

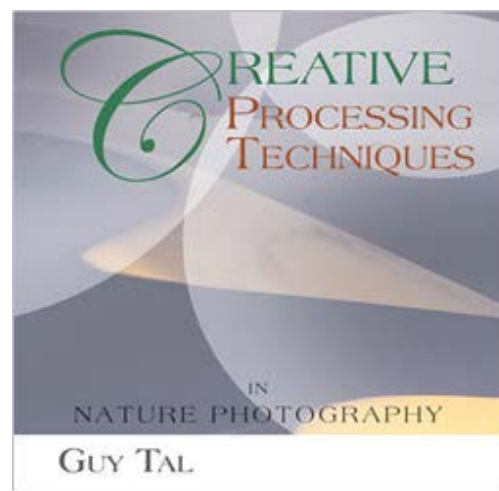


## eBook Preview: Creative Processing Techniques

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In writing [Creative Processing Techniques](#) my goal was to offer a different kind of instructional book. Rather than focusing on just technique and recipes (which are also covered,) I wanted to help readers better understand the tools available to them in the digital studio. To do so, I also introduce a process framework and a way of thinking about images and processing decisions to tell a story beyond just applying simple corrections. In addition I wanted to help explain some of the terminology and concepts involved, which is an area often neglected in mainstream publications. While the eBook is designed to stand on its own, it builds on the foundation introduced in my eBook [Creative Landscape Photography](#). The eBook contains examples using Adobe Lightroom and Adobe Photoshop CS5 and, in addition to demonstrating the tools provided, also clarifies some of the functional and philosophical differences between the two.

Among the topics covered are RAW conversion, adjustment tools such as Levels and Curves, using layers and layer masks, manual blending of multiple exposures, etc.



### Excerpt - Creative Processing Techniques

To some, processing digital images is a daunting topic. Common misperceptions are that creative expression ends with the click of the shutter and time spent behind the computer screen is a necessary evil involving the tedious application of prescribed adjustments in robotic succession to achieve such trivial goals as more vibrant colors or gimmicky visual effects. Nothing could be further from the truth!

# WORKFLOW

**W**hat sets creative pursuits apart from other undertakings is the production of something of the artist's own making: a subjective interpretation rather than a precise reproduction (of either a natural scene or of someone else's creations). As such, any approach cannot be too prescriptive and should leave sufficient latitude for personal expression and experimentation.

In particular, the goal of creative image processing is to guide an image from raw data captured by the camera through a series of creative edits to a master file matching the visualized image conceived in the artist's mind. These edits are, in addition to data recorded by the camera, the artist's own contribution to the ultimate appearance of his or her work.

To make things even more interesting, sometimes there are multiple ways of achieving a desired result. Given the irregular and unpredictable nature of creative epiphanies, your processing workflow should not be linear or very strict, but rather should be one of continuous refinement until

the desired result is achieved. While the process has a known beginning (the RAW file) and a desired outcome (the visualized image), the transition from one to the other may be the equivalent of navigating a complex maze of paths and creative choices.

Some photographers prefer to follow what is known as a **waterfall** approach, where a single path is pursued, and one step logically follows another. This approach can also be thought of as **peeling the onion**, where each consecutive step brings the image progressively closer to the end result. This method is best suited for processing large batches of images in an automated fashion or when the photographer does not wish to spend a lot of time fine-tuning his or her work. While quicker and easier, it leaves little room for fine adjustments and may be better suited for stock, editorial or commercial photography where time is of the essence. For the same reasons, the waterfall approach is not ideal in cases where creative decisions will be made and possibly revisited, and where new ideas may

materialize and influence the desired outcome in different ways as the image takes shape.

Conversely, a non-linear, or **iterative**, approach is one that relies on progressive refinement and course correction, where goals are re-examined at every step and inform the next iteration in ways that may not be obvious from the start. For best results, we sometimes need to take a step sideways or even backwards before moving forward.

For example, if I am working on a color image and want my end result to appear very vibrant, I may start my process with the Saturation tool and intentionally over-saturate the colors, then go back to other adjustments so that I can clearly see their effects on the final palette and color balance. Later in the process I may switch off the added saturation or reach it back to regain the colors I originally had in mind. During this cycle, my image will not look at all like my intended visualized result, but it allows me to better tune the intermediate adjustments before deciding on the final saturation setting.

It's also not unlikely that as your skills improve and your tastes evolve, you may no longer be satisfied with the way you originally processed a given image, and you might want to revisit some of your earlier decisions. A creative processing workflow allows for such changes, adaptations and course corrections.

