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Full Circle: Photographer Douglas Dubler, Retoucher Irfan Yonac, and the Wacom Cintiq Tablet

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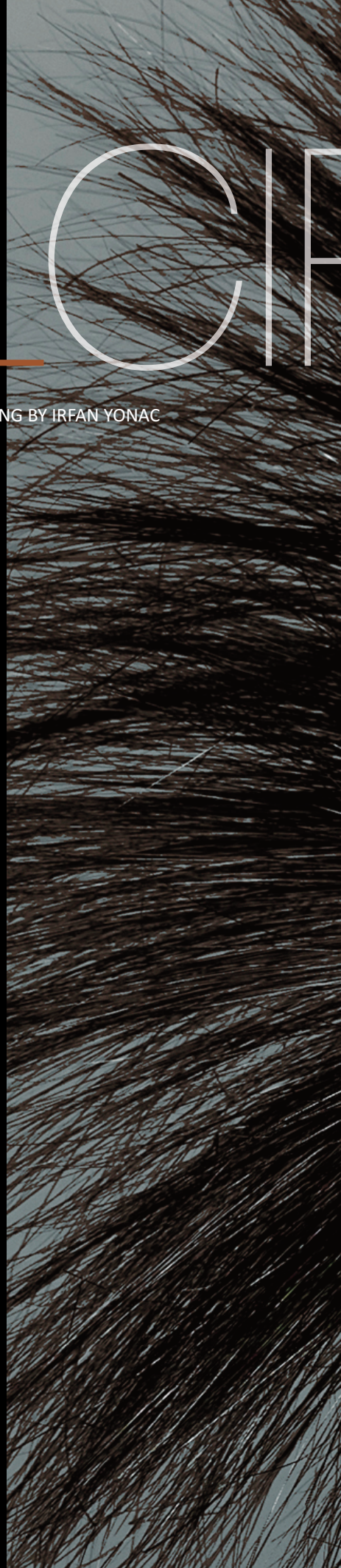
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FULLCIRCLE

WORDS BY RICHARD HOOD IMAGES BY DOUGLAS DUBLER RETOUCHING BY IRFAN YONAC

Except for the artistic vision of the shooter, virtually everything has changed in photography with the switch from film to digital. Perhaps no area of the craft has changed more radically than the role of the retoucher. From grain-to-pixels, from the state of the original image to the medium for making changes, to the retouching process itself, everything has altered. The changes keep-on coming. And among the latest advancements in the technology of digital processing is the Wacom series of "Pen Display Tablets" that provides an advanced interface design for the professional retoucher.

This is a story of a master-photographer's collaboration with a talented retoucher. Douglas Dubler is a renowned fashion-and-beauty photographer whose career has straddled film photography and digital. He has taken scores of cover-photos for major magazines, from international Vogues to all the prestigious photography magazines. He has mounted shows with huge, 15 x 8-foot prints, depicting the finest Russian ballet



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dancers. Through it all, he has evolved, changing his methods and materials—not only to allow the switch to digital, but to take advantage of new developments that can complement his artistic vision in the most effective way possible.

Dubler began as an art student and silkscreen artist. Later, he worked under the mentorship of Ansel Adams. “I learned under Ansel that technology and technique have to remain in service to the art, not the other way around,” he says. “If you believe this, as a basic tenet, you have to be looking constantly at changes in technology and technique that can help improve your feel for the art of the photograph.”

Retouching in the film era was a tedious, painstaking process, done entirely by hand. The “bleach-and-dye” technique was the standard, where retouchers would work directly on a dye transfer print, correcting literally by means of bleaching and dying. “You needed the steadiness of a rock, and the hand of Michelangelo,” Dubler says.

