Rangefinder Magazine
January 2007

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Plug–ins Page by Jack and Sue Drafahl
Alien Skin Plug–in Filters

The Corona filter was applied to this carnival ride.

If you happen to mention alien technology and plug-ins in the same breath, you must be talking about Alien Skin Software (www. alienskin.com). Our first introduction to this fast-growing software company was with its plug-in called Black Box, which eventually evolved into Eye Candy, Xenofex, Image Doctor

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and Splat. More recently, two more Alien products, Exposure and Blowup, have been added to their ever-expanding bag of tricks.

Reviewing all their products in one article would be very difficult to adequately give them fair representation. So, since we have previously looked at Xenofex, Image Doctor and Splat, we will narrow our investigation to the newer Eye Candy 5 line, Exposure and Blowup.

The Smoke filter was applied to the barn and grass.

A single ripple was added with the Ripple filter.

The Waterdrop filter was added to the entire image.

We know it seems impossible to control Mother Nature, but believe it or not, Alien Skin Software has found a way. Its Eye Candy 5 Nature plug-in collection features 10 new or greatly improved filters designed just for the challenge. The four new plug-in filters are Icicles, Rust, Ripples and Snow Drift; the improved classics are Corona, Drip, Fire, Smoke, Squint and Water Drops.

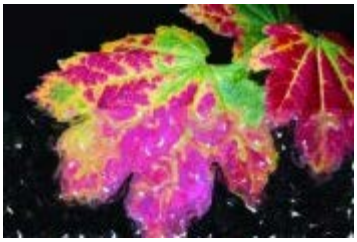
Let's see just how easy it is to give Mother Nature some competition. First, select the areas that you want affected by the plug-in with the Adobe Photoshop Lasso or Magic Wand tools. You can also select an object layer, such as text, before choosing the appropriate filter.

The Bevel plug-in was applied to an image of paint on side of a railcar.

Once you have your object selected, go to the Filter pull-down menu and select one of Eye Candy 5's Nature effects. You will immediately move to a large menu displaying a large preview image on the right with editing control menus on the left. The preview image features controls for zooming and moving, and a button to show you before and after effects.

When you first open the plug-in, it will start processing the image using the default settings or the previous settings. The control menus are divided even further into a list of presets, plug-in settings, and lighting controls. The lists of presets are quite extensive and will generally offer an effect to fit most needs. For example, in the Icicle list, you will have presets that feature different lengths, widths, transparencies and colors for your icicles. Once you find a preset that is similar to your desired effect, you can then progress to the next menus, which allow you full control over the plug-in effect.

Chrome plug-in effect



Film image of fall colors with Impasto plug-in applied to lower half

The Shadow plug-in was applied to this image.

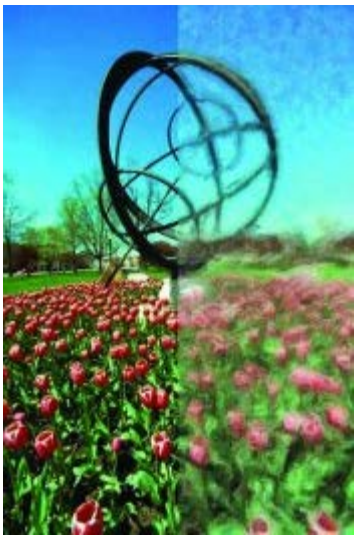
Film image of colorful mailbox with Colored Pencil plug-in applied to right half

To give you an idea just how advanced these controls are, let's look at the Drip menu controls. You can set the length of the drip, width, taper, density and dribble control. There is even a second control that will take the entire image and create a melting effect to simulate wax melting. The lighting and color adjustments provide total control over the color of the light striking the effect, highlight size and color, and the direction of the light. You can even change your mind midstream and try a different effect from the plug-in group. Simply use the pull-down menu at the top to select a different plug-in without having to jump back into Adobe Photoshop.

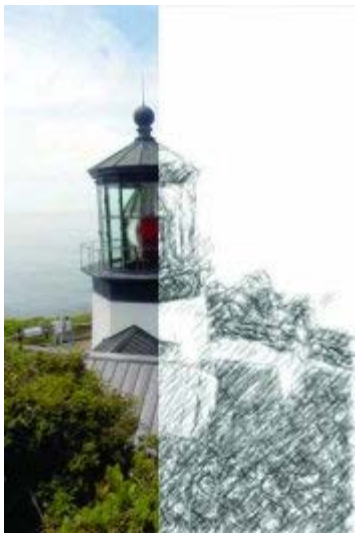
After setting a few buildings on fire, creating volcanoes and causing ice storms, we found we had the most control when we converted our selection into a layer and then applied the effect. A separate effects layer can be repositioned over the main layer for added effect. The more layer and selection tools you use in Adobe Photoshop, the more control you will have over these Nature plug-ins.

