

Lapsus Calami

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On Digital Photography

I HAVE BEEN interested in photography since I was in high school. At first the mechanics of the craft attracted me. Photographic equipment and supplies were relatively inexpensive, and the chemical process was most interesting. I was soon involved in mixing my own developers and experimenting with the available films and printing papers. As my knowledge of the chemistry grew, I became interested in the process as an art. I bought the magazines, and eagerly followed the careers of a number of famous *Life* magazine photographers. I understood that what a handful of photographers were producing was a remarkable art in itself. Their images led me to a study of the history of photography, which was rich and timeless, but based on the photographs of a remarkably few photographers. Photography taught me how to see – and I began carrying a camera with me everywhere I went to record the images that comprised the highlights of my life and that of my family and friends. I worshiped the monolithic sharp images of Edward Weston and Ansel Adams, and became a disciple of Adam's *Zone Method* of exposure and processing. By carefully exposing for shadow areas and varying the length of time the film was in the developer, the density and contrast of most images could be controlled. Once the process became codified, Adams was free to concentrate on the composition of his photographs. But the *Zone System* was not a cure-all. There were a number of variables that photographers had to contend with – the pH of the water comprising the developer, and the length of time and the temperature during the process of development. The recommended time of development in a given developer was just that, a starting point for fine-tuning processing time. Each photographer had to experiment endlessly in order to conjure the desired density and contrast of his negatives. Printing his negatives was yet another process that depended on many variables. There was an incredible difference between drugstore processed images and those of fine prints. There

was a large component of personal alchemy in the process.

Jumping ahead to the greatest revolution in the approximately 175 year history of the art and craft, we have witnessed the shift of the equipment to modern electronic cameras and computers. There is no longer much need for the hard-earned techniques of film-based photography. No longer does the photographer have to be concerned with the variables in photographic chemistry. The photographer is free to concentrate on recognizing and excerpting and achieving desired images. Gone are the elaborate darkrooms that smelled of acetic acid and other weird odors. If the artist feels the need to manipulate the electronic files that now comprise photographic images, rather incredible photo computer programs exist that allow endless manipulation to occur. The exposure systems of modern digital cameras permit the photographer to take pictures under conditions that film photographers had no chance of making.

I, like millions of photographers today, have switched to digital cameras and can carry around with me tiny cameras fitted with extremely complicated computer chips that fit in a shirt pocket, but which produce images in full color that are incredibly sharp and beautiful. I still worship the work of Weston and Adams, but am enjoying the benefit of digital equipment so much that I am reluctant to consider returning to the glorious days of black and white photography. If I want to, I can convert any of my digital pictures into black and white prints.

The letterpress printing processes underwent radical evolutionary processes away from movable type and mechanical printing presses before the evolution in photography occurred. Now there is a happy marriage of digital images and desktop publishing programs and offset printing as well as photocopying techniques that make publishing so easy and enjoyable today.

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