

DIG Tutorial: Yet Another BW Conversion Technique

1. Background

While working with several of my favorite color images I discovered that rendering them in grayscale tones sometimes makes a dramatic print. So I looked for a black and white conversion technique that offered a quick and easy way to experiment with grayscale tonal effects.

The standard Photoshop advice for black-and-white conversion is to avoid the simple one-step techniques such as Image / Adjustment / Desaturate or Image / Mode / Grayscale because they offer no control over the end result. The most common advice is to use the Channel Palette to examine the image in three separate color channels, followed by a Channel Mixer Adjustment Layer in Monochrome mode. My problem with that approach is that I rarely seem to learn anything useful with the Channel Palette, and the Channel Mixer adjustments are not very intuitive.

My favorite technique is a Color Overlay method that I found in one of George Lepp's Digital Image articles and also in one of Tim Grey's DDQ emails. I favor it because it provides direct visual feedback while I quickly explore a huge variety of tonal effects using just a few sliders.

2. Technique

- Flatten and save a copy of your layered color image to provide a base for black and white conversion.
- Create a Levels Adjustment Layer and Hue/Saturation Adjustment Layer above the Background layer but do not make any adjustments yet.
- Create a Solid Black Adjustment Layer at the top of the stack and change the Blending Mode to Color. This creates a black and white image with tones corresponding to the brightness levels in the original image. (If you automate these steps with an Action, the layers can be created with one click.)
- Open the Levels dialog and use the sliders in the normal way to set the black point and white point. Then adjust the mid point slider to set the overall tone of the whole image.
- Open the Hue/Saturation dialog and move the Hue slider through its range to see an amazing variety of tonal effects. Play with the sliders until the dramatic image you knew was in there suddenly appears.
- If that isn't enough control, you can experiment further using the Opacity slider, or exert selective control using a Layer Mask on the Level and Hue/Saturation layers.
- To experiment with a subtle color toning rather than pure grayscale, open the dialog for the solid color layer, invoke the color picker, and play until you get a pleasing result.
- For an interesting variation, you can display a selected part of the image in its original color while all else is grayscale, by using a layer mask on the top black layer.

3. Example

Ansel and I each took a similar shot from the Snake River Overlook in the Grand Tetons. I converted my image to grayscale using the technique described above - Ansel wouldn't tell me how he processed his image. I printed mine on Epson Enhanced Matte paper using an Epson 2200 printer with a Matte Black ink cartridge replacing the normal Photo Black cartridge.

