

# A World of Digital Thought

John Bonath

---

Photoshop can be an important tool in the image-making process, but as such it is only part of a means to the end (and not an end in itself by any means). Knowing visual “mark-making” conventions that have been invented and that have evolved over centuries of art history is critical in order to maximize the possibilities that lie within Photoshop.

The visual structure of an image not only includes formal attributes such as design and color theory but also the psychology of visual communication. The visual conventions that we use to read 3-dimensional space from flat 2-dimensional surfaces make up the framework by which we are guided to perceive, organize, read and interpret what we are looking at. Camera skills and vision at the initial “image gathering” stage and computer skills later are all part of the same creative flow. The mental “pre-visualization” of an image in the beginning includes one’s knowledge of something simple like an object on a string, knowing the string will not be a part of the final image, or the vision of something complex like combining two separate shots. Some things are just easier to take care of later in Photoshop. Since what can be done in PS is a different world than the darkroom, “pre-visualization” in a digital age has evolved to include new ways of thinking.

Image structure evolves at each stage of the process. It can be mostly completed in the camera or in the computer, but ultimately a combination of both occurs, and this balance will vary with each image and idea. I always figure that the more I can achieve initially in the camera with light and concept, the further I can push the vision



*Coiled Serpent* (Python Skull and Assorted Bullsnake Sheds from the Denver Museum of Nature and Science Education Collection)

in the computer. As with most processes, it is best to begin with the highest quality material one can to keep all technical options open.

Understanding where PS comes in is completely a matter of knowing what Photoshop can (and can’t) do. Photoshop may appear “magical,” but despite its complex mathematical configurations, it only has a “brain” in science fiction movies. It is important for the user to understand the logic of the program as related parts instead of a bunch of separate bells and whistles. What the possibilities do in symphony with each other is where the power of Photoshop lies. I rarely use a single Photoshop effect by itself, but rather think in terms of a logical sequence to build an effect. As well, layers of image effects build on previous stages as an image is developed. The mechanical look that computer-based images often have is simply due to the lack of natural organic logic.

There is always more there in the end than a viewer is able to comprehend in a short viewing, giving the image a depth that builds on itself with each viewing. The more levels an image can function on, the longer someone can



*Green Iguana* (from the Denver Museum of Nature and Science Education Collection)



look at it and the more secrets, self-discovery and feeling are unlocked within a viewing experience. Sometimes the viewer takes something with them and the image experience continues to grow in the realm of memory. Sometimes a viewer gets stuck on technical barriers full of questions that have nothing to do with simply looking

at the image. When an image is not immediately assumed to be a “straight” photographic rendering, the edge walked is one of technique dominating image content. At some point, the viewer must be able to get past the technique and just let themselves consider the image in front of them.

Throughout the creative process, content changes and it is critical to evaluate how technical changes affect content. Although I generally adhere to Jerry Uelsmann’s maxim that just because you memorize a dictionary doesn’t mean you have anything to say, the Dada approach to pulling random dictionary words out of a bag to create a poem can also yield potent statements that one should be objectively open to, as this could also lead down in interesting path. The more years I work in Photoshop, the more I realize and accept the fact that every image is technically unique in its own way and what is needed to create an idea is always experimental. I am always trying some new logic with Photoshop and discovering a new way of using it. There is always tremendous growth, learning and skill development with every moment

spent in the program. Photoshop becomes a way of thinking and an extension of the imagination, and the computer a tool for the body and mind to connect with.

My attitude is always experimental in nature. If something is not working as I hoped it would, I just explore an alternative tangent. Often an unexpected effect may be better than what was originally envisioned anyway. If the creative process seems to hit a dead end or things are simply not working, before frustration becomes overwhelming, I just give it a rest and come back to it another day and move on to another image. When I return to an image “on hold,” there is a different perspective on it. The image simply looks different and I get a fresh start that usually takes the image to a different place and often to a new plateau. When I finally decide to stop working on an image, I think of it as an idea finally becoming “crystallized.” I try to imbue an image with an epic state of reality of some sort that causes people to consider something beneath the surface of what they are looking at.

