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The Soft Touch: A Photographer's Guide to Manipulating Focus

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Image sharpness is one of photography’s yin/yang propositions. Soft focus can impair a photograph, and just as readily enhance it—in some cases, greatly enhance it. What we perceive as blur, as soft zones in a picture, function in very much the same manner as deep shadows or overexposed highlights. By minimizing or concealing certain details in the image by selectively throwing areas out of focus at will, the photographer can direct a viewer’s attention through the image as he or she intends. Like the rest stops in a piece of music, creatively manipulated zones of softness can totally govern a photograph’s overall impact.

There are dozens of ways to selectively reduce sharpness in any part of an image, and three important reasons for a photographer to be fluent in his or her ability to create a soft-focus look: (1) to emphasize important picture details by subordinating or eliminating others; (2) to reduce or remove details of a subject that undermine a picture’s intent, and (3) to create a mood impression, an aura, that suggests something about a subject that doesn’t actually appear in the frame.

In this book, Jim Cornfield surveys in detail the art of selectively using soft focus in your photography. Readers will learn about the history of soft-focus photography, then move to technical discussions for creating the effect in-camera (taking advantage of spherical aberrations, circles of confusion, and bokeh—the way a lens, due to its unique properties and specific aperture shape, renders image areas that lie outside of the focus range—often described as “good” or “bad” bokeh). Next, readers will move on to a study of post-capture image manipulations using Photoshop and third-party plugins in order to re-create traditional effects. Finally, the author includes an appendix of currently available optical and digital products intended for the creative application of soft-focus effects.

Armed with the tools needed to produce a predictable soft-focus look, readers will be able to expand their photographic repertoire for enhanced artistic expression and stand-out work that will draw clients and generate client referrals.

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