

MODULE 6. Portrait Post Processing

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Aim:

Training in the basics of portrait post-processing.

Purpose and Outcome

To understand the basic principles of image editing and apply this approach to refining portrait images.

Notes

General resources (updated from time to time) at <https://resources.waverleycameraclub.org/wcc-post-processing-training-resources/>. I will focus here on techniques used in portrait photography post processing (retouching). This is a vast area with specialist practitioners making a very good living out of it. I cannot claim to be an expert, but I will try to give you some basics and some links to further resources. Note that there are almost always multiple ways to achieve an end, so I will focus on some tools and techniques that I have found useful, but there are lots of other ways you will find if you search.

RAW

If you shoot in RAW you will have the full sensor data to process rather than a limited subset as a JPEG.

Non-destructive edits

Non destructive edits allow you to go back and alter some of the edits you made. You generally need not make changes that overwrite your original image data. Use layers and masks instead. You may end up with larger files, but disk space is cheap, and you'll only be doing detailed processing on a handful of images that are the pick of the bunch, not everything you take.

Colour vs Monochrome

Whilst colour can be very powerful, often converting to monochrome will make the image stronger. In monochrome you focus on the tonality and lines, contrast, light and shade, and texture. You can remove the problems of colour casts; you can eliminate distractions by bright coloured areas. Try with some of your own images – colour / monochrome conversion is generally only a click away. Try some of the range of B&W presets your software (probably) provides. Have a play with the colour mix sliders for the monochrome conversion (eg darken the background sky by decreasing the luminosity of the blues). Try sepia or some other toning.

<https://resources.waverleycameraclub.org/>

Post Processing

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Cropping and framing

I usually take a wider view than I think I need in the final frame. It is far easier to crop to achieve the desired framing of the subject than it is to expand the image afterwards. Modern digital cameras have plenty of pixels – you can crop away a lot, and still have plenty of pixels left.

Examine your image carefully. What are the key elements? What is the narrative? Are there things in the frame that take the eye away from the subject? Can you crop to remove them? Don't be afraid to crop parts of a body.



The original framing includes a lot of clutter in the background – shoulders, bookcases, flowers, and wall-pictures. By cropping I can eliminate a lot of this. I also post-processed away the picture to make a plain wall to the right of the face. I left a few artifacts as these are part of the narrative of the owner. The dark sculpture on the shelf (right) helps define the line of the cheek that would be less well defined against the plain wall (unless I darkened the whole wall).

Can you be creative in your cropping? Here I have cropped 3 faces and combined them to make a triptych representing 3 generations.



Try really tight crops...

Maybe try a rotation to add a dynamic tilt to the image...

Feel free to experiment. With

non-destructive editing you can always undo what you have done and try again.



Retouching

Retouching portraits can make the difference between a so-so image and a WOW ! image. There are many professionals around the world who make their whole income just offering post-processing services. However you don't need to spend years perfecting a suite of techniques. Even some basic edits can make a world of difference. Whilst Photoshop provides the basic tools, others, for example Luminar AI provide a suite of tools including reshaping faces, smoothing skin and so on. There are also many specialised software programs that can provide various degrees of automation and AI based editing for portraits.

There is a plethora of guides on the web on various topics on retouching portraits. Here are a few ones that collate a selection of techniques:

<https://fstoppers.com/bts/complete-guide-retouching-portraits-photoshop-free-98236>

<https://helpx.adobe.com/lightroom-cc/how-to/portrait-retouching.html>

<https://expertphotography.com/smooth-skin-photoshop-portrait-photography/>

Let's consider some common processes that you might use with a portrait. Note that I am using Photoshop as the main software discussed, but generally you can adapt these approaches to whichever software you actually use if it isn't PS. Even in Lightroom you can do a lot of these processes to improve your portraits using local edit tools.

Removing spots and blemishes

This is probably one of the most basic processes. Take care. Removing some blemishes, eg an acne spot that is transient rarely is an issue. Removing that "beauty spot" which is a permanent feature of a person's face might misrepresent the truth.

