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(54) **IMAGE CAPTURING APPARATUS, IMAGE CAPTURING METHOD, AND COMPUTER-READABLE MEDIUM STORING PROGRAM**

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

An image capturing apparatus for acquiring images having high dynamic range. The image capturing apparatus includes CCD consisting of a first photo detector for detecting light from central area of a subject, a second photo detector for detecting light from marginal area of the subject, a photometry sensor for measuring brightness of the central and the marginal areas of the subject, and a sensitivity control unit for controlling sensitivity of the first photo detector based on the brightness of the central area measured by the photometry sensor and controlling sensitivity of the second photo detector based on the brightness of the marginal area measured by the photometry sensor.

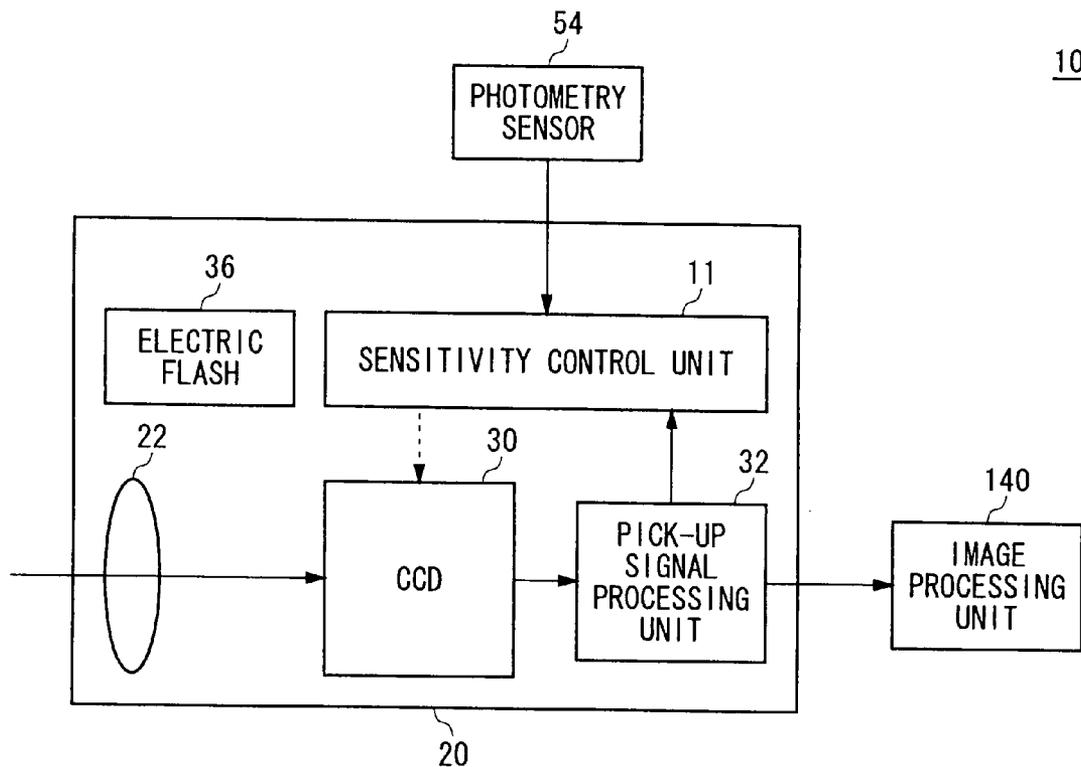
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(62) Division of application No. 10/329,820, filed on Dec. 27, 2002.