The shift to digital took a lot of the difficult details out of the hands of photographer and retoucher. “A digital capture doesn’t require anywhere near the skill-set of transparency film,” says Dubler. “Digital provides twice the dynamic range of film, and a huge variety of possibilities for achieving effects.” Nevertheless—or perhaps because of this change—photographers must be constantly aware of the nature of their

own artistic aims and styles. “It’s easy to allow the camera to take over, to put the artist in its service, not the way Ansel taught me.” Dubler’s dedication to putting the “vision” first has stood him in good stead, giving him an artistic head-start over many photographers who have no analog experience.

Retouching in the digital age starts with the latest version of Photoshop. Again, the ease with which corrections can be made can become a trap: luring the retoucher into over-doing things: burying the photographer’s original image under a pile of changes that reveal only a limited aesthetic. Everyone has seen photos that are ridiculously inauthentic—that wear the name “Photoshop-enhanced” in their exaggerated use of filters, special effects, or over-saturated color/contrast. Finding a retoucher who can communicate reciprocally with the photographer, and remain constantly aware of the image’s artistic boundaries, becomes even more critical than in the days of analog technology.

“So retouching is a very, very, important part of any photographic project I’m involved in,” says Dubler. “You have to find the right person, and then stick with that level of communication. I’ve always kept my retoucher constant, whenever possible. It gives consistency to my work. My first retoucher, Diane Scott, worked with me for twenty years doing all of the bleach and dye work. And I had my second great retoucher, Willie Fantonio,

almost another two decades, until he moved to Australia. So you've got to find the best artist and the best technology, always. And recently, I made a change, a switch that correlates with all these changes in tools and technique." This consistency in collaboration is typical of Dubler's approach. Fashion and beauty photography requires several ancillary technicians: make-up artists, fashion designers, studio technicians, etc. "I work hard to find the best people, and, when I get them, I keep them," Dubler says.

"I met Irfan Yonac on Facebook. I found that he had worked as a photographer, earlier, and so we had a point-of-connection. We have had long, long conversations about the art, the nature of change, the sense of image, itself. This is critical: establishing a direct, meaningful, and relevant communication so that everything remains in service to the actual photograph."

Yonac was the head-retoucher for Sotheby's for fifteen years, and specialized, as well, in their diamonds collection. He has presently established his own company, Yonac Retouching, and Dubler began slowly to switch his work over, when his main retoucher moved to Australia.

"We began to learn each other's modes of working, our strengths and weaknesses. I needed someone who—

like myself—saw this work as a balance of technology and aesthetics. Irfan has developed digital style techniques for dealing with color in LAB space, for eliminating noise, all retaining the identity of the image as a 'Dubler shot.' We have developed a great match."

Key to their work is the Wacom Cintiq 27QHD Touch, which represents the current cutting-edge technology for retouching. Working with this Wacom, "Pen Display" Yonac has direct-on-image control over his work. The unit's pressure-sensitive pen, and 27" screen, allows retouchers to make changes by using the pen directly on the image. Meanwhile, touch functions of the tablet and wireless remote express keys control zooming, scrolling, image rotation and brush-size, etc.. "With today's big-file cameras [Dubler uses a 42 MP SONY A7RII mirrorless, with a Zeiss lens] retouchers need to work nearly at pixel-level," Dubler says. "For most retouchers, that's not necessary, but it is absolutely crucial for what we need: with 40x60 inch prints, if you have imprecise retouching, it's going to show." With the Cintiq 27QHD, Yonac moves the pen on a one-to-one ratio (i.e. if he moves one mm, he covers one mm of the image), and this produces precise creative control over details. The process involves constant dialogue, back-and-forth between retoucher and artist. Shown here, for example, is Dubler's image, Rachele, which he shot









originally for Driven magazine, then re-did in black-and-white for Sony's Alpha Universe magazine. Irfan starts with the face, then expands to cover the entire photograph. "He knows what I like," says Dubler. "I'll say, 'more skin texture, not so cosmetic,' and Irfan makes it work." Yonac checks color, skin-tone, the delicacy of balance in the overall shot, and last, but far from least the relationship of foreground to background. In fashion photography, skin-tone is, of course, critical. Dubler's work has always struck a balance between the sophistication of fashion or makeup and the reality of the model as a living, breathing, human being. Among the outstanding qualities of *Rachelle* is the vibrancy of the skin-tone. "You have to get the skin right," he says. You want it smooth, but don't want to lose the texture of the pores, the warmth of the flesh."