The realism in my work is not coincidental and not a fantasy set in the unreal (as in surrealism). For me, the computer becomes a realm for the performance of an idea. Even when it does not appear so, every minute bit of visual material has been altered in some way. My images are representations of a three-dimensional world that propose a place in space and time. They contain their own reality and relativity and do not need to conform or be governed by the laws of material existence and the everyday universe we live in. Yet the “truthful” nature of these images is inherent in the psychological nature of photography itself. The assumption that photographic reality is representative of the physical world and, therefore, true in some way is what ultimately drew me to the expressive qualities within the medium of photography.

The original material for this image was a dried Iguana, which was gutted and folded up in a box where it dried. As such it fit very nicely into the rectangular box of the format frame. Its mouth was open and its hands and



feet in gestural positions suggesting its death position. I wanted to push the tremendous gestural and expressive qualities of the specimen further. The iguana is an iconic creature for many reasons and catches the imagination with its fantastic qualities. I wanted to represent this dead animal as an emotionally charged creature of myth and wonder on a more epic level and to imbue it with a sense of magical reality.

On a technical and formal level there were a number of issues I had to address to get the image I was envisioning. The iguana was initially photographed in the studio with 4x5 transparency film. The lighting scenario was set up to bring out certain aesthetic and expressive attributes of the specimen. The film was then scanned for the computer work to begin.

### Digital Game Plan

1. I wanted the iguana to turn its head more toward the camera, but it was not dried in this position to do so in a single shot. A more oblique angle on the head connected more to the viewer, gave more power to the expressive quality of the tiny sharp teeth and showed the mouth roof and the amazing tooth structure (the tooth base covers the roof of the mouth, and as the tiny sharp teeth are broken off, they are replaced very quickly with a new constant growth of tooth matter). The head was photographed separately from its best angle and replaced the original head, as if it were simply turned that way in the first place.
2. The eye on the backside of the head was more interesting than the one on the front, and the fantastic round eardrum on the backside was not visible on the front side. The back eye and eardrum were photographed separately, flipped horizontally in PS and replaced the corresponding parts on the front side.
3. The hands and feet were quite suggestive, but the gestures could be pushed more. A separate iguana hand



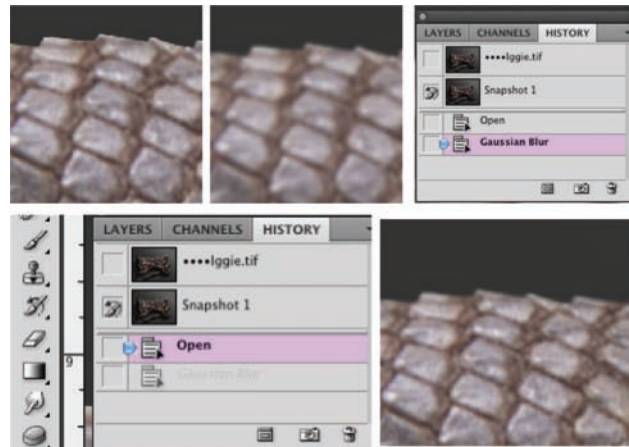


also existed that was very expressive and I wanted to use it. These different visual elements (arms & legs) were each put on their own layer in PS. To do this, selections were made “by hand” with the lasso tool using the option key and a graphics tablet, and each visual element was then put on its own layer (copy and paste or command J). With the “transform tool” they could be moved about in all different kinds of positions. The hands were repositioned somewhat to give more the feeling of an orator or dramatic opera singer. The feet were repositioned to suggest feet paddling and give more thrust to the interaction with the negative space and the directional lighting. The tail was reconstructed with a more fluid line quality to activate the negative space more dynamically and give the “floating” body more stability by anchoring it to the top edge of the format.

4. The original solid black background didn’t connect to the iguana as I had thought it would. Initially the thought was to present it as a specimen and the initial solid black background was consistent with the other works in this series. But this specimen did not naturally “float” in the black, and it felt like it was lying on a surface that didn’t exist. So I just decided to create a new background in PS at that point. The original black background was replaced with a simple black and grey blend (blend tool with foreground color set to grey and background color set to black).