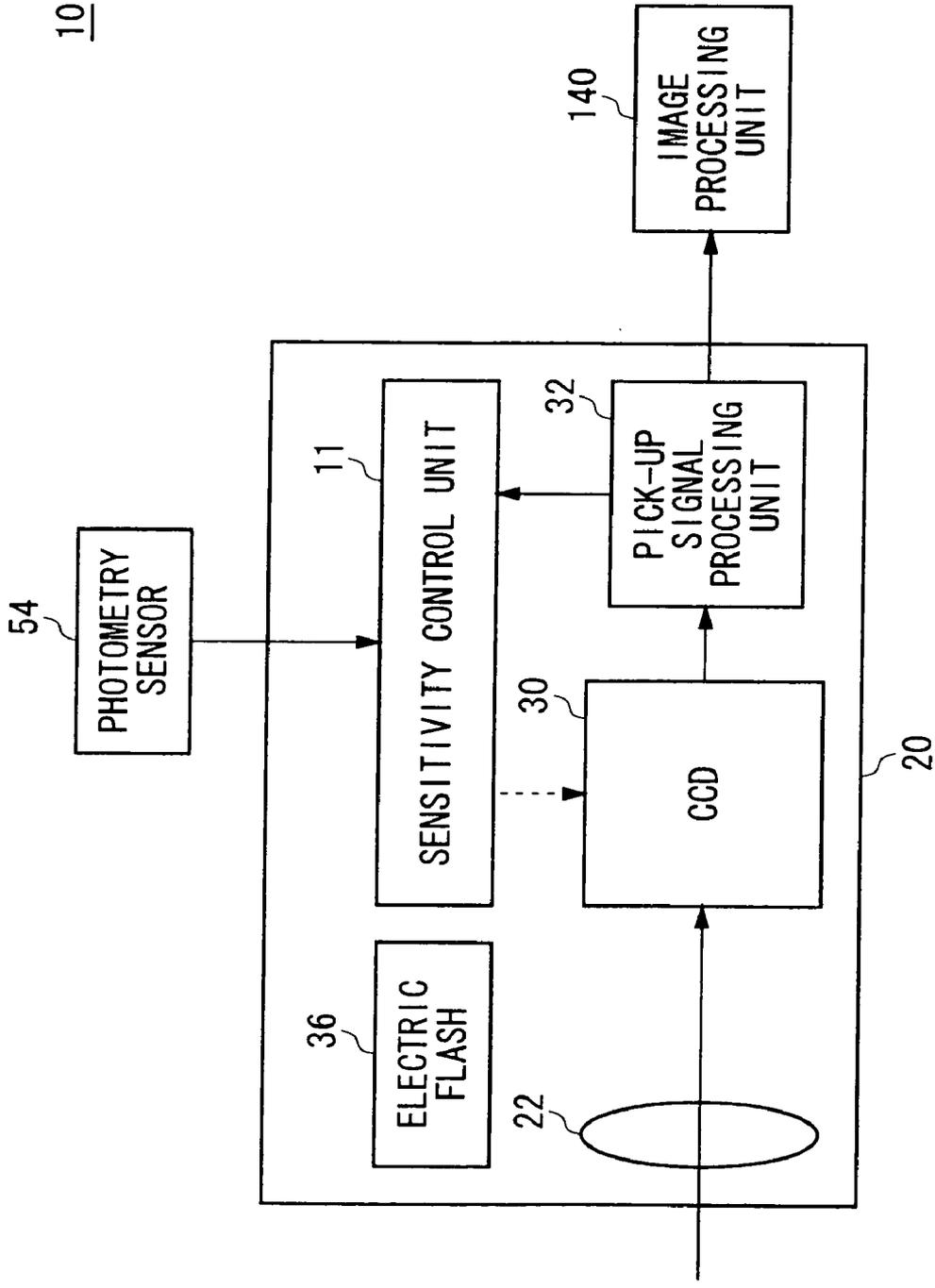


FIG. 1

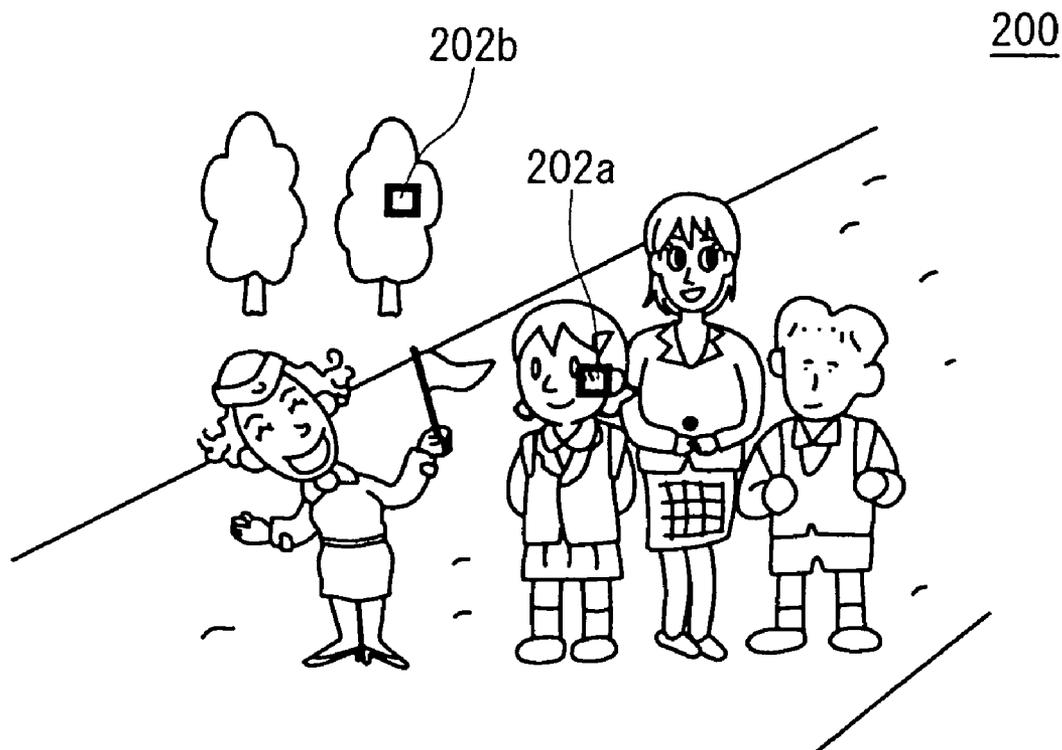


FIG. 2

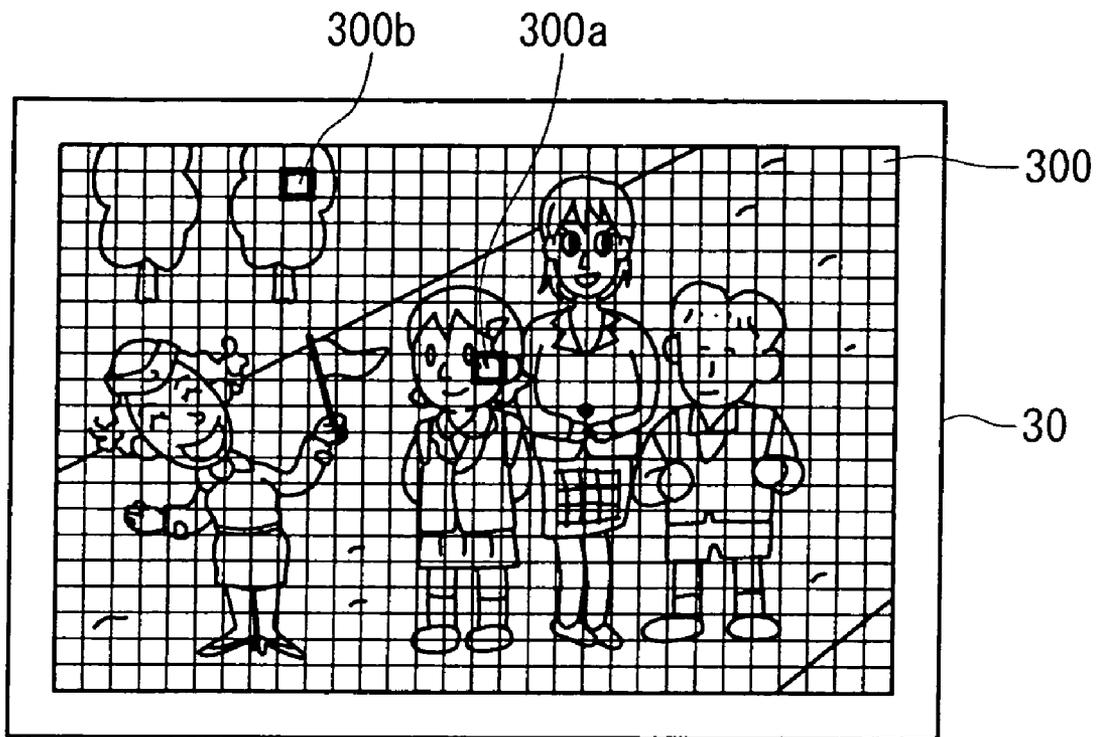


FIG. 3

300

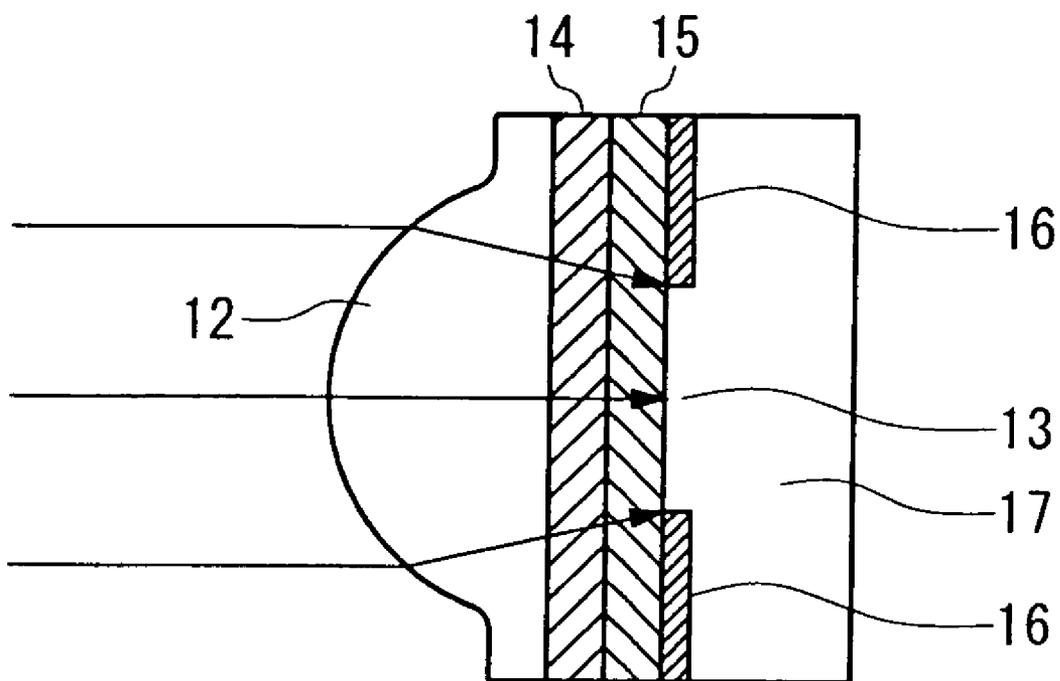


FIG. 4

300

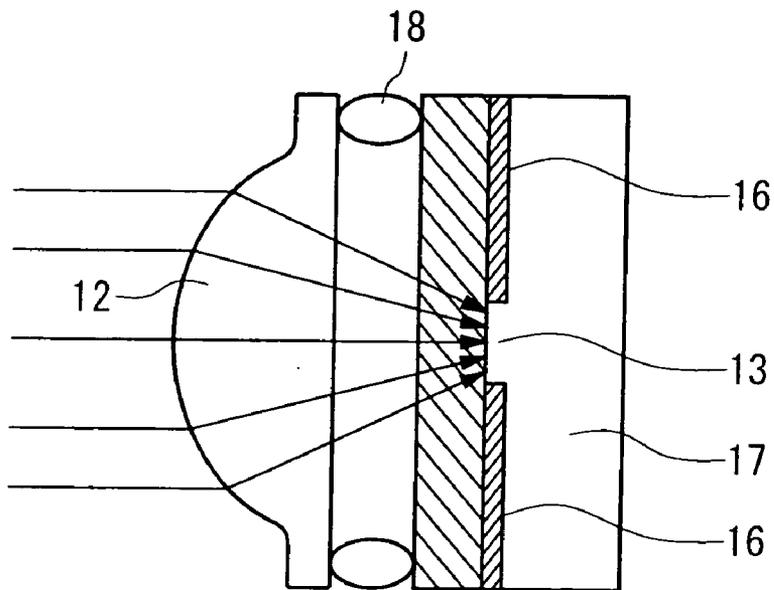


FIG. 5A

300

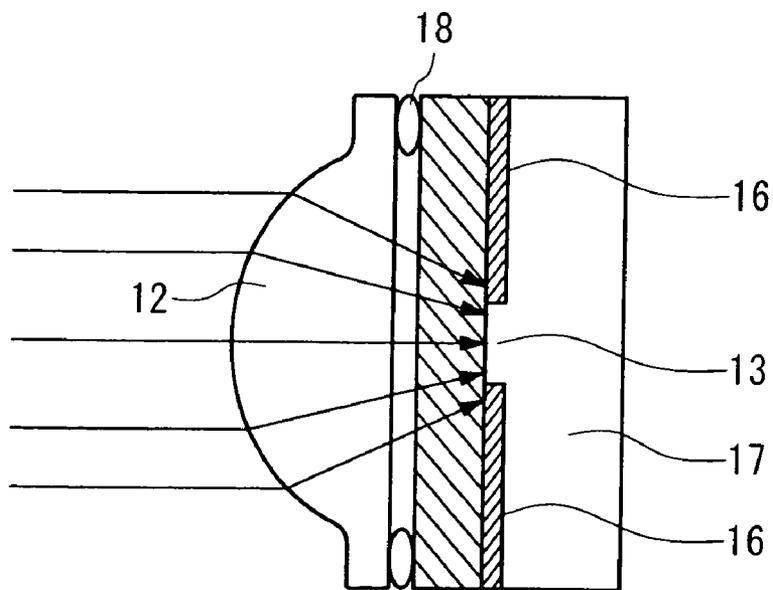


FIG. 5B

300

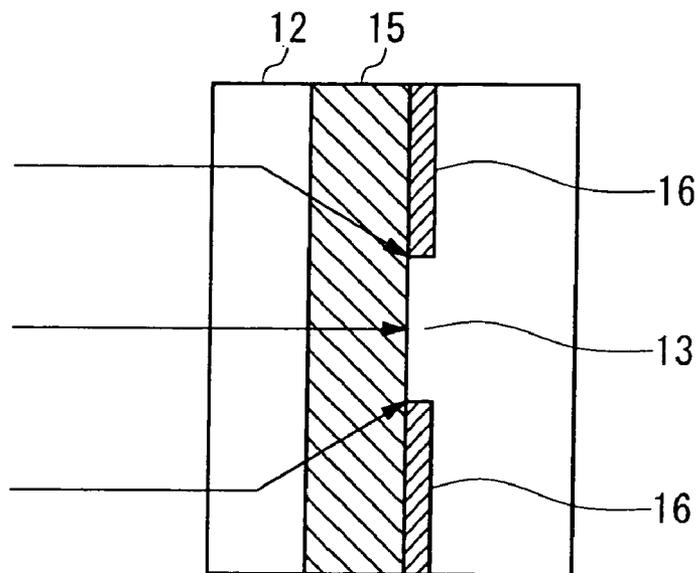


FIG. 6A

300

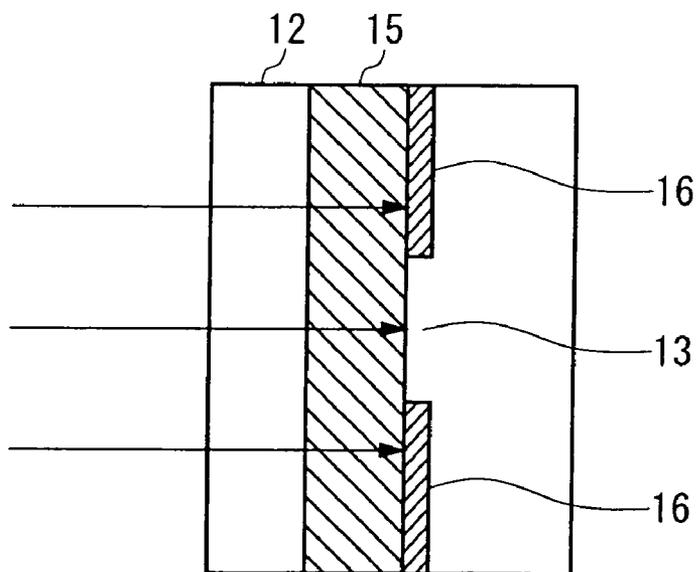


FIG. 6B

230



FIG. 7

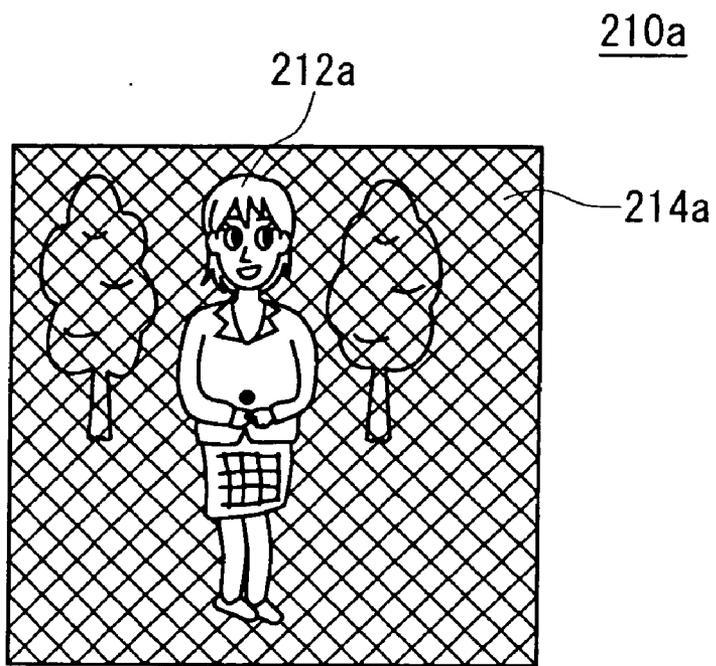


FIG. 8A

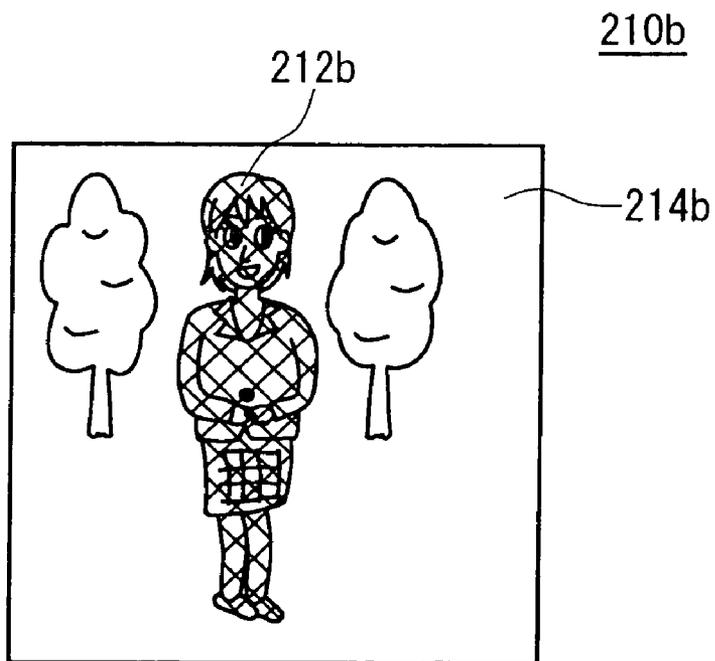


FIG. 8B

212a



FIG. 9A

214b

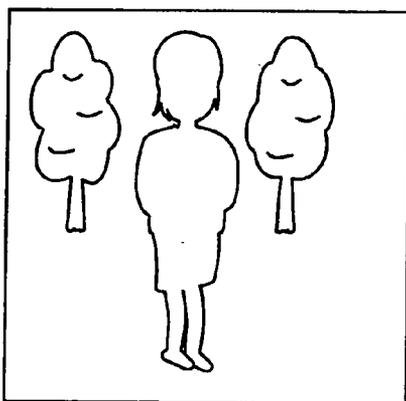


FIG. 9B

220

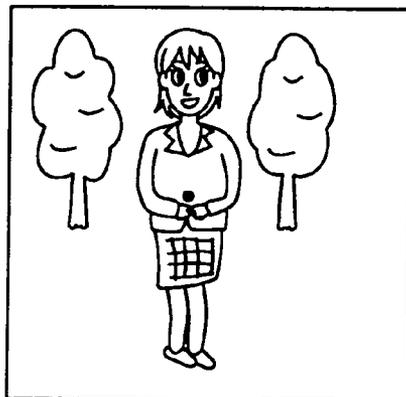


FIG. 9C

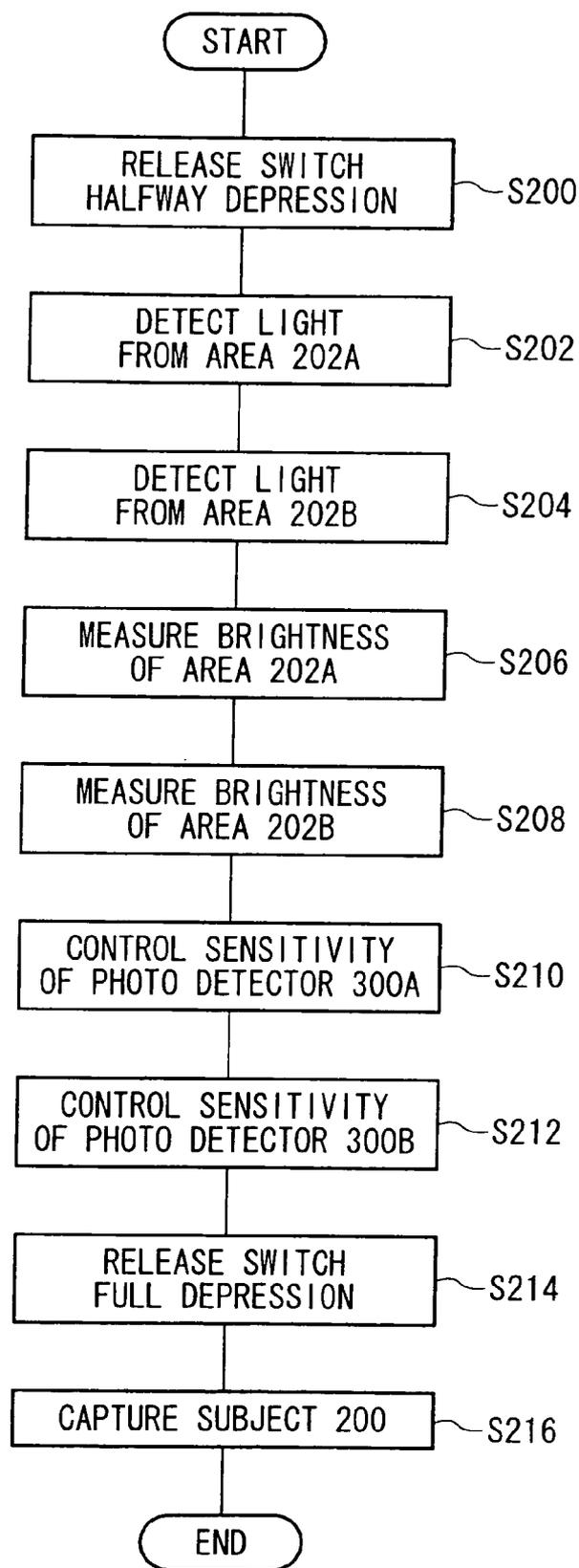


FIG. 10

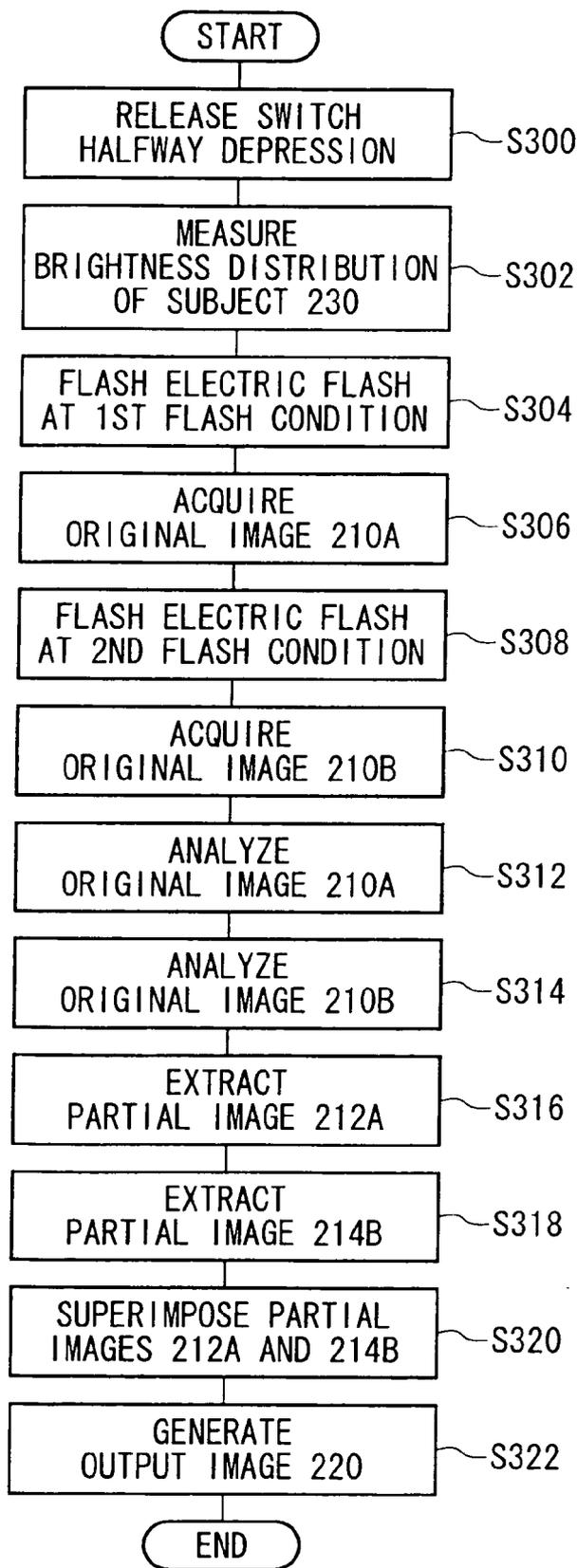


FIG. 11

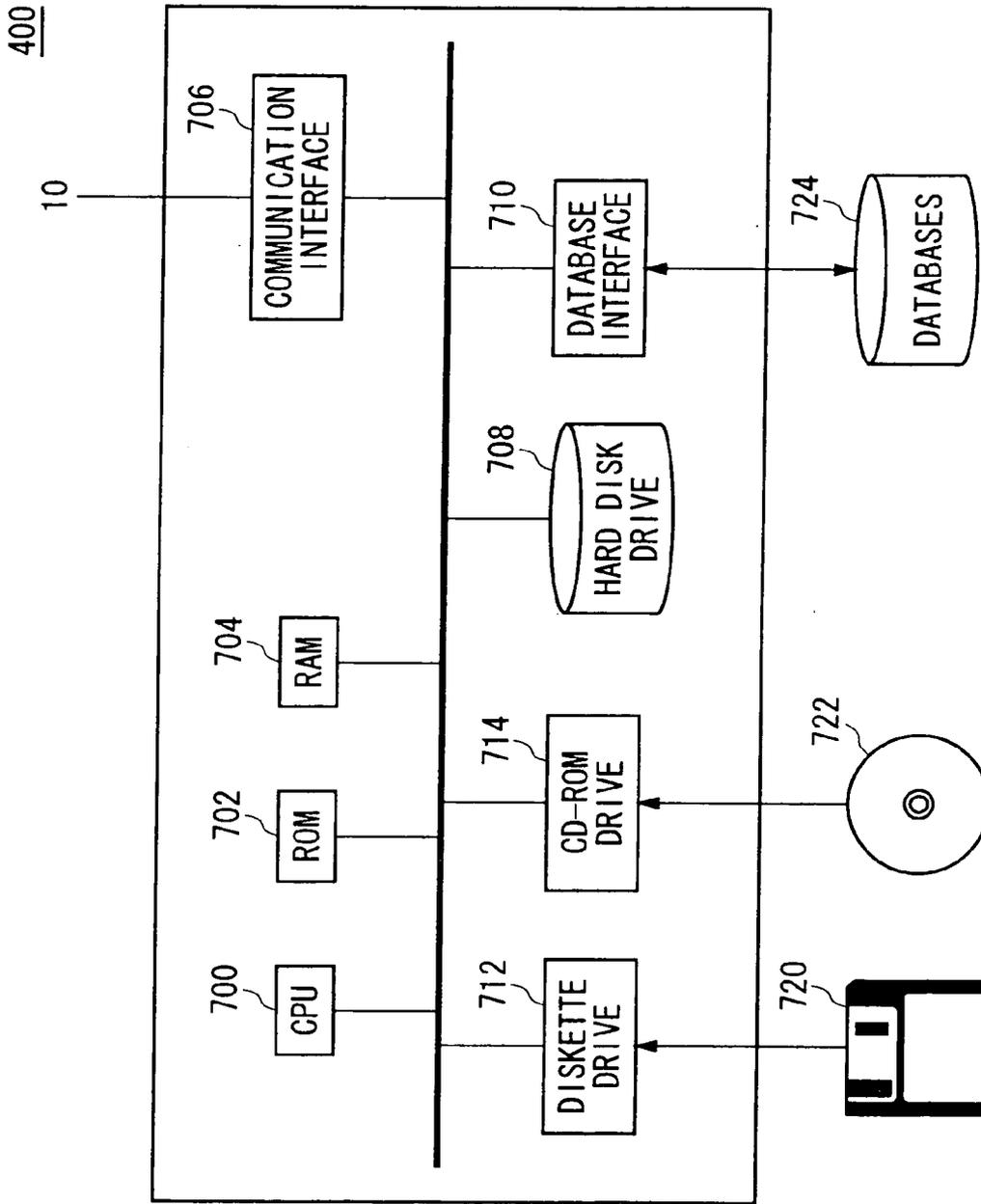


FIG. 12

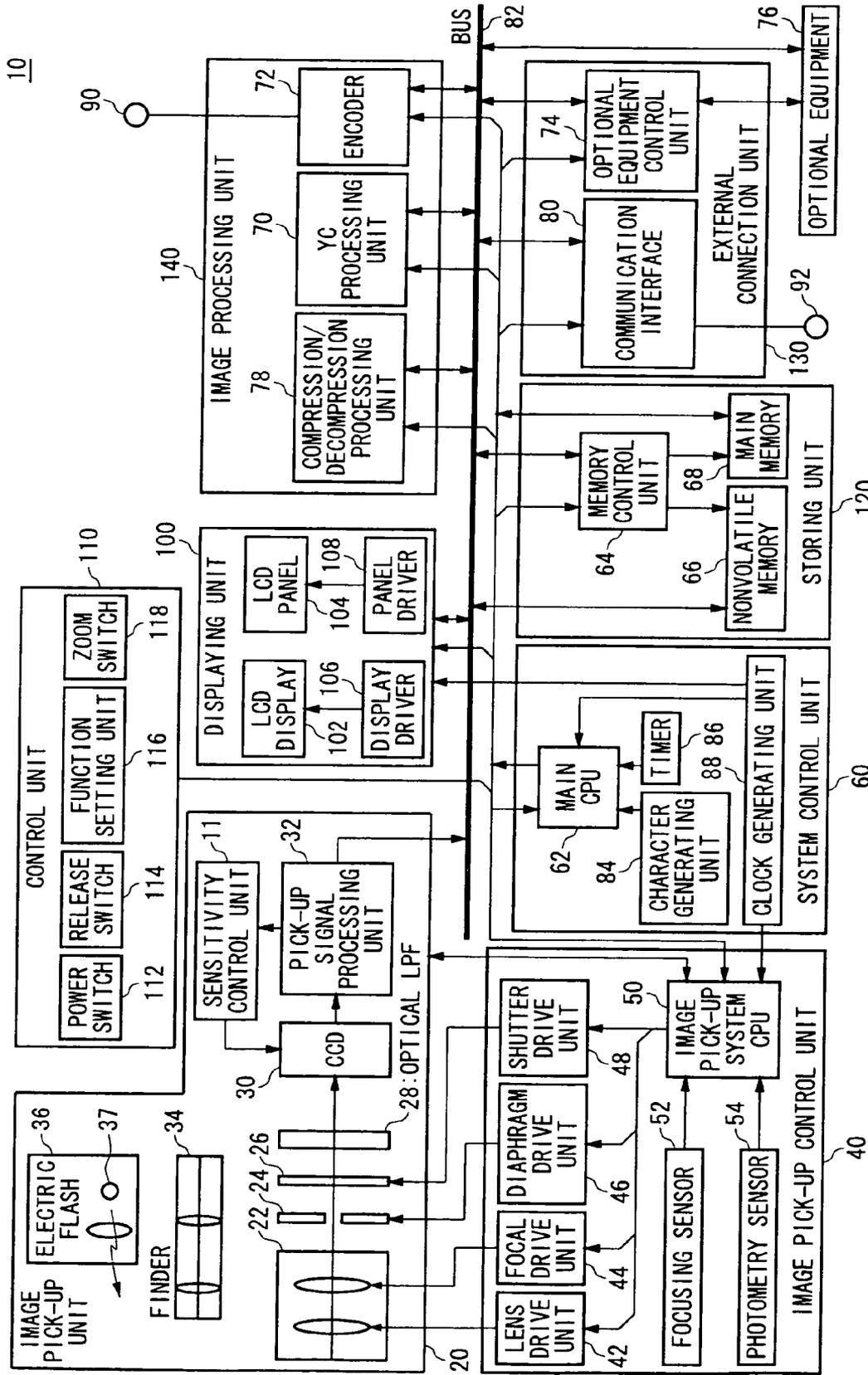


FIG. 13

**IMAGE CAPTURING APPARATUS, IMAGE
CAPTURING METHOD, AND
COMPUTER-READABLE MEDIUM STORING
PROGRAM**

[0001] This patent application is a Divisional Application of application Ser. No. 10/329,820, filed on Dec. 27, 2002, which claims priority from Japanese patent application, 2001-398222 filed on Dec. 27, 2001, the contents of which are incorporated herein by reference.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0002] 1. Field of the Invention