A second Eye Candy 5 plug-in series is called Textures. With this plug-in group, you have the ability to fill either selected areas or the entire image with a wide variety of high-quality textures.

Film image of a rose with Pointillism plug-in applied to right half



Film image taken in Iowa with Pastel plug-in applied to right half



Lighthouse in Oregon with Pencils plug-in applied to right half

The cool part about these textures is that they possess a 3D quality, which creates added dimension. These textures are broken down into 10 major groups: Animal Fur, Brick Wall, Diamond Plate, Marble, Reptile Skin, Stone Wall, Swirl, Texture Noise, Weave and Wood. Each group has dozens of presets that create virtually hundreds of different texture possibilities.

If you look at Reptile Skin for example, the presets will include green snake, gray snake, tiny lizard, red snake, smooth bumps, iguana, snake skin, Gila monster and more. You then have menus to control the size, color, lighting, bevel effects and almost every other aspect of each texture.

A really nice feature of the Texture plug-ins is their ability to use texture colors from the color palette. Of course, you can still use the color of the original object if you prefer. You can even adjust the size of the individual texture components and blend them with your selection's original color. The creative possibilities are endless.

The third Eye Candy plugin group, called Impact, is designed to help you explore the world of special effects. You can backlight selected objects or text and have beams of light pass by, or create the feeling of motion by adding streaks behind your selection using the Motion Trail plugin.

Even 3D effects can be added to objects, selections and text with one of the best shadow filters we have ever seen.

Supermacro film image of a flower with Watercolor plug-in applied to right half

An assortment of Eye Candy 5000 textures

If you like working with shapes and texts, then you might also try your luck with the Chrome, Extrude, Brushed Metal, Bevel, Glass and Gradient Glow plug-ins.

All of the plug-ins in the Impact set have the same slider controls and presets found in the Nature and Texture set of filters.

As we are finalizing this article, a fourth Eye Candy 5 filter, called Snap Art, is in the Beta stage. With this plugin group, Alien Skin ventures into effects like Color Pencil, Comics, Impasto, Oil Paint, Pastel, Pen & Ink, Pencil Sketch, Pointillism, Stylize and Watercolor. These plugins take photographic images and convert them to different types of art media, which can result in an image with the feel of a painting, sketch, watercolor or charcoal drawing.

Looking beyond Eye Candy 5, we find Exposure. This very unusual plug-in takes either digital camera images or film scans and converts them so they take on the appearance of being shot using a specific film.

The top of the image shows the original film image; the bottom half shows the black-and-white film simulation.

Building in downtown Portland with the Blowup menu

For example, let's say you have a film scan of a Kodachrome 200 image. With Exposure, you can select a new film from the preset list, and your image will assume the new film's characteristics. Again, the sliders and controls in the menu allow you to modify your settings as though you were modifying the film processing or scan conversion. This plug-in also has a separate setting for black-and-white films, and has just about every film used over the last 50 years. If you are a film photographer who has converted to digital yet still wants the look film provided, then this plug-in may just be the ticket.

Finally, we come to a very specialized plug-in called Blowup. As the name implies, this plug-in is used to help image editors resize images for printing while avoiding the jagged artifacts found in low-resolution images. Unlike the other Alien Skin plug-ins, you will not find this plug-in under the filter pull-down in Photoshop.

To use this plug-in, you must go to the batch-processing section of Photoshop and look for Blowup in the File > Automate > Alien Skin Blowup menu.

You will then have the options to change pixel dimensions, document size and image resolution. You can also sharpen or add grain on-the-fly as the image is being resized. Images can be resized by as much as 6X (3600%) without obvious artifacting, and the software supports both 16- and 32-bit color.

Eye Candy 5 Nature, Textures, Impact and Snap Art

An Astia film image with the Exposure plug-in applied; the right half of the image shows the effect of the Kodachrome 200 selection.

are compatible with Windows 2000 or Windows XP and Mac OS X 10.2.6 or later. They work in Adobe Photoshop 7 or later, Photoshop Elements 2 or later, Macromedia Fireworks MX 2004 or later and Jasc Paint Shop Pro 8 or later. Each Eye Candy 5 plug-in series sells for $99 or is available for upgrade at $49 each. Alien Skin also features a bundled offer for all three filter collections for $199.

Blowup and Exposure are compatible with Windows 2000 or XP and Mac OS X 10.3.9 or later. They work in Photoshop CS or later and Adobe Elements 3 or later. Both programs list at $199 each, but can be upgraded from other Alien Skin programs for $99 each.

For more information, samples and upgrade policies, go to www.alienskin.com.

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