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CREATIVITY



John Paul Caponigro. *St. Elmo's Keep*, 1996

BLACK AND WHITE PALETTES

With practice and application comes realization. Given time and thought, you'll be more able to articulate, to yourself and others, what it is you want to express.

Most successful artists define a consistent palette for their life's work – for periods during their careers, or for individual bodies of work. It's one of the primary things that creates an easily recognizable signature style. This is as true for black and white photographers as it is for color photographers.

You can precisely describe black and white palettes by identifying the overall lightness or key (high / light, medium, low / dark) and the amount of contrast (high, medium, low, none) held in three ranges of tones – shadows (zones 0–3), midtones (zones 4–7), and highlights (zones 8–10). Put more broadly, the dominant range of tone is identified first and then each range of tone can be described as expanded or compressed; a range of tone that does not exist in an image could be described as fully compressed.

Here are a few examples of black and white palettes drawn from the history of photographic practice both past and present.

Ansel Adams helped define the most widely used or classic black and white palette, using pure blacks, with deep shadows containing subtle shadow detail, almost pure whites – slightly darker than the substrate carrying the image, with highlights containing subtle detail, and many shades of gray. This full-scale palette uses a high degree of contrast in all three ranges of tone – shadows, midtones, and highlights.

The classic black and white palette is often varied slightly; most frequently less shadow detail is preserved. Greg Gorman modifies the classic black and white palette by deliberately eliminating deep shadow detail, creating a slightly more graphic appearance to enhance both the formal and dramatic aspects of his work.

It's rare for an artist to use pure white, revealing the paper base within the image area. This is particularly



2. B&W palette: classic



3. B&W palette: high contrast



4. B&W palette: dark



5. B&W palette: light

problematic when a highlight intersects the image border; if it is pure white the border of the image (typically rectangular) is broken and becomes a highly complex shape rather than a simple geometric one. Because it emphasizes the shape of the border, this practice emphasizes the graphic nature of images.

Alfred Stieglitz's work epitomizes the many soft subtle moods of alternative or historic processes (such as platinum) with soft blacks and whites that compress the entire tonal scale while maintaining very smooth tonal gradients. This medium key palette uses medium shadow contrast, high midtone contrast, and medium highlight contrast.

On occasion Harry Callahan employed a highly graphic black and white palette, using only a few blacks and whites and eliminating all grays. This high contrast palette uses a low degree of contrast in the shadows, no contrast in the midtones, and a low degree of contrast in the highlights.

Matt Mahurin constrains his use of tone to a few midtones and a great many shadows with very little detail, creating a mysterious effect. This very low key

palette uses no highlight contrast, medium midtone contrast, and low shadow contrast.

Joyce Tenneson's ethereal early work was extremely high key, comprised almost entirely of delicate highlight tones, containing almost no midtones and trace amounts of black or near black. This very high key palette uses low shadow contrast, low midtone contrast, and high highlight contrast. Her style has since changed becoming full scale and warm toned.

The discussion of the above palettes does not address the addition of subtle tints (hue and saturation) to images, which can substantially enhance the expressive characteristics of each palette. This is one more set of variables that can further expand expressive possibilities for visual artists.

These strategies for structuring tonal relationships can also be applied to working with full color images. The tonal structure (luminosity) of an image often lays the foundations for subsequent hue and saturation choices.

Artist's visions evolve and change. So do their palettes. It's highly likely yours will too. Your palette can be varied appropriately and consistently to reflect this.