Photography & the Digital Age
By Tom Furlotte

The digital camera has brought profound change to the photographic process. Digital technology advances at a pace that is unprecedented in the photo industry. Camera models change so quickly that it is hard to keep up with current models and features. Software for photo processing gets more powerful with every generation. And the best digital equipment and techniques of yesterday are "obsoleted" by newer equipment and methods.

Good equipment is always good, even if the new and improved version is "better." If your "old" camera takes pictures you are satisfied with, do you need the latest model? (And I say that as a person whose job was to sell you a new model.) I use, and am happy with, a 16-megapixel camera even though the latest model has 36mp. I have no plans to change until I am no longer satisfied with the one I own. The 36mp model would require a new printer, more hard drive space, and a new income source. I don't need to change. Only you can decide your own needs and level of satisfaction.

The basic controls of a camera have not changed. Your shutter speed choice determines whether you freeze action, or if you use blur to show motion. Your choice of aperture determines the range of sharpness in your picture. The choice of zoom settings can change your composition. Proper application of basic camera controls can save lots of computer time. The recording medium has evolved but the basic techniques of photography still apply.

Problems arise when technology starts to overwhelm the process. In the days of film you chose color or black and white, daylight or tungsten. The exposed film went to the lab and you got back pictures. The controls that the lab took care of now must be programmed into the camera before the digital image is made. You set the color mode, image filtration, print quality, contrast, and color saturation – all before the first picture is taken. And you can change any or all of them for each picture. This technology is both appealing and daunting. When you learn to control these options you will have the ability to make photographs. Or you can set your camera on "auto" and snap pictures letting the camera control the results.

Don't be intimidated by technology. Learn to use it effectively. Understanding how the camera settings affect the resulting image and take control over the process.

Use the versatility of digital as a tool to create better photographs. The immediacy of digital photography lends itself to learning because you get to see the results of your efforts without waiting for a lab to process your images. You can try different techniques and see what works and what doesn't. Try the things you learn about in class and see if they improve your efforts. The trying will reinforce the learning and make what you hear about actually have practical meaning for you. And you won't be wasting money on film and developing.