



Processing Practice: Axel Towers

In this lesson I walk you through my real-world processing of a recent iPhone capture, demonstrating how I transformed the raw image into a finished piece. While your final result may vary slightly from my original, you'll gain a solid understanding of my workflow and the techniques I use to enhance my images. The expected outcome is a refined image with balanced colors, improved contrast, and a clear focal point.

Key Concepts

1. **Adaptive Color Profile:** Start with a strong foundation by using the adaptive color profile, which applies initial processing to refine the image, reducing the need for extensive adjustments.
2. **Color Mixer for Saturation:** Control distractions by desaturating specific colors, like blues and greens, to keep the viewer's focus on the main subject.
3. **Black Point Adjustment:** Ensure depth and richness by establishing a true black point in the image, adding contrast and preventing a washed-out appearance.
4. **Contrast and Presence Adjustments:** Fine-tune the overall look by carefully adjusting contrast, clarity, and dehaze to add subtle pop and emphasize details without overdoing it.
5. **Targeted Sky Masking:** Create a clean, high-contrast sky by masking it and using curves to ensure it becomes pure white, simplifying the image and drawing attention to the subject.
6. **Selective Object Removal:** Eliminate distractions by removing unwanted elements, such as small towers or lights, using retouching tools to simplify the composition.
7. **Subject Isolation and Enhancement:** Draw focus to the main subject by creating a precise mask and applying adjustments like negative clarity and reduced contrast to soften and highlight the person.
8. **Retouching Distracting Elements:** Refine the image by removing distracting elements like lights and signs using generative AI, ensuring the viewer's eye is drawn to the intended focal point.
9. **Final Masking for Subtlety:** Complete the image by making final adjustments to minimize distractions, such as desaturating and softening the subject's shoes to keep the focus on their face.

Applying the Adaptive Color Profile (01:57)

Instead of using the default Apple Pro Raw profile for this iPhone shot, I prefer to start with Adobe's adaptive color profile. This profile applies some initial processing that aligns more with how professionals typically edit images. To apply it, navigate to the profile settings and select "Adaptive Color."

This gives me a more refined starting point, reducing the number of adjustments I need to make later. You can also adjust the "Amount" slider to fine-tune the effect, though I found the default setting to be suitable for this image.



Adjusting Color Saturation (03:03)

To address the distracting colors, I use the color mixer to desaturate the blues and greens, ensuring the viewer's attention remains on the main subject.

Basic Tone Adjustments (04:07)

Now, let's move on to the basic tone adjustments. The first thing I want to do is ensure there's true black in the image. I can tell there isn't any by looking at the histogram; the left side isn't touching the edge. Also, the triangle in the upper left of the histogram appears gray, indicating a lack of black.

I then adjust the "Contrast" to add more pop to the image. I experiment with both directions to find the sweet spot, ultimately adding just a touch more contrast.

To further enhance detail, I bring down the "Highlights" slider, focusing on the metal areas between the windows in the upper portion of the tower. This adds depth and prevents the highlights from being overblown.

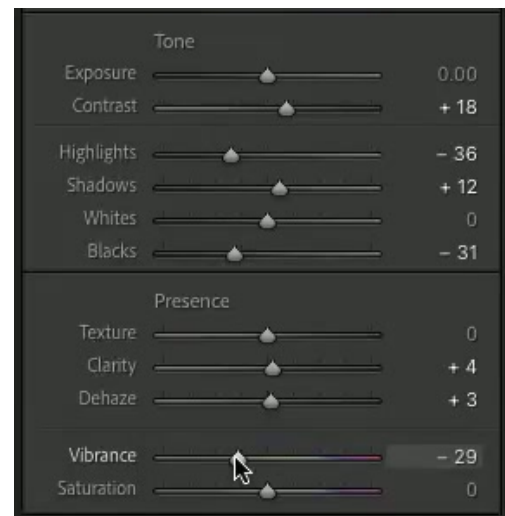
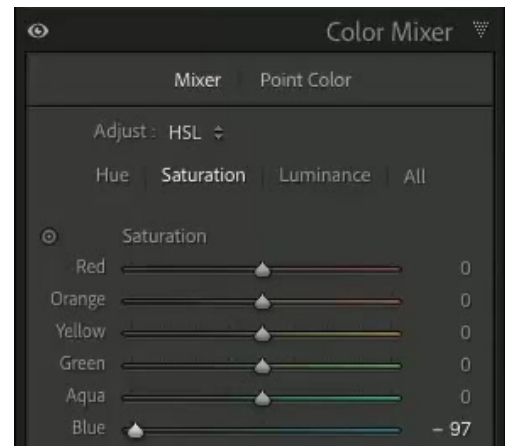
I also bring up the "Shadows" slider slightly to reveal more detail in the darker areas of the image.

