OUT *of the*

by katrin eismann with seán duggan

Katrin Eismann, author of Photoshop Restoration & Retouching *and* Photoshop Masking & Compositing, *is an internationally recognized artist, author, and educator who was recently inducted into the Photoshop Hall of Fame. Check out her website at www.katrineismann.com.*

*Seán Duggan is a co-author of* Real World Digital Photography, 2nd Edition *(Peachpit Press) and* Photoshop CS Artistry *(New Riders). He teaches regular workshops on Photoshop and digital imaging. Check out his website at www .seanduggan.com and www.f1point4.com.*

DARK

SECRETS OF THE DIGITAL DARKROOM

The longer I teach digital imaging, the more I find that fewer students in my classes have ever been in a traditional, chemical-based photographic darkroom. Granted, I haven't mixed developer since graduating with an undergraduate degree in photography from the Rochester Institute of Technology in 1991. But I vividly remember hours bent over a long metal sink cluttered with trays, beakers, thermometers, and tongs, listening to the tick, tick, tick of the GraLab darkroom timer as I gently agitated rolls of film or watched images come up in the developer tray. The moments before I opened the film-developing tank or let the last drops of fixer drip off a print were always full of apprehension, anxiety, doubt, and hope. Did I get the shot or will the photo look as good later as it does in the dim light of the darkroom?
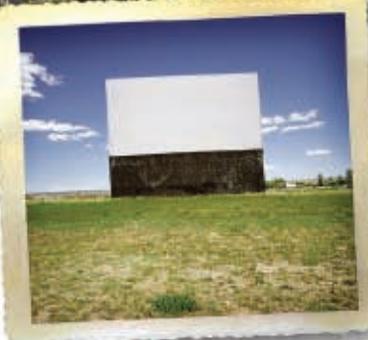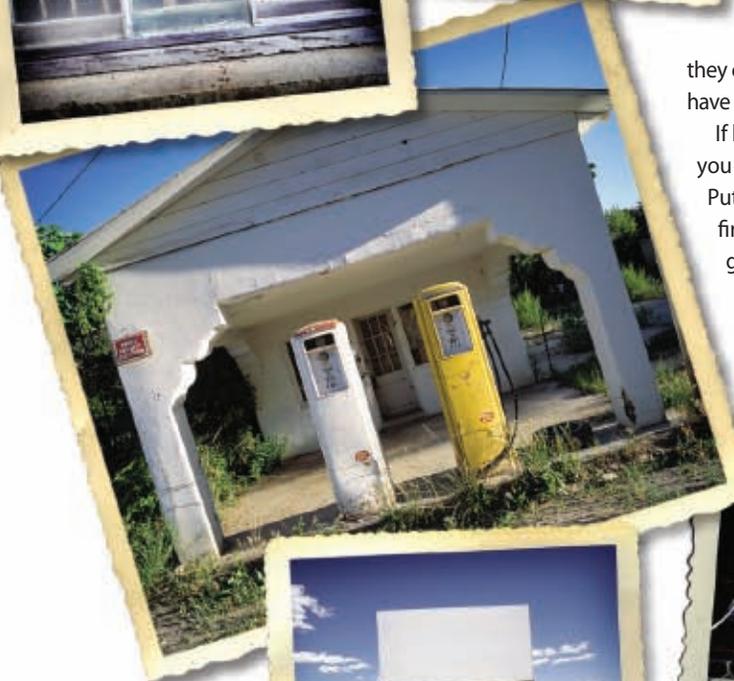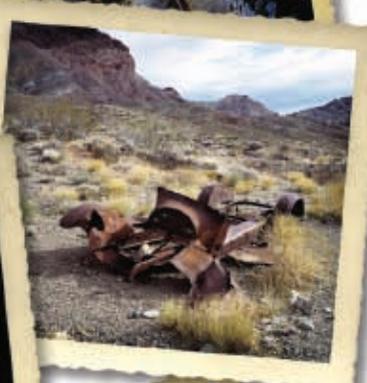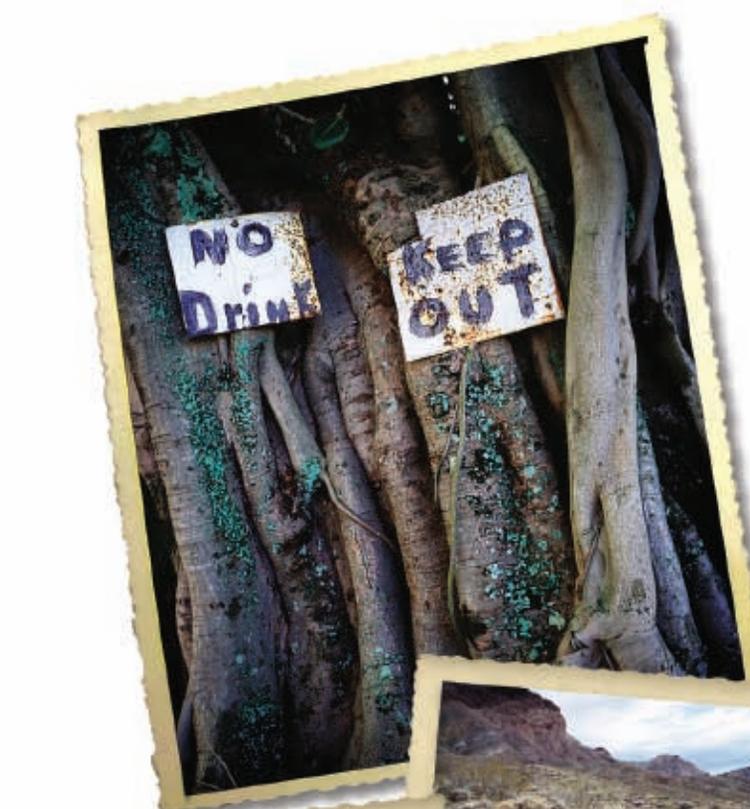
Please don't think that I want to be back in the wet darkroom for one split second. I certainly don't miss the fumes, the stained clothing, or the cleanup at the end of the day. I appreciate and rely on what all that time standing on the cold tile floors taught me about the craft of photography, the value of imagination, and how to nurture a photograph as it evolves from a circle on a contact sheet to the final print.

