

Published February 27th, 2013

## Hyper-realistic Photographer Captures Vibrancy of Nature

By Lian Walden



Portofino, Italy Photos David Dondero

For local photographer David Dondero, a weekend in Yosemite is more than a nature retreat. "It's an opportunity to work," said the artist, whose photos are currently on display at the Moraga Art Gallery through March 23 in an exhibit entitled "The Unbearable Lightness of Seeing." The exhibit features Dondero's rich landscape photos alongside his friend and fellow artist Erik Wilson's evocative urban portraits.

Dondero and Wilson are drawn to almost opposite subject matter; the former choosing to photograph California's oak trees against open skies, the latter drawn to spontaneous street scenes. However, they both explore the ephemeral in their work, capturing seemingly transient moments of luminosity in actively changing environments.

An Orinda native, Dondero was invited to join Moraga Art Gallery's collective about a year ago. The current show marks his first exhibit as a feature artist. He began taking photographs seriously about two years ago while on sabbatical from his day job in the health care industry.

He saw an image by Dan Burkholder in a magazine and called the photographer up out of the blue. Burkholder

was in New York at the time and Dondero happened to be traveling there the following week.

After a serendipitous first meeting, Dondero began studying under Burkholder. He attended a workshop led by Burkholder in Santa Fe and became enthralled with an innovative digital technique called High Dynamic Range (HDR) imaging, which allows the photographer to capture a greater range of contrast in a scene.

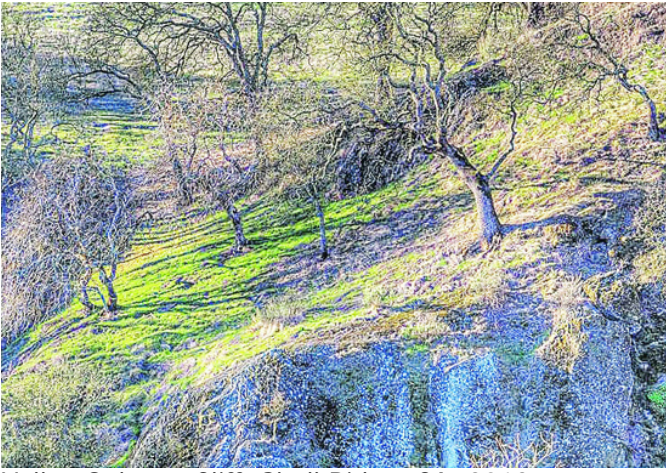
"Photographers are often forced to choose between the foreground and the background, especially when shooting indoors, but with this technique you can depict a bright open window in the background without losing the details in the foreground," explained Dondero. Burkholder utilizes this technique evocatively in his series *Colors of Loss*, which depicts the ravaged interiors of churches, houses, and stores in New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina.

Dondero has appropriated HDR imaging to his own imaginative ends. He refers to his process as his "special sauce." By digitally collating multiple exposures, he is able to blend rich textural detail with layers of vibrant color. The effect is almost fantastical. The photographs feel like they belong in storybook. Each image becomes ever so slightly fictionalized despite its hyper-realistic origin, as though its carbon copy were rendered with pastels. Dondero's photographs therefore have a distinctly painterly quality.

Dondero considers himself series-oriented. He chooses a thematic subject and explores it in depth through his lens. In addition to landscapes, he photographs church interiors, seaplanes, and the Italian coast, where he and his wife often travel to visit family. Similar to Yosemite, Italy is more than a beautiful getaway for Dondero: it's an opportunity to work.



Rainbow, Honopu Trail, Kauai, 2012 Photos Dave Dondero



Valley Oaks on Cliff, Shell Ridge, CA, 2012

Reach the reporter at: [info@lamorindaweekly.com](mailto:info@lamorindaweekly.com)

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