Advanced Masking

How To Create a Hair Mask Without Breaking the Bank

By Katrin Eismann

What you will need:
- Adobe 4.0 or higher
- Model images downloadable from *www.peimag.com*

Creating a subtle hair mask is one of the more stomach-churning endeavors in Photoshop. The standard selection tools rarely allow you to create the transitions required when compositing images, since they work on edges versus transitions. This tutorial describes a masking technique I learned when interviewing German fashion photographer Werner Pawlok for a book I coauthored, *Photoshop Studio Secrets* (2nd edition). Pawlok does incredible composite work of identical models with very complex hairstyles.

If you do much hair masking or other fine detail masking, you should seriously consider investing in a third-party option such as Ultimatte Knockout (see *PEI* December1998) or Mask Pro (see *PEI* March, December 1998). If you do this kind of masking only occasionally, the following method will work well and save you a few hundred dollars. Please note that this method works best with high-resolution images from fine-grain originals.

In this example, we want to

Before   *After*

replace the drab sky (left) with blue sky and clouds (right). This technique works best when the hair and background are of contrasting value, i.e., dark hair on a light background or blonde hair on a dark background. The procedure is outlined in the following steps:

1. Open the Model on Beach file.

2. We want to add a layer behind what is now the background. First we have to turn the background into a layer. Double-click on the background layer in the Layers palette. Name it "Model" and click OK.
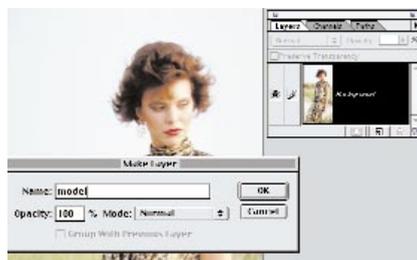
Name Layer

3. Use the Eyedropper tool (set to a 3x3-pixel average) to sample a representative color of the background. Note: If I were working with a light-haired model
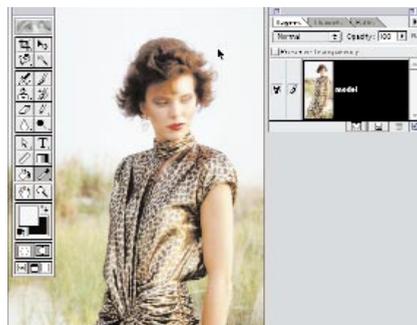

Eyedropper

on a dark background, I would sample the hair and not the background, i.e., sample the lighter of the two entities.

4. Add a new empty layer (Layer>New>Layer) and drag it (in the Layers palette) beneath the model layer. Fill this new layer with the sampled foreground color (Edit>Fill).

5. Add another New Layer on top of the model layer.

6. Option delete (force fill) the empty layer with the selected color and set the layer blend mode to difference.
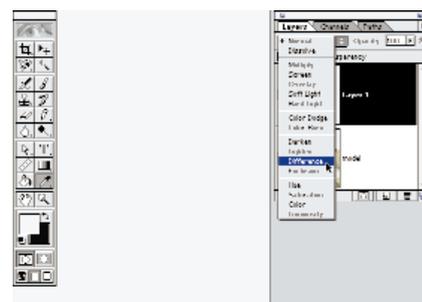

Difference Mode

7. To accentuate the contrast, add a Levels Image Adjustment layer.


Levels

By moving the highlight slider carefully to the left, you can see how the lighter areas of the mask
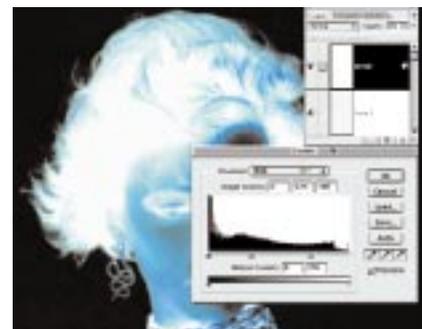
Levels on Mask

grow lighter. In other words, you are increasing the contrast between light and dark. At this point, it's better to be a little conservative, since you don't want to blow out important hair detail.

