

B Y B O B C O A T E S

Inspired by Ansel
ZONESYSTEMINDIGITAL

If you've left the world of black and white behind, it may be time to revisit some of those old files. Reading *Ansel Adams: An Autobiography*, got me juiced up to see if I could create some dramatic black-and-white images myself. If you think about it, all of Adams' images were heavily manipulated. He started with the initial

exposure using a color filter and then under- or overexposed them while making adjustments in the developing process to create as many tones as possible in his negatives. Then he would pull test prints while experimenting with different papers, dodging and burning to further enhance the performance of his negatives.

The low angle of view with the creek and rocks in the foreground add depth to the image.

In his autobiography, Adams says, "I don my *Washington Post* apron and disappear into the darkroom, reappearing to check the tonal quality of the first proofs, often by drying portions of the photograph in



Lines, texture and form give this image a lot of depth. Photoshop's Soft Light layer mode allows complete control of dodging and burning. Overlay mode can also be used with a slightly different effect.

Kevin said, "the images you capture can get stronger and better as new software solutions are created for more selective processing! Try that with film!" This also has come to pass and means you can revisit older files and reprocess them to a better result.

And here we are today with tools for creating great black-and-white images, which have never been better. Photoshop's Adobe Camera RAW, Lightroom, Capture One, Nik Silver Efex Pro and other software solutions, are at the forefront of creative interpretation for our digital files.

We don't have to wait for a microwave to know the effects on our images. With the application of these controls I'm beginning to see black and white as the 'new' color. The ability to micro-adjust individual tones based on different criteria is astounding. Using layers and being able to mask a red filter to only the sky, an orange filter to red rocks followed by a green filter on the trees affords you phenomenal control.

This is not an article on how to manipulate your images, but a primer on how you might think to use the tools available. Once you head down this path you'll find many new creative interpretations yourself. Let's take a look at some of the possibilities:

The old adage for processing film was, "expose for the shadows and develop for the highlights," to overcome limitations. Split-field neutral density filters were used to help control the brightness of skies. The hassle there was the line of the filter was straight, whereas the horizon seldom was. Now multiple exposures allow you to capture more dynamic range. You may have heard this blending of multiple images called High Dynamic Range (HDR).

This is how you shoot HDR: In manual mode, make exposures approximately one stop apart over three to five stops. You can shoot as many as seven or more, if necessary. Photoshop or software like Photomatix Pro, can help blend these images automatically. Many times I prefer to make my own selections and mask them for a more realistic look. With these techniques you can record an unlimited range of tones from black to white, from full sunshine, sky and bright white clouds, to deep shadows

my microwave oven! It can take an hour or several days until I have achieved a print with which I am satisfied."

I was intrigued that Ansel appreciated digital manipulation, and he thought of it as just another tool that allowed the photographer's vision to be transferred to the final print. Adams continued, "I will always embrace a credo of excellence in craft and vision; both are difficult to maintain. Photographers are composers in a sense, and the negatives are their scores. In the electronic age, I am sure that scanning techniques will be able to achieve prints of extraordinary subtlety from the original negative scores. If I could return in 20 years or so I would hope to see astounding inter-

pretations of my most expressive images. It is true no one could print my negatives as I did, but they might well get more out of them by electronic means. Image quality is not the product of a machine, but of the person who directs the machine, and there are no limits to imagination and expression." Keep in mind that this was published in 1984.

Now fast-forward to the early 90s when digital was first coming on the scene. Kevin Ames of Ames Photographic Illustration was making the argument that digital was a better medium than film, in that you now had a magic box where you could continue to pull out exposure after exposure at no additional charge. "Even more important,"



with detail. Back in the digital darkroom make selections based on the proper exposure for each individual area.

But you say, "I shot in RAW. Can't I just process one image for all the tones I need?" The short answer is no. If one image is all you have to work with detail may be recovered, but, for stellar results, work with multiple exposures. If you try to expand or recover tones from the highlight or shadow areas of your exposure, you will end up with noise in the dark tones or areas of no detail in the highlights. Select all the images and

make sure they are in perfect registration. Despite careful shooting on a tripod, there can be some tiny variations in registration due to small camera movements.

