

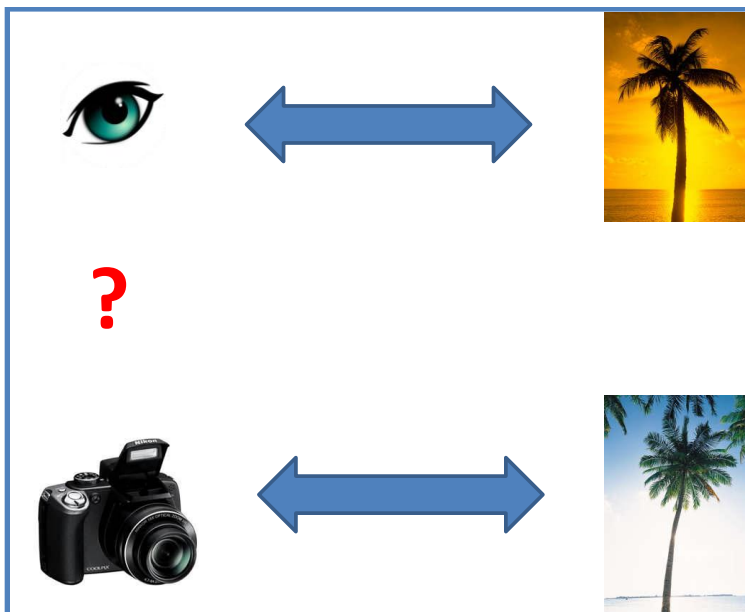
Does Digital Processing Corrupt Photographic Art? - Gary White

Is digital photography modified by processing true photographic art? This is a question I've been wrestling with since I've reacquired an interest in photography. Initially I tried to create a photograph as exact as possible and not rely on any processing. Lately, however, I've revised my thinking, to some degree.

When I was a boy, using my parent's Kodak Brownie camera, I was usually disappointed with my photographic skills. The advent of the Polaroid camera helped some, since it afforded me the opportunity to recapture an image from a different perspective and improve the composition. However, I was usually disappointed in what the image communicated to me. Even the digital camera failed to bring the images to my 'mind's eye'.

To explain the thought process I've come to, I'll need to discuss reality, imagination, illusion, communication, and the brain. All of these impact our photographic skills to some degree or another. Let's take a brief look at reality versus fiction.

Reality in photography pertains to the fidelity of the captured image. But in truth, that image is a distortion of the actual figure, landscape, person or scene. The lens of the camera is not an exact replica of our eye, nor should we expect it to be. We can use rules regarding depth of field (i.e., the f/8.0 setting) to approximate our eye's depth of field as well as other rules regarding light and exposure to create a *similar* image. The below figure illustrates this anomaly. The eye-brain system sees the subtle sunlight, shadows, and reflections. The camera captures an image that is very likely vastly different from what our eye and our mind sees. The camera may not accentuate the colors, shading or be as selective as our eye-brain system.



In our mind, we perceive or imagine an image based on previous experiences, similarity with other observations, and how we have been told to look at that object or scene. The fact that the camera

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records an image in conflict with our minds perception is not a fault; it is simply the fact that all captured images, to some degree or another, don't conform to the filters of our mind's eye. It is the ability of our mind to imagine an image based on our ability to integrate all of the light data that the rods and cones of the eye collect. It is this imagination that comes into play when we examine the differences between what our eyes see, versus the camera's capture of that image.

Ask any pilot, doctor, or magician and they will tell you that what we see is not always reality. Rather, what we as humans see is the culmination of previous experiences and images. Our eye-mind system records an image and then uses the previous data to filter (based on previous experience) and makes a declaration. Thus, everything we think we see is more of an illusion than we consciously think about.

Illusions can be easily illustrated. The great artist, Escher, created impossible images that used the eye-brain data history to create images that defy reality.



A magician relies heavily on the eye-brain's penchant to see what it wants to see, rather than to observe reality. In the painting by Hieronymus Bosch, *The Conjurer*, there is an illustration of the illusion process and a hidden illusion as well.

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The painting shows how the conjurer is misleading the focus of the audience so the pick pocket, who is looking skyward to also deflect any detection. But also, the painting has the focus on the magician; hence one has to carefully examine the painting before the true meaning is revealed.

