

Wrinkle Removal Revisited: Portraiture – A New Tool To Bridge the Philosophical Gap

Several weeks ago, I wrote a note in which I discussed both the philosophical issues surrounding wrinkle removal and the tools available to accomplish the task.

No sooner had the ink dried on that note (of course, I'm speaking metaphorically – there is no ink in 'net world), than I read about a new tool for skin retouching – Portraiture from Imagenomic (<http://www.imagenomic.com/>). I got a copy and I'm supplementing my review to let you know – Portraiture rocks!!!

I'm ready to let go of the philosophical issue – just what is our goal, a representative image or a fantasy presentation? I realize that my documentary film background had me putting my thumb on the scale in favor of a more realistic portrait. Fantasy has its place and if that's what a client wants, that's what a client gets.

In reaching this position, I was very influenced by the presentation of Katrin Eismann at Imaging, USA. Katrin is one of the world's premiere retouch artists. In a very calm, matter of fact way, a way that makes clear that no one looks like the images she produces, she taught us some of the techniques she uses to retouch skin. I wrote about her in the original Wrinkle letter; I've got her books and DVD's and talked about using her burn and dodge on a neutral layer technique. At Imaging USA, Katrin dropped a bit of info on us that made clear the nature of the task professional, high-end-retouchers face. Using the dodge and burn technique, they can spend a day on a face – at \$300.00 an hour. Most of us don't have clients willing to pay for that tedious journey to beauty or youth.

So, we turn to plug-ins and programs. That's where Portraiture fits in. To date, it is the best piece of software for skin retouching I've used.

I really like it because it can be as simple as pushing a button or as flexible as one needs to manipulate the many variables that are involved in correcting a "wrinkle" or skin blemish. Another way of saying the same thing is that if you are the kind of person who just wants to push one button, you can do that; there are several "pre-sets" that let you choose how strong an adjustment you want to make. Choose one, push a button, and you're done.

Or, if you are like me, and like to, as my daughter Jenny says, "fiddle" with the menu choices, you can make very specific corrections using a matrix that gives you a myriad of choices.

In either case, Portraiture plays nice with Photoshop "actions". Once you have created or chosen settings that work for you, you can create an action that will allow you to automate and batch process the skin retouching. As handy as this may be, in playing with the program, it seemed to me that the custom profiles I created were specific to each lighting situation; that makes sense. Turn a light or the subject, even slightly, and you needed to adjust the settings. This isn't a big deal – but it does change the idea of batch processing. (Of course, you can use the pre-sets in batch format. I didn't try to do that. My feeling is that like most everything else in image adjustment, it's not a really good idea to make batch adjustments across different lighting situations.) However, the fact that actions are possible is a big benefit of this software.

Portraiture gets its power and flexibility from what appears to be a very specific approach to skin retouching.

As best I understand it, a blemish or a wrinkle is an area in an image that is a different color from the part of the skin that we want to use as the "standard". A wrinkle often is a shadow created by a fold of skin. We can try to

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light around this – but unless we totally blow out a face so there is no shadow, or at the other end shoot it so dark that there is no lighter area, the shadow/line will show. The same can be said for acne. It is simply skin of a different color.

All of the retouching techniques I mentioned in the previous letter deal with changing the color of the wrinkle or blemish. Be it the patch, healing, or clone tools or burning and dodging on a neutral layer – we are changing colors. Suzette Allen uses “color replacement” to retouch acne. See

<http://www.shootsmarter.com/infocenter/sa027.html>. So, when we retouch skin, we are simply changing the color of pixels, and adjusting the opacity to determine how much of the old shows through the new.

Portraiture, in a set of very helpful instructional materials, teaches us that there is a broad range of skin “tonality” both across the range of people we will shoot, and within the skin of one specific person. The challenge for a software program is to recognize the range and make specific adjustments that are tailored to each different area of the skin. (To test this theory, the next time you are in your image adjustment program, take RGB readings on different portions of a face; you’ll see that even portions very close to each other have different readings. So, when an adjustment program has to go in to make color changes on a blemish or wrinkle, it has to see these differences and determine which to leave alone and which to change.) The challenge for the software is to make a consistent change for the better across a broad range of “tonality” readings.

We don’t have to know any of this. The software does. So, if we choose to push just one button, all we need to know is that after that push the software will do a very sophisticated analysis before making its adjustments. From what I can tell, Portraiture meets the challenge.

However, I chose to do more than just push the button and go “Ahh” at the results. I wanted to push the program to see how it would handle a difficult image. So, I went into the user friendly, non-automatic mode.

For an image, I chose one of the shots of Wrinkle Woman, my pretty friend whose portrait session for her boyfriend started the whole debate about the role of wrinkles in an image. The image was shot with a “noir” look -- a deep shadow line on one the broad side of her face.