Proper selections are made easier than ever, even down to adjusting specific colors which correspond to various tones when converted to black and white. Here are some possible ways of making your selections: Magic wand—Don't just stay with the default settings, changing the tolerance will change the way pixels are sorted. Use the Lasso tool to hand draw selections. If

there is plenty of contrast in your image, using the magnetic lasso can speed up your process. You can fill a mask with black, and use white paint with various size and hardness brushes to reveal what you want to show. I usually place the image that contains the most information on the bottom.

Please note: Many times if you are shooting pre-dawn or after dusk, and all the tones in your image are within three to four stops, the HDR shooting and blending is not necessary.

Pre-visualization is more important than

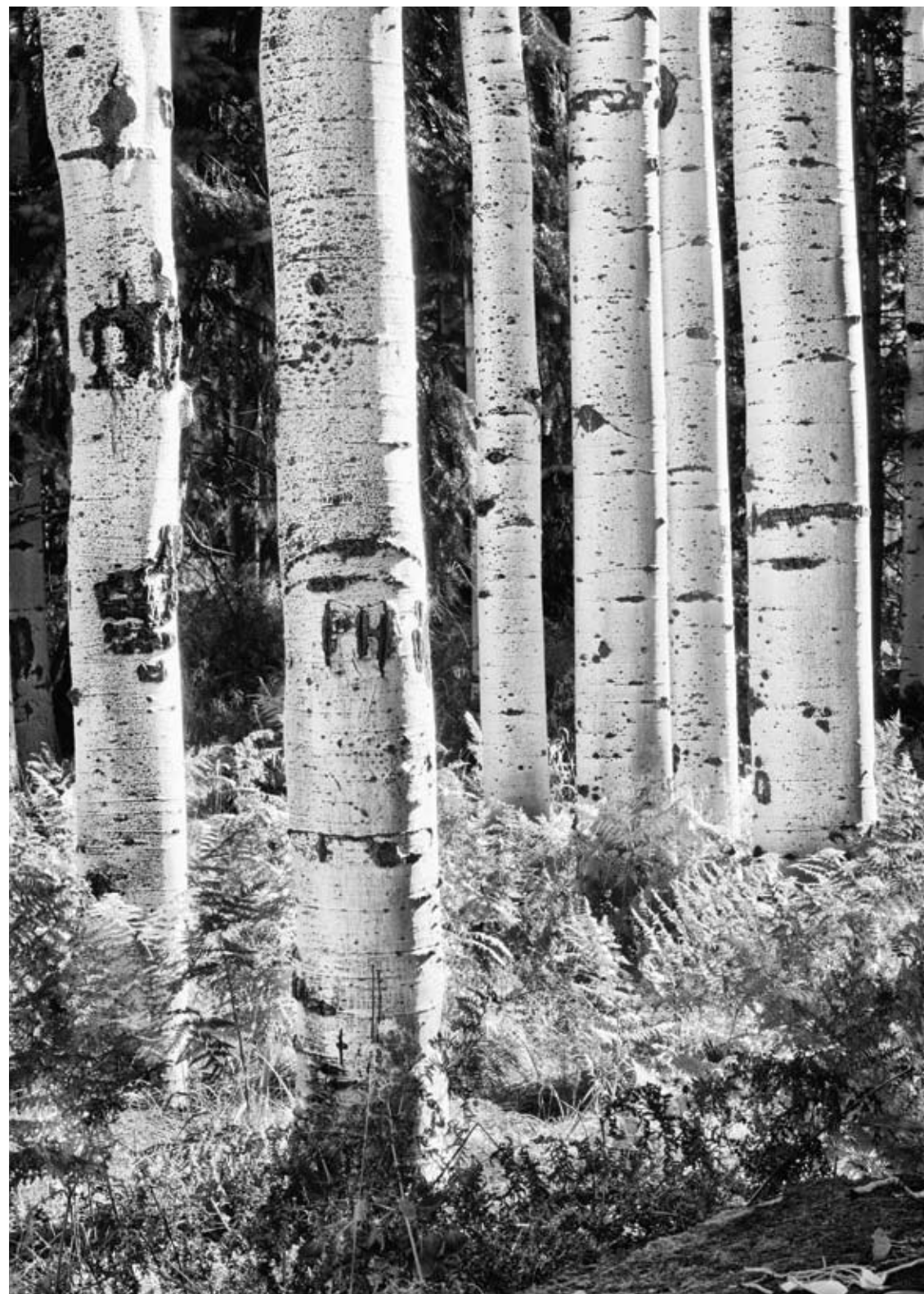
Opposite: Photographed out the back door of a shop in Italy, this scene was worked in NIK Color Efex Pro 3 with the Tonal Contrast and Glamour Glow Filters, then converted to black and white with NIK Silver Efex Pro. Some images will benefit working on your images in color before making the final conversion to black and white.

