

The Digital Revolution

By Tom Furlotte

Photography began as a scientific experiment with chemical technology. Its technical nature kept the process more of a curiosity and craft and less of an art form. Seventy-five years after the first photograph people were still arguing whether photography should be considered an art.

Early photographic processes were tedious and time-consuming, performed with dangerous chemicals and fragile glass plates. A single exposure took minutes. Technology improved the speed of exposures into the realm of fractions of a second. Flexible-based films made multiple exposure rolls possible. Smaller cameras made photography portable and candid. Edwin Land made possible pictures in a minute. Auto exposure came to the SLR in 1967 with the Konica Auto-reflex. Auto focus made sharp results easier for the beginner. KIS put a mini-lab on every corner with film processed and printed in an hour.

Then digital cameras made instantaneous imaging a reality. Digital photography became dominant in the marketplace much faster and technology advanced more rapidly than any of the pundits anticipated. Today digital cameras far outsell film-based ones. Generations of film cameras are getting less and less use and they are rarely used outside of Art photography. The masses have adopted the digital camera and taken it to their heart. Telephones dominate the picture market.

The immediacy of the digital image is its strong draw. Lighting, exposure, composition, facial expression and every other variable can instantly be analyzed in the digital image. Home printers can make amazingly good prints in seconds straight from the camera. Labs can print digital images on the same paper that they use to print negatives and give today's prints the same durability, color and feel they have always had.

Those wishing to learn and improve their skills have the results right away. They can assess the changes to their image when they experiment with a new technique and know what works for them and what does not work. Of course the photographer still has to be attentive to the process in order to gain knowledge from it.

In addition to the immediacy of the digital image, the digital media is reusable. Picture files can be erased and more pictures can be taken on the reusable card. The photographer is free to shoot as many pictures as necessary without adding to the cost. Only the best images need be printed. Cost savings on film and processing can easily offset the expense of new cameras and computers for the active professional.

Software packages such as Adobe Photoshop make the creative photographer able to push the limits beyond the capabilities of the tools that were available in the traditional wet darkroom. There are no practical limits on photo manipulation for the creative mind.

However, quality images still require proper photographic technique. Computer manipulation of a technically flawed image will not result in a quality image. The hours spent on the computer trying to fix what should have been "fixed" before the shutter was released could be spent on capturing new images. The new technologies available to the photographer of today will respond to the application of good technique equally as well as the processes of yesterday. The tools are the only things that have changed. The skills and vision of the photographer are still as important as they ever were.