

The Freeman Patterson Effect

By Rick Cloran © 2009

We have all admired those soft dreamy images that masters like Ray Guillette, Andre Gallant, Jake and others have shown from time to time. These images were generally based on taking one slide in sharp focus at a small aperture like F 22 and a second slide with the same scene shifted out of focus using an aperture of F 4 or F 5.6. The slides were then montaged. Because they were putting two slides together, the makers would often adjust the exposure on one or both images to the over side to avoid having too much density. They might even zoom the lens prior to the second exposure to keep the out of focus image slightly larger, but in about the same proportion as the sharp initial exposure.

While their techniques may have varied, they all followed the general lead of a well known photographer named Freeman Patterson who, to the best of my knowledge, pioneered the dreamy style that results. The good news is that a few of the Photoshop gurus have been able to simulate this effect using a single digital image. The following steps closely follow those recommended by Mark Johnson.

Open a suitable image. Try using a bed of flowers or a tree with autumn foliage if you never tried the slide version before, since not every subject looks good with this technique. Duplicate the background layer and change the blend mode to Multiply. Those of you with CS3 or CS4, convert the layer for Smart Filters before going further. (Sorry Elements workers, this option isn't available for you.) Apply a Gaussian Blur so that the effect looks dreamy. Settings between 5 – 15 pixels generally work well, but feel free to experiment.

While still on the Background Copy go to Edit > Transform > Scale (In Elements Transform is found under the Image menu.) Make sure the link between the height and width boxes is checked and apply a setting of between 101 and 103 in either the width or height box (the other box will adjust automatically) and select OK until the dialog closes. This is an optional step, but it provides the size adjustment effect that we used to get by zooming on the second out of focus image.

The result is effectively complete, but it often lacks a nice sense of highlight and shadow. To add these, with the Background copy active create a new Levels Adjustment Layer. Drag the White input marker (the top scale of the two is the input values) to the left until you see the brightest pixels turning white then back off a bit. Next drag the Midtone marker to the left until the middle tones open up. There are no hard and fast values here so make the adjustment to get the look that you like. Fill the layer's mask with black to hide the lightening effect entirely. Now using a medium size, soft edged brush set for 50% opacity or less and with white selected as the foreground color, paint on the layer mask in white to "reveal" the highlights where you want them. Don't be afraid to vary the opacity of the brush or to make multiple passes to adjust the extent to which the lightening is seen.

Select the Background layer to make it active. Add another Levels adjustment layer. This time drag the black output marker (the bottom of the two scales is the output scale) to the right until you see the shadows open up. Again, there is no hard and fast value for this, just what you like. Fill the layer's mask with black to hide the effect. Now using a medium to small, soft edged brush at 50% or lower opacity, paint with white over the shadow areas that you want to bring out to let the adjustment show through. This too is something you need to do to taste.

You'll want to save the finished working file as a PSD or TIFF file with all of the layers present. You can then flatten it and size it for projection or printing. It should go without saying but, since our intent was to get a soft dreamy look you won't bother sharpening the final output.