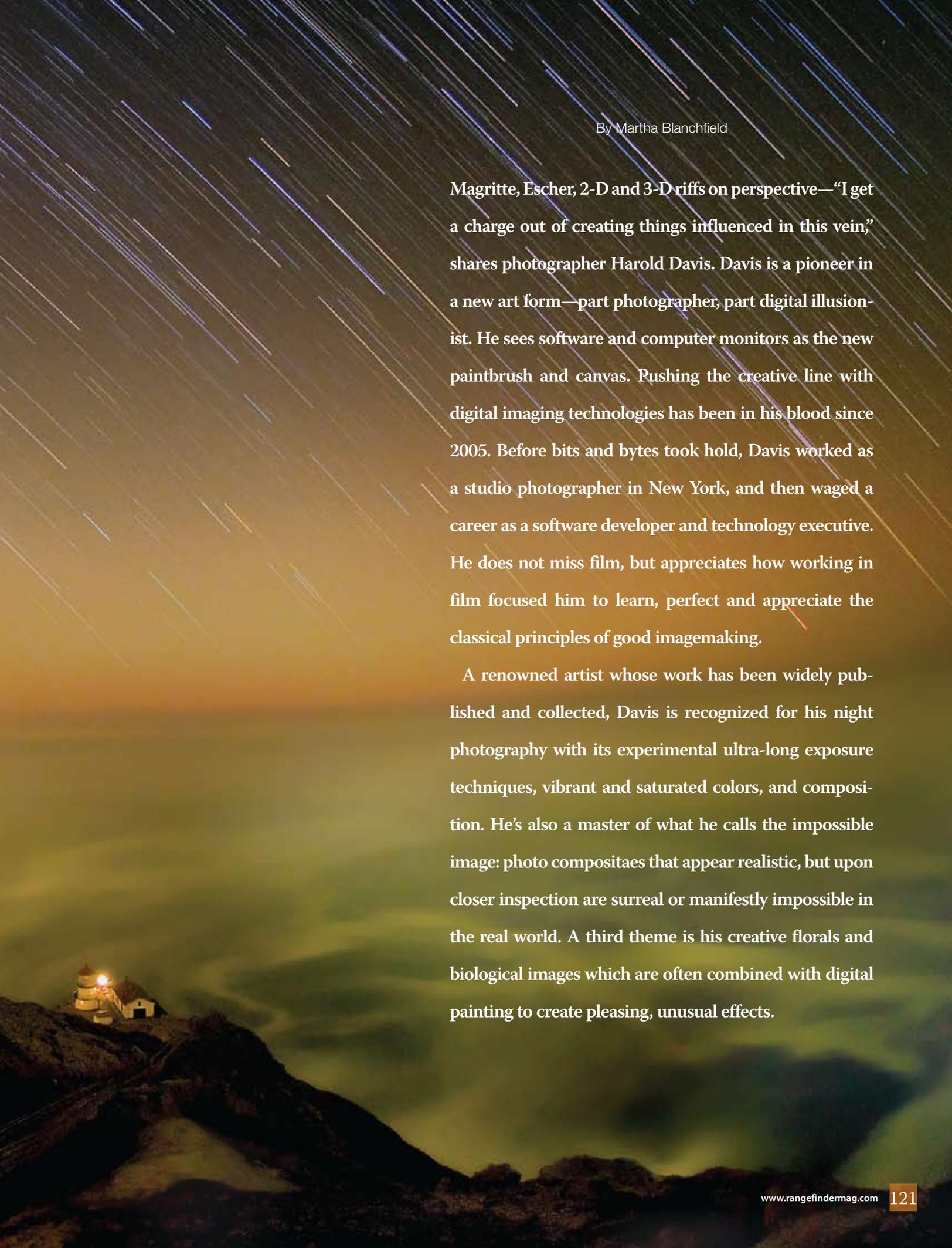


HAROLD DAVIS
the impossible
and
improbable

ALL PHOTOS COPYRIGHT © HAROLD DAVIS

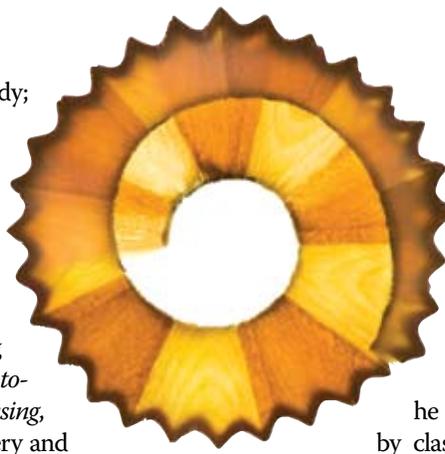


By Martha Blanchfield

Magritte, Escher, 2-D and 3-D riffs on perspective—“I get a charge out of creating things influenced in this vein,” shares photographer Harold Davis. Davis is a pioneer in a new art form—part photographer, part digital illusionist. He sees software and computer monitors as the new paintbrush and canvas. Pushing the creative line with digital imaging technologies has been in his blood since 2005. Before bits and bytes took hold, Davis worked as a studio photographer in New York, and then waged a career as a software developer and technology executive. He does not miss film, but appreciates how working in film focused him to learn, perfect and appreciate the classical principles of good imagemaking.

A renowned artist whose work has been widely published and collected, Davis is recognized for his night photography with its experimental ultra-long exposure techniques, vibrant and saturated colors, and composition. He’s also a master of what he calls the impossible image: photo compositaes that appear realistic, but upon closer inspection are surreal or manifestly impossible in the real world. A third theme is his creative florals and biological images which are often combined with digital painting to create pleasing, unusual effects.

He challenges his viewers to stop and study; images are often not simple to understand, nor simple to produce. Complexity cannot be produced over night, and along the path Davis has amassed expertise in many areas of digital magic—which he readily shares. He teaches seminars and is a frequent guest lecturer. He’s authored more than 30 books, 10 of which are on camera magic and working with digital media. A current edition, *The Photo-shop Darkroom: Creative Digital Post-Processing*, is peppered with signature impossible imagery and detailed steps to show how each was created. Davis gives kudos to publisher Focal Press for allowing him to break a few rules when it came to presentation within the book. Flip the pages to see instruction presented through whimsical and witty graphics produced by Davis and his co-author and wife Phyllis, a graphic design artist and writer.



“Inspiration comes in phases,” shares Davis. “I tend to work in bits and pieces, creating paradoxes and composites, grabbing and saving pieces for eventual use. For example, I cannot tell you how many photos I have taken of those flowers,” waving a hand toward a patch of tall poppies. “They have been a huge source of attraction in recent weeks.” Sometimes he sees the germ of an idea while photographing conventionally. In other cases he uses visual ideas garnered in a file from work by classical surreal photographers and artists such as Man Ray, Salvador Dalí, René Magritte and his all time favorite M.C. Escher. “But most often,” says Davis, “I end up playing at the computer for hours at a time. What comes out of these improvisational sessions can be nothing that I ever expected when I sat down.”

