Compositing – Expand Your Creative Space!

By Jim Christensen (NY)

Why Learn Compositing?

While it's just one of our image editing techniques, it lets you do amazing things:

- Completely change the mood of an image (beyond enhancement)
- Selective abstraction
- Improve composition (much more anyway)
- "Defect" removal
- Time shifting (by combining elements taken at different times or days)
- Compositionally surreal images

It lets you create images with more of your artistic imagination, and open-up your creative space to images that mix your imagination with your digital captures. I'll show several examples in this talk that demonstrate the jaw-dropping power of compositing to create images that range from photo-realistic (like the one shown in figure 1) to ones that are more abstract and "painterly" (like the one shown in figure 2).



Figure 1

Is it OK to "Photoshop" an Image?

Photos have been manipulated for more than 150 years, long before Photoshop and digital photography existed. It's not appropriate for all type of photography. Some applications demand straight shots such as photojournalism, documentation, nature competitions, etc. In these areas, manipulated photos can mislead people, and can be regarded as "fakes."

But other applications, such as art, advertising, marketing, and fashion, have embraced compositing. The benefits can be practical (for example saving time/money on shoots), and can also give artists greater creative freedom and space.

How Do You Make Composite Images?

Photoshop layers, layer masks, blend modes, and layer styles (blend if). These are

Figure 2



Authors retain the rights to their articles which are published here with permission.

Articles may not be copied or distributed without prior permission from authors.

the same tools and techniques that we use for other kinds of image editing... that's good news! I'll demonstrate how these familiar tools and techniques can be used to make two of the example composite images shown in this talk.

Layers and Layer Masks

Layers and layer masks are the "bread and butter" tools for composites. But good masks can be hard to make... especially when images have soft edges, or contain subjects with hair, fur, and little differentiation (color/contrast) between the elements.

Figure 3





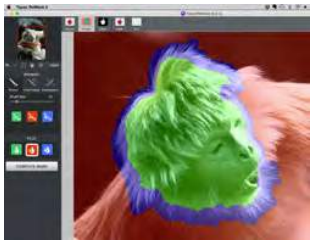
Figure 4

Photoshop's built-in masking tools have gotten a lot better in recent years: specifically the "Quick Selection" tool (which tries to find the edges of objects in an image), and the "Refine Edge" dialog (which lets your fine tune a mask/selection). Excellent 3rd party plug-ins exist for masking also. I'll demo one that I use a lot from Topaz Labs, called "ReMask," to create the image shown in figure 3 (titled "OMG") from the two digital negatives shown in figure 4.

- We'll use the Topaz ReMask plug-in to mask the head of the monkey in the photo on the right side of figure 4, and then composite that head into the photo on the left side.
- Topaz ReMask lets us trace the edge (not as a detailed cut-out, but with a crude broad brush) of the monkey head with a blue-colored brush as shown in figure 5, and then use a paint-bucket tool to "flood-fill" the background with red paint, to identify the background (unwanted) part of the image (shown in figure 6). Note that the image is now separated into three areas: green (wanted), red (unwanted), and blue (the boundary area between the red and green areas).
- Once that's done, a single click generates the (astoundingly good) gray-scale mask shown in figure 7, and another click adds a new masked layer to the original image, named "Head Only" in the Photoshop layer stack shown in figure 8. Note that I've turned off the "eyeball" on the background layer so we



Figure 5



© Jim Christensen

Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

Authors retain the rights to their articles which are published here with permission.

Articles may not be copied or distributed without prior permission from authors.

are seeing just the unmasked pixels from the "Head Only" layer in the big image window. The checkerboard area enclosing the masked head is Photoshop's way of showing an area of the overall image with no (unmasked) pixels.

- That masked layer is then copied to the Photoshop image of the three monkeys, as shown in figure 9.
- The new head is too bright, so we'll have to adjust its brightness using an adjustment layer labeled "Curves 1" in figure 10. We want this adjustment to effect only the "Head Only" layer (immediately beneath it), so we ask Photoshop to make it a "clipping mask." That little right-angled, downward-pointing arrow on this layer (circled in figure 10) indicates it's a clipping mask layer.
- To complete the composition, three additional layers (called "Clarity", "Brightness/Contr...", and "Curves 2") are added to enhance the overall image, as shown at the top of the layer stack in figure 10.

Figure 9



Figure 10





Figure 11

Layer Blend Modes

Blend modes don't always work for compositing, but when they do work they can save a lot of time and enable composites that would be practically impossible using the masking techniques described above. The next example will not use a mask with fine-tuned edges to select objects to be composited. The heavy lifting will all be done with Photoshop's blends modes and layer opacities.

We'll make the final (composited) image shown in figure 11 from the two shown in figure 12. In the following notes, I'll call the image on the left side of figure 12 the background image, and the one on the right the clouds image.

We'll start by adding the reflection of the clouds to the water in the background image:

Authors retain the rights to their articles which are published here with permission.

Articles may not be copied or distributed without prior permission from authors.



Figure 12

- The clouds image is added as a new layer (called Water Color) to the background image, as shown in figure 13. That layer is flipped (left to right), stretched, and the top half (the sky) is crudely masked so that only the water reflection is used for this new layer. The blend more is changed from Normal to Overlay, and the layer opacity reduced to 60%.

Figure 13



- To restore the texture and ripples on the water, the background layer is duplicated and added as a new layer (called Darken Water) with the blend mode changed to Multiply, as shown in figure 14. Our crude layer mask



Figure 14

Figure 15





Figure 16

(from the Water Color layer) is copied to this new layer.

- The overall image is now too dark, so an adjustment layer is added (called Water Lighten) to restore the original brightness of the background image (as shown in figure 15), with a simple gradient layer mask to keep the sky from getting too bright.

Figure 17



Authors retain the rights to their articles which are published here with permission.

Articles may not be copied or distributed without prior permission from authors.

Next we'll add the colorful clouds to the sky of the background image.

Now a second copy of the clouds image is added as another new layer (called Sky Color), flipped, stretched, and this time the bottom (the water reflection) is crudely masked-out because we're working on the sky. The blend mode is changed to Multiply, and the opacity left at 100% (as shown in figure 16).

To complete this image, two adjustment layers are added as shown in figure 17. One to tone-down the saturation of the blue patches in the sky (and this Hue/Saturation adjustment layer, a clipping mask layer which applies only to the Sky Color layer immediately beneath it), and a second adjustment layer (a curves layer called Overall Brightness) lightens the overall image.

Note that while we used some crude layer masks to make this composite, no carefully manicured masks or edge tracing was needed. The more you use blend modes, the better your intuition will be about when they're likely to work and for what effects.

What Else Can You Do With Compositing?

We've just glimpsed the power of compositing in this talk. But what other rendering technique lets you make images that existed only in your imagination? Painters and sculptures have created visual art in this way for centuries, and now we digital photographers get to play too!

You can see more of Jim's work on his website and also the schedule for his other talks and workshops. Please send email if you'd like to setup a talk at your club, or attend a workshop.

Jim Christensen

JimChristensenPhotography.com

© Copyright 2016 by Jim Christensen

About the author

Jim Christensen *(NY) is a photographer, teacher, and speaker from the New York City area; a member and past president of the Westchester Photographic Society, NY. His work has been featured in galleries and other venues in NY and CT, and spans landscapes, night-scapes, wildlife, people (in the studio and on the sidewalks of NY), flowers, and abstracts. In addition he designs and builds one-of-a-kind mixed-media frames, and has a deep technical background in digital imaging theory and software.*

