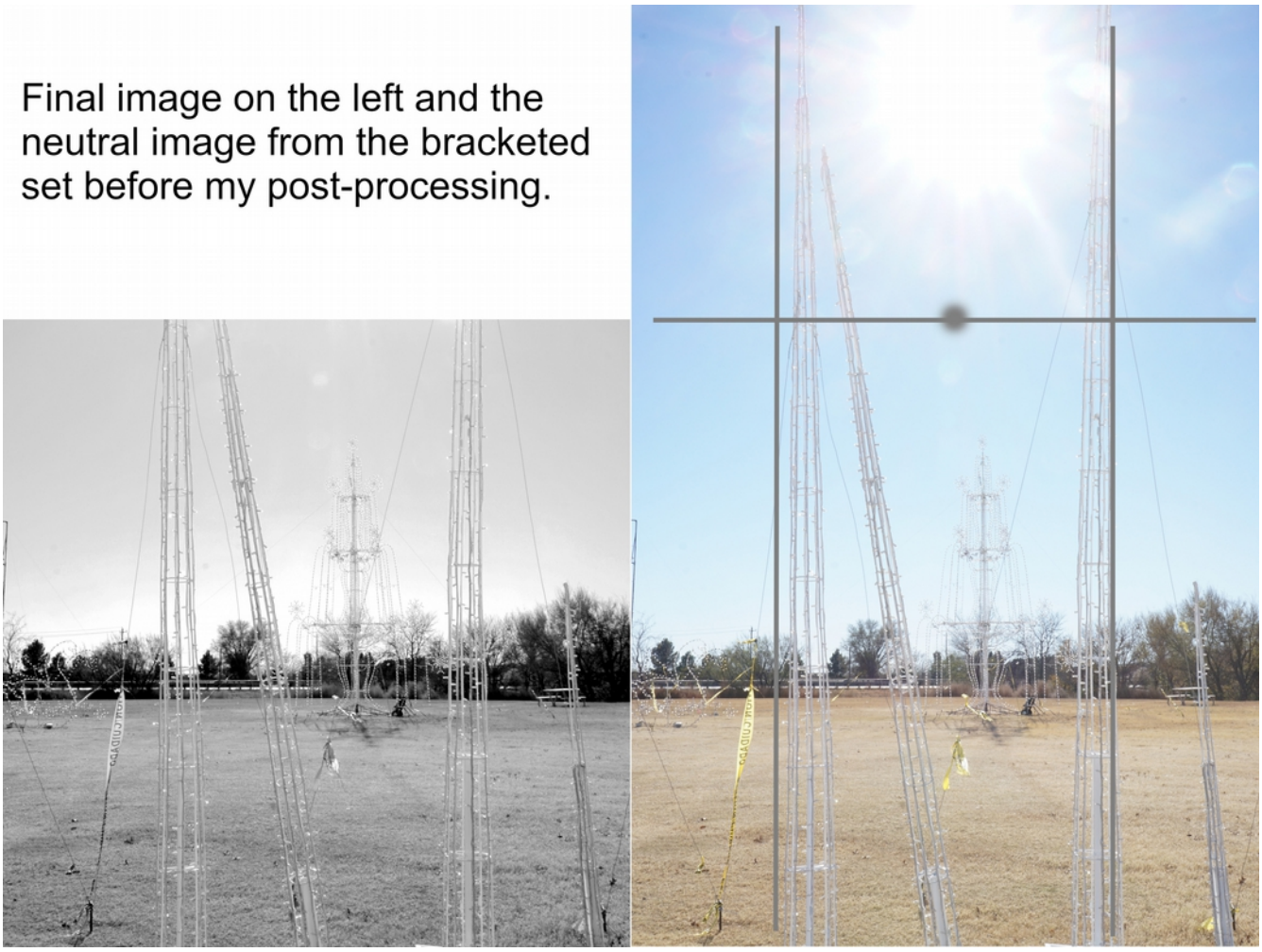
Composing around the hot spots

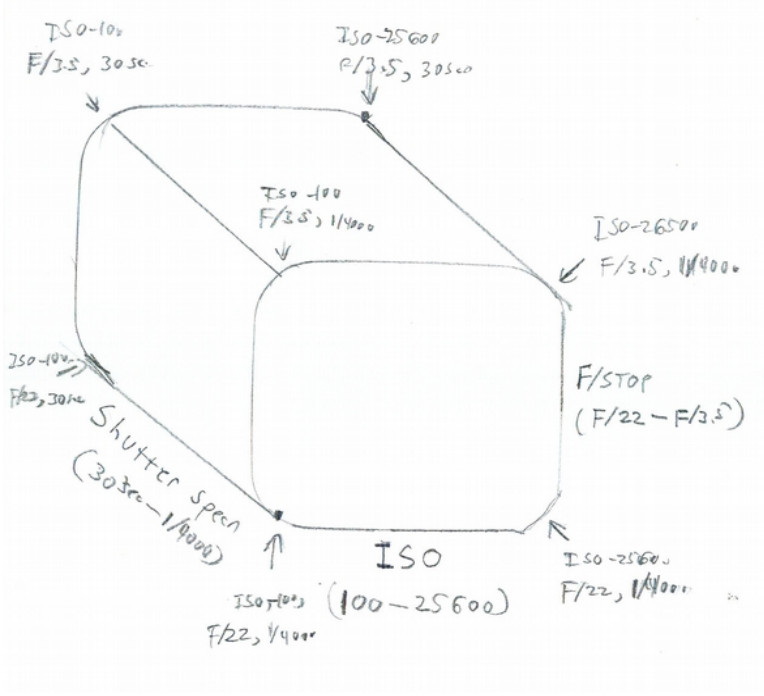
by Malcolm McElvaney



12/15/2021 - Taken on 12/12/2021 in Odessa, TX at the Star Bright Village Christmas display area at 2:27pm. The camera was set at 1/30, F/22, ISO-100 and I did overexpose the image to some degree as my neutral image in the bracketed set. My goal was to capture the light making the bulbs “light” up in sun; therefore, I had to have it back lit and crop out the overblown sun in the top of the image. The final cropped, square presentation was planned infield so I had some planning for the image you see but why did it work out like it did. Having given the required details and settings most photographers would ask about it doesn't tell the whole story.