Presence Adjustments (06:18)

To refine the overall look, I use the "Presence" controls. I add a tiny bit of "Clarity" to introduce some edge contrast, but not too much, as it can be overdone. Then, I add a touch of "Dehaze" to emphasize the blacks and add depth to the image. Finally, I reduce the "Vibrance" to bring the colors closer to black and white, creating a more subdued and less distracting palette.

Masking the Sky (07:30)

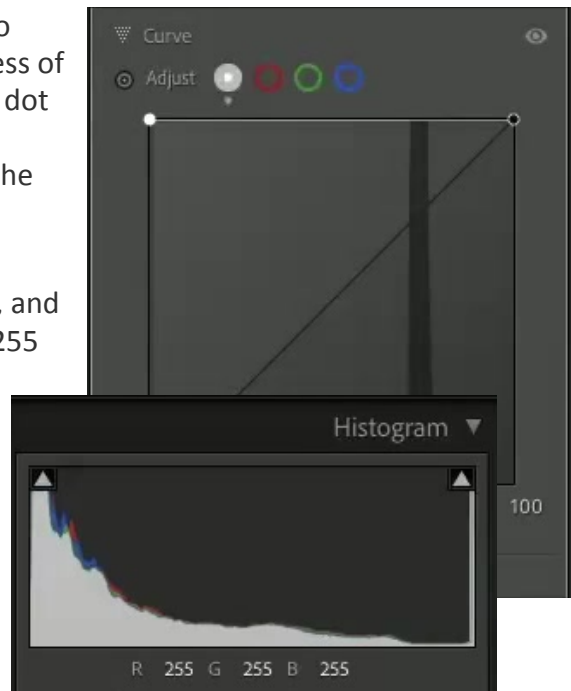
The sky feels too gray, so I want to make it pure white for a high-contrast look. Instead of using the "Whites" slider, which would affect the entire image, I'm going to mask the sky. I select the masking tool and choose "Select Object," then use the brush to paint over the sky, being careful not to overlap the building too much.



Once the sky is masked, I use the "Curves" tool to ensure it becomes and stays pure white, regardless of any other adjustments I make. I drag the bottom dot in the curves panel all the way to the top, which maximizes the light in the masked area, turning the sky white.

I can confirm the sky is white by looking at the histogram, which shows a spike on the right side, and by checking the RGB values, which should be at 255 when hovering over the sky.

To refine the mask, I zoom in to check the edges and use the "Subtract" brush to remove any unwanted brightening from the building's edges.