listening to images

The most important aspect of working in the digital darkroom is before you even lift the mouse, as you study, listen to, and learn from your own images. Carefully consider your image before starting. What is the image telling you? What are you trying to express with it? What does it mean? What is this photograph about? Is it "just a pretty picture" (which is fine) or is there more than meets the eye at first superficial glance? What ideas or feelings are you trying to explore and express?

Take a look at these first six images that I've taken over the course of many years. I photograph to honor the past, to hear voices still audible within the walls, and record the traces we leave on the environment. If I were to photograph the National Parks, I'd be behind the dumpsters, finding beauty in the discarded and overlooked. Of course, I appreciate classical landscape photography, but by studying my photography, I recognize what motivates me and that I value the marks left by the passage of time as they connect our short life spans with the many generations that have come before and that will follow all of us.

If listening to an inherently silent collection of pixels makes you uncomfortable or if you think I'm treading on New Age Silly Putty®, remember why you composed the photograph in the first place. What caught your eye: Was it the light, texture, gesture, color, or an emotion? Learn to read the image, to comprehend it, to express what you think about it *before* starting to work on it. This exercise of reading the image—of identifying what's essential in it—is the first step to making the most of your time in the digital darkroom.

IMAGES ©KATRIN EISMANN
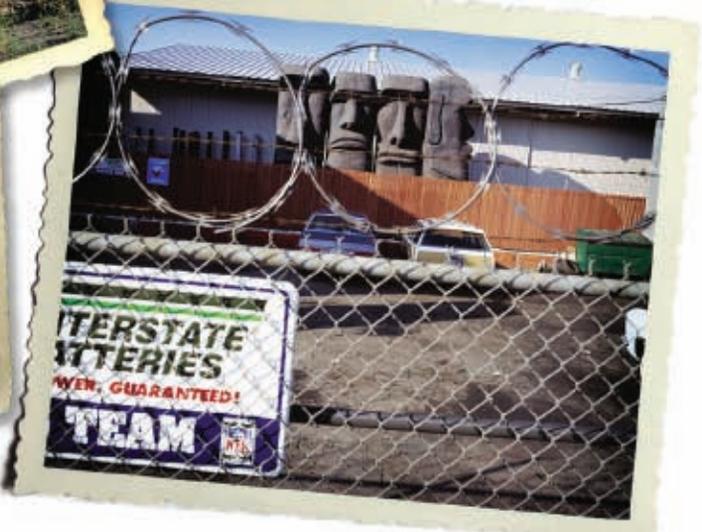
guiding the viewer's eye

As you identify the essence of the image, you'll also notice the flaws: the distractions, the areas that need to be de-emphasized, or removed altogether. Be aware of how your eye travels through the image—what it's drawn to, what it overlooks, and what it keeps returning to. Our visual cortex is attracted to light, contrast, color, and detail; therefore, if you want someone to look at an area in the image, enhance the light, contrast, color, and details to subconsciously guide the viewer's eye through the image. The best darkroom work (traditional and digital) is the work that isn't obvious or distracting and that encourages the viewer to enjoy the image again and again.

