

The making of Moonlit Summer Night* by Mark Beckelman

The process of making this issue's cover illustrates a pro's composite-making strategies

By their very nature, photo composites frequently take on a life of their own during post-production. Because we, as digital artists, have the technical ability to improve and refine, the creative possibilities are seemingly limitless as we build an image. Moonlit Summer Night was originally conceived as a simple piece of visual whimsy; but as the composited image evolved, it soon became apparent that I would have to play the part of mad scientist—harvesting body parts and elements from other photos taken during the shoot in order to create the image I had imagined.



Moonlit Summer Night

Photography for compositing

I began in the studio, photographing the bench and the children as separate elements to be combined later. Kids are unpredictable by nature, and I wanted to have the flexibility to pick and choose each child's best facial expression and body position without interference from the back of the bench.

Knowing I would place the moon in the upper right corner of the image, I simulated its light on the bench and children by positioning a Dynalite 1000ws head with a small Chimera Lightbank behind and to the right of the subjects as my main light. That was then supplemented with two Lightform panels with Dynalite heads placed to edge-light the scene, and two Foamcore panels to the left and right of camera to provide fill.

As this image was created before my

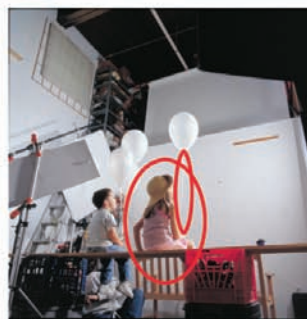
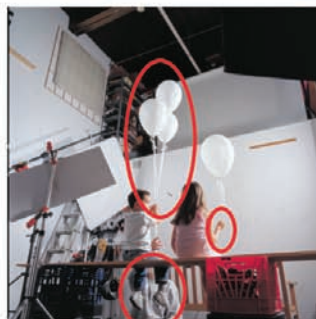


Figure 1. The eight images that went into the final composite.

switch to digital capture, all photos were shot using a Hasselblad 500CM with an 80mm lens on Kodak 120 EPP film.

Post-production

In all, I used 12 different elements from seven original pieces of film and one digital stock image: the moon (from NASA); the tree line; a cloudscape; the bench; the boy's torso and the girl's balloon (to overlay onto moon) from transparency one; from transparency two, the boy's balloons, the girl's hand, and the boy's feet; from transparency three, the girl's torso and the moon ribbon; and from transparency four, the girl's legs.

I began by silhouetting the boy's torso (negative one), the girl's torso (negative three), the moon, and the bench. Since all these elements were hard-edged (with no translucency and without fine detail), I used the pen tool, enlarging the image onscreen to 200%, and then drawing a path around the subject. I've found this method gives me the cleanest edges with the least amount of fussing and cleanup later on.

Because the pen tool creates a hard-edged selection, the resulting edge needs to be softened in order to have it blend more seamlessly into a composite. Once a path has been created, save it, and then convert that hard-edged path to a selection (at the bottom of the paths palette, click on the third icon from the left, or use the keyboard shortcut `cmd/ctrl + Shift`)

Enter quick mask mode (hit `Q` on your keyboard), and go to `filter > Gaussian blur >` and use a low setting of `.8` (this specific setting is dependent upon your file size, and the level of softening needed for your specific situation). While you could always assign a feather to soften the edge when converting your path to a selection, this method allows you to see the result you're going to get in real time.

After returning to normal mode (hit `Q` again), click on the create layer mask icon at the bottom of the layers palette to mask out the background.

In situations like this, you may discover a faint light or dark unnatural

edge around your subject when placing your newly masked image on top of the background image. If that's the case, you may want to shrink your layer mask slightly. There are various ways to do this (Photoshop is notorious for offering the user a myriad of possibilities). Try activating the layer mask's selection (`cmd/ctrl-click` on the layer mask in the layers palette), contract the selection by 1 pixel (`select > modify > contract`), invert the selection (`select > inverse`), and using a black brush, paint out on the layer mask the areas that are showing unnatural edges.

Assembly

With all the elements silhouetted, I began the assembly process by creating a new document and dragging the bench into position. After bringing in the boy and the girl, I discovered that the bench's back was so high that it blocked the heads of the models (figure 4).

This problem was solved by selecting the bench's back with the lasso tool, copying that selection to a new layer (`cmd/ctrl + J`), and then doing a free transform (`edit > free transform`) in order to reduce its height.