[0003] The present invention relates to an image capturing apparatus, an image capturing method, and a computer-readable medium storing program. More particularly, the present invention relates to an image capturing apparatus which obtains images having high dynamic range.

[0004] 2. Description of Related Art

[0005] Image capturing apparatuses, such as digital cameras and video cameras, obtain an image by converting an optical image of a subject into an electrical signal by image sensing devices, such as CCD and MOS. However, the dynamic range of these image sensing devices is remarkably lower than dynamic range that exists in real life. Consequently, a conventional image capturing apparatus adjusts optical information of a main subject within the dynamic range of the image sensing devices to obtain an image using an optical stop, an electronic shutter and the like. For this reason, when a subject includes an area having high dynamic range, there has been a problem that the conventional image capturing apparatus can obtain only images that ranges from a predetermined brightness to a predetermined darkness.

[0006] A Japanese patent application publication No. 11-32242 discloses an image capturing apparatus which generates images with high dynamic range by compounding signals acquired by a plurality of CCDs having different sensitivity. Also, a Japanese patent application publication No. 5-260391 discloses an image capturing apparatus, where the image capturing apparatus is adapted to increase the amount of charges by reading charge pattern accumulated in CCD for multiple times so that the dynamic range of the image is expanded.

[0007] However, since the image capturing apparatus disclosed in the Japanese patent application publication No. 11-32242 requires optics, such as a plurality of CCDs and a beam splitter, large-size and high-cost of the apparatus cannot be avoided. Moreover, in the image capturing apparatus disclosed in the Japanese patent application publication No. 5-260391, although the amount of charge transfer from the CCD can be increased, the dynamic range cannot be expanded unless increase of the amount of charge storages is accomplished.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0008] Therefore, it is an object of the present invention to provide an image capturing apparatus, an image capturing method, and a computer-readable medium storing program which can solve the foregoing problem. The above and other subjects can be achieved by combinations described in the

independent claims. The dependent claims define further advantageous and exemplary combinations of the present invention.

