Table of Contents

The Highlight Contrast Increase Mask

Article #3 in a Series of 3
by Mark Jilg and Dennis McNutt

Straight photograph
The cow lily leaves in the center of the photograph printed too dark and dull for our taste.

Printed from a sandwich of the original negative and highlight
mask mounted together in a pin register negative carrier.

Highlight masks allow you to go beyond conventional techniques for controlling highlight densities and contrast, such as dodging, burning, flashing, changing grades of paper or print developers. Some details are too complex for dodging; flashing gives useful but limited control over upper tones; changing papers or developers operates unselectively on all the tonalities of the print. A virtue of HLMs is that they can work with the finest of details; they can be made to operate selectively on
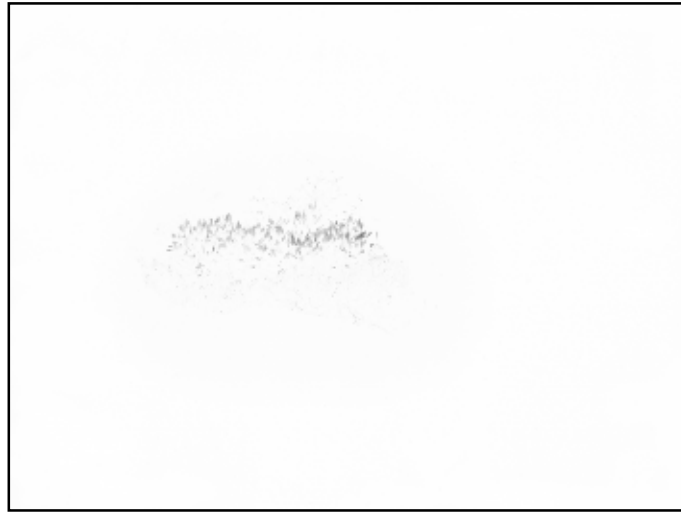
Highlight contrast mask (HLM)

This is how the mask appears when it is placed on a white backing paper and viewed by reflected light. I bleached out some of the high tones that I did not wish to brighten (e.g., the bright rocks in the stream). When viewed by transmitted light, the HLM appears to have much less density.

just the brightest highlights or to reach down into even the middle tones.

You make your final print with the HLM sandwiched in register with the camera negative. The HLM is a negative image of the original scene. The HLM should have density only in the highlights, so it will be clear in all the lower tones. By adding density to the higher tones of the camera negative, the HLM causes them to print lighter. The density range of the HLM controls the tonal separation of the highlights.

Making a Highlight Mask

Since the HLM is a negative, you must use either a two-step process with negative materials, or a one-step process with a direct positive film. We'll describe both approaches because each offers advantages.

In addition to your standard darkroom setup, you will need a registration contact printing frame/ negative carrier combination. As long as you have comparable equipment to that shown on pages 14 and 15, you'll have no problems. Any questions you may have about registration can be answered quickly by studying Figures 1 and 2 on page 33.

Our procedures are based on the use of litho (high contrast) films. Kodak recommends a 1A light red safelight for litho films. A dim yellow or amber safelight can be used, but be sure to make a 4 minute fog test to verify that it is dim enough. Due to the huge variations of subject matter, processing and personal taste, the starting points suggested in this article are only that - places to begin your explorations.

Finally, always have an unmasked print on hand for reference purposes.