The image helped me to see a system and what I was working with in a new way, note the grey lines on the original on the right these show how the hot spot (sun and grey dot below) create zones to compose within and areas that may have issues in post processing. In this example I really only could crop since my choice of overexposing made the hot spot worse. The cause wasn't seen but the effect was still very much

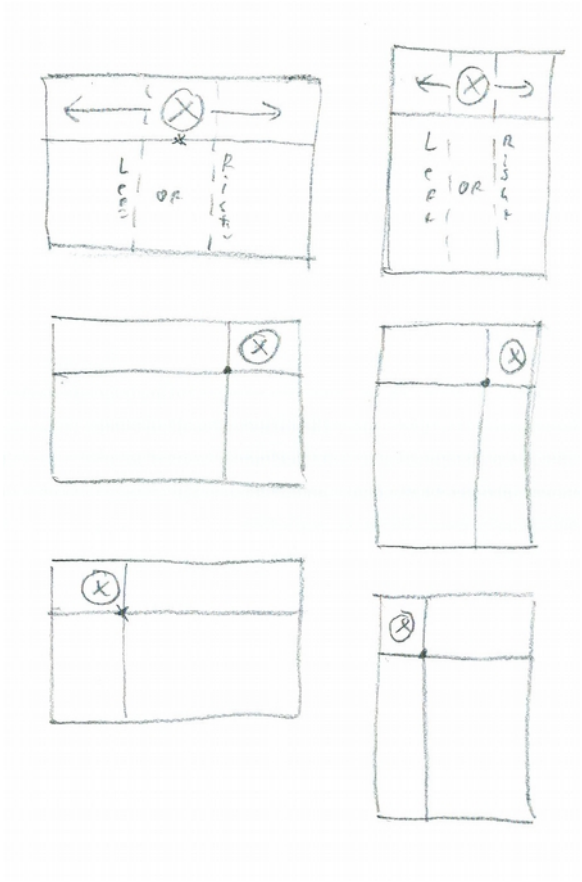
present. The intersection point either to the right or left of this hot spot forms that grid augmenting any composition aids like the rule of thirds grid that may be used. When I cover the system in more detail this will make better sense as illustrated. Before I do I would like to take a detour and tell you why I even approached taking the image the way I did.