Layer masking

I used a layer mask on the original bench layer to hide the bench's back,

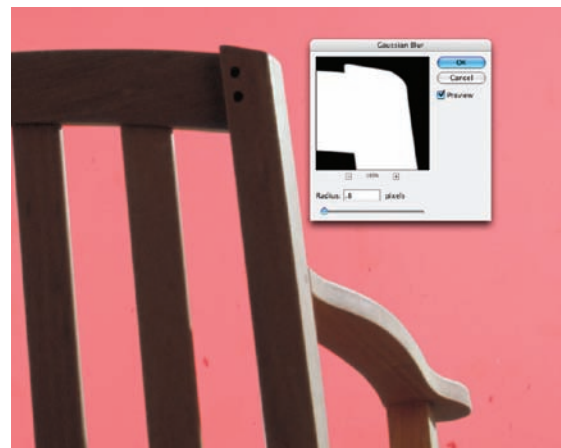


Figure 2. The Gaussian blur window.



Figure 3. The bench edges during the clean-up process.



Figure 4. The bench back with the children's torsos composited in.

and masked a portion of the shrunken back so it blended seamlessly with its base. In this kind of situation, when you have a masked element (such as the bench), and you want to apply further masking and blending, rather than risk the possibility of ruining your original mask, try creating a group from the layer (layers palette fly-out menu > new group from layers) and apply a separate layer mask to the group (figure 5). You now have the flexibility

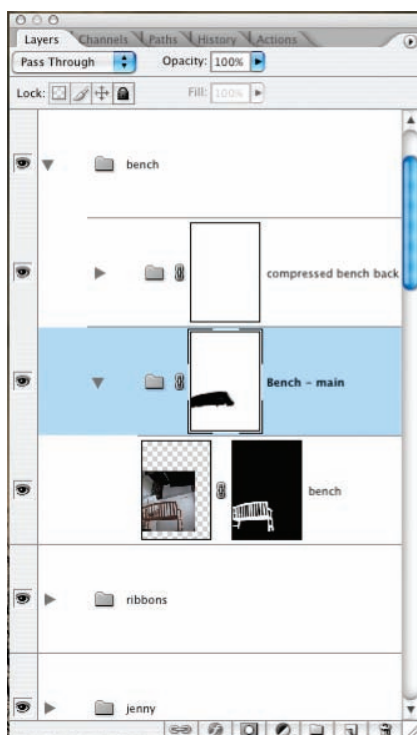


Figure 5. The group layer mask.



Figure 6. The balloons added in, along with a different hand for the girl, and both children's legs.

to do further masking on the group's layer, without altering the individual layer's mask.

With the bench masked, it was time to bring the boy's legs, the girl's hand, and the boy's balloons (from transparency two), and the girl's legs (from transparency four) into the composite. All had been silhouetted using the pen-tool technique outlined above.

Next I added the sky background and dragged its layer to the bottom of the layer stack in the layers palette. As the original file is a horizontal, I used free transform and stretched it to fill the vertical frame. To give the illusion of a twilight sky, I added an Invert adjustment layer—giving the blue sky and clouds an amber hue and a dramatic tonality.

Moon

The moon was the next element to be added. As I wanted it to mimic the shape of the balloons, I went to edit > transform > warp, and pulled the lower left and upper right handles to elongate the moon's shape (figure 9). To give the moon a more balloon-like tonality, I overlaid a single balloon from transparency one—stretching and shaping it with the liquify filter (filter > liquify) to match the shape of the moon, and then used a hard light blending mode to blend it into the moon.

The moon had an artificial, cutout appearance, so I added a soft glow around it. After creating a new layer directly beneath the moon layer, I used the elliptical marquee tool and made a



Figure 7. The blue sky background.

selection slightly larger than the moon. I filled that selection with white, and then applied a Gaussian blur of 200 pixels and set the layer's blending mode to hard light (with an opacity of 85%)

By placing each effect on its own layer, as I did with the moon's glow, I'm able to exert more control over the various elements by altering the layer's opacity or changing its blending mode. To help manage all those layers, be sure to name them, and make use of layer

groups to reduce your layer palette clutter (and your confusion).

To create the ribbon that connects to the moon, I used a section of ribbon from transparency three. I duplicated it repeatedly, patched it together into one long continuous flowing ribbon, and then used a combination of the liquify filter and edit > transform > warp to give it curves. I added a small separate piece of ribbon to the bottom of the girl's hand to give the appearance of her holding it.

