MAKING BIRDLADY

BY JEFF SCHEWE

THE CREATION OF *BIRDLADY*

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It's ironic that a really well-done computer imaging job will fool most people into thinking that the final image is an actual photograph. The *Birdlady* image is one that falls into that category. I've had many people ask me who the makeup artist was that did the bird makeup. While I did have a really good makeup artist to do basic fashion makeup, all the real work was actually done right in the computer.

THE ASSIGNMENT

They hired me to create a unique image for a Consolidated Paper ad campaign. The designer wanted something that she had never seen before. She got it.

GATHERING THE ELEMENTS

The way I work is to break down a job into logical stages: preproduction, shooting and imaging. In this case, we had already found the basic Mardigras mask. The problem was casting for a model who had the perfect face and eyes for the image.

This is the raw photograph selected for the base image of the woman. The original shot was on 120mm film and scanned to about 130 mbs. Note that I placed a feather collar to aid in the integration of the mask and wing.

Casting is crucial when using models, just looking at comps (model head sheets) doesn't really give a good indication of a person's enthusiasm, desire, and current appearance. So we had about 25 women come to the studio. In this case, Lisa was the clear winner because of her eyes and the strength of her face that would show below the mask. The next step was to locate element areas I needed for assembly. The stylist found a perfect stuffed pheasant that had the right colors and feathers that would blend well with the mask.

THE PHOTOSHOOT

When all the elements were selected, the planning of the actual photo shoot took place. The ad series had already set a precedence for the look of the background, so we concentrated on the lighting and look for the model. One of the really important aspects of shooting for imaging is to have the lighting blend without any visual contradiction. Often, this will be as simple as shooting the various elements under the exact same lighting conditions. This was the case with Birdlady.

I always try to shoot the most variable image first; so we shot the model first in order to get the perfect angle for the line of the model's neck and "the look". When we reviewed the film we had a hard time picking just one. But, usually, there is the perfect one - the one that has a special look or feeling. Then, it was a matter of matching the angle and the light for the two additional photographic elements. The mask was shot under the exact lighting conditions as the model and positioned so that the basic angle lined up with the model's face and. The pheasant was also positioned so the

light was correct, although in this case I moved in to make the image bigger on the film.

IMPORTANCE OF GOOD PHOTOGRAPHY

Let me take a moment here to expound on the importance of good photography (*stepping up on soapbox*). While it is true that software has gotten very sophisticated and powerful, there are still things that are far easier and better to do on the film. The quality of light that a photographer has control of is a real powerful tool when used correctly. It's not merely whether the light is hard or soft, but how appropriate it is for the subject matter. It's also important to know how to control the contrast range of the film to make sure you have the proper detail on the film. Sometimes it's a matter of moving a fill card closer to the subject, other times it's choosing a larger or smaller light source so that the shadowing wraps the right way. The point I'm trying to make here is standard photographic skills and artistic judgment are STILL vitally important even in today's digitally enhanced world. Photoshop will allow you the power to make a bad shot better. . .but it can't make a bad shot great. The strategy I use is to photograph the "essence" of the image I need. Camera angles and perspectives, light quality and contrast range, focus and sharpness are all photographic aspects that are still easier to control when you shoot than to "fix" in Photoshop. (*stepping down from soapbox*)

BUILDING THE IMAGE ON THE SYSTEM

Whew. . .ok, back to the matter at hand. We have the film, now we scan the images and start the process of building the image on the system . Just as the photographic issues need a strategy, so

The original mask shot, also on 120mm film, was scanned to about 100 mbs.