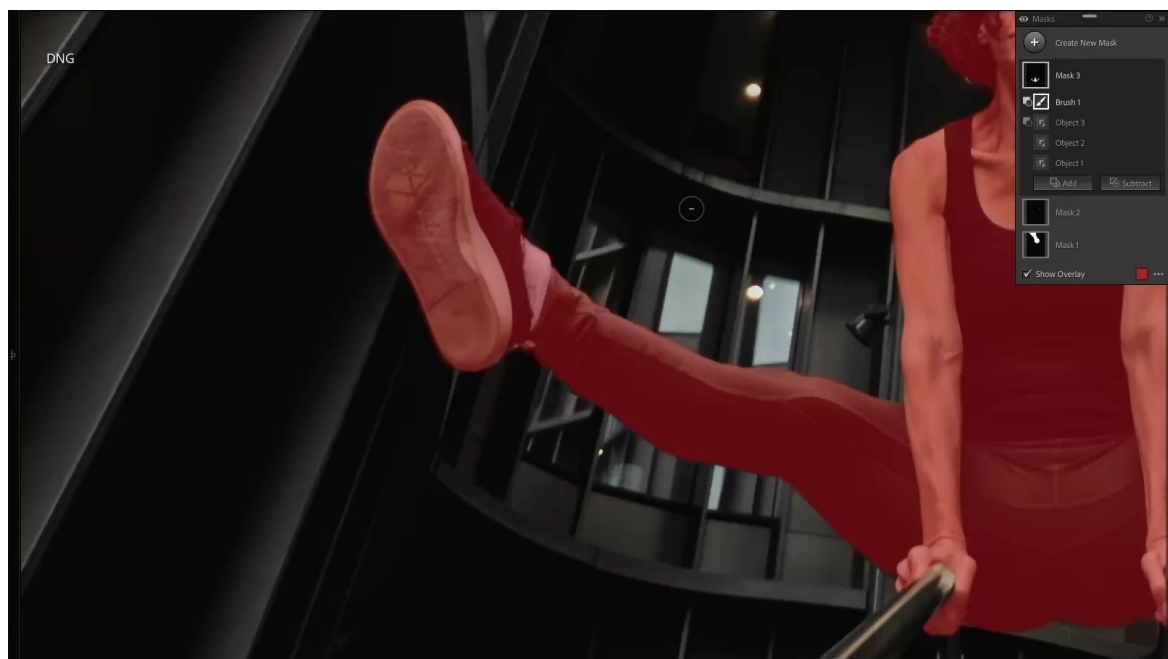
Removing Distractions (11:32)

I find the small tower near the sky to be a distraction, so I'm going to remove it. I zoom in and create a new mask using the brush tool with low feathering. I paint over the tower and then use the "Curves" tool to force those areas to white, effectively making the tower disappear into the sky. I then use the Option key (Alt in Windows) to subtract from the mask and refine the edges, ensuring a clean result.

Enhancing the Subject (13:50)

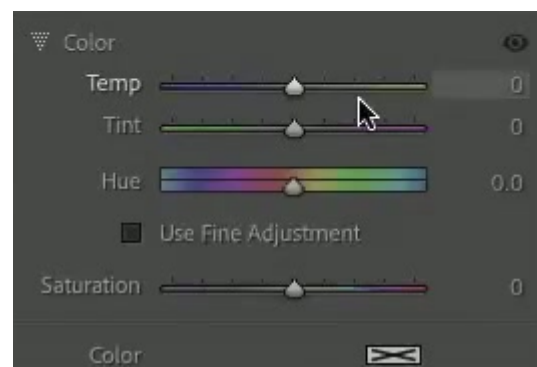
Now it's time to focus on my wife, Karen. I use the "Select Object" tool and carefully paint over her to create a mask.

I zoom in to refine the mask, adding any missing areas and subtracting any unwanted selections, such as parts of the railing. To add to the mask, I select "Add Object" and paint over the missing areas. To subtract, I select "Subtract Objects" and paint over the areas I want to remove from the mask.



To soften her appearance, I apply negative clarity to her mask, reducing contrast and minimizing any harsh details. I also lower the contrast to make the dark and bright areas more similar, creating a softer look. To balance the tones, I lower the highlights to darken her socks and skin, making them more similar to her outfit. Then, I bring up the shadows to reveal more detail in her outfit. Finally, I increase the whites to brighten her overall appearance, making her stand out in the image.