In the traditional darkroom, after processing the film, I'd make contact sheets, then carefully study them, circling potential images or crossing out missed exposures or compositions with a red grease pencil. After narrowing the potential keepers, it was time to make a quick 8x10" work print, which clearly revealed the strengths and weaknesses of the image. If the work print showed missed focus or the image wasn't as compelling as the small contact sheet led me to believe, then there was no reason to continue working with that specific image. If a work print showed potential, I'd giddily mark up the print with that same red grease pencil, sketching a possible crop or a guide of what needed to be dodged up or burnt down.

When working with traditional materials of silver-based film and chemicals, deciding which image to work with entailed a serious commitment to the image. There was no reason to spend hours in the darkroom with an image that the work print had revealed to be either technically, aesthetically, or conceptually unsuccessful.

In the digital darkroom, however, this critical edit-and-select process is often skipped. I find myself seduced by the luminosity and color saturation of the monitor as I listen to the "call of the Photoshop siren," trying to convince me that with enough time, effort, and layers, I can fix the flaws in any image and (mistakenly) rework the barely adequate into a stunning photograph.

Now that I'm only shooting digitally, I take more pictures, which makes the edit-and-select process even more important.

Adobe Bridge is indispensable in the selection process. I use a strict binary approach when viewing the images in filmstrip mode for the initial image selects. An image is either a keeper or it's not. It either merits a one-star rating or it doesn't (the equivalent of circling potential images on the contact sheets). Then I filter the images to show "1 or more stars," which hides the rejects. Now, rather than making work prints, I carefully inspect each "keeper" and decide if it merits more stars. Once again, I'm fairly specific: an image is now rated one, three, or five stars, with five-star images being the equivalent of the work print images. I keep all of the digital camera files but the rated images are the ones to which I dedicate my time and attention. A five-star rating is a commitment that starts with imagining how the final image will look, and continues with wondering if I should treat an image independently, or whether it requires a stylistic treatment to make it fit within a series of images.

in the digital darkroom

The strategy I use in the digital darkroom relies on what I learned in the traditional darkroom, expanded upon with Photoshop. After studying the image in Adobe Bridge and imagining what the final image should look like, I follow these steps, starting in Adobe Camera Raw, followed by refinement, improvement, and interpretation in Photoshop.

initial image processing

STEP ONE: Process the image in Adobe Camera Raw to refine overall exposure, color, and contrast. If needed, remove flaws, such as vignetting, chromatic aberration, and noise. Save the file at the native resolution of the digital camera sensor as a 16-bit image in the ProPhoto RGB color space.

STEP TWO: In Photoshop, I use Pixel Genius PhotoKit Sharpener (www.pixel-genius.com) to apply input sharpening, which offsets the inherent and optical softness of the RAW camera file. After inspecting the sharpening, and possibly adjusting its strength with opacity, flatten the file. *Note:* This is the only time I'll flatten layers because I've found that I never readjust the input sharpening, and maintaining the input sharpening layers almost triples the file size.

STEP THREE: Correct perspective, alignment, and remove lens distortion using a combination of Lens Correction and Free Transform. The Lens Correction filter (Filter>Distort>Lens Correction) is a fantastic feature to straighten, align, and reposition how the image falls onto the image plane.

Then I use Free Transform (Command-T [PC: Control-T]) when I need to refine individual image corners via the Distort menu or in the rare case that I use Warp transform (Edit>Transform>Warp) to bend an image into shape.

