

Rock, Spencers Creek, Snowy Mountains - The Making of a Photograph



Each year as I set about the printing of images for my High Country Calendar, I am usually required to use all the so called “tricks” that one can do in the darkroom. They are not really tricks, but more solutions to achieving the final result that you wish, for the particular negative, you have selected.

You are also reminded that it is sometimes possible to make a natural scene look unnatural because you have overlooked some of the rules of nature. The print I have offered here is one such example that rears its ugly head usually every time you have an image that has still water and sky within the main body of the picture.

Looking at the straight print, the natural tendency is to darken the sky, because it is just too light. Assuming that is all that is done then all of a sudden we have a scene that looks incorrect and it would be.

What am I leading to here is that reflections in water are darker than the real thing. I have found that there are rarely exceptions, and cannot think of one time that I have ever encountered it.

In the case of the print before you the overcast sky is darker in the water area. To just darken the sky would set an imbalance in the picture and so make it unreal. One has to darken the water as well not necessarily to the same degree, but enough to make it believable. You will know if this is necessary when looking at the contact sheet for it is here that all will be revealed.

The photograph was made in the Snowy Mountains in May of this year as I was scouting around not only for workshop locations, but also for possible images for my calendar. I have used a 65mm lens on a medium format camera with Kodak T-MAX 100 roll film. This lens equates to a wide angle for this format. The whole roll was given my normal development in D 76 @ 1:1 which is 8 1/2 minutes as the rest of the scenes on the roll were not excessive in contrast and also were not low in contrast so normal development

was good. In fact when I use this camera, because it has interchangeable backs, I will use a different back for the negs that require a reduction in contrast and a different back if I want to develop longer to expand contrast. It's a good system and allows me the freedom to adjust negatives if I have to.

With the print you see before you the straight print was printed on Grade 2. This was my first choice because looking at the contact print which was printed on grade 1, I thought by increasing to grade 2 would be sufficient for what I remembered and for what I wanted, but I was disappointed. Perhaps I made a mistake with the contact sheet and thought I dialed in the correct amount of yellow for a grade 1. Maybe I dialed in more. These things do happen now and again. Anyway!

So grade 2 wasn't to my liking with the main print. I thought that it required more contrast so I increased to a grade 3. This made a big improvement in the print so I set about thinking what other adjustments I needed to make. This is where if you have pre-visualized the print in the field and you can recall what you thought you should do, then you just go ahead and do it, or you may be suffering from post visualization and all your adjustments are a result of what you decide when you are in the darkroom. I think the day I printed this photograph I had a combination of both.

With the increase from grade 2 to grade 3 it gave print much more depth and it made the rock have a stronger presence within the image. It was here that I thought about darkening the sky along with the water. The normal course of events is to burn, or give more exposure to, everything above the rock. The problem with this is that the land behind goes too dark. We could darken the sky area to the degree we want and then just darken the middle section to what is appropriate, but this manoeuvre can be quite tricky and it is possible to mess up in several areas on the print.

The easiest solution is to dodge the rock during the initial exposure (for say part of the time you will burn the bottom section back in) so then when you burn the water back in the rock doesn't go too dark. I found by dodging the rock for the full time (of the burning back in time) it made the rock look a bit flat and actually too light. By dodging for half the time, although it made the rock darker, it still left it looking like a rock.

I also thought that by pre exposing just the sky area of the print with non image light, it would give me a little more density to begin with when I started the actual exposure with the negative in place. In fact if you do a fair bit of pre exposure of prints then it is worth having a second enlarger for this purpose. An el cheapo suits just fine. Even an empty paint tin (why would you use a full one I ask myself) with a small hole drilled in one end and a light socket in the other will do the trick. All you need is the light to cover the printing paper for it to work.

So I have pre exposed the paper for enough time that brings the paper up to threshold (you will have to do a test to determine the your correct time for your enlarger). Moved the paper to the other enlarger that contained the negative and then gave the print the required amount of time to render an image that I was happy with. During that time I dodged the rock for 25% of the entire time as well as dodging the strip of land on the left hand side for about 10% of the exposure time. Both manoeuvres were quite straight forward.

Then the sky area was given a further 40% of exposure just creeping into the land slightly and moving the card all the time so as not to create a burn line in the print. The next area to burn was the bottom section of the print which got about 30% more exposure also just creeping into the land a bit similar to the top section of the print. I then burn that small patch of snow on the right hand side of the print for an additional 50% of exposure time at grade 1. This was sufficient to darken the snow, but not darken the dark areas around it. I then mixed up a weak solution of potassium ferricyanide and bleached the rock back to where I was comfortable. This also added contrast to the rock and made it even more prominent within the image. So in a sense I created more of an atmosphere within the image but still working with what was on the negative.

I also made different prints where the land area was darker in some and lighter in others. Surprisingly, in my opinion, neither way looked better than the other which sometimes can be annoying because you don't know which way to lean. (A bit like the independent politician). This doesn't happen too often, but when it does making a final decision is quite difficult.

So you can see that there have been a few "tricks" applied to this image to reach the final result. If I had to I could approach this negative from a different angle, apply different methods and arrive at the same or a similar result. For me this was the most straight forward, but had it not worked to my liking then I would have embarked on another journey.

The modern darkroom has many options and solutions to making fine expressive prints. If you are struggling, don't give up. Keep at it for the alternative is not much easier and certainly not near as much fun.

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