

Imaging Software: Servant Or Master?

A few years back when all these digital doings got started I was chatting with some photographers about how having images as information would affect our work. At one point in the discussion we started to joke about how the next generation of software would give us an instant Van Gogh, or emulate a Sunday painter's watercolor, or even create pen and ink drawings from any image we had on the screen. We had a good laugh about those possibilities, and how digital might just take all the work of artists who, in their time, had blazed new trails, and make them applicable to any image with the push of a button. It sounded silly at the time not only because we thought it unlikely, but because we also thought it would trivialize vision and consign inspiration to a me-too software trick. It turns out we weren't that far off.

Today we have amazing programs that can do all the above and more, giving us instant Van Gogh's, Monet's, and even Stieglitz's. We can turn a swamp scene into an illustration for haiku lickety-split. We can emulate any toning technique—from selenium to copper—and even make our digital camera pictures look as if they were exposed on Scotch 640T film. There's little, it seems, that hasn't been exploited or explored when it comes to somebody else's vision, or medium, or even message.

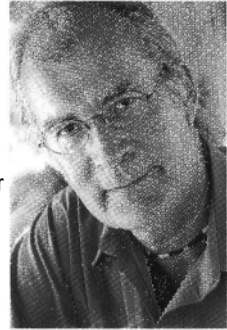
There's an argument to be made that all this can lead to an understanding of the potential of this medium, and in the process make us visually literate about what came before and apply it to our own work. How many times have you discovered that the pictures you made when you began were being made by past masters way before you picked up a camera? Indeed, many of us got into photography because someone's work turned us on to a new way to see the world, and many of us spent our first years making, or trying to make, our own personal Ansel Adams or Henri Cartier-Bresson.

Can we say the same today with a heavily manipulated image? Are we now being inspired more by software code

writers than photographers? Don't get me wrong. It's fine to transform images into whatever suits your fancy or need. There are few if any rules in this game. And most software now comes with more than just push-button changes; there are enough sliders and variations within the dialog boxes of these effects to create your own "filters" from what is first offered as the default. And if you are doing this commercially your customers might just want the Rembrandt style, or even the "Hazy II" effect on their portrait, with an instant vignette and crackled framing to boot.

The point is that software these days can let you do just about anything you desire with an image. It can also allow you to create any effect without too much fuss or bother, thus spend lots more time photographing than staring at a screen. But after the first blush of amazement with image transformation you might want to take a step back and consider this: are you using the software, or is it using you? Does the result serve the image and its communicative power, or is it just a display of the code writers' art?

Photography has always been an art form that relies most on the point of view of the photographer, the content and composition and the way the photo informs us about the world. Software and special effects might just serve that end, or it might just inform us about which program now resides on the photographer's computer. Learning how you can transform and enhance images these days has become part of the craft. Applying that knowledge mainly in the service of your vision is where your art comes to the fore.



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