©KATRIN EISMANN
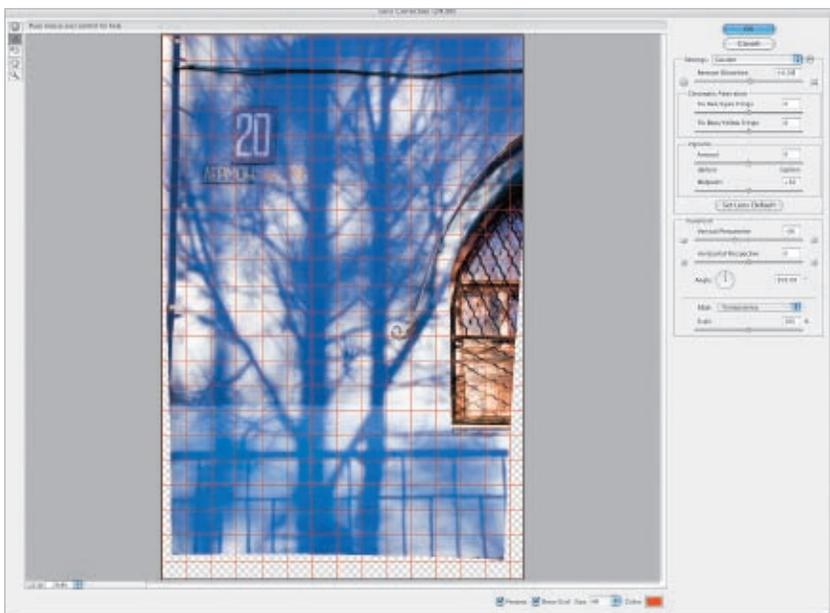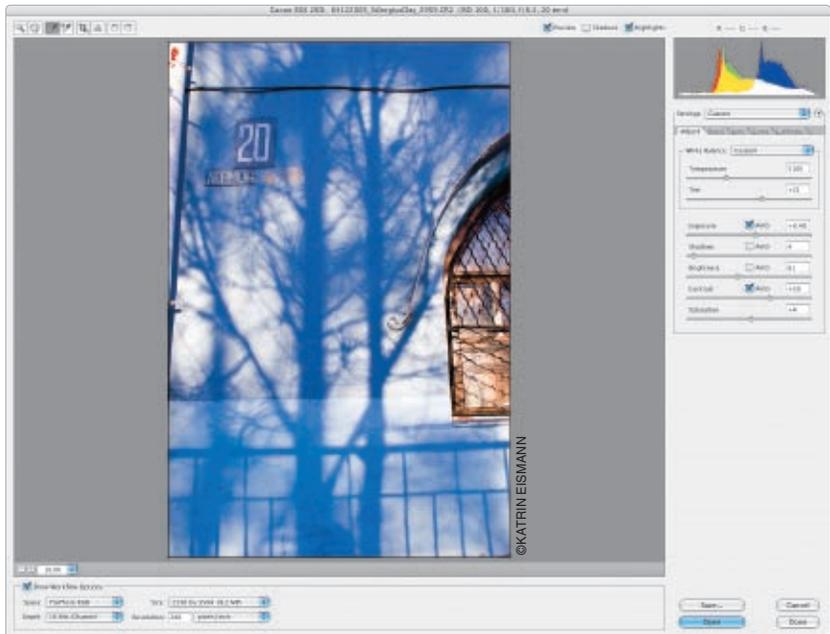
global tonal and color correction

Now that the image is straight and square, concentrate on tone, color, and detail, starting with overall global improvements and further refining the image with selective tonal improvements. The tonality of the image—be it color or black and white—is the basis for emphasis, interpretation, mood, and emotion. The color of the image is the mood and interpretation of the image, so start by finding a neutral and then refine the overall color to better convey the spirit of the image to

your viewers. Enhancing details is often accomplished by both delicate dodging to lighten and burning to darken specific areas or by applying creative sharpening to make essential areas in the image appear sharper.

STEP FOUR: Add three adjustment layers, from bottom to top, as follows:

- ▷ Levels (Image>Adjustments>Levels) to refine the black and white points and tweak the midtone, if needed.
- ▷ Curves set to Luminosity to improve contrast.
- ▷ A Hue/Saturation or Selective Color or Color Balance layer to add, subtract, enhance, or change color. The color quality of the image is the musical score in a movie; it's the emotion of the image.

Note: Now that I'm spending more time and care in the conversion of the RAW file in Adobe Camera Raw, I find my images need fewer global improvements.

specific tonal and color correction

STEP FIVE: Apply image-specific dodging and burning to draw the viewer's eye to the lighter areas. Of course there's more than one way to dodge and burn in Photoshop, but here's how I maintain flexibility and have tremendous control over the image:

- ▷ **To Dodge:** Add a Curves adjustment layer (Image> Adjustments>Curves) and click OK without changing any settings. Change the layer blend mode to Screen and reduce the layer Opacity to 35%. Next, choose Image>Adjustments>Invert to invert the layer mask to

black, then use a soft-edged, 50% Opacity white Brush to paint in the areas that need to be lighter.

