

The Digital Gurus

Ian van der Wolde



These articles profile some of the experts in digital imaging technology working in Australia. This month Barrie Smith concludes this three-part interview with Victorian professional photographer Ian van der Wolde.



In last month's article, Dandenong-based photographer Ian van der Wolde discussed various aspects of his switch to digital capture, including whether it's better to lease or buy new equipment, and the importance of "selling" a professional photographer's skills to clients... especially those who think using a digital camera makes it all easier.

Modestly maintaining that he is a "middle of the road", medium level commercial photographer, Ian explains that he doesn't compete with any high-end ad agency photographers and relies entirely on his regional client base in what is, in reality, "a big, industrial town."

While saying he wouldn't knock back any commercial work that came through the door, the bulk of what he does is studio product photography for packaging, some corporate portraiture and the occasional family portrait.

He concedes he isn't terribly competitive by nature and so decided early on to step away from high energy commercial and ad work in Melbourne and set up a studio in Dandenong. He began by borrowing \$30,000, putting up his parents' home as collateral, and signed a one year lease with 2x2 year options on a shop.

"The scary thing was that I didn't have any jobs booked to pay for it all," he recalls.

The early days saw Ian travel down the school photography route, but this didn't generate anywhere nearly enough returns to pay for his financial obligations.

"At the time I maintained that I wasn't going to do wedding photography... I would rather have closed the doors."

But then, by chance, he saw some innovative wedding work that changed his opinion of this type of business.

His first wedding was a lucky strike.

"It was one of those dream weddings where everything went right, everything went into place."

Within two years he was covering about 70 weddings a year, but over this time he was also building up the commercial side of the business. "I decided to start my own school photography business so I was shooting weddings on the weekends, commercial jobs in the afternoons and schools for the rest of the time. I found that I was making money, but had no time to enjoy my life.

"The biggest thing I found was that I wasn't able to devote my time to any one area and service it properly. I made the decision to give up school photography and keep the weddings. It was really switching to digital capture that put me far enough ahead to be able to finally give up the weddings as well. I found was that I was starting to get a bit of a name with my clients because I was able to reproduce their products accurately, in terms of colour. They were getting files that were useable the first time so they kept coming back."

Sorry Tales

Ian recalls that in the early days of professional digital capture there was a host of sad and sorry tales doing the rounds about the lack of skill in the industry.

"For example, we had a photographer do a catalogue for us in digital and all the skin tones were orange. So, quite quickly, I developed a reputation within my own clients that I was able to handle colour reproduction and get a good result."

Always willing to learn from experience, Ian contends “every area of photography can teach you something”.

On one occasion Ian was asked to photograph the CEO of a major international company, shortly to arrive from Europe to tour the client’s manufacturing plant. The client said that all what was needed was a couple of PR shots and added, “We just want you to come along to the factory and take a few shots. The reason we’re asking you is that the last photographer was a commercial photographer and he had all these big brollies and lights... he had to stop at every point and plug them in, take light readings and it took too long”. This client then asked Ian if there was any way of doing all this quickly.

“Well, as a wedding photographer you have to do it all quickly,” Ian continues. “At the time I was still shooting weddings on a medium format camera, but I was using a two-flash set-up with an assistant holding one of the flashes... and I knew it worked. So, at the factory I could quickly shoot on the fly the whole way, achieving the professional-looking results the client really wanted, but without unduly delaying the CEO’s tour.

“If I’d come from a commercial background I probably would never have thought of tackling the job that way, but having been involved in weddings, I knew there were other ways of doing it. I think a lot of commercial photographers are too quick to dismiss what wedding photographers do — however, I think that everyone can teach someone something.”

Noise Works

Although Ian has now totally switched to a digital workflow, he says it’s still helpful to occasionally stand back and take a good hard look at where you are.

Consequently, he has found that sometimes the “perfectness” of digital capture can be a drawback. With film, the inherent chemistry in different emulsions led to each having a specific individuality or ‘look’. Digitally captured images tend not to have individual characteristics and so can sometimes look too good to be true.

“You can get around this by putting a little bit of noise back into the file — a bit of ‘grit’ if you like — to make it look more film-like. You can certainly work on a computer to make it look like film, but shooting in different colour spaces also gives different effects which is similar to shooting with different film emulsions. Photoshop now has a photo filter so there are a few things you can do to a digital image to make it look like one originated on film.”

Ian says his method of handling colour management is to “...work to a very rigid digital workflow”. When shooting a commercial job in an unfamiliar lighting situation, he first photographs a colour chart to establish a reference for colour balancing the image files.

“However,” he cautions, “the digits don’t always give you a pleasing result, but they deliver a starting point so you at least know the file has a grey card in it and that there should be between 127 and 128 units of red, green and blue in all shadows.