Shadowing was then added to reinforce the iguana’s relationship to the new light source and background. At this point, all the separate elements are on different layers like pieces to a jigsaw puzzle. The background is now independent and does not have the iguana on it. Any old body part remnants selected and deleted. Once the various elements were in their final positions, the eraser tool was used in various percentage opacity modes to blend them back together. This can easily be done where the edges come together because what is being blended (the skin) is the same texture on both layers. When the separate layers are no longer needed, they are merged together.



The shadow was created by holding down the “command” key and clicking on the image icon in the layers palette. This automatically selects the object outline of that layer—in this case, the complete iguana body. Then I created a new layer under the iguana layer and above the blended background layer. With this new, blank layer chosen and the selection of the body outline active, the selection was filled with black (option-delete if the foreground color is black). Then deselect (get rid of any active selection) and blur the black shape to a nice blur for a shadow (with “Gaussian Blur”). Then move the black blur layer (with move tool) from in back of the iguana to a logical shadow position, in this case, dictated by an upper right light source. You can use “layer opacity” to make it more transparent and eliminate parts of it with the eraser tool if parts of the shadow are not naturally logical.

The last step was to make the cutout edge of the iguana naturally connect with the background. This is usually the last step, and at this point, the image can be flattened. Viewing the edge in a blown up state, I go into Gaussian Blur and choose a blur amount (on the whole layer) that is just right for a nice soft blur on the edge (how much will depend on your image size and resolution). Then go to the History Palette and at the very bottom of the palette window, click on the little camera (new snapshot icon). This will create a new icon at the very top of the History Palette. Click on this icon to select it. This will then be the image you can paint with in the History Tool. Now in the history window, click back to the previous state prior to blurring the image. Then select the History Tool, choose a brush size that is small enough to just cover the edge in your image, and brush in the entire soft edge of the shape with the history brush. In general, I find this effect the best way to handle edges in composite images vs. all the other quicker possibilities (including layer/matting/defringing).



final images



original shots



The spirit of other life forms has had an important relationship to the human race from the beginning of time. It is a critical part of human identity and the human psyche. This relationship contains power and a spiritual connection to the larger universe. And it is just as valid today in modern societies as it was in primitive cultures. This bond is important to preserve for future generations. These are a couple of portraits that allude to this heritage. The two children are from a series entitled *Vanities*. The bubble is used in this series as a symbol of our fleeting mortality in the present and a crystal ball into the future. The armband is a public convention used by individuals to identify with a larger group. The boy with the mud and frogs is from a different series entitled *Passages from Untold Fairy Tales* and has a similar and more primeval motif of human consciousness.

*John Bonath's career as a fine art photographer spans over two decades. He attended the Cleveland Institute of Art for undergraduate work and earned an MFA at Western Michigan University. As a professor at Colorado State University, Fort Collins, he developed the fine arts photography program, followed by a move to Japan to do independent photo work. For 18 years, Bonath has lived in Denver, CO. Recent recognition includes: 2009 Best of Show, the Art of Photography Today, Camera Obscura Gallery; 2009 People's Choice Award, Colorado State Fair; 2008 Best of Show, Colorado Photographic Arts Center; 2007 Westward Best of Denver, Solo Fine Art Photography Show; and recipient of the 2003 Ultimate Eye Foundation Award for creative excellence in digital fine art photography. John is represented by Camera Obscura Gallery, Denver, CO. [www.johnbonath.com](http://www.johnbonath.com).*

To ask a question or comment on this article, visit our online Forum: [www.phototechforum.com](http://www.phototechforum.com)

#### Product Resources

Camera: Cambio 4x5 View Camera; Film: RDP Provia 4x5 sheet film (newly available in a 20-sheet box); Lighting: Norman Studio Strobes; Scanner: Imacom Flexlight; Computer: MacPro desktop; Software: Adobe Photoshop CS4; Printer: 9800 Wide Format; Paper: Hahnmanule & Breathing Color Canvas & Veneer.