A Digital Platinum/Palladium Portfolio

by Dan Burkholder

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Commentary

I think it goes without saying that Photoshop is the neatest trick to be introduced into photography perhaps in the entire history of the discipline. The problem, of course, is that it makes trickery so easy to accomplish. That is its great Achilles' heel. It's easy to make trite photographs — the bilaterally symmetric floating rocks and trees I've railed against in so many other forums. This image by Dan Burkholder may be the very first Photoshop image I've seen that I thought really showed us what Photoshop was going to be capable of — in the hands of talented photographers who avoid the trite composition. This is no mere bilaterally symmetric floating turtle.

So, what is it about this photograph that makes it not trite? In my way of thinking the answer is found in the subtle philosophical questions Burkholder asks in this image. Why would a turtle be inside building? And not just any building, but a very formal looking, even church-like building? What has happened to gravity? Is it captured, or tranquil? These are serious questions that may not occur to every viewer — it is after all also a humorous photograph of a flying turtle in a room. But even that begs the question — flying turtles? And why is the door roped off? Is the turtle prevented from leaving or securing its privacy?

Sometimes trying to ask these kinds of questions of a photograph is to overburden it with philosophical speculation. In Zen they call this "putting legs on a snake." Perhaps the photograph just is what it is, no more. Be that as it may, what it is not is boring, trite, obvious, or devoid of all possible interpretation. We may not choose to approach this from a philosophical analysis, but we can if we want to and that's part of what makes this so different from the typical trite Photoshop manipulation.

Burkholder has become one of today's great masters of the digital image — not because he has become skilled at controlling the technology, but rather because he understand that the technology allows him to create images — and ask questions — that were previously impossible, well, or at least very difficult. His images (this one included) don't scream, "I am accomplished at Photoshop," but rather scream, "What is your perception of reality, and why?" He is a photographer/artist, but like all the best artists is more than a mere picture maker. He follows in the footsteps of other surrealists who ask questions through their visual artwork — think Magritte, Salvidor Dali, and Escher. Photography need not stop at showing us the world any more than painting does. With digital tools, the inquisitive mind now has the means to show us a world grounded in the artist's imagination — which is a much more interesting thing that merely showcasing technological dexterity.