Continuing, “A recent example of an impossible image progression started with a pencil shaving that I found in my kitchen sink. The curl and position triggered a more complex vision for me. I lifted the shaving and placed it on a light box. A little moisture was added to make the shavings more transparent, then I used a 200mm macro lens augmented with a 36mm extension tube. I couldn’t resist inverting the images and extending the spiral in Photoshop.”

A Complicated, Impossible View

On any one moment it can be seen that Davis is soaking up all in his world. Conversation darts between studio printing and artistic visualization; hovers over the minutia of a nearby flower, and then back to broad artistic influences. Even between these varied topics persists a stream of connectedness—one that precisely describes how he processes through a Zen approach. He shares that his mind steps through pre-visualization, then visualization. He notices small components (perhaps images he needs to photograph), but at the same time he’s assembling them with larger images (maybe images he has or images that need to be captured). He’s connecting the dots and looking at shapes for what’s possible and impossible. The pieces need to come together in the end to ‘feel’ like a picture.

Digital Artist’s Day and Night Palette

To gather the many elements needed to fashion an impossible, night, floral or any image, Davis relies on a Nikon D300 and files that can size to several gigabytes each. Paired with the camera is generally an 18–200mm VR Nikkor zoom tucked inside a stained and faded Lowepro backpack. Other tools include a number of different macro lens (his favorites are a 200mm f/4 Nikkor telephoto





macro and a Carl Zeiss 100mm f/2 macro), Gitzo tripod, remote cable release and polarizer. “But a most important tool is my mind’s eye. Half of my work is produced with a camera and the other half while at the computer. Digital images are one part photography and one part software; my creative time at the computer is as important to me (and my clients) as my time photographing in the field.”

He shoots every day and pushes experimentation. “I change styles and environments. It’s a natural and vital process that helps me evolve, frees my mind and allows me to remain open for new concepts. I don’t keep to a strict discipline. I see and

study,” Davis adds. “I’ve stared at objects for days, knowing there’s something there I need, but do not yet have the entire vision.” He goes on to add that photographers working from a point of passion, rather than for the sake of commerce, most often produce images with more meaning and intent. “Understand that many of the best work first to please themselves, and it’s often during freeform times such as these that the most successful images come to mind and camera. Viewers will also feel the photographer’s passion, and that’s what makes a moving piece of art.”

