



Viewpoint Mike Smith

Heavy-handed HDR has a lousy reputation, but Mike Smith reckons the technique can deliver good results when used tastefully

I confess that I like HDR. There, I've said it. But why? Well, I was thinking about dynamic range. This is the ratio between the darkest and brightest points in an image, and in photography we measure this in f-stops. Most compact cameras (and smartphones) fall in the range of 7-9 stops, DSLRs 12-14, with the top performing Nikon D810 on 14.8. But how does that compare to the human eye? Well, the eye doesn't have a fixed range as it depends on the context. Its *instantaneous* perception is thought to be 10-14 stops, while if you allow your eye to adapt to the scene it can increase to 20-24 stops. In fact, I'd argue that the perception of our dynamic range is 20-24 stops.

Look at the image below – the interior of the old dining room at the magnificent Charingworth Manor in Gloucestershire. The leather and wooden beams are dark, inching their way toward blackness, while the light cast from the windows is bright and airy, illuminating the walls and carpet. The fireplace shows evidence of fires that have raged across the ages and, yes, you can see some of the detail of the trees outside. OK, it's an HDR image, it looks like an HDR image and we instinctively know it is. But the next time you're consciously viewing the interior of a room, assess the dynamic range of the scene. Look at the darkest tones in the image as well as the detail through the windows

and identify how many of the tones you can see. HDR is real life. OK, I won't go as far as saying the heavily overprocessed, tone-mapped images are natural, but, well, these are.

Of course, while with multiple-image HDR we often shoot 5 stops over and 5 stops under in order to expand the dynamic range, we still can't represent that on a print or monitor. LCDs typically run at around 10 stops, which means we need to use a process such as tone-mapping to reduce the dynamic range while retaining local contrast.

When undertaken with subtlety, the HDR workflow is both appropriate and much closer to the real world we perceive on a daily basis. What HDR is actually competing with is our familiarity with the traditional image, both printed and projected. Such reproductions have low dynamic range and when we sever the visual continuity we have with our understanding of what an image should look like, it is cognitively jarring. HDR isn't wrong – it's an alternative representation that we aren't familiar with. So, the next time you capture the interior of a building, shoot it 'normally', then use an HDR mode on your camera (or smartphone) and compare it with what you are looking at. I think you might be surprised.

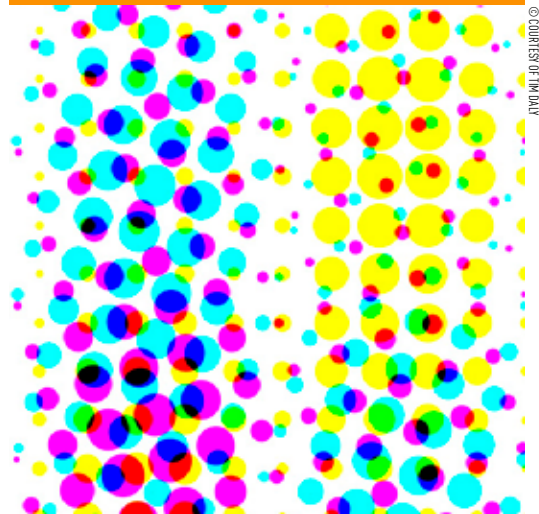
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While this is obviously an HDR shot, it's closer to our visual experience

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