Bosch is one of my favorite artists because he places many details and illusions in his paintings as a means to communicate with his audience.

Photographic art communicates to us on many levels. It awakens our senses, gives us fresh perspectives, and causes us to think, imagine and explore. It is this communication process that we, as photographers, attempt to begin with each image we capture. That is why much of the frustration comes in. What our imagination, mind's-eye, and brain wants the camera to see and capture, may not be in fact what the camera captures.

For example, I was taking some Christmas decoration pictures to enter into a local camera club contest. What I envisioned from the scene was a Charles Dickens-like effect of yellow lights against a heavily wooden background. What the camera saw and recorded was something quite different than my imagination. While it was an acceptable picture (see below left) it didn't capture the effect I wished to communicate.



After some thought, I decided to modify the image with some processing by softening the edges with a Gaussian blur and adding a slight level of fog overlay. (See above right) Which is the better image?

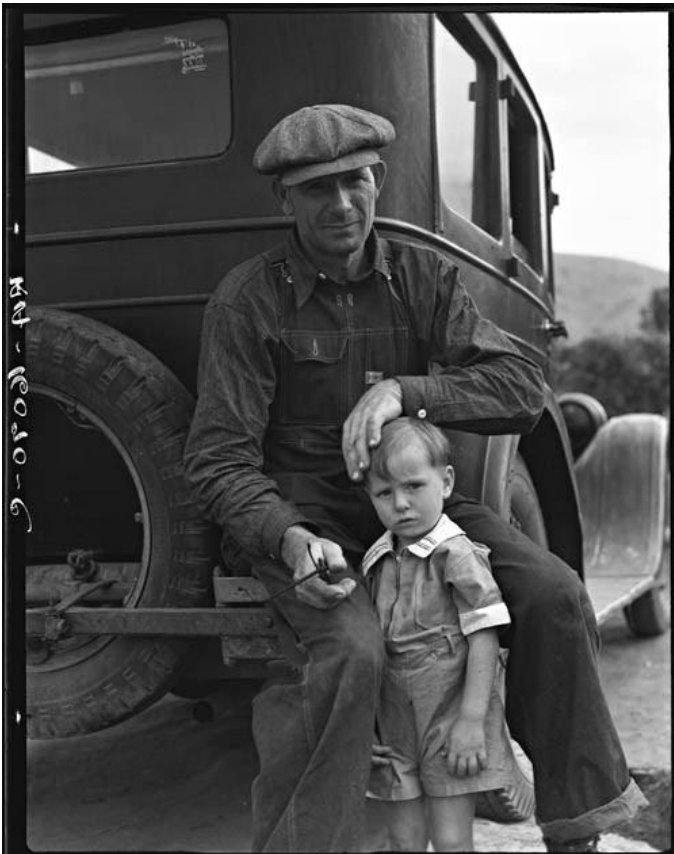
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Well in my mind's-eye, the one on the right captures the effect I was aiming for much better and it will be the one I submit for the contest.

At this point many purists might jump in and say; "Whoa bucko, you changed what the camera saw, you should have added filters, blew smoke across the scene, and taken the photo over..." I have to agree that this used to be my thought process and approach. But it seems that how any modification, either to the image capture process or to the captured image itself is not relevant. What is important is capturing an image that conveys the ideas, imaginations and feeling that cause us to take the photograph in the first place.

One can learn a lot about photography by studying images that appeal to you. They help awaken your imagination, senses, and contribute to developing better images. One of my favorite photographers is Dorothea Lange who was famous for her photographs in the Depression and the Dust Bowl.

The below image captures a father's protection of his young son, yet it also seems to reflect the despair and worry and the apprehension in the boy's face. Examination also reflects a lingering bit of vanity, since the father has taken off his glasses. Did Dorothea pose this photo that way, is this a reflection of what she saw, am I seeing what she wanted to say?



To conclude this short essay, let me say that many of my images are unprocessed since they capture the effect and don't need any further modification. One of my photos I took for this Christmas decoration contest is one that captures how a child might see a decoration or a present under the tree. Here it is.

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