[0009] According to the first aspect of the present invention, there is provided an image capturing apparatus for capturing a subject. The image capturing apparatus includes an image sensing device including a first photo detector for detecting light of a first area of the subject, and a second photo detector for detecting light of a second area of the subject; a brightness measuring unit for measuring brightness of the first area, and brightness of the second area; and a sensitivity control unit for controlling sensitivity of the first photo detector based on the brightness of the first area measured by the brightness measuring unit, and controlling sensitivity of the second photo detector based on the brightness of the second area measured by the brightness measuring unit.

[0010] The first photo detector may include a first micro lens for condensing light and a first exposure unit for detecting the light condensed by the first micro lens. The second photo detector may include a second micro lens for condensing light and a second exposure unit for detecting the light condensed by the second micro lens. The sensitivity control unit may control relative position between the first micro lens and the first exposure unit based on the brightness of the first area measured by the brightness measuring unit, and may control relative position between the second micro lens and the second exposure unit based on the brightness of the second area measured by the brightness measuring unit.

[0011] The sensitivity control unit may control focal length of the first micro lens based on the brightness of the first area measured by the brightness measuring unit, and may control focal length of the second micro lens based on the brightness of the second area measured by the brightness measuring unit.

[0012] According to the second aspect of the present invention, there is provided an image capturing apparatus for capturing a subject. The image capturing apparatus includes an image sensing device including a first photo detector for detecting light from a first area in the subject, and converting the light having first intensity into an electrical signal having first intensity; and a second photo detector for detecting light from a second area in the subject, which is different from the first area, and converting the light having second intensity into an electrical signal having second intensity, the light being not converted by the first photo detector, where the first and the second photo detectors are positioned on the same semiconductor substrate.

[0013] The image sensing device may include a plurality of the first photo detectors adjoining mutually, and a plurality of the second photo detectors adjoining mutually, which are located outside of the plurality of first photo detectors in an exposure area of the image sensing device.

[0014] The first photo detector may include a first exposure unit and a first micro lens, where a proportion of light irradiated on the first exposure unit to light irradiated on the first photo detector is defined as a first proportion, and the second photo detector may include a second exposure unit and a second micro lens, where a proportion of light irradiated on the second exposure unit to light irradiated on the second photo detector is defined as a second proportion.

[0015] A relative position between the first exposure unit and the first micro lens may be different from a relative position between the second exposure unit and the second micro lens. A focal length of the first micro lens may be different from a focal length of the second micro lens.

[0016] According to the third aspect of the present invention, there is provided an image capturing apparatus for capturing a subject. The image capturing apparatus includes an electric flash; an image pick-up unit for capturing a first image of the subject using the electric flash flashing at a first flash condition, and for capturing a second image of the subject using the electric flash flashing at a second flash condition; and an image generation unit for generating a third image based on the first image and the second image.

[0017] The image generation unit may generate the third image by trimming and extracting a first partial image, which is a part of the first image indicating a first area of the subject, and a second partial image, which is a part of the second image indicating a second area of the subject, and superimposing the first partial image and the second partial image. The first flash condition may be a condition for suppressing flash of the electric flash, and the second flash condition may be a condition for forcing flash of the electric flash.

[0018] According to the fourth aspect of the present invention, there is provided an image capturing method for capturing a subject. The image capturing method includes steps of detecting light of a first area of the subject by a first photo detector; detecting light of a second area of the subject by a second photo detector; measuring brightness of the first area, and brightness of the second area; and controlling sensitivity of the first photo detector based on the brightness of the first area measured in the brightness measuring step, and controlling sensitivity of the second photo detector based on the brightness of the second area measured in the brightness measuring step.

[0019] According to the fifth aspect of the present invention, there is provided an image capturing method for capturing a subject. The image capturing method includes steps of capturing a first image of the subject using an electric flash flashing at a first flash condition; capturing a second image of the subject using the electric flash flashing at a second flash condition; and generating a third image based on the first image and the second image.

[0020] According to the sixth aspect of the present invention, there is provided a computer readable medium storing thereon a program for an image capturing apparatus which captures a subject. The program includes a brightness measuring module for allowing the image capturing apparatus to measure brightness of a first area and brightness of a second area; and a sensitivity control module for allowing the image capturing apparatus to control sensitivity of a first photo detector for detecting light from the first area based on the brightness of the first area measured by the brightness measuring module, and to control sensitivity of a second photo detector for detecting light from the second area based on the brightness of the second area measured by the brightness measuring module.

[0021] According to the seventh aspect of the present invention, there is provided a computer readable medium storing thereon a program for an image capturing apparatus

which captures a subject. The program includes an image pick-up module for allowing the image capturing apparatus to capture a first image of the subject using an electric flash flashing at a first flash condition, and to capture a second image of the subject using the electric flash flashing at a second flash condition; and an image generation module for allowing the image capturing apparatus to generate a third image based on the first image and the second image.

[0022] The summary of the invention does not necessarily describe all necessary features of the present invention. The present invention may also be a sub-combination of the features described above.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0023] FIG. 1 is a block diagram showing a functional configuration of a digital camera according to an embodiment of the present invention.

[0024] FIG. 2 shows a subject according to the present embodiment.

[0025] FIG. 3 is an optical image of the subject according to the present embodiment being focused on CCD.

[0026] FIG. 4 is a sectional view of an image sensing device according to the present embodiment.

[0027] FIGS. 5A and 5B are other examples of the image sensing device according to the present embodiment, showing an actuator is actuating a micro lens.

[0028] FIGS. 6A and 6B are other examples of the image sensing device according to the present embodiment, showing that a focus of the micro lens is being changed.

[0029] FIG. 7 shows the subject captured by the digital camera according to the present embodiment.

[0030] FIGS. 8A and 8B show images of the subject in various flash condition captured by the digital camera according to the present embodiment.

[0031] FIGS. 9A, 9B and 9C show trimmed images and a superimposed image.

[0032] FIG. 10 is a flowchart showing an example of operation of the digital camera according to the present embodiment.

[0033] FIG. 11 is a flow chart showing another example of operation of the digital camera according to the present embodiment.

[0034] FIG. 12 is a block diagram showing an example of a hardware configuration of a personal computer according to the present embodiment.

[0035] FIG. 13 is a block diagram showing an example of a detailed configuration of the digital camera according to the present embodiment.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0036] The invention will now be described based on the preferred embodiments, which do not intend to limit the scope of the present invention, but exemplify the invention. All of the features and the combinations thereof described in the embodiment are not necessarily essential to the invention.

[0037] FIG. 1 is a block diagram showing a functional configuration of a digital camera 10 according to an embodiment of the present invention. The digital camera 10 is an example of the image capturing apparatus of the present invention. The image capturing apparatus may be a digital still camera which photographs a still image, and may be a digital camcorder which takes movies. The digital camera 10 includes a photometry sensor 54 which is an example of a brightness measuring unit for measuring brightness of an area included in a subject, an image pick-up unit 20 for capturing a subject and acquiring image pick-up data, and an image processing unit 140 for performing image processing on the image pick-up data acquired by the image pick-up unit 20. The image pick-up unit 20 includes an electric flash 36, the taking-lens unit 22 for condensing an optical image of a subject, CCD 30 which is an example of an image sensing device for converting the optical image condensed by the taking-lens unit 22 into an image pick-up signal, a pick-up signal processing unit 32 for processing the image pick-up signal converted by the CCD 30, and a sensitivity control unit 11 for controlling sensitivity of photo detectors which detect light of the above-mentioned area, among photo detectors included in the CCD 30. The image processing unit 140 may have a function as an image generation unit for generating an image based on a plurality of images processed by the pick-up signal processing unit 32. Also, the pick-up signal processing unit 32 may be an example of the brightness measuring unit for measuring brightness of the area included in the subject.

[0038] When the digital camera 10 captures a subject, the pick-up signal processing unit 32 or the photometry sensor 54 measures brightness of the subject at first by detecting an electrical signal outputted by photoelectric conversion of photo diode. The sensitivity control unit 11 controls sensitivity of the CCD 30 based on the brightness of the subject measured by the pick-up signal processing unit 32 or the photometry sensor 54. Next, the electric flash 36 flashes based on the brightness of the subject measured by the pick-up signal processing unit 32 or the photometry sensor 54. Then, the CCD 30 converts the optical image, focused by the taking-lens unit 22, into the electrical signal, and outputs the electrical signal. The pick-up signal processing unit 32 performs A/D conversion of the electrical signal outputted from the CCD 30, and outputs the obtained digital image data. The image processing unit 140 generates an output image by performing image processing on the image data outputted from the pick-up signal processing unit 32 based on predetermined conditions.

[0039] FIG. 2 shows an example of a subject 200 according to the present embodiment. FIG. 3 is an optical image of the subject 200, which is condensed by the taking-lens unit 22 and focused on exposure area of the CCD 30. The subject 200 includes an area 202a and an area 202b. The CCD 30 includes a plurality of photo detectors 300 arranged at equal intervals. The photo detectors 300 include a photo detector 300a for detecting light from the area 202a of the subject 200, and a photo detector 300b for detecting light from the area 200b of the subject 200. When the digital camera 10 captures the subject 200, the pick-up signal processing unit 32 or the photometry sensor 54 measures brightness of the area 202a and the area 202b. In this case, the pick-up signal processing unit 32 or the photometry sensor 54 may measure the brightness of the area 202a or the area 202b for multiple times at different sensitivity. Accordingly, even when the

difference between the brightness of the area 202a and the area 202b exceeds the dynamic range of the pick-up signal processing unit 32 or the photometry sensor 54, since appropriate sensitivity is selected for measurement of the brightness of the area 202a and the brightness of the area 202b separately, brightness of the whole subject can be measured appropriately.

[0040] Next, the sensitivity control unit 11 controls the sensitivity of the photo detector 300a based on the brightness of the area 202a measured by the pick-up signal processing unit 32 or the photometry sensor 54. The sensitivity control unit 11 also controls the sensitivity of the photo detector 300b based on the brightness of the area 202b measured by the pick-up signal processing unit 32 or the photometry sensor 54. For example, when sunlight reaches the area 202a and does not reach area 202b, the difference between the brightness of the bright area 202a and the dark area 202b tends to exceed the dynamic range of the photo detector 300a and the photo detector 300b. Then, the sensitivity control unit 11 decreases sensitivity of the photo detector 300a to a certain level so that the photo detector 300a can detect the intensity of light of the bright area 202a appropriately. Also, the sensitivity control unit 11 increases sensitivity of the photo detector 300b to a certain level so that the photo detector 300b can detect the intensity of light of the dark area 202b appropriately.

