

Huntington Witherill • *Photo Synthesis* Image Process Description

In production of the series: *Photo Synthesis*, I currently use a Canon EOS 5D digital camera and 24-105mm, 1.4 L IS USM lens. The flowers and other botanical subjects are normally photographed using a relatively plain background. Once the original images have been shot and uploaded to a Macintosh computer, the Adobe Photoshop software program is used to alter and restructure the images in much the same way a painter might use a brush and a palette of colors to achieve a painting. That is to say that the individual techniques employed are rarely repeated in the same sequence for any two given images (much as a painter would rarely use the exact same brush stroke, twice). The process itself is accomplished in more of an intuitive and/or improvisational manner, rather than by employing a fixed or repeatable sequence of steps in order to achieve an end result. After the original camera image has been made, the whole process might best be characterized as being more comparable to painting, or perhaps even jazz improvisation, than strictly to photography.

From the original camera image, and among an indeterminate variety of steps taken during the process of achieving a finished image, each step (change) made along the way will— by nature of its visual appearance when viewed on the computer monitor— indicate to me what the next appropriate step might be in order to further refine the visual character of that particular image. Thus, the images themselves can not be “pre-visualized”. In accomplishing all of the steps I can’t anticipate what the next appropriate step might be until after I’ve seen what the previous step has visually produced. Decisions are made *on the fly*. The finished image is itself a product of all of the individual decisions made along the way, together with an understanding of what particular controls and adjustments within the Photoshop program might best serve to achieve each specific visual change. Think in terms of jazz improvisation.

Suffice it to say, if I started with exactly the same original camera image on two separate occasions, I could not hope to achieve two finished prints which exhibited (even remotely) the same visual qualities as I would surely make different choices along the way, and thus the accumulation of all those decisions would produce an entirely different result.

Nevertheless, some of the techniques I regularly employ within the Photoshop program include masking techniques, used to separate out portions of the image in order to alter the contrast, color, saturation, luminosity, and/or opacity of those areas. I will also often construct masks that segregate the edges of specific objects within the frame, so I can then alter the nature of those edges to achieve a variety of painterly effects. Frequently, areas of the image are diffused so as to introduce blurring into selected portions of the image (again, painting those effects back into the image through layer masks). I also often create masks to alter contrast and luminosity in selected areas so as to achieve different types of lighting and atmospheric effects. Additionally, the images are nearly always distorted with respect to their shape and proportion. Further, I will often copy, re-size and re-orient the images, and then paste those images on top of one another (much like the techniques used in a collage). Different visual effects can be achieved by using a variety of layer blending modes, opacity settings, and layer masks to selectively draw those specific effects into chosen areas of the image. Though all of the techniques I use can be accomplished within the Photoshop program, none of the techniques could be strictly outlined or quantified as to their appropriate sequence and/or precise implementation. Just like a painting, or a musical improvisation, there can be no prescribed set of steps, or techniques used in order to achieve a predictably successful result.

Each completed image can require anywhere from a few hours, to several days of work to accomplish. Also, much like a painting, one of the keys to achieving a successful image lies in knowing when to intuitively stop the process and discontinue “re-working” the image. I find that I reject and subsequently discard more than 50% of the images I begin as they will eventually prove to be inferior. Finally, once an image is completed, archival pigment ink prints are made using an Epson Stylus Pro 7600 printer with Ultrachrome inks and 100% rag content fine art papers. This combination allows me to achieve a print with the desired “look” and “feel” and also serves to insure each print’s longevity.

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