

The Digital Corner

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Garbage In, Garbage Out



This digital age is truly wondrous! For the equipment junkie it almost approaches ecstasy. A person with no photographic experience whatsoever can now capture amazing images on smart media that they could never get before on film.

We only have to look as far as PC Photo or B&H to drool over an amazing array of digital bodies, battery chargers, auto flashes, digital video resources, scanners, photo printers, smart cards. Not to mention compact readers and lens converters - it's all there for the buying by professionals or amateurs alike. And we are buying, in droves.

It's express mail. It's already well on its way to obsolescence, that's how fast the technology is evolving. I know, I bought a Nikon LS2000 film scanner three weeks before the LS4000 model came out. Nikon, of course, didn't mention the pending product update since that would have left them holding some outdated model. Then, I come to find out that Nikon's LS2000 scanner drivers are configured to work only with Mac OS 8.6-to-OS 9.1. I don't know how this translates for PCers. For Mac owners this means that anyone with an LS2000 who upgrades midstream to the new G4 line is left out in the cold. Why? The new G4s ship with OS 9.2 and OSX and only the LS4000 scanners are designed to work with OS 9.2 and above. Klunk. Maybe such glitches are to be expected but explain that to my accountant.

In the case of photo printers, there's a vast choice of paper types for us to play with and inks are getting more and more 'archival'. Aunt Trudy, 100 years from now, will be able to view and appreciate our treasured, saturated Epson photo prints, or so we are promised.

Those of you who own Epsoms have probably discovered that buying one of these photo printers is just the beginning. Not only does one need to buy a large quantity of expensive ink cartridges and photo papers, but you'll also need to set up a calibrated system from scanner to computer to printer. And you must keep abreast of ColorSync technology and understand Photoshop color management and more, always more.

Gone are the good ole' days of clicking PRINT, and something prints. Now we click, click, calibrate, click some more, test print, reconfigure, recalibrate (especially if the ambient light changes), test print again, wait, change ink cartridges, clean ink jet nozzles, print, wait, and probably print again. That's assuming our CPU doesn't crash in the middle of it, necessitating a reboot and an instant replay of all of the above.

Last November I got caught with a bad batch of Premium Glossy Photo papers. I printed approximately 150 8X10's for a project that had to be entirely redone once I determined that the output was Epson's fault, not mine. Epson cheerily replenished both the inks and the paper, but I was stuck with a hundred hours of duplicate work and and some sleepless nights.

The printer interface reminds me of the exodus a few years back of 35mm shooters to 4X5 cameras. Just as many of those folks eventually returned to the 35mm format for ease of use in the field, just as an equally large number of Epson owners will probably throw up their hands and return to printing houses to do their print work. For the same reason - too much work and too little time to do it!

Here is my view on all this.

First, this is FUN STUFF. It really is. It makes film-based photography seem mundane at times. The thought of waiting a few days or even a week to get my slides back is just too much to ask because the computer age has given us instant gratification and now we expect no less. This is especially true for the consumer market which is mostly plug & play anyway.

Imagine: we photograph our entire extended family at a Fourth of July picnic, then we erase the more reprehensible members. We can delete pimples, straighten teeth, remove gray hair, trim waistlines, and even turn regular mountains into magnificent mauve masterpieces. It's amazing...but this is not what photography is all about. I call all this new stuff Mere Imaginations - and I suggest renaming PC Photo to PC WYSIWYW (What You See is What you Want).

As cool as all of this new stuff is, the saying Garbage In, Garbage Out still prevails. Professional shooters, even those who use the latest pro digital systems, can take heart. No amount of Photoshop magic or new liquid filters can turn a distasteful, painful original into a masterpiece. The industry just wants us to think it can.

However, your future as an income generating digital photographer is safe. Remember that the vast majority of digital consumers do not have an eye for composition and they won't any time soon. They don't know about light. They don't understand perspective. And they don't have the slightest idea about what makes a good photograph. About flash they know nothing. The same goes for scanning and printing. They aren't dealing in photographs, after all, they are merely harboring and abetting imaginations which is great, but that's not photography.

For some of us, these are pro tools in our Domke but the artistry is inside our heads and our hearts. There is no price tag on that.

Editor's note - More of Ellen's work can be viewed at www.drellenrudolph.com.

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