[0041] The CCD 30 captures the subject 200 with the sensitivity control unit 11 controlling the sensitivity of the photo detector 300a and the photo detector 300b independently. Therefore, even when the difference between brightness of the bright area 202a and the dark area 202b is large, the photo detectors 300a and 300b, of which the sensitivities are optimized respectively, can detect brightness of the area 202a and the area 202b appropriately within dynamic range of each of the photo detector, and can convert it into an electrical signal.

[0042] In addition, the pick-up signal processing unit 32 acquires the sensitivity level of the photo detector 300a and the photo detector 300b, being controlled by the sensitivity control unit 11, and the electrical signals outputted from the photo detector 300a and the photo detector 300b in association with the sensitivity of the photo detectors respectively. Then, the pick-up signal processing unit 32 amplifies or attenuates the electrical signals outputted from the photo detector 300a and the photo detector 300b based on the sensitivity level of the photo detector 300a and the photo detector 300b being controlled by the sensitivity control unit 11. For example, when the sensitivity control unit 11 decreases the sensitivity of the photo detector 300a to $1/100$, the pick-up signal processing unit 32 amplifies the electrical signal outputted from the photo detector 300a 100 times. Alternatively, when the sensitivity control unit 11 increases the sensitivity of the photo detector 300b 50 times, the electrical signal outputted from the photo detector 300b is attenuated to $1/50$. Then the image processing unit 140 generates an output image by composing the signals amplified and/or attenuated by the pick-up signal processing unit 32.

[0043] According to the digital camera 10, even if the dynamic range of the subject 200 is higher than dynamic range of the photo detectors 300, an optical image of the subject 200 is acquirable as a charge pattern within the

dynamic range of the photo detectors **300** by controlling sensitivity of the plurality of photo detectors **300** independently for every areas. In addition, by amplifying or attenuating the electrical signal outputted from each of the photo detectors **300** independently according to the sensitivity level controlled by the sensitivity control unit **11**, the output image, having higher dynamic range than that of the photo detectors **300**, is obtainable.

[0044] According to another example of the CCD **30** of the present embodiment, the CCD **30** may include a photo detector **300a** for detecting light from the area **202a** and converting it into an electrical signal at a predetermined sensitivity, and a photo detector **300b** for detecting light from the area **202b** and converting it into an electrical signal, the light not being convertible into an electrical signal by the photo detector **300a**. Specifically, the CCD **30** includes a plurality of photo detectors **300a**, having relatively low sensitivity, which adjoin mutually at a central part in an exposure area of the CCD **30**. Then the CCD **300** further includes a plurality of photo detectors **300b**, having higher sensitivity than the photo detectors **300a**, which adjoin mutually and are located outside of the photo detectors **300a** in the exposure area of the CCD **30**.

[0045] In order to set the sensitivity of the photo detector **300b** higher than that of the photo detector **300a**, the photo detector **300a** has a micro lens which is adapted so that light irradiated on the photo detector **300a** is condensed by an exposure unit of the photo detector **300a** at a predetermined rate, and the photo detector **300b** has a micro lens which is adapted so that light irradiated on the photo detector **300b** is condensed by an exposure unit of photo detector **300b** at a rate higher than the photo detector **300a**. In other words, condensing efficiency of the micro lens of the photo detector **300b** is higher than condensing efficiency of the micro lens of the photo detector **300a**. Specifically, relative position between the micro lens and the exposure unit of the photo detector **300a** is set differently from that of the photo detector **300b** so that optical efficiency of the photo detector **300b** becomes higher than the optical efficiency of the photo detector **300a**.

[0046] According to another means for setting the sensitivity of the photo detector **300b** higher than the sensitivity of the photo detector **300a**, focal length of the micro lens of the photo detector **300a** is set differently from focal length of the micro lens of the photo detector **300b** so that optical efficiency of the photo detector **300b** becomes higher than the optical efficiency of the photo detector **300a**. Specifically, shape of the micro lens and/or refractive indexes of material of the micro lens of the photo detector **300a** may be different from those of the photo detector **300b**.

[0047] According to the digital camera **10** of this example, since the sensitivity of the photo detector **300a**, which captures the central part of the screen, is kept low even if the subject **200** is captured using the electric flash **36** with a main subject at the central part of the screen being located relatively at a short distance from the photo detector, over-exposure of the main subject is preventable. In addition, since the photo detector **300b** with high sensitivity captures a subject located in a marginal part of the screen and at a long distance from the photo detector, where flashlight of the electric flash does not reach easily, the photo detector **300b** captures the subject at proper exposure.

[0048] FIG. 4 is an example of a cross section of the photo detector **300** according to the present embodiment. The photo detector **300** includes the semiconductor **17** including a photo diode for converting light into a charge, a shielding layer **16** which consists of aluminum etc., an exposure unit **13** formed from an opening of the shielding layer **16**, a micro lens **12** for condensing light, a liquid crystal filter **14** for controlling permeability of the light condensed by the micro lens **12**, and a color filter **15**. The micro lens **12** has a peculiar focal length determined by a refractive index of material and a shape of the lens.

[0049] The micro lens **12** included in the plurality of photo detectors **300** further condenses an optical image once condensed by the taking-lens unit **22**. The exposure unit **13** detects the light condensed by the micro lens **12**. Then, the semiconductor **17** accumulates charges according to intensity and duration of the light detected by the exposure unit **13**. The semiconductor **17** outputs the accumulated charges with predetermined timing. A means, by which the sensitivity control unit **11** controls sensitivity of the photo detector **300**, may be the liquid crystal filter **14**, or may be an electronic shutter for controlling duration of charge accumulation into the semiconductor **17**. The sensitivity of each of the plurality of photo detectors **300** is controllable independently by either the liquid crystal filter **14** or the electronic shutter.

[0050] FIGS. 5A and 5B show another example of a cross section of the photo detector **300** according to the present embodiment. The photo detector **300** includes an actuator **18** for changing a relative position between the micro lens **12** and the exposure unit **13**. FIG. 5A shows a state that the micro lens **12** is condensing incident light into the exposure unit **13** efficiently. FIG. 5B shows a state that the actuator **18** contracts the distance between the micro lens **12** and the exposure unit **13**. If the actuator **18** is to change the position of the micro lens **12** from the position for condensing the incident light into the exposure unit **13** most efficiently as shown in FIG. 5A, to the position shown in FIG. 5B, the intensity of the light irradiated on the exposure unit **13** will decrease. Therefore, the sensitivity control unit **11** can change optical efficiency of the light utilized by the photo detector **300** by actuating the actuator **18** to change the relative position between the micro lens **12** and the exposure unit **13**. That is, the sensitivity control unit **11** can control the sensitivity of the photo detector **300** by controlling the relative position between the micro lens **12** and the exposure unit **13** included in the photo detector **300**.

[0051] FIGS. 6A and 6B show another example of a cross section of the photo detector **300** according to the present embodiment. The photo detector **300** includes a variable focus lens, such as a liquid crystal lens, as the micro lens **12**, and each of the plurality of photo detectors **300** can change focus of the micro lens **12** independently. FIG. 6A shows the state that the micro lens **12** condenses incident light on the exposure unit **13** efficiently. Moreover, FIG. 6B shows the state that refractive index of the micro lens **12** is changed. The refractive index of the micro lens **12** is changed according to voltage applied to the micro lens **12**, and rate of incident light condensed on the exposure unit **13** is changed consequently. Therefore, by controlling the voltage applied to the micro lens **12**, the sensitivity control unit **11** can control the focal length of the micro lens **12**, and can change optical efficiency of the light utilized by the photo detector

300. Thus, the sensitivity control unit **11** can control the sensitivity of the photo detector **300**.

[0052] FIG. 7 is an example of a subject **230** captured by another examples of the digital camera **10** according to the present embodiment. The subject **230** includes an area **232** where subjects are located at a relatively short distance, such as a person, and an area **234** where subjects are located in a relatively long distance, such as a background. When the digital camera **10** of this example captures the subject **230**, the electric flash **36** determines a plurality of flash conditions having different intensity of the flash, based on distribution of brightness of the subject **230** measured by the pick-up signal processing unit **32** or the photometry sensor **54**.

[0053] Moreover, the electric flash **36** may determine a plurality of flash conditions based on distance of the subject **230**. For example, when the subject **230** includes the area **232**, where a bright subject is located at a relatively short distance, the flash condition is set so as not to flash or flash weakly. Alternatively, when the subject **230** further includes the area **234**, where a dark subject is located at a relatively long distance, the flash condition is set additionally so as to flash maximally. Then the electric flash **36** flashes in accordance with the plurality of set-up flash conditions, and the CCD **30**, which is a part of the image pick-up unit **20**, captures each of the images of the subject **230** at each of the plurality of flash conditions respectively.

[0054] FIGS. 8A and 8B show images in which the image pick-up unit **20** captures the subject **230** in accordance with the plurality of flash conditions of the electric flash **36**. FIG. 8A is an original image **210a** captured in condition where the electric flash **36** does not flash or flashes weakly. FIG. 8B is an original image **210b** captured in condition where the electric flash **36** flashes maximally. When capturing the original image **210a**, since the electric flash **36** flashes weakly to optimize the brightness of the area **232** where a subject is located at a relatively short distance, a partial image **212a** is captured at optimal exposure. However, intensity of the electric flash **36** for optimizing the brightness of the area **232** cannot fully reach the area **234** where a dark subject is located at a relatively long distance. Therefore, a partial image **214a** of the area **234** becomes underexposure.

[0055] On the other hand, when capturing the original image **210b**, the electric flash **36** flashes at the maximum intensity to reach the area **234** where the dark subject is located at a relatively long distance. Accordingly, a partial image **214b** of the area **234** is captured at optimal exposure. However, intensity of the electric flash **36** for optimizing the brightness of the area **234** is too bright for the area **232** where the subject is located at a relatively short distance. Therefore, the partial image **212b** of the area **232** becomes overexposure. Then, the image processing unit **140**, which is an example of an image generation unit, generates the output image having proper exposure over the whole image from the original image **210a** and the original image **210b** as follows.