You can approach photography from an analytical point of view or maybe a more creative way but a process of learning still occurs as trial and error come into play and more details build on each other and begin to make sense. Add a what if scenario and something interesting can be discovered. One of these discoveries relates to the model of this visual effects "space", the premise is simple there is a dual nature to f/stop, shutter speed, and ISO that isn't just about the exposure control but how visually the image looks too. "1/30, F/22, ISO-100" translates visually to a scene exposed for a total of 1/30th of a second with a maximum depth of field (f/stop) and using the full dynamic range with the cleanest image (ISO-100). This is labeled by the variables I need in the camera but it is the visual effects combined in different ways it represents.

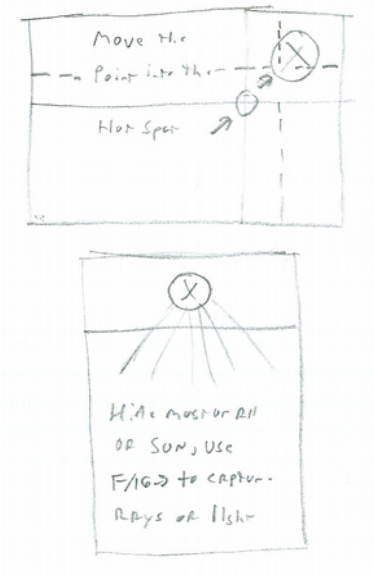
Now for the what if scenario involving the build up to this point. The exact middle of this volume based on my camera is a shot at ISO-1600, F/9, and 1/10th of a second and it is this test done in daylight pointing out my window into a cat cage that yielded an observation that made me think. The cat in that cage came through out of the overblown white of the image as he came back in. Detail can appear to come out of the dark of an underexposed image and so the opposite is also true. A new technique to figure out was the result that day and it is another skill to add to my knowledge base. Now you know why I even approached that example image the way I did.

The “System”



Should I chose to compose an image and back light it causing issues this is at least a strategy to deal with it or maybe it is my only option to get the image at all. As a layer in the decision process for composing the image this area (hot spot) can be beyond the contrast the camera can handle so will be the first thing to consider along with the horizon lines, leading lines and all the other aspects. I'm visually oriented so the illustration should help show where the patterns can occur and what to compose within and areas to not worry about. It is an intersection point forming a grid but also produces lines that on one side could be seen as keep details and the other side discard them, in post processing this can actually be implemented. I can “see” this in my head as I visualize the process I apply in post or use the rule of thirds grid lines as an aid but however you take your photographs hopefully this has been of some help and a starting point.

I have yet to fully test this “system” but I can imagine some ideas to try out should the opportunity present itself. That intersection point can be moved to within the hot spot so providing some context and minimizing it visually. The trick of using a higher f/stop like f/16 and above to create rays of light is another possibility to consider, the source can be as visible as you like. I photograph nature and the sun is my light source I'm alluding to here but is it always up in the sky. The sunset and sunrise gives an opportunity to flip the pattern and focus on the sky only.



12/16/2021 – Some further thoughts on the "system" and with some test I got this example image. Understanding the pattern is one thing but another piece of camera gear is also applicable here, the lens hood. I used a bigger piece of poster board to block the sun from the left and it was visible in the image captured but I cropped it out. A 4x6 note card worked just as well and is more portable to hand hold in place, I found as I moved it into place my histogram altered as well. When the histogram no longer was blown out the hot spot (sun) was covered and with fine tuning the image is definitely improved. The image on the left is without a blocking tool and the one on the right I blocked the light to improve the results. It might seem subtle but compare the included histogram to see for yourself. The other tip I have to share is I found that I could underexpose drastically and that hot spot will clearly show up.

In conclusion every condition has some way to be captured so hopefully seeing a pattern to exploit and figuring out that process is something reading this has inspired. The modified lens hood is one tool I found that worked and maybe even that simple 4x6 card trick will work in general for me.