*Workflow*

In fact, the freedom to change your mind and set a new target at any point in the process means that the workflow may never truly be finished, and you will need to make an explicit decision to stop when you deem the image sufficiently complete. Indeed, some photographers revisit and re-process their work years or even decades after capturing the initial image.

The circular workflow I describe is the result of years of processing and re-processing my images. It is one that allows for adaptations and leaves ample room for creative decisions. While it provides a structured approach to tackling the specific tasks at hand, it also leaves much room for personal customization to meet a desired outcome or even to change the desired outcome altogether as I go along.

Not all processing activities require software and technical skills. In fact, the *Analysis* and *Dynamic Visualization* phases require no hands-on work at all, although they are critical to the ultimate success of the finished image.

The following is an overview of each process milestone. Each step is also discussed in more detail in the following chapters.

"Not is never finished, only abandoned!"

—Henri de La Motte

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Certainly, digital image processing can be confined within limited boundaries, and much of it can be automated when the intent is simply to create usable images for a variety of purposes. In my classes, however, I refer to such simplistic processing goals as the “microwave approach” -- in goes a container of food, pre-mixed and flavored to meet a popular common denominator, and out comes an edible but generic meal. Although it may satisfy your hunger, the dining experience likely won't be a memorable one.

By comparison, a creative cook revels in hand-selecting ingredients, adjusting amounts, optimizing cooking time and temperature, varying the recipe a little each time as skills and tastes evolve, experimenting, arranging the final presentation to add visual appeal, matching it with a suitable wine, and ultimately creating a holistic experience that is far more satisfying to both cook and guests.

Similarly, creative processing is about more than applying a generic recipe to the captured image or aiming for “acceptable” or “usable” results. The digital studio at your fingertips is every bit the fertile bed for creative expression as any field technique, and it allows complete control over how the raw data recorded by your camera will ultimately appear in the final image. Moreover, it provides the tools necessary to craft the image into a creation that is uniquely yours and representative of your own sensibilities, making you an active participant in shaping its appearance rather than a mere operator of camera controls.

In my Creative Landscape Photography book, I discuss the importance of Visualization: the ability to see in the proverbial “mind's eye” the finished image early in the creative process and before making an actual exposure. Once conceived, the visualized image serves to guide subsequent technical and creative decisions, both in the field and in the studio. Each decision becomes another small step toward closing the gap between where the image is at a given point and the visualized end result.

In the processing phase, we have already found a worthy subject to photograph, determined the most favorable composition, and used our photographic equipment to record its visual qualities. At this point, we have all the raw ingredients necessary. Now is the time to take them into the kitchen and cook a visual feast. This is not the time to cut corners or to shove everything into the microwave, hoping the automated settings will transform the mix into a gourmet meal.

It should be acknowledged that some photographers' primary motivation is the technical practice of their craft. They become enamored with the gear, the thrill of the hunt for interesting subjects, the desire to accurately render their subjects and quantifiable measurements of “image quality” rather than with subjective aspects such as emotional appeal or artistic expression. Creative photographers, on the other hand, while still relying on these same technical skills, are generally more concerned with personal expression and evoking a response from their viewers.

The goal of creative photography goes beyond the mere production of images that are technically good or that adequately reflect the subject as seen; rather, the goal is to produce images that uniquely represent the photographer's vision and possess meanings beyond the literal visual elements they portray. This small shift in priorities can have profound implications when it comes to making processing decisions. Consider carefully where your own sensibilities fall between the two extremes before setting out to process your work.

The digital studio offers boundless opportunities for creative expression, experimentation and infusing your work with your own style and vision. Seen in this light, it is much more than just a set of tools for adjusting or correcting pixels. Rather, it is the place where your thoughts and ideas take shape and manifest themselves visually in your creations. Understanding the digital studio's capabilities will also inform your decisions in the field and allow you to visualize more effectively as you factor in what you know to be possible.

It's worth mentioning that your images will be processed whether you do it yourself or not. There is simply no way to make the transition from discrete light measurements taken by a digital sensor to a visible image without some degree of subjective decision-making. Your camera can process your images for you (e.g., if you work in JPEG mode) based on mathematical calculations programmed by software engineers with the aim of satisfying most people's expectations, but obviously with no consideration of your creative ideas.

Working in RAW is also no guarantee of creative control. Your RAW conversion software can make decisions on your behalf if you choose to accept its default settings. And any number of other tools, scripts and actions can be used to add interesting effects at the click of a mouse -- effects representing the creative efforts of other people.