[0056] FIGS. 9A, 9B, and 9C show an example of the image processing unit **140** according to the present embodiment for trimming and extracting partial images from the original image **210a** and original image **210b** and superimposing them. FIG. 9A shows the partial image **212a** trimmed and extracted by the image processing unit **140** from the original image **210a**, where the area **232** of the subject **230**

is captured at optimal exposure level. FIG. 9B shows the partial image **214b** trimmed and extracted by the image processing unit **140** from the original image **210b**, where the area **234** of the subject **230** is captured at optimal exposure level. FIG. 9C shows an output image **220** generated by the image processing unit **140** superimposing the partial image **212a** and the partial image **214b**. According to the digital camera **10** of this example, since the output image **220** is generated by superimposing the partial image **212a** and the partial image **214b**, which are captured at optimal exposure, the whole image having optimal exposure can be obtained.

[0057] FIG. 10 is an example of a flow chart showing an operation of capturing a subject by the digital camera **10** according to the present embodiment. After the subject **200** is framed, a user depresses a release switch halfway (S200). The photo detector **300a** detects light from the area **202a** in accordance with the halfway depression of the release switch (S202). Then, the photo detector **300b** detects light from the area **202b** (S204). The pick-up signal processing unit **32** measures brightness of the area **202a** based on an electrical signal outputted from the photo detector **300a** (S206). The pick-up signal processing unit **32** measures brightness of the area **202b** based on an electrical signal outputted from the photo detector **300b** (S208). The sensitivity control unit **11** controls sensitivity of the photo detector **300a** based on the brightness of the area **202a** measured by the pick-up signal processing unit **32** (S210). The sensitivity control unit **11** controls the sensitivity of the photo detector **300b** based on the brightness of the area **202b** measured by the pick-up signal processing unit **32** (S212). After the control of the sensitivity of the photo detectors is finished, the digital camera **10** may notify the user about the completion of the control by means of such as sound and light. After the control of the sensitivity of the photo detectors is finished, the user further depresses the release switch fully from the half-depressed position (S214). The image pick-up unit **20** captures a subject **200** in accordance with the full-depression of the release switch (S216). The sequential function flow is ended hereinbefore.

[0058] FIG. 11 is another example of a flow chart showing an operation of capturing a subject by the digital camera **10** according to the present embodiment. After the subject **230** is framed, a user depresses a release switch halfway (S300). The photometry sensor **54** measures distribution of brightness of the subject **230** in accordance with the halfway depression of the release switch (S302). Next, the electric flash **36** flashes at a first flash condition suitable for reaching the area **232** based on the distribution of the brightness measured by the photometry sensor **54** (S304). The image pick-up unit **20** captures the subject **230** almost simultaneously with the flash of the electric flash **36**, and acquires the original image **210a** (S306). Next, the electric flash **36** flashes at a second flash conditions suitable for reaching the area **234** based on the distribution of the brightness measured by the photometry sensor **54** (S308). The image pick-up unit **20** captures the subject **230** almost simultaneously with the flash of the electric flash **36**, and acquires the original image **210b** (S310). Next, the image processing unit **140** analyzes exposure level of whole area of the original image **210a** (S312). The image processing unit **140** analyzes exposure level of whole area of the original image **210b** (S314). The image processing unit **140** trims and extracts the partial image **212a**, where the area **232** is captured at optimal exposure level, from the original image

210a based on the result of the analysis in **S312** (**S316**). Then the image processing unit **140** trims and extracts the partial image **214b**, where the area **234** is captured at optimal exposure level, from the original image **210b** based on the result of the analysis in **S314** (**S318**). Next, the image processing unit **140** superimposes the partial image **212a** and the partial image **214b** (**S320**), and generates the output image **220** (**S322**). The sequential function flow is ended hereinbefore.

[**0059**] FIG. 12 is a block diagram showing a hardware configuration of the personal computer **400** according to the present embodiment. The personal computer **400** includes CPU **700**, ROM **702**, RAM **704**, a communication interface **706**, a hard disk drive **708**, a database interface **710**, a diskette drive **712**, and a CD-ROM drive **714**. The CPU **700** operates based on a program stored in the ROM **702** and the RAM **704**. The communication interface **706** communicates with the digital camera **10** through network. The database interface **710** writes data in a database, and updates the contents of the database. The hard disk drive **708**, as an example of a storage device, stores setting information and program executed in the CPU **700**.

[**0060**] The diskette drive **712** reads data or a program from a diskette **720**, and provides the data or the program to the CPU **700** and the communication interface **706**. The CD-ROM drive **714** reads data or a program from CD-ROM **722**, and provides the data or the program to the CPU **700** and the communication interface **706**. The communication interface **706** transmits the data or the program provided by the diskette drive **712** or the CD-ROM drive **714** to the digital camera **10**. The database interface **710** connects with various databases **724**, and transmits and receives data to/from the databases **724**.

[**0061**] The program, which is executed by the CPU **700** and supplied to the digital camera, is stored in a record medium such as the diskette **720** or the CD-ROM **722** and provided to a user. The program stored in the record medium may be either compressed or decompressed. The program executed by the CPU **700** is installed from the record medium to the hard disk drive **708**, read by the RAM **704**, and executed by the CPU **700**. The program supplied to the digital camera is read from the record medium, installed in the digital camera **10** through the communication interface **706**, and executed in the digital camera **10**.

[**0062**] The program in the record medium, which is installed in the digital camera **10**, includes a brightness measuring module, a sensitivity control module, an image pick-up module, and an image generation module as a functional configuration. Since the function of the modules, by which the digital camera **10** is manipulated, is the same as the operation of the corresponding component in the digital camera **10** of the present embodiment, explanation of the function of the modules is omitted.

[**0063**] A part or all functions of the operation of the digital camera **10** in all embodiments explained in this patent application are storable in the diskette **720** or the CD-ROM **722**, which are examples of the record media depicted in FIG. 12.

[**0064**] These programs may be read by the RAM from the record medium and be executed, or may be executed after the programs are installed in the RAM. The programs may

be stored either on a single record medium or a plurality of record media. The programs may be stored in an encoded form.

[**0065**] It is possible to use an optical record medium such as DVD or PD, a magneto-optical record medium such as Minidisk, a tape medium, a magnetic record medium or a semiconductor memory such as an IC card or a Miniature Card as a record medium instead of the diskette or the CD-ROM. A storage device, such as a hard disk or RAM in a server system on a dedicated communication network or the Internet, may be used as a record medium and the program may be provided to the digital camera **10** via the communication network.

[**0066**] FIG. 13 is a block diagram showing an example of a configuration of the digital camera **10** according to the present embodiment. The digital camera **10** includes the image pick-up unit **20**, an image pick-up control unit **40**, a system control unit **60**, a displaying unit **100**, a control unit **110**, the storing unit **120**, an external connection unit **130** and the image processing unit **140**.

[**0067**] The image pick-up unit **20** includes a taking-lens unit **22**, a diaphragm **24**, a shutter **26**, optical LPF **28** (low pass filter), the CCD **30** (charge-coupled device), the pick-up signal processing unit **32**, a finder **34**, and the electric flash **36**.

[**0068**] The taking-lens unit **22** takes and processes a subject image. The taking-lens unit **22** includes a focal lens, a zoom lens, etc., and forms the image of the subject onto surface of the CCD **30**. The diaphragm **24** limits the light which passes the taking-lens unit **22**, and the optical LPF **28** passes light having longer wavelength component than a predetermined wavelength. Each of the photo detectors **300** included in the CCD **30** stores charge according to quantity of light of the formed subject image (the charge is referred to as "stored charge" hereinafter).

[**0069**] The shutter **26** is a mechanical shutter and controls whether to form the image of the light onto the CCD **30**, the light passing the taking-lens unit **22**. The digital camera **10** may include an electronic shutter function instead of the mechanical shutter **26**. In order to realize the electronic shutter function, each of the photo detectors **300** of the CCD **30** has a shutter gate and a shutter drain. The stored charge is discharged to the shutter drain by turning on the shutter gate. Duration of storing the charge to each of the photo detectors **300**, i.e., shutter speed, is controllable by controlling the shutter gate. In the CCD **30**, the stored charge is read by a shift register by applying a readout gate pulse, and is read sequentially as a voltage signal by applying the register transfer pulse.

[**0070**] The pick-up signal processing unit **32** separates the voltage signal indicating the subject image outputted from the CCD **30**, i.e., an analog signal, into R, G, and B components. The pick-up signal processing unit **32** adjusts white balance of the subject image by adjusting R, G, and B components. The pick-up signal processing unit **32** performs gamma correction of the subject image. The pick-up signal processing unit **32** converts the analog signal, which is separated into R, G, and B components, to a digital signal, and image data of the digital signal of the subject image (referred to as "digital image data" hereinafter), obtained by the A/D conversion, is outputted to the system control unit **60**.

[0071] The finder **34** may have a displaying means and may display various information from below-mentioned main CPU **62**, etc. The electric flash **36** includes a discharge tube **37**, which discharges energy stored in a capacitor, and when the energy is supplied to the discharge tube **37**, the electric flash **36** functions by the discharge tube **37** emitting light.

[0072] The image pick-up control unit **40** includes a lens drive unit **42**, a focal drive unit **44**, a diaphragm drive unit **46**, a shutter drive unit **48**, an image pick-up system CPU **50** which controls the drive units above, a focusing sensor **52**, and the photometry sensor **54**. The lens drive unit **42**, the focal drive unit **44**, the diaphragm drive unit **46**, and the shutter drive unit **48** include driving means, such as a stepping motor, and drive mechanical components in the image pick-up unit **20**. According to depression of a below-mentioned release switch **114**, the focusing sensor **52** measures distance to the subject, and the photometry sensor **54** measures brightness of the subject. The focusing sensor **52** and the photometry sensor **54** supply focusing data and photometry data to the image pick-up system CPU **50**, where the focusing data means the data of the measured distance to the subject, and the photometry data means the data of the measured brightness of the subject.

