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Photoshop Creative Magazine Interview - 2006

Interview by Zoe Mutter

1. What drew you to using Photoshop initially?

When I first started using Photoshop, it wasn't quite the same as I use it now. I was doing medical imaging so I didn't have access to a high-end color scanner, and the output was limited to 4x5 transparencies. Hence, I wasn't exactly outputting images I shot to paper. But the "possibilities" were very clear even in the early versions of Photoshop. The potential for such a tool, the more you knew about it, was massive.

Over time, as functionality increased, the number of possibilities went up slightly, but what REALLY changed was the speed and flexibility. Arguably, Layers were the most important addition to Photoshop and allowed for changing the layers of information in the document at any time. It also meant you could experiment with different ideas without altering other data in the image. "Multiple undo", otherwise known as the History palette, also allowed for much more flexibility.

2. What made you then want to teach and share your knowledge of photography and creativity with others?

I really enjoy teaching; one aspect in particular draws me - to see that "light bulb" come on over someone's head when they "get" something that has puzzled them for weeks (or years in some cases). The ability to translate what Photoshop is doing behind the scenes into something people can understand is an art form itself. It's also very rewarding to see what people create having seen one of my presentations years ago. I'm also not the most technical person, but I can serve as the liaison between the engineering team and the end users explaining (hopefully) some very technical concepts in simple terms.

3. What is your favorite or most commonly used tool in Photoshop and are there any indispensable plug-ins you can recommend?

I think everyone can agree that the "Undo" command is of utmost importance to the creative process! The Clone/Stamp tool is certainly a big one, likewise for the Healing brush. As for plug-ins, my primary focus is on the application itself, though there are a number of partners making great plug-ins for Photoshop. I'd hate to mention some and leave any out. I know that my Wacom tablet travels with me everywhere, and my Wacom Cintique is amazing.

4. Do you use any specialist photographic equipment to capture your shots?

For the book, I tended to use a black sweatshirt to reduce reflections from the window, but you don't want to be doing anything suspicious on a plane these days. For my digital illustrations, I use a flatbed scanner a great deal. I tend to place things directly on it which allows for really high-res scans, but it also gives a lighting effect I can't really do any other way. I actually borrow my husband's scanner I had gotten him for Christmas to scan a dead bird. When I was done, he told me I could keep it.

5. Window Seat was an incredibly original idea for a book. Do you have any other exciting projects planned?

I had the idea to photograph everything I ate for a while. I think it would be pretty interesting to group what you eat different ways, color, texture, quantity, time of day, etc. I need to watch my intake of leafy greens, so I'd imagine that the green area would be lacking a bit. I've also loved neon signs, and I'm fascinated by the way things decay. Rust, erosion, etc. are interesting to me because they take a while to happen and we think of those words as being bad. I always have a few personal projects on the back burner, but I don't know which will grow into a full body of work. I am going to focus on my digital illustrations for a while and see what happens.

6. What subject do you enjoy photographing the most?

I love textures! That was one aspect of Window Seat that I liked the most, these abstract patterns and textures on the ground that, if you didn't know they were photographed out of a plane, you might never guess what they were. There are other textures that just make me cringe and I don't know why. Honeycombs, for example. There was a honeycomb ceiling in a theater one time and I had to leave. I also love to photograph people, but I think it requires some amount of invasion of their personal space. If you ASK if you can take someone's picture, you get a much less candid image. I've certainly seen photographers just take pictures, but I really want to be "invisible" to them. I also love to photograph details, the handles on a door as much as the door itself, the rivets on an oil tanker, etc.

7. You lecture and serve as an inspiration to many others but which photographers and digital imaging experts inspire you the most?

Ansel Adams, Jerry Uelsman, Keith Carter, Michael Kenna, and John Sexton from the film world, Stephen Johnson certainly for the digital realm, as well as Maggie Taylor, Jeff Schewee, Martin Evening, Katrin Eismann for Photoshop and digital explorations.

8. What would you say is the most important step in developing or refreshing your creative thinking?

The most important is also the one I find the most difficult - stepping out of my "comfort zone". I MUST explore new things, whether it's simply taking a different route to work on occasion or trying something I've never tried before. I mention in the book how much I value becoming a beginner at something.

9. What are your top five tips for using Photoshop to enhance photographic images?

- Start with a RAW camera file if you possibly can. There is SO much more flexibility with a RAW file, even if your final result will be in black and white. Process as much as you can in the RAW dialog box before continuing into Photoshop.
- Fix dynamic range. Go into levels and make sure the full range is being utilized. This will make other corrections much easier.
- Perform color correction at this point and certainly remember that color can be applied in varying amounts to an image to convey a mood.
- From here, you can start manipulating the image if desired. Whenever possible, work in layers. If you're adjusting an earring in a portrait, adjust it on a layer. If you're applying levels to the image overall, do it in an adjustment layer. Even if you're cloning an area, clone to another layer (an option many people don't recognize). Layers allow you SO much more flexibility, it's rare that I do anything on the same layer.
- And, come to think of it, before I reach for the mouse or keyboard, I always sit back and look at the image for an extra second. I find it helps to really think about what you want to achieve with an image before you begin editing. If it's a simple color correction, it's not that tough, but for more complicated retouching, I find the sixty seconds I spend planning what I'm going to do makes for a better image and saves me processing time.