

Artistic Vision and Digital Infrared Photography by Joe Nalven

When I began shooting infrared it became immediately obvious, if I wanted to create beautiful images, I needed to learn to see in infrared.

At a recent gathering of artists, I showed several digital infrared photographs. One was a montage, all appeared black and white, and all were processed in Photoshop CS3. I was asked, "But aren't these just black and white photographs? What's infrared got to do with it?"

That led to a discussion about other toolsets and styles that became turning points in the history of visual expression. The real question is about using this technology — can it lend a hand with artistic vision?

Several visual artists have contributed to this article. There is no one path recommended here; rather, there are art narratives by Tim Fleming, Wayne Cosshall, Jack Davis and myself illustrating a range of experimentation with this toolset. (I use the term "toolset" since we talk about a camera, sometimes with a filter, generally processed in Photoshop, sometimes with Adobe Camera Raw and presented on a variety of papers and/or monitors.)

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Perspective: Joe Nalven

Having found myself in a rut — pleasant and oftentimes beautiful images — I wanted to force myself in a different direction. The adventurous Jack Davis proclaimed at a workshop that digital infrared (IR) was the new thing and, at a later workshop, that digital IR panoramas was the next new thing. I was game, especially since I had some traveling scheduled that would require thinking "new" both thematically and technologically. I sent off for a refurbished Nikon D50 and had it converted by LifePixel to a dedicated IR camera.

Yad Vashem, Holocaust Memorial / Jerusalem, Israel from Israel Infrared

Color was interesting. My automatic setting produced a red-tinted image in the LCD, and setting custom white balance on dark green shifted that red-tint to a cyanic-blue image. This was fine for varying the starting point with JPEGs, but for both JPEGs and RAW, the white balance was essentially ignored by Adobe Camera Raw in Photoshop. So, that leaves some interesting choices in figuring the "color" of one's IR images — even if the decision is to go with a black and white presentation, tinted or otherwise.

This image, Yad Vashem (Holocaust Memorial, Jerusalem), was taken as a JPEG with the automatic setting, hence, a red cast to the image when opened directly in Photoshop. Here, I traveled down familiar paths with various color adjustment tools, like curves and selective color, with some minor cropping. Because no photographs are allowed inside Yad Vashem, and since there was extensive glass as part of the external architecture of the building, the see-through effect captured a distinct view of the building's structure. As a purist, one might argue against an aggressive use of Photoshop tools, especially when they are destructive, adding noise and whatnot. On the other hand, that might be exactly what one needs to step around the complaint of a highly rendered look. The challenge is to find one feels right, aesthetically, to oneself—rather than to the audience. Skin tones and portraiture were other areas I wanted to explore. Black skin, white skin; white fabric in a hot sun; impacts elicited in stark or gentle tones; and posed images contrasted with those in motion. Placing digital IR at the forefront of my image capture continues to fascinate me. As I look at these images, I tell myself, "This is not the way the images ought to be, but they are. And I like it."

Panoramas become more doable, particularly with Photoshop CS3's photomerge. And the panorama need not be horizontal; they can be vertical as well. When I was at the Wall in Jerusalem, I was thinking panorama. I took more than thirty images and stitched them together to get an extremely detailed panorama at 30" x 60". But, here, on the monitor we find ourselves in front of and with this webzine's template, the image is limited. Why not select some details and change the orientation from a horizontal to a vertical oriented image? The information in the image shifts, but, well, why not! Recompositing is just another adventure in image making.

Wall / Jerusalem, Israel
from Israel Infrared

Wall Details, Vertical Panoramas Perspective: Tim A. Fleming

I was first introduced to digital infrared about 35 years ago in college photography class. I was the Lab assistant for the photography instructor and the assignment was simply, to shoot a roll of 35mm B&W infrared film with a homemade filter, process the film, make a proof sheet and print an 8x10. It was very educational to watch the beginning photography

students make every possible mistake that can be made using infrared film. It was even more educational to watch the successful beginning students create fantastic and striking images from the mundane subjects within walking distance of the classroom door. These other-worldly images remained in the back of my mind and I made a promise to myself to someday create a portfolio using this Infrared technique. Ecola Beach

About a year ago I was re-introduced to infrared photography via the digital SLR method. A customer of my Giclee printing business brought me images to print that were created with his standard Nikon digital SLR camera and a Hoya R72 filter. This reminded me of my past experiences with the infrared and inspired me to finally get started. I researched digital infrared on the Internet and discovered that I already had a super Hi-Res digital IR camera. The same 4x5 camera that I use to photograph paintings for the Giclee printing process (called a Betterlight Scanning Back) turns out to be extremely sensitive to Infrared wavelengths. It was an obvious choice, all I had to buy was a filter and I was ready to create super Hi-Res digital infrared images. I make my IR images with the Betterlight camera set at about half resolution. This speeds up the picture taking process and still gives me a 16 bit RGB Tiff file at about 140 Megs in about 15 second scan time. The technology to make this digital 4x5 kit truly portable just came into being, the tiny (4lb.) laptop, the new lighter smaller (faster) Betterlight controller, and a new (just out) smaller lighter (2lb.) double power lithium battery. All this fits into a backpack with my regular 4x5 kit and weighs in at about 50 lbs total. Inspiration Point, Tourists