9. After adding contrast with Levels, add a new layer; use this to fill and paint out any areas that need to be pure white or black, as seen below.
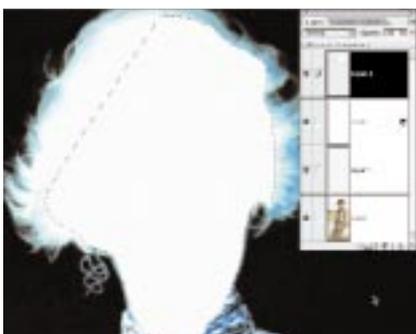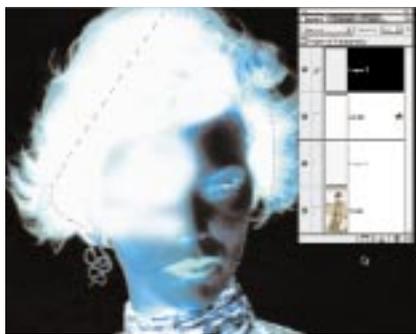
Face and Fill

10. Select the bottom of the image with the Marquee tool and fill with white.

11. Use a soft, white airbrush to soften the transition to the background grasses.

12. Once the mask is to your liking, the challenge lies in attaching it to the model layer. In the Select menu, choose Load Selection and use the default "Layer 2 Transparency." (**Shortcut**: On a Macintosh

Fill

system, hold down the Command, Option, Control, and Shift keys and press the tilde "~" key; on a Windows system, hold down the Control, Alt, Shift, and Windows keys and press the tilde "~" key.)

14. Activate the Model layer and add a layer mask. Voilà, the mask you created will appear in the layer mask.
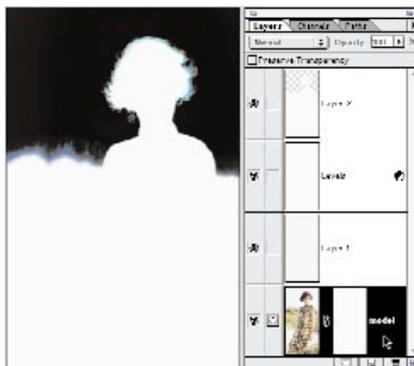
Layer Mask

15. Turn off the three production layers to see the effect. For now, the mask will mask to the white layer that you placed below the model layer, but you can add any type of background you desire.

16. In this case, drag the Puffy Clouds file onto the model file and place the layer underneath the model layer.

Puffy Clouds

17. Before you're done, spend a little time matching depth of field and film grain of the sky to the model picture, as well as matching the tone of the model to the sky (by adding a bit of blue to her). In the layers palette, add a layer mask to the clouds layer and use the Gradation

tool from black to white to soften the transition at the horizon line.

19. Use Gaussian Blur (Filter> Blur>Gaussian Blur) to soften the clouds to match the background grass in the image. A Radius setting of 2 pixels should be sufficient.

20. Choose Filter>Noise>Add Noise, using an Amount setting of about 8, Gaussian, and check "Monochromatic," to match the film grain.

Noise

21. Work with the opacity of the background layer (clouds). I used a setting of about 70 percent.

22. Finally, choose Layer>Flatten Image. You can flatten the image and discard the hidden layers in one fell swoop.
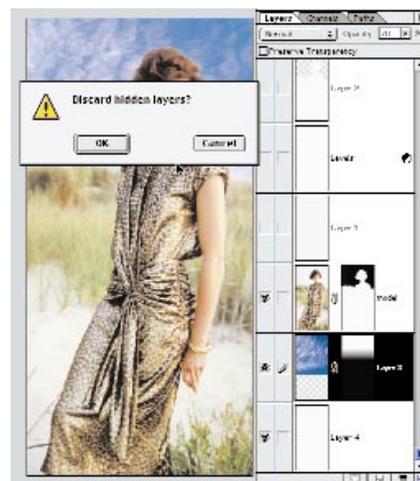
Puffy Clouds

Need bio for Katrin