## CURVES ADJUSTMENT

I started the adjustments discussion with Levels because their use is relatively straightforward and they provide a good way of illustrating the degree of control Photoshop offers. Still, as indicated in the previous section, even with these powerful features, Levels are blunt instruments, and though it may not be obvious now, they're also fairly limited. Now that the concept of adjustment layers is a bit clearer, though, let's make the leap to what may be the most powerful of them all: Curves.

To add a Curves adjustment layer, select it from the Adjustments Panel:



If the adjustment selection is not visible, it may be that you have another adjustment (e.g., the Levels adjustment layer from the previous exercise) currently active. You can return to the new adjustment selection by clicking the arrow button on the bottom left side of the panel, as shown on Page 98.

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I briefly discussed Curves on Pages 70-71, where I explained the rather limited Tone Curve available in Lightroom. As you'll see in this section, the full implementation of Curves provided in Photoshop is the Swiss Army knife of adjustments. While their use requires some skill and practice to master, they can be used to achieve almost anything possible in various other adjustment tools combined.

While I mentioned that Levels will rarely be sufficient to finish an image by themselves, there will be cases in which one or two well thought-out Curves layers may be most or all the processing you'll need (although I still suggest breaking up the work into smaller chunks to leverage other more intuitive tools for some purposes).

Curves are displayed on a graph, where the horizontal axis shows values in the current image (input), and the vertical axis shows the new values they will be mapped to once the adjustment is applied (output).

The faint diagonal line in the center of the graph is where input=output, meaning that anything along it will remain unchanged. This is the starting point for the curve. When the curve is pulled above this line, input tones will be mapped to higher (brighter) values; conversely, when it is below the line, input tones will be mapped to lower (darker) values.



In the example above, most of the bright tones in the current image are mapped to brighter ones, and most of the dark tones are mapped to darker ones. In other words, this curve will make the lights lighter and the darks darker, resulting in an overall increase in contrast.

In order to position specific tones above or below the line, simply click the curve and drag it up or down. You'll notice that wherever you click, an anchor point is added to the curve. These anchors can later be re-positioned by dragging them or, if needed, removed by holding down the Command/Ctrl key and clicking them again.

In the background of the graph, you will notice a histogram of the current image. This is similar to the histogram used by the Levels adjustment. Similarly, there are also sliders that can be used to set the black and white points, as well as the same three eye droppers we saw in the Levels panel. You can already see that the Curves panel can be used to achieve a similar effect to that of the Levels panel, and more.

For ease of identifying mid-tones, shadows and highlight, a grid is provided behind the curve. If you need greater granularity, toggle between a 4x4 grid and a 10x10 grid by holding down the Option/Alt key and clicking anywhere on the graph. While this may seem like a trivial feature, consider the following:

In the 4x4 grid, the two middle sections correspond to the image's mid-tones where most of the details generally can be found. Similarly, the right section corresponds to the highlights and the left section to the shadows. This assumes that the histogram fills most of the tonal scale, which it should if you set

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By delegating these tasks to the camera or automated software, you take yourself out of the driver's seat and allow a computer to make creative decisions on your behalf. Computers may be accurate, and software may be designed to produce appealing results, but creative they are not. Even if they were, it would not be your creativity that comes into play. Creative processing is about taking control and putting in your own hands the power to guide an image toward your visualized end result.

In this book, I cover both technical and creative aspects of digital image processing, but it is not meant to be a comprehensive reference for every function of your imaging software. Rather than review every possible button, slider and dial, I work instead on understanding essential concepts of digital imaging and how they can be creatively applied to make the transition from raw data recorded by the camera to an expression of your own vision, making your work more than just a collection of images, but instead your art.

To get your own copy of the 168-page *Creative Processing Techniques* eBook, visit [guytalbooks.com](http://guytalbooks.com).

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**Guy Tal** is a professional photographer and author residing in the state of Utah, in the heart of a unique and scenic desert region known as the Colorado Plateau. Guy teaches and writes about the artistic and creative aspects of photography and guides private workshops and individuals seeking the beauty and solitude of the canyon country. More of his works and writings can be found on his web site and blog at [guytal.com](http://guytal.com). You may also follow Guy on [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#).

Guy is the author of three e-books, [Creative Landscape Photography](#), [Creative Processing Techniques](#), and [Intimate Portraits of the Colorado Plateau](#).

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