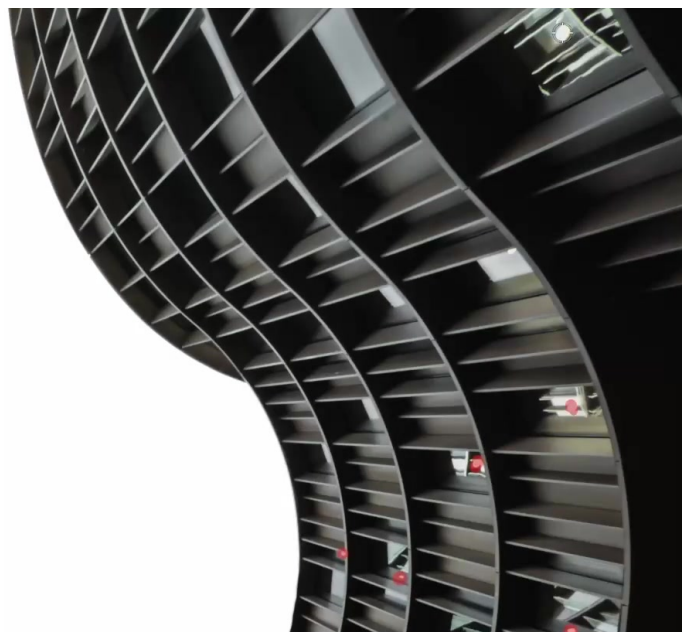
I fine-tune the color balance to ensure she looks natural, experimenting with warmer and cooler tones until I achieve the desired result.



Retouching Distracting Elements (20:40)

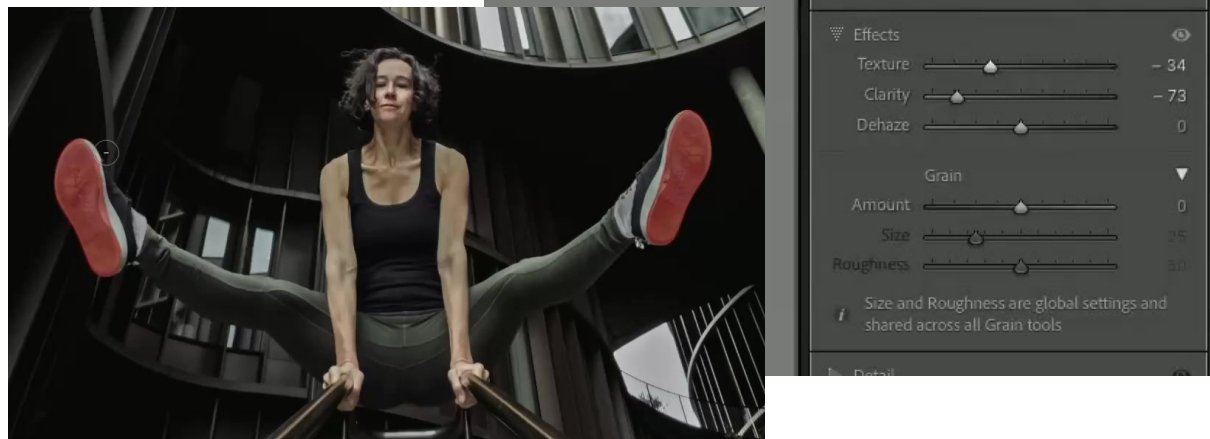
With the main adjustments complete, I now focus on removing any remaining distractions. I use the retouch tool with generative AI to remove elements like the "2K" sign, light bulbs, and other small lights that draw the eye away from Karen. I carefully paint over each distracting element, ensuring I cover the entire object and its glow. After covering all the distractions, I press Enter to let the AI retouch them out.

Since I've made retouching changes, I need to update the masks. I hold down the Shift key and click on the update icon that appears just below the histogram to update the adaptive profile and masking.



Final Adjustments (24:50)

For the final touch, I want to minimize the distraction caused by the bottom of her shoes. I zoom in and use the "Select Object" tool to create a mask around the shoes. To add to the existing mask, I use the Shift+N shortcut to create a new mask and paint over the other shoe. I then desaturate the color in the shoes to reduce their prominence. Finally, I apply negative clarity and texture to soften the details and make them less eye-catching.



Summary

And with that, the image is complete! By following these steps, I've transformed a raw iPhone capture into a polished and engaging photograph with a clear focal point and balanced tones.