Below: Aspen tree trunks, Snowbowl, Flagstaff, AZ. Multiple exposures blended together allow detail to show throughout the image especially on the highlight side.

Right top: Black-and-white treatment allows the beautiful tones to stand out on this capture of a Prickly Pear cactus. Tones enhanced using NIK Color Efex Pro 3.0 Tonal Contrast and Glamour Glow filters.

Right middle: Control of the tones and texture using Nik Silver Efex Pro allowed the drama of Cathedral Rock in Sedona, AZ, to really stand out.

Right bottom: Twisted Cypress root in Bryce Canyon National Park, UT.





ALL PHOTOS COPYRIGHT © BOB COATES

The remnants of the Cypress tree on the rim of Bryce Canyon, UT, is enhanced by using Nik Silver Efex Pro as separate layers with different settings in Photoshop. This allows different color filter effects to be used on different parts of the image for greater control.

ever. Being able to see the final print in your mind allows you to apply filters with certain areas in mind. Selective sharpening, blurring and curve bumps allow a print to sing! Use the black-and-white adjustment layer to adjust individual colors seeing the effect on your tones as you adjust. If you wish to adjust a certain tone but don't know what color it is, click on the hand tool and place your cursor over the tone you wish to adjust, then click hold and slide left to make the tone darker, and right to make it lighter.

The Nik Silver Efex Pro has a structure slider where you can add contrast and detail to red rocks or other rough surfaces without adding it to the sky. In addition to many other tools, Nik allows you to try different filter and exposure combinations and see the results before applying them. I will often try out different filters and selectively apply them to different areas of an image.

In Photoshop there is a soft light layer for adjustable dodging and burning. Painting

Focus Throughout the Frame

You can extend your depth of field by bracketing focus. There are techniques using Photoshop to blend these images, or you can use specialty software if you are processing often. Helicon Focus (www.heliconsoft.com) software creates one completely focused image from several partially focused images, by combining these focused areas.

This makes focusing from here to infinity possible. With your camera on a tripod, focus on the nearest object in your frame. Then move focus forward a little bit in the frame, then capture another frame until you've worked your way to the end of the field of focus. This is especially helpful in doing macro work; this technique will change possibilities of making flowers with seemingly infinite depth of field. If you plan to do a lot of your images with this technique, get a StackShot (www.cognisys-inc.com), a fully automated focus-stacking rail that will make all the incremental focus steps automatically.

on this layer with black darkens tones of the prints and white lightens. This permits infinite control. Unlike the darkroom days when every single print would be different due to the techniques used to hold back or add light during the printing process.

Should you turn on the black-and-white setting on the camera? Absolutely not! You will throw away much of the needed information that will allow you to capture every tone because the camera will decide what your black and white should look like. If you shoot RAW, images will show up on your LCD in black and white, but all the color information will be recorded anyway.

I encourage you to step out and experiment with all the new tools at your disposal leaving you with this final quote from Ansel, "I hope that my work will encourage self-expression in others and stimulate the search for beauty and creative excitement in the great world around us."



Bob Coates is teaching "Inspired by Ansel: Black-and-White File Processing," a MasterClass on Tuesday, February 22 from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m.

A photographer, educator and author, Bob Coates is based in Sedona, AZ. See his Web site and newsletter on running a successful photo business at www.successful-photographer.com; and his site www.bcphotography.com for more information.