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Story of an Image

going deep

BY BRIAN MATIASH

I recently had the fortune of camping at White Pocket, nestled in the Vermilion Cliffs National Monument in Arizona. While accessing the area requires a four-wheel-drive vehicle and driving through a wild and winding path made of sand, the effort is totally worth it.



When you reach the destination, you're greeted by an expanse of rocky terrain that veers in all sorts of mesmerizing, circular patterns. For me, it marked the first time I was able to photograph what is affectionately referred to as Brain Rock.

In no uncertain terms, I could have spent days photographing in this area, and if I can share a tip for anyone interested in photographing around this sort of terrain, consider investing in rock feet for your tripod. Using rock feet gave me much greater peace of mind around how rigidly locked my tripod feet were, especially when splayed in extreme angles.



While exploring an area of hilly Brain Rock, I noticed a solitary tree growing out of the ground. Aside from the nice juxtaposition that the tree introduced in the scene, I also really liked the green color. It aided in breaking up the dominant, drab color of the foreground.

developing the shot

Upon framing the photo, there were two particular items that were important to me. The first item was that I wanted to use a long lens to introduce compression to the scene so that the vacillating Brain Rock hills would appear closer together and give the tree more presence. With a wider lens, the tree would appear much smaller in the frame, and moving closer would lose a lot of the layering that caught my eye to begin with, as well as introduce a lot more distortion. As such, I opted to use a Canon 70–200mm f/2.8L IS lens for the right amount of compression. The second item was that I wanted the photo to be sharp through and through, from the foreground all the way through to the sky in the background.

As a matter of practice, I usually set my lens's aperture between f/11 and f/16, depending on which glass is currently mounted on my camera. In fact, I almost always try to avoid using really small apertures like f/22 and beyond (unless I'm trying to drag the shutter with minimal filters)

because there's a clear point of diminishing returns as it relates to optical sharpness through the frame. Now, it would probably require an entire article to discuss the varying nuances of finding a given lens's sweet spot and there are plenty of websites and discussion forums that cover this very topic. Overall, in my own practices, I find that the glass I use most gives me the sharpest results between f/11 and f/16. Given the tight focus of my lens and the aperture I was photographing at, I couldn't get a sharp photo through and through in a single frame, and that's when focus stacking popped into my head.



Briefly, focus stacking is the practice of taking bracketed photos of a scene, but instead of the typical shift in exposure time, you're actually shifting focus to cover all of the planes in your frame, from the closest foreground element all the way through to the furthest background element. You can then use software to focus stack or blend these bracketed images by aligning the high-contrast edges (or hard edges) together. To illustrate, in this scene, I identified three primary planes of focus: the initial hill in the lower-right corner of the frame, the secondary hill just beyond that one (see next page), and then the large hill that the tree was growing on. I felt confident that the third and final bracketed image would cover me through the sky because, at that point, my lens was already focusing at infinity.





in lightroom

Take a moment to capture three images with three primary planes of focus as described above and then follow along in Lightroom.

step one: The first thing to do is correct the white balance (WB) in the Basic panel in the Develop module. Photographing in the desert causes my camera to freak out a bit with WB. Thankfully, using the RAW format, it can easily be adjusted in post. Apply basic corrections to the first photo of your set and crop it as needed. This image was cropped so that the tree took up more space in the frame.



step two: Next, return to Grid view (G), Command-click (PC: Ctrl-click) the two other photos in the series to select all three images, and click on Sync Settings. On the subsequent Synchronize Settings dialog, click on Check All to sync everything across all three images and then click Synchronize.



in photoshop

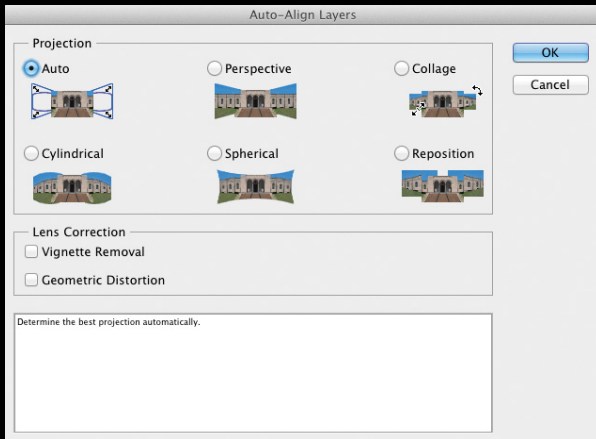
Now that all three images look the same and are cropped identically, let's begin the process of focus stacking. There are a number of great applications available that specialize in focus stacking; however, Photoshop has a really nice focus stacking utility built right in, so we're going to go that route. (One thing to note is that we're using Photoshop CC and all of the screenshots here are derived from that version.)

step three: To start, you'll want to have all of your images in the focus sequence as their own layers in one document. Fortunately, Lightroom has a super-easy way to accomplish this task. With the three images still selected in Lightroom, click on the Photo menu item, select Edit In, and then select Open as Layers in Photoshop to send all three images to Photoshop, placing each image on its own layer under one active document.