“If you’re shooting in RAW mode you can just click on the grey card with an eyedropper and neutralise the file. So it may not give you the results you’re expecting or it may affect the skin tone, but it does give you a neutral file from which to start.





All images by Ian van der Wolde, copyright 2004.

"In the past, you would choose a particular film depending on the application, and you would experiment with your films. When you're using the digits you're just bringing it back to a neutral tone and from that point on you can play with the saturation and colour temperatures in order to adjust it to where you feel it should be."

Delivering Results

A question asked of all our gurus is whether digital capture is 'there' yet for professionals.

Ian van der Wolde is convinced it has arrived. He cites the capabilities of the high-end capture backs as proof that digital imaging can satisfy the most exacting quality demands.

"The only thing stopping me from going there is that a camera like that would be such a small part of my workflow it wouldn't justify the expenditure. The Canon EOS-1Ds that I'm using now satisfies 95 percent of my total need in terms of digital capture."

Asked whether he feels that the present state of CCD and CMOS technologies are ahead of optics in terms of resolution and quality demands, Ian answers, "Yes, in some instances, digital technology is definitely ahead of the lenses that are currently available. Certainly in the wider angle range there seem to be some issues and I believe the direction in which the light rays must hit the sensor needs to be much more perpendicular than it has to be with film."

Other nagging problems are the lack of edge definition, and an urgent need to defeat the problem of dust getting on the sensor when lenses are changed.

"Dust on the sensor is a major problem, especially in this country, and the camera makers need to come up with workable solutions that don't involve the camera having to be serviced every time."

Expectations

At the other end of the scale to the high-end backs are the so-called 'prosumer' digital cameras which continue to offer better performance and features... often, on

paper at least, looking better than an entry-level D-SLR. Should pros be tempted by these cameras?

"I think they are good for the photographers who are just putting a foot into the water and want to learn about digital capture without spending a lot of money. Frankly, if the results are good, the type of camera shouldn't matter, but clients do have expectations. In the past you wouldn't turn up on a job with anything less than a Nikon F5 in tow. Presentation — and the gear you heft — is still important."

Ian adds that there are things other than file size that are important when it comes to selecting a digital camera for professional use.

"Everybody is now so obsessed with the digital aspects that what often gets totally overlooked is the camera performance such as autofocus and metering. For example, the autofocus in the higher end SLR bodies is superior to that in the lower-priced models, even if both cameras have the same pixel count."

Making An Impression

The choice of file format for original capture is a touchy one with some photographers opting for space-hungry, but slow-writing TIFFs, while others seem to feel JPEGs can be more than adequate.

For Ian van der Wolde, there isn't an option — he asserts that "every professional photographer should be shooting in RAW mode".


"I've heard all the arguments against it — like that it eats up memory space — but we're professionals and it's our job to give our clients the best that we possibly can."

Ian observes that the evolution of the digital camera — in its various forms — has changed photographers' attitudes to equipment with, curiously, some of the old safeguards being carelessly discarded.

"The digital age has had a funny effect because photographers who would previously have taken along a \$30,000 Hasselblad outfit to a wedding or a couple of pro-level 35mm SLRs, are now replacing these set-ups with just one Nikon D100 or an EOS 10D or something similar. Yet they seem to think that they're going to get the same level of capability and reliability.



"I'm sometimes accused of being a gadget man because I carry two high-end D-SLR bodies, but my argument is that when I was shooting on either medium format or 35mm I always had a back-up camera. If I was on a job and something went wrong I could keep shooting. Now some photographers seem to think that one camera is able to do it all which just isn't the case."

Ian van der Wolde is also firmly of the opinion that it's a trap to make digital photography "look easy to our clients so they start to think they can do it themselves". He knows of one photographer who always sets up studio lights wherever he goes regardless of whether he needs them or not — because he wants his clients to have that perception that he knows what he's doing! 

Ian van der Wolde can be contacted via telephone on (03) 9794 9870 or via email to info@alteredimages.com.au His Website at www.alteredimages.com.au

He Said What?

Due to a prepress glitch a couple of lines of text 'fell off' the page in last month's article. The transition from page 33 to 34 should have read as follows:

In Ian's opinion, everyone needs to realise that capture is only part of the whole process. An important step is what happens to the image when it reaches the computer and software stage.

"You hear a lot of these Doomsday photographers saying it's the end of us because anybody can go out and buy a good digital camera and put us out of a job. I think this is very wrong. They are discounting the fact that, as professional photographers, we've been trained to see, to compose, to record life. We understand concepts like depth-of-field and other technicalities. It would be like me saying 'Well, I'll go and buy a set of Sidchromes and instantly become a professional mechanic'. I can buy the tools, but it doesn't mean that I'm suddenly qualified to do the job."