A passion for this creator is photography at night. “The great artist Vincent van

Gogh noted that the colors of the night were brighter and more vivid than daytime colors. Van Gogh may have been crazy about some things, but he knew colors.” To prepare for an evening shoot, Davis practices in dark rooms and closets with his eyes shut so he can manipulate his camera in darkness. He prefers to photograph lonesome landscapes. He’s spent the night photographing on top of Half Dome and alone in the desert. His night images often include star trails produced by combining up to twenty RAW files. Davis uses the Statistics script (part of Photoshop CS3 and CS4 Extended) and shoots for an underexposed histogram bunched to the left. “This is counterintuitive and not what you’re supposed to do, but it leads to images that are deeply saturated with gorgeous colors in environments that appear colorless to normal sight.”

The Challenge Of More Vs. Less

His collecting of component images has yielded upwards of 10TB of storage on Buffalo TerraStation Pro Network Attached Storage (NAS) units. “My filing and archival system is disciplined. Saving images so they don’t get lost and being able to find them when you need them is a skill that’s simply essential to modern digital artists and photographers.” Davis goes on to share that he worked as a professional ser-



vices consultant and software developer for an enterprise database company. “They’d say ‘no knowledge is wasted,’ and I’ve used what I learned then to help organize my collection—hierarchical by shooting date but cross-referenced with content slugs.”

Quantity of image files reigns supreme in the studio, but quantity of images is not king when showing work to clients. A slice of advice shared by an editor is recounted: “He told me I should be able to present myself with only six images. Not an easy task, but it really makes you consider what pieces are your best so that you don’t inundate the viewer.” For tackling that distillation Davis recommends culling to a cohesive theme or vision. “Narrowing down can really trip up a photographer. When marketing to an art buyer or private collector it’s important that they recognize immediately what you stand for, what your signature is.”

Making It Come Together

The hours, months, even years of hunting and gathering, start to come together at the computer. “I try to be really relaxed when I edit,” Davis states. “It’s a rigorous process—but there’s an element of improvisation too. I listen to music to loosen up. I don’t know if my musical taste influences or not, but lately I’ve had Bruce Springsteen on my headset. Alison Krauss, Robert Plant and Raising Sand have seen me through many

blending layers of Photoshop.”

His impossible photographs follow a workflow that steps through 10 to 20 files, each file with 20–40 layers in Photoshop. A super-charged Apple Mac Pro with 5 gigabytes of RAM and a 30-inch Apple Cinema monitor are requisite. Simple photographic images take a minimum of an hour or two to post-process, and more complex works can take days or even weeks. Besides Photoshop, a variety of standalone software and plug-ins, including Photomatix, Nik Software’s Color Efex Pro and PictureCode’s Noise Ninja, can be used.

“I am proud to be active in the birth of a new medium,” waxes Davis. “I think digital imaging technologies are opening up an entire new art genre. Things that you and I cannot even imagine will be seen in coming years.” While some viewers of his work may say, “Oh, that’s not real,” others will linger with frozen gaze filled with thought, then emit a quizzical, “Hmm,” followed by, “That’s pretty cool.”

What Is Possible

Davis is more and more frequently being tapped for presentations and educational seminars, and is working on several new written editions. Even as a father of four, he finds the time to produce heavily detailed instructional tomes for the masses. In the works is a new series of elegant

books about creativity in photography for publication later this year by John Wiley. “I love teaching photography,” he shares. “Writing books is a way for me to distill my teaching and point of view. Each book uses hundreds of my images so this is a great marketing tool and way to get some of my more experimental images out there. It also encourages licensing requests.”

The Berkeley Hills resident continues to draw an ever-widening circle of private collectors who are finding him through word-of-mouth or his online portfolios. And he’s recently engaged an art agent who has been successful in placing his work as reproductions on canvas and Giclée prints, greeting card and other products.

“Having an agent handle my décor sales means that I can focus on art creation, rather than on marketing. Every professional photographer needs to think about the market for their work,” summarizes Davis. “But if you have to spend too much time on marketing, the excitement and vision of the creation process can get lost. I’m thrilled to be at the dawn of a new era that combines photography with imagery created only in my mind. I never want to lose the sense of exploring an infinite sea of worlds of wonder.”



Martha Blanchfield is creator of the Renegade Photo Shoots (www.renegade-pr.com) and a freelance marketing and public relations consultant.

