CDIA: Split Shot - Integrating Photoshop in the Creative Studio

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Integrating Photoshop Into the Creative Studio -- That's the snazzy title of the 8th course in CDIA's Professional Digital Photography program. Not too long ago, photographers that shot film could spend hours setting up perfect lighting in a shot using snoots, grids, reflectors, gobos, and other light modifiers to capture the perfect image with one shutter click. With the advent of digital photography its possible to achieve that perfect shot in far less time by shooting several versions of the set then combine the images in Photoshop using layer masks and blending. In the digital photographer's studio, the final image is often a composite that makes best use of time between setting up the lighting and post production editing.

The first exercise in this course is known as a split shot, a technique to control reflections in a set. Imagine an art director sets up a product shot in the studio composed of a couple books and some CDs, carefully placing each element in his or her preferred configuration. Then its the photographer's job to capture the image just as the art director composed it, even though the set may have elements of differing reflective surfaces or different contrasts. The CDs have prismatic reflections of the books behind them, and the books may have shadows or glossy reflections of the other books or CDs in front of them.

To achieve a well lit, final image begin by capturing the original set, then use light modifers such as cards or gobos to capture subsequent shots where one element of the set is lit properly. Weight down the tripod to completely avoid nudging the camera since later several captures will be layered and combined.

In this example having two glossy books and two silvery CDs in front, I began by adding white cards to isolate and balance the lighting on the first CD. Next, I move the white cards to light the second CD properly. After the CDs were done, I remove them from the set entirely, which allowed me to capture the books behind them without the CD glare cast onto the book covers behind them.

With a black book cover, the white studio paper itself cast on the cover, so a black card was laid in front of the book to achieve better contrast with the red and white on the cover.

The last book had a gold cover with colorful holograms on the surface, so I also shot that book in isolation with everything else removed, but it turned out later that the gold book looked better in the shot with the black book in front of it, so the shot with only the gold book wasn't used.

Later in Photoshop, I layered the selected images and began masking them to reveal the best parts of each image in succession, adding masked adjustment layers as well to fine tune each revealed element in the set. Once the layers were stacked, masked, and adjusted the composition appeared just as in the first, original set shot, but the overall lighting was much better.

Initially, it seemed counter intuitive to me to arrange the elements in the shot then

decompose it piece by piece. It seemed more logical to me to add an element to a scene, shoot, then add another element, but the risk with this approach is that you might move something in the shot when building it up this way and its safer to build the set then break it down carefully. Another rationale for this is that in many situations someone else, perhaps the art director, will compose the scene for you in advance and the only choice is shoot while decomposing the set.