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SXSW

A world of attention

Word is traveling about Austin photographer's vivid HDR images that straddle artistry, realism.

By Omar L. Gallaga
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF
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Some people, Trey Ratcliff says, see in HDR. Others don't.

The Austin techie, a chief executive officer of an international video-game company, is becoming an increasingly world-renowned photographer.

His photos, which are frequently featured on community news Web site digg.com and as some of the top-rated images on the photo-sharing site Flickr.com, are called "high dynamic range" photos. HDR is an emerging technique for enhancing digital pictures. It can make photos look stunningly bright, like fresh, electrified paintings, or simply enhance the brights and darks to make what started as a flat image look more realistic.

Ratcliff, whose blog Stuck in Customs (www.

stuckincustoms.com) was recently nominated for a Bloggie award for best photography (he finds out if he won at 12:30 p.m. Monday during a ceremony at the South by Southwest Interactive Festival), is one of the pre-eminent HDR practitioners in the world.

His photos combine a sense of realism with eye-poppingly saturated colors, well-defined detail and exotic locales. Ratcliff takes photos around the world and then processes them on an Apple Mac Pro desktop computer in his Northwest Austin home.

In only nine months, he's gone from being curious about photography to gaining fans all over the world for his boundary-pushing work.

Ratcliff's hobby, which he says sprang from curiosity and quickly developed through self-taught tinkering, earned him an exhibit at Halcyon coffeehouse. His site has received a flood of traffic since the Bloggie nominations were announced: Stuck in Customs received more than 250,000 visitors and almost 3 million page views in February.

So what is HDR? It's a technique for utilizing the vast amounts of lighting data that higher-end single-lens reflex (SLR) digital cameras can capture at their highest resolutions.

After a photographer captures several photos shot at different shutter speeds (say, a dark, normal and light version of the same landscape), photo software can combine all the data into one dynamic image that includes all the lighting data from all the images.

Details pop out from shadows. Whites go from overexposed to vibrant, but without a loss of shapes and textures. And colors can be shown as saturated as they'd appear to the human eye, something that appeals to Ratcliff's sensibilities.

"I think it's cool because it really closely equates to what people see when they're actually there," Ratcliff said. "When you show most people a picture of a sunset and you say, 'Oh, you had to be there,' it's because in your mind's eye, while you're there, you're thinking the trees are a beautiful green and I'm getting beautiful yellows and pinks in the background. When you take a picture, you think, 'That's not quite right.' "

Ratcliff uses a high-end Nikon digital camera, but says nearly any decent SLR camera can take images suitable for HDR. Those kinds of cameras typically start at about \$400, but prices have fallen fast in the past two years.

While some HDR photographers become enthralled with the trippy, animationlike effects that can be produced with the technique, Ratcliffe tries to keep a degree of realism in his images. While he might enhance clouds to give them more pop or illuminate the pixels of a snowscape, he says he's trying to straddle the line between realism and artistry.

A stunning unaltered image of a snowy pit near Iceland's Mount Hekla is great, but could be better. Ratcliff moves his mouse pointer around a large widescreen display hooked up to his Mac and begins tinkering.

"I think the snow looks a bit dark. The clouds look a little bit fuzzy for me." He runs five separate images of the same scene through his programs, crops out the clouds and adjusts the light range, creating in under a half hour a photo that shows remarkable detail and lighting range.

He might add a Gaussian blur filter in Photoshop to give the image a slightly dreamy quality ("that Barbara Walters effect," he says) or enhance parts of the image that need more illumination or sharpening.

Ratcliff travels to places such as Kuala Lumpur and Japan regularly for his games company, John Galt Games LLC, and began using his travel as inspiration for his photos. The images on his site include glowing Russian submarines, otherworldly Icelandic geysers, an Amsterdam church aglow.

The images are often so vibrant, they appear to be holographic. Some who went to his exhibit thought he printed out his photos, then painted over them, Ratcliff said.

Ratcliff, who has had requests to produce postcards and have his images used in magazines, hopes he's communicating what his eye sees on all these different continents. "I'm really proud to show this to people and say, 'You've got to go to this place and check it out. This is what it really looks like.' "

How he does it

A brief look at how Trey Ratcliff creates his high dynamic range photos.

Shooting

Using a Nikon SLR camera and a tripod, Ratcliff shoots in 'aperture mode,' which allows him to capture up to nine pictures at a time with different shutter speeds. He sets the ISO, the camera's sensitivity to light, to 100 to avoid grain and get more sharpness. Typically, he shoots three or five images, sometimes more depending on the available light, or less if there's motion. He usually shoots in 'Raw' format, which captures a large amount of data.

Importing

Ratcliff uses a program called Adobe Lightroom to keep his images organized and to group pictures he'll use to produce an HDR photo. Once images are grouped together, he'll copy them to a directory.

Processing

Using a downloadable program called Photomatix Pro, Ratcliff imports the images from a directory, adjusts settings to tell the program how many images are being used and how to process them, then runs the program to create a single HDR photograph.

Tweaking

Ratcliff brings the HDR image into PhotoShop, where he can adjust brightness, use blurring or sharpening effects to enhance details in the image, crop the photo, or use overlaid copies of the image to adjust specific parts of the image. In this 'final reckoning,' he uses his artistic sensibility to decide the mood of the image and to adjust the levels of brightness accordingly.

Uploading

Once the image is finalized, Ratcliff uploads it to Flickr.com, where millions of people can see it. Within minutes, he might get thousands of views and dozens of comments from admirers and critics. He also posts some images to his blog, Stuck in Customs, and often uses the online company Imagekind Inc. to print poster-sized versions of some of his work.

ON THE WEB: For a more detailed tutorial from Trey Ratcliff, visit www.stuckincustoms.com/?p=548

HDR software and resources

hdrsoft.com — Home of the popular Photomatix Pro software, which processes HDR images. (For Windows and Mac.)

fdrtools.com — FDRTools is another piece of software that can process HDR images. (For Windows and

Mac.)

www.flickr.com/groups/hdr/ — Many examples of HDR photography as posted by Flickr.com users.

stuckincustoms.com — Trey Ratcliff's photo blog.

backingwinds.blogspot.com/2006/10/how-to-create-professional-hdr-images.html — Another tutorial on creating HDR images, this one using Photoshop CS2.

Find this article at:

<http://www.austin360.com/arts/content/events/sxsw07/stories/10hdr.html>

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