One of the things I like most about Portraiture’s approach is the use of “masks” to both show us and allow us to control what areas of the skin will be affected by the adjustments. Don’t get scared. We need not know “mask” theory as we might in Photoshop. Portraiture will make the mask for us. By use of an eyedropper, we pick the predominant color we think best represents an area of clear skin – clear of wrinkles and/or acne. The program, using that color, creates a mask. We can add to or subtract from that mask by using an eyedropper to add colors.

The cool thing about a color-mask-based system is that it knows that there is a difference between hair color and skin color (in most cases). So, things like eyebrows and eyes, hair and lips, are easily excluded. Other programs use “detail” based selections. To save things like eyebrows, you have to diminish the corrections done on fine details. This can cause a problem when the wrinkle or blemish is “fine”. By starting with a mask, Imagenomic’s technology seems to know the difference between a wrinkle and an eyelash – and if it gets fooled, you can adjust it.

The Noir lighting on Wrinkle Woman presented a problem. If I simply picked a color sample from the short lit (brighter) side, it wouldn’t handle the skin in the shadow. Portraiture allowed me to adjust the mask to fit the lighting pattern. Not all programs or tools allow this. I think it is a real benefit.

Another feature I really liked were the side-by-side preview windows – one that showed the original image and one that showed the mask or the corrections. The previews were quick on a G5 Mac. That’s important to me. I hate

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to wait for anything.

The remaining interface is simple. Sliders allow you to dial in the amount of smoothing you want on “fine”, “medium” and “large” detail areas. Because I had a mask, I was able to concentrate the impact on the skin areas that concerned me and not the other areas that might be inadvertently included in an adjustment.

There’s a lot more in this plug-in, but no need to discuss it. There’s bracketing, saving previews and profiles – lots of stuff.

And, there’s some stuff I didn’t find helpful. I think the program has tried to put more in than need be. There is an “Enhancement” section that allows one to sharpen, soften, and adjust “warmth”, brightness and contrast. I, for one, will do that in RAW and/or Photoshop. So, I turned off the section. You might find it helpful. If so, turn it on.

Portraiture is a great plug-in. If the proof of the pudding is in the tasting, the proof of the plug-in is in the result. I liked the look I got. I found the skin looked real and natural – not like plasticized Barbie skin. Because the work is done on a separate layer, one can use both a mask and the opacity adjustment to fine-tune the result. I didn’t have to do that. I liked it the way it came out.

I know my reviews tend to be a bit complex so let me make one thing clear – THIS IS AN EASY TOOL TO USE – BOTH FOR THE BEGINNER WHO JUST WANTS TO PUSH A BUTTON OR THE MORE ADVENTUROUS RETOUCHER WHO WANTS TO DO CUSTOM WORK. Even in its “advanced” mode, it is easy to master.

It is the best skin program I’ve used and it will be my go to tool when facing acne and wrinkles.

BTW -- I am so impressed with Portraiture that I’m going to try two other Imagenomic programs – Noiseware and Real Grain. Reviews will be forthcoming.

Actually, I’ve already goofed around with Noiseware. Haven’t read the manual – just pushed some buttons. Just for the heck of it I ran it on the Wrinkle Woman image. No adjustments, just pushed a button. The result was amazing. Smooth skin, a very cool look – a little bit on the fantasy side, but a look she would love.

I mentioned Noiseware to a photographer friend who is a Photoshop guru. He knew the program and told me that it had once “saved his ass”. It seems he went outside to take the family Christmas photo. Like many of us, he didn’t realize that his camera had been set at a very high ISO for his kid’s nighttime sports event – and never set back. The resulting image was grainy. He downloaded a trial copy of Noiseware, pushed the button (no custom settings) and “Voila”, he got a very useable image.

I’ll try this program and report back to you the next time I shoot high ISO (deliberately or by mistake.)



Stephen J. Herzberg

Commercial photographer Steve Herzberg has merged his creative approach to photography with his passion for teaching to form Hands On Seminars – a unique venue in which eminent photographers join with him in teaching a wide assortment of classes. The seminars, limited to 15 students per session, are taught in his Houston, Texas studio. Sessions have been taught by Doug Box, Dave Newman, Hanson Fong; soon to teach are Dave Cross and Jim DiVitale.

An Emmy award winning documentary filmmaker, Steve has both written and directed nationally distributed television shows, and been an on air magazine format broadcast host. Photography has been in his blood since he was young. His dad had a darkroom in the house and Steve spent hours learning the craft. An early adaptor to digital photography, he tries to combine his creative side with his technical/geek side to first understand, and then simplify and teach digital photography and lighting. His musings are distributed in his *Hands On Newsletters* (to receive the newsletter and notice of the seminars, email Steve asking to be put on his distribution list).

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