- ▷ **To Burn:** Add a Curves adjustment layer and click OK without changing any settings, then change the layer blend mode to Multiply, and reduce the layer Opacity to 35%. Go under Image>Adjustments>Invert to invert the layer mask to black, then use a soft-edged, 50% Opacity white Brush to paint in the areas that need to be lighter.

The beauty of using separate layers for dodging and burning is that you have infinite control over the effect by adjusting the opacity of each layer and the opacity of the brush.
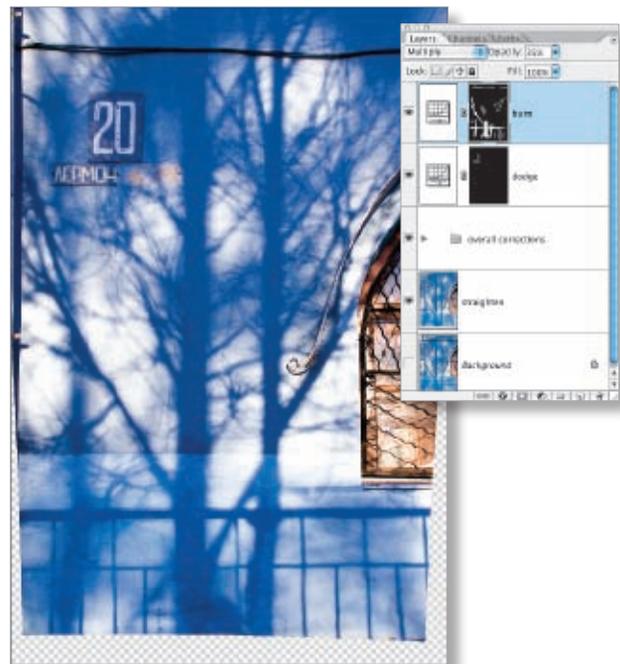
focus, atmosphere, and sharpening

STEP SIX: The final step is to refine the details, focus, and atmosphere. Because sharpening and softening are resolution-dependent and the effects would change upon resizing the image, I often do this step after the image is resized for final output.

sharpen specific areas of an image:

- ▷ Click on the topmost image and press Command-Option-Shift-E (PC: Control-Alt-Shift-E) to merge all working layers up and change the layer blend mode to Overlay. The image will temporarily become very contrasty.
- ▷ Choose Filter>Other>High Pass and in the dialog, set the Radius to between 2–5 to define the edges of the image. Click OK to close the dialog.
- ▷ Now under the Layer menu, choose Layer Mask>Hide All and use a soft-edged 75% Opacity white Brush to paint in the areas you want to be sharper.

soften specific areas of an image:

▷ Turn off the sharpening layer and press Command-Option-Shift-E (PC: Control-Alt-Shift-E) to merge all working layers up and change the layer blend mode to Soft Light.

▷ Choose Filter>Other>High Pass and in the dialog, set the Radius to between 2–5 to define the edges of the image. Click OK.

▷ Now go under the Image menu and choose Adjustments>Invert to invert the image, which will soften rather than sharpen the image.

▷ Finally, select Layer>Layer Mask>Hide All and use a soft-edged, 75% Opacity white Brush to paint in the areas you want to be softer.

experiment with texture and borders:

Not all images require additional creative interpretation and in the example (below), I cropped the image and used a simple black border to elegantly frame it.

output sharpening:

After I've saved the layered master file, I create a duplicate file, flatten it, and resize it to fit my output. Then I'll use Pixel Genius Photo-Kit Sharpener to apply output and paper-specific sharpening.

it's a challenge

Challenge yourself to make variations of the same image. Keep your options open and flexible by using adjustment layers and not resizing the master image. Make a commitment to interpreting and improving your images. Use Layer Comps to keep track of image brainstorming, ideas, and interpretations.

The ability to experiment and create variations of the same image without using a lot of print materials is one of the best aspects of working in the digital darkroom. And of course with a computer, the final cleanup is a lot easier too: Just choose File>Quit and shut down the computer—instead of wiping damp trays and sinks.

Most importantly, always make your time, effort, and skills worthwhile by choosing the images you work with wisely. ■