Among the most important factors is the quality of Dubler's lighting, among the significant "signatures" of a Dubler image. "When I light a shot, I do it for mood and feeling. So it's crucial to the overall artistic quality of my work. I'm less concerned with the flaws or heavy shadows, because Irfan will do that. So I can concentrate on the expressive effect, and the harsh shadows, or spots, or flaws in skin tone can be solved in the retouching."

For example, in the original capture of *Rachelle*, "she had burgundy spots as part of the eye makeup. I didn't like it, because it tended to anchor her look to a particular time. But I didn't worry with redoing the make-up or any of that tedium. . . I said, 'Let's move on,' and talked to Irfan after the shoot. Now the picture is more 'timeless,'

with an expressive quality that transcends the moment."

And so on. . . back-and-forth, Dubler and Yonac communicate, working on the image, maintaining Dubler's signature look. "He waits to hear from me. For example, at one stage of retouching I saw some hairs on the model's neck that I didn't like. At another, Irfan drew in some eyelashes to help balance the face. All of this is done in collaborative process."

The smoke in *Rachelle* was put-in during retouching, to help emphasize the foreboding nature of the shot. "In the old days, we'd use a smoke machine," says Dubler. "But you can't control that. You end up keeping what you get, because you don't have a choice. Now, with the Wacom Cintiq 27QHD, I can wait for the retouching stage and have the smoke hand painted-in." Dubler sent Yonac some samples of other "smoky" shots, to show the ethereal quality he wanted, "and Irfan did it all by hand, making over five-hundred brush strokes for each image."

So, in a way, we've come full circle. Staying attuned to the latest-and-best in current technology, Dubler (and Yonac) can return, in spirit, to the old days of analog bleach-and-dye retouching (without the tedium), while maintaining the kind of vision and quality to which Dubler has always dedicated himself. In a sense, this represents a return to the purity of Dubler's analog roots, with the Wacom Cintiq 27QHD allowing for "the hand of Michelangelo" once again to play a part in the retouching of a master-photographer's work.





Up and Close with Douglas Dubler

MacDirectory: You have been an advocate of digital technology for creative purposes for many years. Where do you see the creative industry going with the continuous advances of technological tools?

Douglas Dubler: I have maybe a different philosophy when it comes to technology. Simply stated I'm only for different when "different" is better. Not for the sake of change or marketing.

On the camera front, I am a great Sony fan. After 40 years of Nikon, I have switched over to the mirrorless technology and my images are the better for it. The sensors will of course continue to improve. Less noise, greater resolution etc. My images are created with the end point being a print. Not electronic display. I am greatly influenced by Ansel Adams who stressed that viewpoint throughout his life. Realistically speaking, I hope all of the digital technology to come will continue to service that goal.

MacDirectory: Every time we sign into a social network, we are exposed to large amounts of content. How would you rate the quality of the social media imagery? And do you see any opportunities to explore the creative process through social media?

Douglas Dubler: I'm not a great fan of social media. I think that in the long run, because by it's nature, it consumes imagery at a rate that exceeds that of the creation of it by artists. Maybe unlike most people, I would rather have 200 qualified eyes on my images than 200,000+ unqualified...

MacDirectory: Pen tablets and creative pen displays have been an integrate part of many artists. How is it used in your work?

Douglas Dubler: I have used Wacom tablets for years with my limited retouching skills. But the experts like my friend Irfan are better sources for answers to this question...

MacDirectory: How has your work relationship with Irfan evolved over the years?