The simplest approach is to create a new layer in your image, and then locally add matching skin/texture to cover the blemish you want to hide. In Lightroom the spot removal tool is very handy (set the mode – clone or heal; the diameter and feathering). LR automatically finds a suitable patch to use, but if it selects a less than ideal spot you can manually move the source to select a more appropriate patch.

In Photoshop, use a new blank layer, and one of the clone stamp or one of the healing brush tools (set the tool to clone from "this layer and below", to capture the colour and texture from the underlying layer(s).

See <https://resources.waverleycameraclub.org/removing-objects-and-healing-blemishes/> for more details.

Taming wrinkles

This is a similar process to the approach for removing spots. In LR use the spot removal tool but drag it along the wrinkle to minimise. You might want to tweak the opacity of the brush to reveal a little of the wrinkle but not the whole thing – a totally smooth skin can look artificial, which a hint of wrinkle and skin texture showing through can ameliorate. Experiment and see what works. There are other, more complex approaches. Search the web to find alternatives.

Smoothing skin

Smoothing skin can be great, done right, or give an unpleasant plastic appearance if done wrong. There are many approaches, many involving dozens or hundreds of steps. Being lazy, here is my quick and simple approach (it may not be optimal, but it gets you 90% of the way). I describe the steps using Lightroom and Photoshop, but the general approach should work with other applications. And if it doesn't work for you or for a particular image, search the web for more recipes.

1. **Using Lightroom.** Tidy up blemishes and wrinkles. Then select the local adjustment brush. Choose a largish brush with soft edge. Double click the Effect label to set all the settings to zero, then drag the clarity slider down to, say, -40. Now paint over the face (avoid the eyes and lips where you want to see detail, or paint over then then hold down alt and use the

eraser brush to paint them out of the mask). Check the effect and tweak the clarity slider to adjust the effect until you are happy.

2. **Using Photoshop.** Fix up blemishes and wrinkles. Duplicate the base and edit layers and merge these duplicates. Name this layer “smoothed”. Convert to a smart layer if you want to tweak the filter later. Apply a Camera Raw filter with clarity set at about -40 (slide it about and see the effect – select the clarity that gives the best effect in the preview; if you used a smart layer you can come back and edit this setting later). Apply the filter. You will now see the effect over the whole image. Add a layer mask (hold alt whilst clicking the layer mask button to get a black mask). With a black mask none of the smoothed layer shows. Now use a white paint brush (medium size and medium soft, perhaps, to paint over the face where you want smoothing. Leave the hair, eyes and lips and nostrils masked as you probably want these to look sharp. If your mask painting goes wrong, press X to invert the brush colour and paint things back in. This is effectively the same as what you did in Lightroom. If you want to back off the effect a bit, reduce the layer opacity on the smoothed layer, or edit the Camera Raw filter to adjust the clarity slider (if you used a smart layer).

Bringing out texture

Sometimes may you want to increase the skin texture, perhaps with an older person where you want to show the “character”. A simple approach is to use the clarity slider with a positive setting, perhaps with some tweaks to the sharpening tools (in LR try sharpening with the radius slider pushed to the right; in PS try the Unsharp mask with the radius increased to 3 or more pixels). You can also play with increasing the dehaze setting which can be useful, especially with monochrome portraits.

Make-up

Commercial photographers will often have a make-up artist (MUA) as well as high-end models at a photo shoot. As amateurs we don’t have that luxury. If you are paying a model, they often will do their own make up as needed. If you are doing something formal like a wedding, then someone is likely to organise make-up, so you don’t need to worry. If you are photographing males, then make-up is probably less of an issue. If you are photographing “in the wild” – street photography, travel photography etc, then make up is not an issue. If it is, say, a family portrait, the sitters will probably take care of their own make-up and grooming. However, it does not harm to add a comb or two to the camera kit to straighten out windblown hair and the like. if needed.