[0073] The image pick-up system CPU **50** controls the lens drive unit **42** and the focal drive unit **44**, and adjusts a zoom magnification and a focus of the taking-lens **22** based on photography information, such as a zoom magnification directed by a user. Alternatively, the image pick-up system CPU **50** may control the lens drive unit **42** and the focal drive unit **44**, and may adjust a zoom magnification and a focus based on the focusing data received from the focusing sensor **52**.

[0074] The image pick-up system CPU **50** determines stop and shutter speed based on the photometry data received from the photometry sensor **54**. The diaphragm drive unit **46** and the shutter drive unit **48** control the aperture size of the diaphragm **24**, and the opening and closing of the shutter **26** in accordance with the determined value.

[0075] The image pick-up system CPU **50** controls light emission of the electric flash **36** based on the photometry data received from the photometry sensor **54**, and adjusts the aperture size of the diaphragm **26** simultaneously. When the user instructs to take an image, the CCD **30** starts to store the charge and outputs the stored charge to the pick-up signal processing unit **32** after the shutter time calculated from the photometry data is elapsed.

[0076] The system control unit **60** includes main CPU **62**, a character generating unit **84**, a timer **86**, and a clock generating unit **88**. The main CPU **62** controls whole parts of the digital camera **10**, especially the system control unit **60**. The main CPU **62** sends and receives required information to/from the image pick-up systems CPU **50** by serial communication or the like.

[0077] The clock generating unit **88** generates an internal clock of the main CPU **62**, and supplies it to the main CPU **62**. The clock generating unit **88** also generates internal clocks of the image pick-up system CPU **50** and the displaying unit **100**. The clock generating unit **88** may supply the clocks having different frequencies to the main CPU **62**, the image pick-up system CPU **50**, and the displaying unit **100**, respectively.

[0078] The character generating unit **84** generates text and graphic information, which is superimposed onto the captured image, such as date/time or a title of the image. A timer **86** has backing of battery etc., counts time always, and supplies time information, such as information about the captured date/time of the captured image, to the main CPU **62** based on the counted value. It is preferable that the power is supplied to the timer **86** from the battery so as to count time even when main power supply of the digital camera is switched off. It is also preferable that the character generating unit **84** and the timer **86** are annexed to the main CPU **62**.

[0079] The storing unit **120** includes a memory control unit **64**, nonvolatile memory **66**, and main memory **68**. The memory control unit **64** controls the nonvolatile memory **66** and the main memory **68**. The nonvolatile memory **66** is composed of EEPROM (electrically erasable programmable read only memory) or flash memories etc., and stores it with data which is to be held even when the power supply of the digital camera **10** is switched off, such as setting information set by a user or a factory preset value. The nonvolatile memory **66** may store a boot program, a system program, etc. of the main CPU **62**.

[0080] It is preferable that the main memory **68** is composed of memory which is relatively inexpensive and has large capacity, like DRAM. The main memory **68** has a function as frame memory to store the data outputted from the image pick-up unit **20**, a function as system memory which loads various programs, and a function as a work area. The nonvolatile memory **66** and the main memory **68** communicate with each part inside/outside the system control unit **60** through a bus **82**. The nonvolatile memory **66** may further store the digital image data.

[0081] The image processing unit **140** includes an YC processing unit **70**, an encoder **72**, and a compression/decompression processing unit **78**. The external connection unit **130** includes an optional equipment control unit **74** and a communication interface **80**.

[0082] The YC processing unit **70** performs YC conversion to the digital image data, and generates a luminance signal Y, a color difference signals B-Y and R-Y. The main memory **68** stores the luminance signal and the color difference signals based on control of the memory control unit **64**.

[0083] The compression/decompression processing unit **78** reads the luminance signal and the color difference signals sequentially from the main memory **68**, and compresses them. Then the optional equipment control unit **74** writes the compressed digital image data (referred to as "compressed data") in a memory card which is an example of the optional equipment **76**.

[0084] The encoder **72** converts the luminance signal and the color difference signals into a video signal (such as NTSC or PAL signal), and outputs the video signal from a terminal **90**. When generating the video signal from the compressed data recorded on the optional equipment **76**, the compressed data is supplied to the compression/decompression processing unit **78** at first through the optional equipment control unit **74**. Then, the data is decompressed in the compression/decompression processing unit **78** and the encoder **72** converts the decompressed data into the video signal.

[0085] The optional equipment control unit 74 performs generation, logical conversion, and/or voltage conversion of the signal that flows between the bus 82 and the optional equipment 76, in order to conform the signal to the specification of the optional equipment 76 and the bus 82. Other than the above-mentioned memory card, the digital camera 10 may support a standard PCMCIA I/O card, for example, as the optional equipment 76. In this case, the optional equipment control unit 74 may be composed of bus control LSI for PCMCIA standard or the like.

[0086] The communication interface 80 performs control such as protocol conversion to comply with the communication specification supported by the digital camera 10, e.g., USB, RS-232C, Ethernet, etc. The communication interface 80 may output the compressed data or the digital image data to external equipment or to a network through a terminal 92. The communication interface 80 includes a driver IC if necessary and communicates with external equipment through the terminal 92. The communication interface 80 may be adapted to communicate with the external equipment, such as a printer, a Karaoke machine or a video game machine, through an original standard interface.

[0087] The displaying unit 100 includes an LCD display 102, an LCD panel 104, a display driver 106, and a panel driver 108. The display driver 106 controls the LCD display 102. The panel driver 108 controls the LCD panel 104. The LCD display 102 is positioned on the back face of the camera, of which the size is about 2 inches for example, and displays an image currently captured, a playback image, zoom magnification of the captured or playback image, remaining battery charge, date/time, mode selection screen, a subject image, etc. The LCD panel 104 is a monochrome LCD, for example, is positioned on top face of the camera, and displays information, such as quality of the image (fine, normal, basic, etc.), flash mode (forced flash, suppressed flash, etc), number of available frames, number of pixels, and remaining battery charge.

[0088] The control unit 110 includes a power switch 112, a release switch 114, a function setting unit 116, and a zoom switch 118. The power switch 112 switches the digital camera 10 on and off based on direction of a user. The release switch 114 can be depressed in two levels, i.e., halfway depression and full depression. For example, when the release switch 114 is depressed halfway, the image pick-up control unit 40 performs automatic focusing and automatic exposure, and the image pick-up unit 20 captures a subject image by depressing the release switch 114 fully.

[0089] The function setting unit 116 is, for example, a rotatable mode dial or a 4-direction button and accepts settings such as "file format", "special effect", "print", "determine/save", "change display", etc. The zoom switch 118 accepts setting of zoom magnification of the subject image captured by the image pick-up unit 20.

[0090] The digital camera 10 having the above-mentioned structure operates in the following manner. First, the power switch 112 is depressed and power is supplied to each part of the digital camera 10. The main CPU 62 judges whether the digital camera 10 is in photography mode or in playback mode by reading status of the function setting unit 116.

[0091] When a digital camera 10 is in photography mode, the main CPU 62 supervises the depression status of the

release switch 114. When the half-depression of the release switch 114 is detected, the image pick-up system CPU 50 acquires photometry data and focusing data from the photometry sensor 54 and the focusing sensor 52, respectively. The image pick-up control unit 40 adjusts focus and stop of the image pick-up unit 20, etc. based on the photometry data and the focusing data acquired by the image pick-up system CPU 50. After the adjustment, the LCD display 102 informs a user about the completion of the adjustment by displaying characters, such as "standby".

[0092] Then, the main CPU 62 supervises the depression status of the release switch 114. When the full-depression of the release switch 114 is detected, the shutter 26 is closed after a predetermined shutter time is elapsed and the stored charge of the CCD 30 is discharged to the pick-up signal processing unit 32. The digital image data, generated as a result of processing by the pick-up signal processing unit 32, is outputted to the bus 82. The digital image data is once stored in the main memory 68, then it is processed in the YC processing unit 70 and the compression/decompression processing unit 78, and is recorded in the optional equipment 76 via the optional equipment control unit 74. The captured image based on the recorded digital image data is displayed on the LCD display 102 for a while, so that a user can check the captured image. As described above, a sequence of the photographing operation is finished.

[0093] On the other hand, when the digital camera 10 is in playback mode, the main CPU 62 reads the captured image from the main memory 68, the nonvolatile memory 66, and/or the optional equipment 76, and displays the image on the LCD display 102 of the displaying unit 100.

[0094] In this state, when a user directs either "move forward" or "move backward" on the function setting unit 116, the main CPU 62 reads another captured image stored in the main memory 68, the nonvolatile memory 66, and/or the optional equipment 76, and displays the image on the LCD display 102 of the displaying unit 100.

[0095] As described above, the present invention provides the image capturing apparatus which obtains images having high dynamic range.

[0096] Although the present invention has been described by way of an exemplary embodiment, it should be understood that those skilled in the art might make many changes and substitutions without departing from the spirit and the scope of the present invention which is defined only by the appended claims.

What is claimed is:

1. An image capturing apparatus for capturing a subject, comprising:

an electric flash;

an image pick-up unit for capturing a first image of the subject using said electric flash flashing at a first flash condition, and for capturing a second image of the subject using said electric flash flashing at a second flash condition; and

an image generation unit for generating a third image based on the first image and the second image.

2. The image capturing apparatus as claimed in claim 1, wherein said image generation unit generates the third image by trimming and extracting a first partial image, which is a

part of the first image indicating a first area of the subject, and a second partial image, which is a part of the second image indicating a second area of the subject, and superimposing the first partial image and the second partial image.

3. The image capturing apparatus as claimed in claim 1, wherein the first flash condition is a condition for suppressing flash of said electric flash, and the second flash condition is a condition for forcing flash of said electric flash.

4. An image capturing method for capturing a subject, comprising steps of:

capturing a first image of the subject using an electric flash flashing at a first flash condition;

capturing a second image of the subject using the electric flash flashing at a second flash condition; and

generating a third image based on the first image and the second image.

5. A computer readable medium storing thereon a program for an image capturing apparatus which captures a subject, the program comprising:

an image pick-up module for allowing the image capturing apparatus to capture a first image of the subject using an electric flash flashing at a first flash condition, and to capture a second image of the subject using the electric flash flashing at a second flash condition; and

an image generation module for allowing the image capturing apparatus to generate a third image based on the first image and the second image.

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