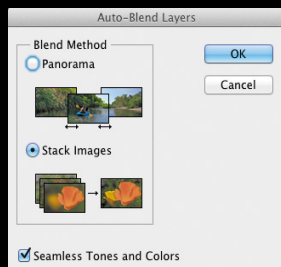
step four: Once in Photoshop, the first thing I do is satisfy my OCD by labeling the layers more appropriately. In all seriousness, though, this will make the masking that we're going to do in a minute much easier to understand. Double-click directly on a layer's name in the Layers panel to rename it. Drag the layers in the Layers panel so the Foreground layer is at the top of the layer stack and the Background layer is at the bottom.



step five: The next thing to do in this focus stacking process is ensure that all of the layers are aligned. The easiest way to accomplish this is to select all of the layers in the Layers panel, and choose Edit>Auto-Align Layers. In almost all cases, I stick with the Auto option for alignment. Click OK to proceed.



step six: With the layers aligned, we're ready to blend them together so that only the sharpest parts of each appear. To use the focus-stacking tool in Photoshop, reselect all three layers, and go to Edit>Auto-Blend Layers. In the Auto-Blend Layers dialog that pops up, select the second radio button, Stack Images. Ensure that the checkbox for Seamless Tones and Colors is selected, and then click OK.



step seven: When the process is complete, you should have an image that is, for the most part, sharp through and through. Use the Crop tool (C) as needed to apply a quick crop (in this example, we wanted to bring the tree into an even more dominant position). By looking at the layer masks created by Photoshop, you can see they were created by



cutting at the high-contrast edges of each layer. Photoshop detected the sharpest regions of all three layers.

step eight: While most of the heavy lifting was done by Photoshop, there are some refinements that are needed. If you look closely at the transition areas of the masks, you'll see that there are still some soft area remnants that need to be dealt with. By toggling the layers on and off (click the Eye icon next to each layer in the Layers panel), you can quickly see the affected areas (in this case, the problem is caused by the Middle layer). This is where renaming the layers plays such an important role.



step nine: To start, click on the layer mask thumbnail for the Middle layer in the Layers panel to make it active. With the Brush tool (B) selected and your Foreground color set to black (press D then X), begin painting in the image to hide the soft areas of the Middle layer. This will create some transparent areas, but we'll fix that in the next step.

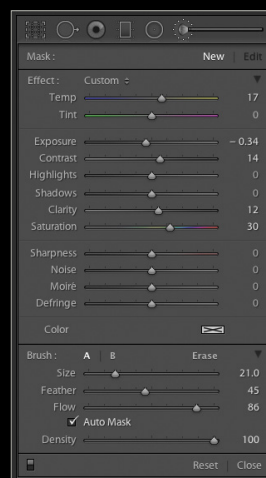


step ten: With the offending areas masked out, select the layer mask thumbnail for the Background layer, invert the Foreground color to white by pressing X, and paint through the masked areas. Doing this restores the in-focus area of the original Background image.

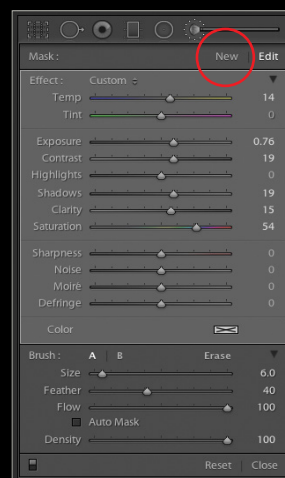


perature and boosting the color saturation. This helps separate it from the rest of the rocky foreground.

Next, a new brush was created by clicking the word “New” in the Adjustment Brush panel. This brush was applied only to the tree, adding a strong bump to color saturation and brightness, among other sliders. This helps the tree pop off of the screen.



Sky



Tree

step eleven: Repeat the exact same process of this mask ballet between the Middle and Foreground layers until you’re left with an image that’s sharp at every major bend.

back in lightroom

When done, save the photo and return to Lightroom for final editing and stylization.

step twelve: To start, we applied an Adjustment Brush (K) to the sky to darken it while also cooling down the color tem-

step thirteen: Finally, a Radial Filter (Shift-M) was applied on top of the same tree, dropping down the exposure and color temperature to draw the eye to the tree and introduce some color contrast by making the tree the warmest part of the image. Also important is to adjust the Feather of the Radial Filter to help create a more subtle and realistic transition.

In the end, I’m left with an image that’s sharp from the foreground all the way through the background, while also retaining the compression that I had aimed for from the beginning. ■



ALL IMAGES BY BRIAN MATIASH