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Analog vs Digital

For my final project I set out to compare film to digital printing. Specifically I wanted to test the versatility of both forms in terms of collage. The ease of use and range of possibilities is clearly better in digital with the advent of computers, but I wanted to see what film was capable of. My goal was to create essentially the same collage in both forms and compare not just the quality of print but the artistic qualities as well. I've always felt that physically manufacturing an image creates a different feeling than digital representations. To me it seems more realistic or more austere to use film and only see your image after you can hold it rather than just see it on screen and make a million tiny changes. To this effect, I knew making a collage in print would be difficult but I was hoping it would return better results than a digitally parsed snapshot.

At first I was hoping to collage together a variety of my favorite photos to make an image that defied the boundaries of the individual images. However as I set out on the process of physical printing I realized that would require far more skill and patience than I have and perhaps more exact tools.

The photos were originally taken in film near the Stata Center of a wall that received much of the reflection off of another part of the building that was covered in curved shiny metal. I caught this during a time of day and year when the setting sunlight washed over the ground and adjacent wall. To match it some silver lined clouds hung in the clear sky. I took one photo rated to catch the wall and one to catch the clouds.

The print collage was accomplished by creating a mask for each negative to dodge the appropriate half of the scene. Since the pictures were taken from the same location, I assumed that the geometries would be close enough so that only one mask was needed, but as it turns out the comparative geometry was just incongruent enough to make one mask more of a hassle. By which I mean the angles of the buildings were just slightly different in each photo. So to block each half either two separate cardboard masks were needed or careful dodging was required. I opted to dodge although this proved to be very hard to do. Exposure times for each varied greatly since one half was very light and the other very dark, additionally to achieve the luminous feeling in the clouds a 3 1/2 filter was used to increase sharpness, but this increased exposure time as well. Picking exposure times was easy enough to do, but being able to position each negative was a huge hassle. I realized if I printed one half, covered it, and then turned the light on again I could find the relative placement without ruining my print and marked it by laying the second mask down. Then after switching negatives I would line up the second image with the mask by moving the tray. Then the tricky part was removing the cover without losing the mask's placement. By practicing where to hold the mask beforehand and resting my hand on a surface I was able to keep things relatively steady. However as the print shows the real problem was overlap between the masks, or rather where there wasn't overlap the print comes out too dark. Managing this type of error is incredibly hard to do because it

requires not only knowledge of where and how to hold a mask but how well the mask was cut becomes significant as well. The left side of the image was essentially blacked out because that part of the picture was not in the lower half and was only rated for the clouds, so it came out very dark.

On the other hand, digital composition of a collage was incredibly easy, so to make it more interesting I tried using only the tools in Photoshop that were representations of the physical processes of printing. I only used Polygonal Lasso to select, Scale and Rotate to modify, Brightness and Contrast where necessary, and Crop. I chose the prints I had developed to find the exposure times for the physical collage to scan into Photoshop to keep consistency.

Collaging things digitally is far easier than physically printing because you don't have to worry about overlapping layers since only the top one is seen. Physical prints that get multiple exposures in the same location lose their quality. Additionally there is much more fineness possible with digital prints—one pixel control in fact. Whereas in physical printing you could not possibly cut a mask with one “pixel” resolution. So instead you opt for getting pleasing gradients by waving the mask properly. The whole process is made much faster on computer, though. The digital collage took about an hour to create, whereas the physical print took nearly 6 hours with limited results.

The results show that I was not capable of creating a collage with film as good as one in Photoshop, but I won't rule out that it's not possible by someone with very steady hands, very good cutting skills and incredible patience. Perhaps an intricate set up where one could hold mask positions at steady elevations or at least some way off hitting the timer while both hands are busy would be useful.

At the heart of the matter though is the artistic result. Even if the film print did not come out perfectly, one can imagine what it would look like, and the quality is much different than the exactness of the digital results. I was able to frame the digital picture with quarter inch resolution of position. The results of the paper print were dictated more by how much I could fit onto one sheet of paper at a time using my mask. However with the digital print you are forced to see the exactness of the lines. The edge of the wall is so exact it feels fake. The paper print is fuzzy and has character regardless of distracting lines and shades. So in conclusion, with another several months of practice I may have been able to control my prints better, but this project has shown to me that collage, although harder, gives a more endearing feeling when printed from film.

Film Print



Photoshop