Make up can make a dramatic difference to appearance. Masters of disguise are masters of make-up. Subtle changes in visual shadowing can change the apparent shape of a face, give a visual lift to cheek bones, fill out lips and so on. Some cosmetics sites offer web-based virtual cosmetic try-on programs where you can see the effect of different brow treatments, liner colours, eye shadows, mascara etc ([here is one](#) – if you search the web you may well find better ones). You can also do the same sort of effect using your image editing software using techniques like dodging and burning, colour overlays (with masks) etc. Some programs even have automated tools to do virtual make-up effects on your image, including tricks to reshape the face, adjust sizes of noses and eyes, elongate necks etc.. Here are some resources. Search the web for more.



<https://planetphotoshop.com/applying-digital-makeup-in-photoshop-cc.html>

<http://creatingawebstore.com/how-to-apply-makeup-using-photoshop.html>

<https://design.tutsplus.com/tutorials/realistic-makeup-application-in-photoshop--psd-17599>

Creative effects

Texture overlays

Use of texture overlays can enhance an image and/or change its narrative. Here are some examples.



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Jen Fawkes. <https://waverleycc.smugmug.com/Monthly-Competitions/Monthly-Competitions-2020/November-2020-Open-EDI-Advanced/i-hBbVcZ7>

Compositing

Composite images, made by combining two or more images can be very effective. You can use this for creative effect, or to create a narrative or fantasy scene. You can place a model in a location or setting that is quite unlike the setting in which you took the photo. If you do this, pay particular attention to make sure the lighting is consistent over all the component parts, and that shadows and reflections in the composite are realistic (you will almost certainly have to generate shadows in post processing to make the composite look coherent).



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Anthony Yap. <https://waverleycc.smugmug.com/Monthly-Competitions/Monthly-Competitions-2020/October-2020-Open-EDI-Advanced/i-cKqs4Df>

Legal and other issues

Rather than me re-inventing the wheel, have a look at the notes I wrote about the legal issues at <https://resources.waverleycameraclub.org/photography-legal-issues/> which outlines many of the issues you should consider in portraiture photography.

One of the key issues in Portraiture is the Model Release. This is a written (there are some designed for use on mobile devices) agreement between the photographer and the model stipulating the circumstances that images taken can be used. Typically, a model will grant the photographer broad rights to use the images, but in other circumstances, more limited usage rights will be granted (eg, the model may agree to non-commercial use, but require a new negotiation if the photographer wants to use the image to make money. A simple Model permission form template is on the next page (based on one made by Tim Keane). See the resources page cited above for more info.

A simple generic model release form template

Model Permission form

I, the Model, hereby give permission to the photographic artist to reproduce photograph(s) of me and utilise the image/s in any media or manner, including, but not limited to the image being printed, entered into competition(s) and being placed on public display.

Photographic Artist: _____

Date photographs taken _____

Location photographs taken _____

Model Name: _____

Model contact: _____

Signed by Model: _____

Signed by Artist: _____

Date: _____

Wrap up

Things to look for:

- play of light,
- the posing – does the pose look natural; does it add to a narrative,
- the props. A painter, typically, exercises a lot of “artistic license” in what they include and exclude; then decide on a composition and then make the painting piecemeal – drawing different background items and people separately to complete the final image. As a photographer you need to get everything together at one time, or else use your skills at compositing to combine multiple images to get the final.
- Is there a narrative? A narrative needs to be clear enough for to the viewer to grasp it. For the photographer artistic license to add or remove elements to clarify the narrative is limited to post processing and compositing. It is best, therefore, to have a clear idea what narrative you want to present, and try to capture that vision in camera at the time.

REFERENCES

<https://digital-photography-school.com/basic-photoshop-tutorial-add-creative-overlays-portraits/>

Exercise

Quiz

Homework

Submit a portrait to WCC for consideration for the 10-club portrait competition.