Most of what we do comes from other sources and is applied until it has found a place in our own visual literacy. I must admit to pillaging other people's ideas and using them until I have my own slant on them. So these methods are not hard and fast rules, but a source for your own creativity. Borrow and purloin at will.

The picture sequence is designed to give a walk through method. Some of the tools, filters and sequences are repeated but in another situation. This 'organic' approach is devised to show how each image was made. The chapter on layers, for example, is about how some layers have selections that keep them independent. Some layers are used to adjust the layers below it, whereas some are designed to blend with other parts of the image. It can be seen that I use large layer stacks with many adjustment layers often with the original image at the bottom of the stack. Rather than pull the pixels in one direction and then push them in another, with each edit progressively degrading the original information, I try to keep pixel editing to a minimum to preserve the integrity of the original.

Although some methods might seem cumbersome, they have a purpose and allow me to change my mind until I am satisfied with the result.

Despite the power of today's computers, be aware that some tasks are still labor intensive. A good Quick Mask selection can still take time to paint. Mistakes, however, can be easily repaired, and selections can be saved for future use. This is a far more pleasant prospect than painting onto an expensive, bromide print with a thick, solvent-based solution, where a mistake means starting afresh.

The special effects wizards responsible for the stunning visuals in films like the Matrix, import sequences into Photoshop to create masks for the digital effects to be overlaid on original footage. Attractive people that grace the covers of magazines seem, these days, to owe their continuing looks more to Photoshop than cosmetic surgeons. In fact, this particular software is omnipresent in all aspects of current media production. Images can be imported from other software packages, exported to web design and sent to clients based in other cities and countries. Photoshop allows really creative people almost unlimited avenues to explore their visual ideas.

All the images and graphics in this book, even the darkroom chapter, were created in Photoshop. It was actually easier emulating test-strips and sepia tones with my computer than to go into the darkroom. I've included this chapter to illustrate a concept.

Finally. When I visited Focal Press in Oxford to hand over the CD's for my first edition I was nervous about whether it was any good. It was remarked that what I had written was quite personal. At first I thought that it might limit the readership somewhat. I've since had compliments and good reviews, which have been pleasant

to receive. Encouraging as well. I'm sure there are some naysayers out there. As a result I've thought, that's the reason I make pictures. It is personal. So if I drop a few names and speak in the first person too much that's the way I am. Whether working for a client, sitting at my Mac. or fiddling with my pinhole camera, making pictures for me has always been personal.

Acknowledgments