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1st Exposure: MetaCreations ***2D and Beyond by Jack and Sue Drafahl***

The art and science of digital photography is gradually becoming more accepted by professional photographers. The main hardware, scanners and cameras, are still on a steep upward spiral towards higher resolutions and faster image processing. Yet, they are becoming less expensive to buy. Software is also improving with every never-ending version they release. We are at the point where manufacturers simply tweak the software from version to version, there generally are not many earth-shattering new designs.

Look how few newcomers you find on the editing software shelf. Most manufacturers approach photo editing in a similar fashion, with the exception of MetaCreations Corporation. Over the past few years, MetaCreations has become a respected leader in image editing, offering an impressive array of software programs that cover both 2D and 3D imagery. When we first tackled the task of reviewing the MetaCreations group, we soon realized it would be impossible to encompass it all in one article. So, logically we decided to split the review into the 2D and 3D programs, beginning with the 2D Painter series and Kai's Power Tool plug-ins.

Painter

At present, the Painter series consists of three similar editing programs that offer an artistic approach to image editing using a vast series of special digital paint brushes—hence the name. The largest program is called Painter 5.5 Web Edition, and includes just about everything you will find in any other editing program plus a whole lot more. A smaller version of the program without the Web functions is called Painter Classic. The third program, Painter 3D, starts to cross the bridge to 3D editing.

Each of the three programs have all the traditional toolbox and pulldown controls for contrast, brightness, color correction, gamma, and sharpness. They also have all the standard special effects filters—you know the ones—emboss, posterize, warp, swirl, and blur. In fact, the entire series of Painter programs can use any of the plug-ins normally used in Adobe Photoshop, including MetaCreations' own plug-in filters, called Kai's Power Tools, or KPT series.

As we said earlier, what makes the Painter programs so unique is all the additional functions using the digital brush. The bulk of Painter's brushes vary in width, texture, transparency, color, grain, fading, and other variations. Painter uses brushes to simulate pencils, eraser, chalk, pens, crayons, liquid, airbrush, water color, and a very unique brush called an image hose. Each of these brushes has more than a dozen control sliders to adjust everything including pressure, direction and velocity of each brush. It's almost like a painter mixing a little of this and a little of that to get just the right brush strokes.

Another group of brushes creates transitional effects in the image. The popular clone tool gets rid of the scratches, dust, and any other artifacts brought into the digital world. Painter uses dozens of clone tools to perform miracles. Some simply copy information from one area to the next, while others create painter-like effects simulating Van Gogh and turning your photos into artwork.

The Super Cloner pulls data from another image and loads it in as a texture. With this tool, you can start with a white background and paint part of the picture onto the white as though it were an unfinished painting.

This creative program has a built-in tracing paper that lets you use a brush over the top of a standard photo. When you are done, you can separate the two and you have a tracing of your photo.

Another interesting brush is the liquid metal. The resulting brush strokes look like liquid silver or gold dripping on your photo. If you want to use silver metal lettering, simply type in your text and then use the liquid metal brush to trace over the letters.

Our favorite brush is, as mentioned, the image hose, which is represented by an icon of a hose with a large nozzle on the end. When you start to move this brush over the surface of a photo, it pours out random images relating to a specific theme. For example, one image hose has orange poppies at different heights and angles to create a natural bed of poppies. Another image hose sprays different colored Easter eggs onto the image. The program has a series of sub-menus for creating your own image hoses.

As avid scuba divers, we wanted an image hose of fish, so we scanned in 20 different fish images. We grouped them together as instructed, and saved it as an image hose file. Now we can brush on random images of fish into any scene. You can also add drop shadows to each image and feather them so they blend better into the background.

Painter 3D goes beyond 2D with the ability to import 3D models. Once they are imported to the edit screen, you can use brushes to coat the various surfaces of the model and rotate it to the angle you want to render into a 2D scene. Painter 3D is very much like Painter Classic in every other way.

KPT Plug-ins

The Painter programs are even better when you add the plug-in filters found on the KPT 5 CD-ROM. This collection of high quality plug-ins can be added to the plug-in directory in Adobe Photoshop, Corel Paint 9, or MetaCreations Painter.

The KPT 3 plug-ins have been out for some time and were always popular with photographers using editing programs. The 18 original KPT 3 filters are split between technical changes and the creative edge. Enhanced control of contrast, noise, blurring, sharpness, and color are just some of the technical applications. On the creative side, plug-ins include options to make your image into hundreds of images on a flat plane, or in a vortex. Others variations create gradient backgrounds, add textures, spheres, or give the image a page curl.

Most of the 10 new KPT 5 plug-in filters create separate images you can later combine with an image you are editing. Some filters are actually quite bizarre. FraxPlover has millions of possible 2D fractal images at any resolution you desire. Frax4D is a 3D fractal generator that makes images look like pieces of melted glass.

If you want some really different images for backgrounds, either KPT plug-in will do the job. Blur does just what it sounds like, but with more variations than a standard blur filter. Noise adds texture and detail while the RadWarp plug-in gives you endless ways of distorting an image. Smoothie takes the jaggies out of line art when it is scanned into the system. FraxFlame creates unusual lighting effects, similar to the northern lights or fireworks. FiberOptix grows hair and fur on whatever area you select in your image. We told you some of them were bizarre!

We really like the Orb-It plug-in, as it creates spheres and will reflect any other image or texture you want to add to it. We think the most practical of the KPT 5 plug-ins is the ShapeShifter. You can take any shape mask, add 3D bevels, shiny lighting and soft shadows. These are great for making WEB pages, where you need lots of fancy buttons, arrows, and related internet page links. You can also make some interesting text that looks like it is standing up off the page. We use more than a half dozen editing programs in our digital lab. Mainly this is because we have to stay up-to-date on all the latest offerings from software manufacturers to keep you informed. We also find that we often like the different features each software has to offer. Many of the ways MetaCreations handles menus, pull downs, and related menus are quite different than programs like Adobe PhotoShop. This just makes it a little harder to get used to and you may actually have to read the Painter manual. If you're as impressed with Painter 5.5 Web Edition and KPT 5 as we are, just wait until you see the 3D editing programs from MetaCreations. In an upcoming article we will review Bryce 4, RayDream Studio 5 and Conoma. Stay tuned as the world turns and 2D meets 3D.

For further information, contact MetaCreations Corporation (805) 566-6200 or check them out on the Internet at [www.metacreations.com].

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