Douglas Dubler: We have only been working together for

a few years but during that time period we have created some exciting images.

MacDirectory: You have taught photography at the International Center for Photography in NYC and The School of Visual Arts for many years. What have you learned from your students?

Douglas Dubler: Teaching is a great exercise in changing your perspective. The best students encourage a teacher to think outside of the box and explore alternative approaches to solving creative challenges.

MacDirectory: Tell us about some of your current projects.

Douglas Dubler: I'm working on a fine art print exhibition in Tokyo for later this year. Several new cover and editorial articles for foreign publications. I'm also preparing material for a book on my four decade plus career in the fashion/beauty world.

MacDirectory: What are your formative steps to execute a creative project?

Douglas Dubler: The first step is to come up with a brilliant concept. Once you have that it's like building a house. The concept is the foundation and the execution is the build out. I make sure I have the correct talent for the project and I delegate responsibility accordingly to those individuals.

MacDirectory: And what are some of your techniques to generate creative ideas?

Douglas Dubler: I spend a lot of time in the major museums in NYC. I live several blocks away from the Met, the Guggenheim, The Frick Collection. The Met Breuer. I'm inspired by great art not pop art.

Connect with Douglas Dubler:

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Up and Close with Irfan Yonac

MacDirectory: Technology plays a fundamental role in your work. Tell us how Wacom technology is used in your creative process.

Irfan Yonac: Most digital artists today already knows how Wacom's is powerful drawing tablet but I believe many are not aware how Wacom's Cintiq series is a powerful retouching device. Later I upgraded to the Intuos Extra Large GD 12"x18", Intuos-2 XD 12"x18", Intuos-3 PTH 12"x19", then Intuos-4 XL 12"x19". I believe that larger tablet size offers more precise subtle detail control then the smaller ones, because of the ratio relation between tablet and monitor. One to one ratio is ideal which is only possible with the Cintiq series.

Currently I'm using a Wacom Cintiq 27QHD Touch, which is a spectacular hardware. I would say that the Cintiq 27QHD has become second nature to me when it comes to working with Photoshop. I'm using it for all kind of retouching I do. After putting Cintiq 27QHD on my desk no Intuos tablet has been seen on my desktop.

MacDirectory: And how long have you been a retoucher?

Irfan Yonac: I am doing retouching for a living since 1984 and it is only my income source. I started as a traditional retoucher doing mostly transparency retouching for print media, as well as black and white and color negative retouching. I also did dye and bleach print retouching. When Photoshop 3 released in 1994, I realized that traditional retouching is going to die and finally it become a lost art. Since 1994 I took digital retouching seriously.

MacDirectory: What sets of skills are needed in order to become a good retoucher?

Irfan Yonac: Short answer is: Practice, practice, practice and being patient, patient, patient.

MacDirectory: Can you elaborate more about the art of retouching?

Retouching is the invisible art. The retoucher should not compete with the photographers. The retouching is mostly a subtractive process, rather then additive as opposed to the digital art or illustration. The final image reflects only the subject best features, without technical distractions or physical flaws, and the retoucher does it without leaving a trace. Photographic retouching remains the only trade where the product is good when undetectable.

In addition, skills and personality plays a big role in retouching. The photographic retoucher is usually a person with a curious set of interest and talents. Imbued with a natural or acquired artistic ability, the retoucher is fascinated with color and design, has a working knowledge and appreciation of photography. An effective retoucher is a constant experimenter with methods for making tasks easier and more effective. Finally, a retoucher needs extraordinary patience because the work is tedious, time-consuming, and very exacting.

The best way to learn retouching is to study with a skilled retoucher, preferably the one who is making a living in the trade rather then only teaching. Retouching calls for visual and mechanical abilities that are difficult to acquire through reading and watching instructions. The rudiments are best learned by watching an expert at work. Proficiency then comes by constant practice.

Connect with Irfan Yonac: www.yonacdigital.com