The pheasant was shot under the same lighting to aid compositing. This image was scanned to 120 mbs
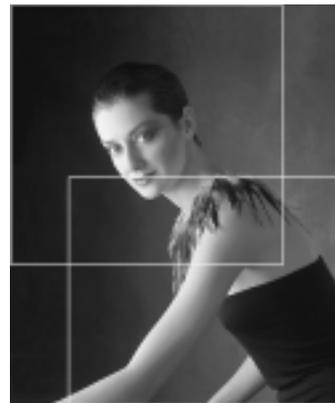
The image on left is the final crop of the woman with the detail paths shown. There is an area of overlap between the "Head detail" and "Wing detail", so the first area to work on will be done before the second area can be worked on. Above is the path palette with the named paths.
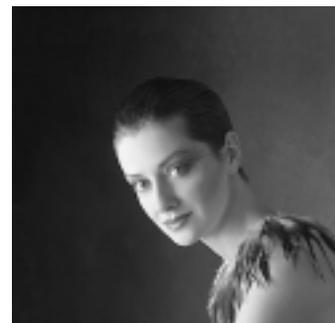
This is the image area that will be used for detailing the mask onto the woman's face.
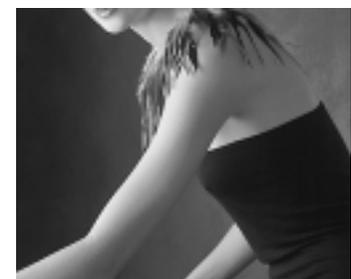
This area will be used to add the wing detail, but only after the mask is applied.

too do the computer imaging issues. Back in the "old days" of Photoshop, these strategies were even more crucial because you didn't have layers. Layers have made compositing much easier, but you still need to work smart. One of the issues I deal with all the time are huge file sizes.

The approach I use is to open only those sections of an image I really need to work on at any given time. This allows me to concentrate the full power of my machine on the details of the image. So, my first task is to open the "base" image (the image that other layers will be added to) and do general global work such as color correcting and spot cloning the raw scans. I also plan out the areas I need for the various sections of elements. If the work you need to do is only a portion of the entire image, you will work MUCH faster by pulling that area of the image out and working on it separately. You could use Quick Edit, a function of importing and exporting sections of images (*see the PS manual for details*) but I prefer the control I have when using my method. Next, I use the Marquee tool to create unfeathered selections that I then turn into named paths. I save the paths and then save the main file with all the paths. After saving, I can turn a path into a selection (with NO feather) and use the "Crop" command to eliminate the excess data. With this method, any paths or channels already created will be present in the "Detail" versions of the files. Also, by using the paths to make selections, I can precisely reposition the "detail" image back into the main file positioned pixel for pixel!

Manipulating the Images in Photoshop

With Birdlady, I chose to work first on the head. When working on elements that are shot against the same background, often there is no need to accurately outline the entire element because the backgrounds often match up. I did a rough outline to isolate the basic element and copied the headdress element as a layer in the

This is the preliminary outlining of the mask. Please note, the checkered background is to show transpariency

This is the final distorted mask image just prior to adding as a layer to the head detail image.

At this stage, the mask has been brought into the Head detail image as a layer.

The throat feathers have been copied from the Pheasant image and cloned to enlargen. It's also a layer.

This is a preliminary blend of the mask over the face. Further work is needed for detail areas like the eyes.

Here the throat feathers have been added intigrating the neck with the face colors.

head detail image. At this point, I needed to size and position the headdress over the woman's head. I used Photoshop's Free Transform tool to adjust the size, position and distortion so that the alignment of the mask matched the contours of the woman's head. Usually, I will adjust the

opacity temporarily so the underlying image is partially visible. The need here was to match the eye holes of the mask to the woman's eyes and the size & shape of the overall feather mask. After getting the size and shape correct, the next step is to eliminate unwanted background. Usually, hard edged elements will be outlined with paths to create very accurate selections. The advantage of using paths is they give you the ability to be extremely precise when placing the path. Other times, I will use Color Range to select by color or often just use the Eraser tool in close to erase unwanted details.

