

The Workstation

Imaging Environment

Before we get to all the cool toys that digital imagers get to play with, it's absolutely essential to plan a physical environment conducive to image editing. Few things will do more harm to your image editing than mixed lighting sources, strong sunlight, and brightly colored walls. CRT monitors exhibit fairly low contrast, and when properly calibrated are relatively dim. To view the screens under optimum conditions means dimming artificial light (better yet, turn it off) and/or blocking direct sunlight. You don't have to live in a cave, but forget about editing by your patio deck overlooking the Pacific ocean. Your monitor is tuned to a specific color temperature. While this temperature can vary with different needs, it will certainly not match that of household light bulbs, so avoid situations where "dirty light" is introduced to your workstation area. If you edit in a room with windows, turn off the lights, close the blinds, and you'll be fine for all but the most demanding of editing situations.

To evaluate printed output with any degree of reliability, it's crucial to set up a single color corrected light source. While you can spend well over \$1000 on a soft proof viewing booth, an inexpensive *Ott-Light*® or *Solux*® viewing lamp with 5000K "daylight" bulbs is often sufficient for black and white prints.

Computing Power

Simply put, image editing means Photoshop, and Photoshop means processing power—lots of it. Your computer and operating system can never be too new. And you can never have too much RAM (memory) and hard drive space (storage). If you're counting ceiling tiles while waiting for your files to open, it's probably time for an upgrade.

Scanners

It wasn't long ago that the choices were limited to drum scanners costing 6 figures. Polaroid and Nikon have emerged as the most dominant players in the desktop film scanner market with models capable of optical resolutions of 4000ppi. Differences in technology and marketing hype aside, what you're looking for is a scanner that can deliver detail in shadow areas without digital noise. Highlights generally pose much less of a challenge. Everyone has different needs and budgets. Many photographers produce great results by doing the scanning themselves. Make no mistake though, drum scanners still retrieve the most detail from film, even resolving the grain itself. And wet mounting has benefits of its own. But the competence of the scanner operator plays a huge role in image quality. So if you decide to send out for scans, be prepared to search for an operator who is able to produce images to your satisfaction.

Monitors

Bigger is better. A large screen area allows for more productive work. And with the popularity of LCD models, the CRT behemoths have come down drastically in price. If you're considering a CRT, it's preferable to choose one that comes with its own hardware calibration device, or "puck". LaCie, Sony, and NEC/Mitsubishi offer such models and these integrated packages offer direct hardware control over the electron guns. If one of the guns is found to be weaker, it can be brought up to match the others. With 3rd party pucks on generic monitors, only software adjustments to the video board are possible. If one of the guns is found to be weaker, the others must be brought down to a similar level before calibration. LCD screens are compact, light, and extremely cool. But to date, only a select few are optimized for critical image editing. Expect to pay a premium for the top of the line LCDs from companies like Eizo, Apple Computer and Formac (you'll still need calibrators for these).

Printers

Since the mid-90's Epson has enjoyed a dominance in the fine art printing market that would make Microsoft jealous. Their printers, ranging in output from letter sized to 44", enjoy wide support from third party paper and ink vendors. The printers have proven themselves durable and consistent performers capable of outstanding output. Sure we all wish they were faster, but it's Epson's world, we just live in it.