Trees and clouds

The last element was the tree line. Because of its fine detail, the pen tool was not the best choice for silhouetting the trees from the sky. When faced with masking such a complex subject, the first place I look is in the channels palette, clicking on each individual red, green, and blue channel and looking for the most contrast between subject and background. In this case, I found that the blue channel provided the most contrast between trees and sky. I dupli-

cated the blue channel by dragging it to the create new channel icon at the bottom of the channels palette, and applied a levels adjustment layer (image > adjustments > levels)—moving the shadows input level to 100 (thereby darkening the shadow areas and increasing the contrast) and the high-lights input channel to 251.

This got me part of the way there, but the sky still had tonality that had to be removed. By using a soft-edged 70-pixel brush set to white with an overlay blending mode, I was able to carefully paint out on the blue channel copy any tonality in the sky, leaving the tree detail intact (figure 10). A light touch was essential to retain fine detail.

Cmd/ctrl-clicking on the blue channel copy activated it as a selection. I then went to select > inverse to invert the selection, and then clicked on the layer mask icon at the bottom of the layers palette to create the layer mask. To eliminate the blue fringing around the trees, I applied a channel mixer adjustment layer (with monochrome selected in the dialog box).

Finally, as a last step I do with all my montages, I enlarged the completed composite to 100% on-screen and inspected all the elements and their edges.

I hope that following me through the process of constructing this image, has given you some ideas for images you might want to construct, while providing some useful technical tidbits along the way. ■

Mark Beckelman, an award-winning photographic illustrator, combines a healthy dose of imagination with the latest in digital imaging technology to create new realities for editorial, corporate, and advertising clients. In 2004, he collaborated as lead digital photographer for Katrin Eismann's 550-page book Photoshop Masking and Compositing, creating numerous digital composites, concept illustrations, and photographic examples. To see more of his work, visit his Web site at www.beckelman.com



Figure 9. The layers palette and groups.

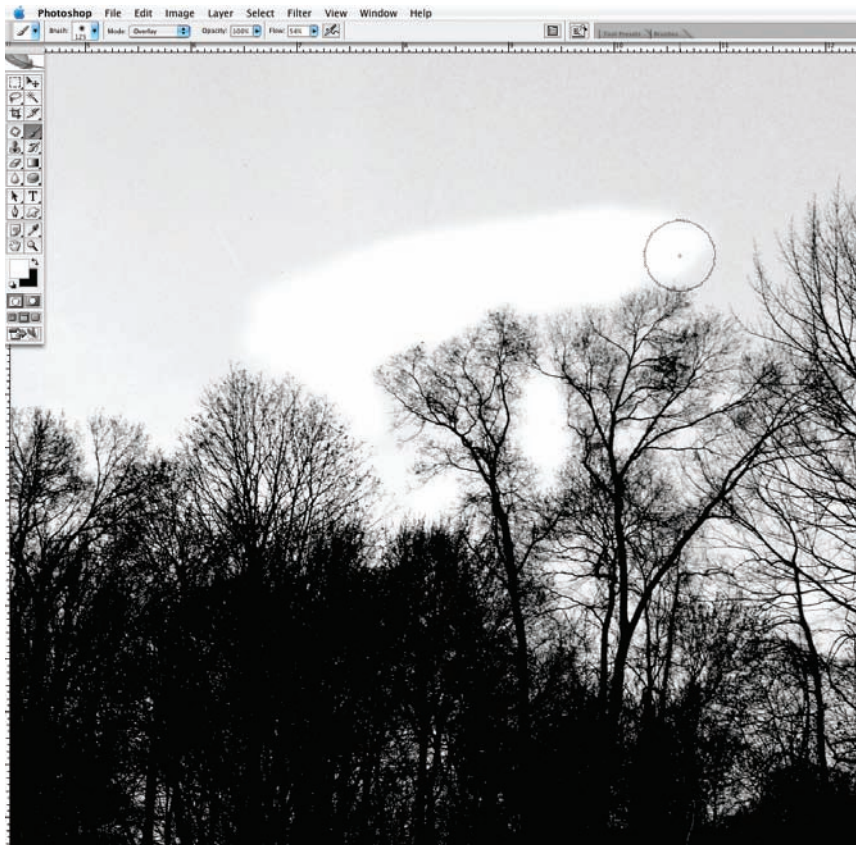


Figure 10. Painting on the mask for the trees, using a soft-edged 70-pixel brush set to white with an overlay blending mode.