The 4x5 camera really slows me down and that is a good thing. It makes me take extra time to truly evaluate a potential image. It has to be really worth it to: set up the tripod, mount the camera, chose and mount the lens, boot the laptop, compose and focus, control the depth of field and perspective with the view camera movements, set the exposure, make a test prescan and have a look at it on the screen. Of course, whether an image is really worth it or not can only be decided later, after it is put through the digital workflow and an actual print is made. Mono Lake Tuffa

When I began shooting infrared it became immediately obvious, if I wanted to create beautiful images, I needed to learn to see in infrared. I think that in order to create good images, you need to be able to previsualize what the final image is going to look like on paper, then take good notes and aim for the original concept. Digital photography is a fantastic way to learn quickly because of its instant feedback on the computer screen.

One thing I especially like about Infrared photography is that great images can be created during the middle of the day (high noon sun). I usually don't bother to get out my camera gear to photograph when the sun gets high in the sky. Well for infrared shooting, it is that (high noon sun) lighting that makes the most striking of the Infrared effects. The general IR effects include: Blue sky becomes very dark to black, reflections in water become black, most fabrics photograph white or very light gray, people have milky white skin, green leaves and foliage become white, and the tone qualities of other objects also change, some a little and some a lot. IR photography cuts through haze, making distant objects seem closer and sharper. Sometimes the image looks like it is half negative 1/4 normal and 1/4 solarized. Yosemite Chapell like to photograph familiar subjects in IR, presenting them in a new way. When I imagine the image composed in IR tonalities, my composition changes to fit a new strange universe of IR light. New elements are dominant. That other-worldly tonality is always there but is not always obvious that it was created with the IR process. Sometimes it just looks weird (I like weird). There is a certain amount of shock value to infrared photos. The more familiar the scene type is, the more shock value it seems to have. You've got to wrap your brain around the fact that familiar objects and shapes are as expected but some of the tonalities are bizarre and other-worldly, hence it has, what I call shock value. This makes showing my IR images more enjoyable, as people of all levels of artistic education, seem to spend a lot more time looking at my IR images. I like to think that I am challenging people to see familiar subjects in a new and interesting way.

Perspective: Wayne J. Cosshall

The thing that attracts me to infrared photography is the otherworldliness of the resulting images. At some levels the way IR responds to the world mirrors my own feelings, especially about the landscape. Most trees and other plants become light and full of hope and life energy. Many manmade things become darker and thus more absorbing of energy. So at a gut as well as an intellectual level, IR tracks my feelings and thoughts in a way that full color photography and conventional monochrome do not quite.

Digital processes have opened up IR in a wonderful way for me. The immediate feedback possible with digital not only helps me with the technical aspects of correct exposures, etc, but also allows me to use the camera to interactively explore my surroundings in a different light. It thus allows a much more immediate and intimate engagement to take place, which I hope translates across to the viewer as well -- though I must say the impact on the viewer is of secondary concern for me. My IR work is immensely personal in orientation. If others get something great from it I am happy, but primarily I am having an internal dialog.

I use both a converted for IR digital SLR and unconverted ones. The converted camera gives me handheld, normal picture taking. The unconverted cameras give me very long exposures with an IR filter attached, forcing and thus allowing me to slow down, work in a more considered fashion and to integrate time as an aspect of the resulting images. The two approaches thus work very well for me.

Flight to Nowhere

This is an IR image composite from about 20 individual images shot at different times and places. It is part of an emerging series. The original is sized 21" x 50";

Devil A single image with some Photoshop manipulation

The Digital ImageMaker , Photography and art forums , Personal art site
wayne@dimagemaker.com

Perspective: Jack Davis

Four cameras in a fanny pack? All with different capabilities, lens, sensitivities and... fun stuff? Or maybe just a single little Raw shootin' wide angle miracle that's always on your belt, so you never have to miss that moment, that smile, that light. Arches, an abridged horizontal panorama

Though they will never replace our beloved Big Boy cameras (let's be honest, sometimes you just have to stop playing around and get to work! ;), many of the current generation of compact Point-n-Click cameras are truly amazing (especially with a little help from Photoshop) and very liberating as well.

These images were taken with IR Converted Canon Powershot SD800 (point and shoot camera). Stitching images together either horizontally or vertically in Photoshop can make the smaller digital cameras far more effective. Urban scene, a vertical panorama

Motion can be combined with infrared while shooting out the car's window.

[Ed. Note] For those interested in a broader discussion of infrared photography, see: A Gentle Introduction to Infrared Photography , Infrared Photography, Debunking Myths and Wiki's Infrared photography .)