The making of engine 428 - a 'what-to-do'

Introduction

Engine 428 cresting the Weka Pass, started out as an experiment and quickly got more "+1s" on Google+ than any of my other recent pictures. It also got a request for a 'how-to', which is what you are reading now.

The risk with producing a 'how-to' is that it can be seen as some sort of recipe; something that can be applied over and over to any number of pictures. But picture making is seldom like that - even when I am after a similar 'look' it may take quite different settings to achieve that look with different pictures.

It's better to treat this how-to as a general approach, in which 'why' is just as important as the 'what' or the 'how'. We don't just apply an effect because it is 'cool',

but because it moves the picture in a certain direction of our choosing.

Because of that I have called this a 'what-to-do' rather than a 'how-to'. I'll tell you what I did (and why) with the tools I use. I won't tell you how to use those tools because, if you don't use the same tools as I do, it won't be much help to you. So you will need to work out 'how' to do 'what' I did, with your own tools.

Just for the record, my tools are Adobe Lightroom, Photoshop Elements 10, Topaz Simplify and Perfect Photo Suite 7.

With that said, on with the show...

Background

Nothing happens in isolation. The photograph I describe working on in this 'what-to-do' was one of a number that I had taken at this location. I had already processed one a couple of months before and produced the picture you see here on the right. But I had also kept today's photo in the 'to be processed' folder to look at later.

Of course, I didn't want to repeat the treatment I had given the first photo; I wanted something quite different, I just wasn't sure what ...

Lightroom stage

The second photo sat in my Lightroom folder looking as it does below - a pretty ordinary colour photo that had been developed quickly to an acceptable snap shot. It hadn't needed much adjustment to get to this point - cropping to 10x8 format, reducing highlights to bring some texture into an overcast sky, and increasing shadow brightness to get more detail on the black engine. So, the starting point was simply a properly developed colour snap.

At this stage in the process I am trying to work out the direction in which to take the photo. I may have an idea or I may not and, if not, I might explore a few options. Lightroom has a feature called 'virtual copies' so that I can make a virtual copy and work on that without messing up the original picture. Then, if it doesn't work out, I can delete the virtual copy and go back to the original to try something else.

So, I made a virtual copy and decided to try a black and white conversion by reducing the saturation on each channel in Lightroom's HSL (Hue, Saturation and Lightness) panel. This allowed me to tweak the colour balance to lighten the greens and yellows (grass and trees) while darkening red. (I am trying to make the train stand out more from the background.) Afterwards I painted back the saturation on the headlight so that it retained its golden colour. The headlight aside, the goal at this point was

a good black and white conversion with plenty of contrast.

Although the black and white looked good, I decided it would be improved by a split-toned look, toning the light tones with a pale yellow and the dark tones a semi-desaturated blue. You will need to play around with the hue and saturation levels of the toning until you get something that pleases you.

Then I thought a square format might suit the picture better (probably a hang over from shooting black and white on a Rolleicord many years ago) so I cropped it square and liked the result.

When I was done I had the picture on the right.

So, now I'm finished in Lightroom, I export the picture as an 8 bit PSD file ready for Photoshop Elements.

Photoshop (Elements) stage

The first things I do in Photoshop are to run a couple of Topaz filters - DeNoise and InFocus. DeNoise removes any digital noise in the picture, while InFocus performs 'input sharpening' which, essentially, means removing the blurring introduced by the camera's anti aliasing filter. Both these Topaz filters ensure that I start work in Photoshop with the best possible quality file.

There are a number of things wrong with this picture at this stage: the pylon and power lines on the hill, as well as the fence posts in the fore/mid ground, are all distractions. And I am thinking that the train doesn't stand out from the background enough - the background needs to add context to the subject but not to swamp it.

So, first I use Photoshop's clone tool to carefully paint out the pylon and fence posts. Yes, there are content aware tools that can do a similar thing but none of these can match a carefully wielded clone brush. It takes time, but clone brushing is a skill worth learning for the very best results.

Now, there are three things that can help make the train stand out from the background:

1. blur the background
2. lighten the background
3. emphasize the engine.

Step 1 - To blur the background create a duplicate layer and run a Gaussian blur filter (set at around 5 pixels - your preference). Then create a black mask on the new layer (to hide the blur) and paint in the mask with a white, low opacity brush wherever the blur is needed. When I am happy with the result I merge it down into the background layer.

Step 2 - To lighten the back ground, duplicate the background layer then set the blend mode of the duplicate layer to 'screen', this lightens the whole picture. So, again, I create a black mask on the duplicate layer (which hides the lightening effect) and with a large, soft, brush set at a low opacity, paint white into the mask paying special attention to the corners and extreme edges. Effectively I am painting in a custom vignette. I continue this until I am happy with the result and then merge that layer down into the background.

Step 3 - The final stage is more difficult and involves creating a black and white line drawing of the train. For this I use Topaz Simplify (other filters can do a similar thing). I create a duplicate layer and run the Simplify filter (BuzSim, edges only) to produce a fine line drawing (leftmost part-image below). Back in Photoshop I will paint over all the lines I don't want with white (effectively erasing them) so that only the engine and train carriages are outlined (rightmost image below) . Now I change the blend mode of the layer to 'linear burn' and usually reduce the opacity to about 50% or less. The result emphasises the edges of the train giving it a subtle 3D effect. Once this is done I flatten the image.

The vignetting of the background and the outlining of the train have both subtly changed the overall tonal balance of the picture so now I bring in a levels adjustment layer and adjust the white, black and midpoints of the picture to restore a proper balance.

The rest of the process is finishing: creating the mating effect and enlarging the work for print.

For the mat, simply create a new layer and move it under the background layer (unlock the background layer if necessary). Then, with the new layer selected, enlarge the canvas all around by a small amount (it depends on the size of your file but I added 20px to both the width and height for this picture). Then, using the eye dropper, sample a dark tone from the picture and fill the new layer with that tone. If you don't like the result then select another tone and fill again until you get something pleasing. That gives you a 'pin stripe' around the picture which reflects the toning used in the shadow areas.

Now create a second new layer and move it to the bottom. With this layer selected, enlarge the canvas again, this time by a larger amount to form a broad border (I used 300px). Use the eye dropper to select a very light tone from the picture (or use white) and fill this bottom layer. You should now have a mated picture which you can flatten and save.

The final step in the journey for this picture was to use Perfect Photo Suite7 to resize the picture for printing at 24" square. If you are not intending to print at larger sizes, you can skip this step altogether.

And that, basically, is how the picture was made. Yes, it takes a lot longer than applying an Instagram filter but that's what its all about - you 'take' the photo but you 'make' the picture. ☺

David.

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David Ford
PO Box 4
Oxford 7430