Blending the Image

The next step is my personally developed technique for blending the color of one image into the texture of the underlying image. This technique is really a fundamental compositing method that I've never really seen described elsewhere. The goal here is to literally take the color and shape of the feathers and blend the data over the skin detail. This will preserve the shading and texture of the face while adding the color of the feathers. After doing the face, I moved onto the neck. Again, taking the element and bringing it into the file as a layer and using the image blending technique to composite the feathers into the neck image.

After finishing the head and neck, I took the detail image back into the main file. Once the pasting of the image as a new layer is complete, I generally save the file as a new file with a name that indicates the image's status. I have found that it is very important to save out any and all relevant versions that may be needed down the road. While it is sometimes tempting to trash interim versions to save on disk space, I usually find that Murphy's Law will find me wishing I

Here is the final Head detail image pasted back into the main image. At this point, I flattened the file to conserve file size and saved the image out as a version named: *Woman with Mask.* From this version, I then used the Wing detail path to create a selection and used that to crop out the additional data.

had NOT trashed a version. Not only does this hold true for main files but element files as well. With the lowered cost of hard drive space, it is more economical to waste hard drive space than my time recreating some crucial element I trashed.

The next step in the process was to flatten the main file and call up the Wing Detail path, create a selection, and crop the file down to what I needed to add the wing. The steps to add the wing are basically the same as for the head; do a loose selection of the wing, bring it over to the detail file, scale & distort to fit and blend the wing feathers into the shoulder using Image Blending. I also needed to add feathers for the back and the belly, so I pulled the images I needed from the pheasant shot and brought them all into the Wing Detail image as layers. After doing the compositing of the wing, the back & belly, I saved the file and opened the main file again to bring the new image over to the main file.

Fine Tuning the Image

At this point, the majority of the really hard

work is done. The image looks pretty much like the final image, but there is yet one final step that is important - examination of the image: up close and personal. This last step is needed to make sure there are no little mistakes or artifacts that will ruin the believability of the final composite. This detailing of an image is a crucial step to make absolutely sure all the edges blend correctly without the tell tale sign of edge effects. Often, I will catch little areas where the color or tone may not look correct. I also look to make sure that overall colors and tones look convincing. Often, subtle shading is needed to maintain a more photographic appearance. In the case of Birdlady, I purposely darkened down the back to give a more photographic shadowing and darkened the far left of the overall image background to have the birdlady image pop out of the background.

The overall production time involved to create this image, including casting, preproduction, shooting and imaging was about 6 days. The computer imaging was basically a 20 hour process including final tweaks. The final file size was about 132mbs as an RGB file and the image was output to an LVT film recorder on 8x10 transparency film. The client scanned the transparency at a traditional color separator for the final ad.
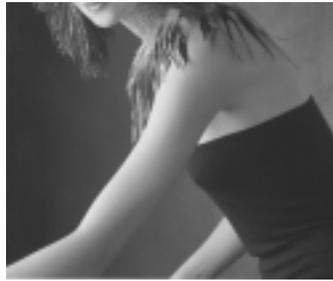
This is the Wing detail image with the mask already in place.
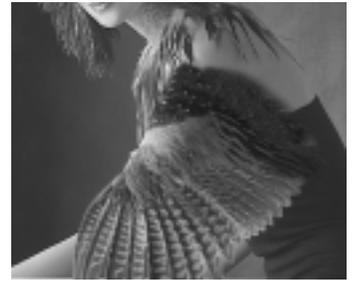
Here the Wing detail image has had the wing image brought in as a layer and positioned.

At this point, additional feathers have been brought in as separate layers and positioned.
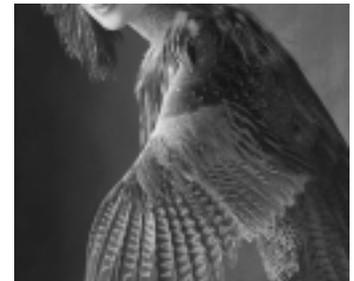
This is the final stage of the blending of the wing and the feathers with some additional shade toning.

The final image with all elements blended together.