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The digital photography magazine for enthusiasts and pros

Issue 54

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20
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News roundup



Mirroring light

■ The news of Lightroom's official launch may still be resonating in the ears of keen photographers, but the NAPP has already unveiled a supportive how-to publication. The National Association of Photoshop Professionals is the world's largest digital imaging association and it hopes that *Darkroom* will help creatives get to grip with Lightroom.

Supermarket software

■ Supermarket chain Tesco has added another string to its product bow. The multi-national retailer has released its own brand of software, including a photo-editing app. Sources suggest that the titles will be available for under £20. Other applications are said to include an office suite, two security products, a personal finance package and CD/DVD burning software.

Lifting the bar

■ Third-party Photoshop plug-ins producer Pixel Vista has launched a new tool for digital photographers. The plug-in, known as Photolift, enables users to enhance local contrast strengthening the detail and texture of images without changing the overall tonality. The tool is a particular useful solution for counteracting reflection from water, and strengthening texture in subjects such as clouds. Visit www.pixelvistas.com.

Final version of Lightroom released

Adobe releases the highly anticipated finished version of its extensively trialed Photoshop Lightroom

Adobe, the software producer behind CS2, decided it was time to call it a day on the beta versions of Lightroom, after half a million volunteers downloaded and experimented with the application over the last 12 months.

The creative application, which enables professional photographers to import, manage and present a large volume of digital photographs, is designed to benefit photographers who struggle with digital workflow, equating to more time behind the lens and less time in front of the computer.

The first version of Photoshop Lightroom contains a bounty of new features, including significant changes to the Library and Develop sections, which are aimed at complementing the functionality of the Slideshow, Print and Develop modules. Advanced keywording tools have been added to help photographers filter their extensive libraries in a more intuitive, streamlined, fashion. One of the most raved-about areas of the finalised version is the incorporated Key Metadata Browser, which provides quick access to specific information

tags with an improved ranking system, which includes colour labels and a pick/reject process to improve search speed.

Testers of the beta counterpart can expect additional gadgets, including hue, saturation and luminance adjustment tools for honing image edits. Non-destructive clone and healing features have also been brought in to aid photographers wishing to eliminate sensor dust across one or several images.

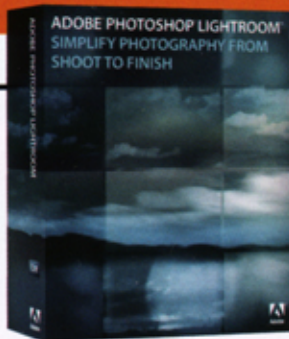
Attractively, the system utilises Adobe Camera Raw technology supporting over 150 native RAW file formats, in addition to JPEG and TIFF, allowing photographers to bundle RAW conversion into a single workflow experience. The software manufacturer has also sought to add support for new and forthcoming camera releases, including the Nikon D40 and D80 and the Pentax K10D. Another bonus is that files can be converted to the Digital Negative specification (DNG), or renamed and segmented by folder or date upon import.

The product is on sale at an introductory price of just £125 (+VAT) until the end of March 2007 from the Adobe Store (www.adobe.com/store), after which it will have an estimated street value of £175, which is still good value for what you get.



■ The attractive new user interface incorporates new intuitive features improving digital photographers' workflow

"Designed to benefit photographers who struggle with digital workflow, equating to less time in front of the computer"



Inside this issue...



074 Alien encounters

We talk to two professional photographers who metamorph floral pictures into alien beings through the power of Photoshop. RAM Art Photography, otherwise known as Mike Murphree and Rodrigo Pedrolli, has had plenty of successful exhibitions with *Alien Nature*. Find out why here.



078 Tutorials

Another look at Adobe's Lightroom, this time comparing and rating your images. We also look at creating a web gallery in minutes with Photoshop, and perfecting your portraits with a host of techniques.



088 Helpdesk

All of your questions are answered by our resident expert Rod Lawton, including lens compatibility issues and different results from different cameras. We also have a basic look at overriding automatic exposure.



Alien encounters



New York has been seized by an alien force of a more earthly kind. RAM Art Photography, aka Mike Murphree and Rodrigo Pedrolli, has transformed macro shots of flowers to create numerous alien-like species that threaten to take over America

Alien Nature may sound like the title of a tacky Eighties sci-fi flick, when in actual fact it is a vibrant and vivacious portfolio of beautifully stimulating floral images. These images have been adapted with subtle effects in Photoshop, generating the illusion of extra-terrestrial life forms, printed to the unusual dimensions of 18 inches wide and 60 inches high.

The project has caused such a sensation in New York City that the creative duo behind the show, known collectively as RAM Art Photography, will be touring America with the exhibition, having recently confirmed a list of show dates that will see them through until the autumn. The striking images have to be seen to be believed, but for those who need

further explanation, one half of the creative team, Mike Murphree, fills us in: "Imagine a hot summer's day and the feel of that warmth on your skin – that's what our vivid colours are like. The blues are cool like the water in a stream or a fresh winter day, all combined with the sweet smell of a flower and the richness of its aroma. Feel the softness and complex structure of a rose: that's the subtle depth that each piece displays; but at the same time it's shocking, like the electric charge you get from static electricity... while listening to psychedelic music." Partner Rodrigo Pedrolli, attempts to clarify further: "Our intent with *Alien Nature* is to spark your imagination and place you in our kingdom – to take you on a journey where passion is yellow and udders

■ **[Far left]** The alarming and edgy nature of this *Alien Samurai* shot defines what the whole *Alien Nature* show is trying to achieve
Shot details: Canon EOS Rebel XT with Canon Macro 100mm lens

■ **[Middle left]** The ferocity of colour and stature of *Alien Chrysalis* plagues the viewer with a threatening overtone
Shot details: Canon EOS Rebel XT with Canon Macro 100mm lens

are purple. This domain is a mosaic of organic structures in a world where ants bow down to the scent of the 'Alien Queen'. In this realm there is no death, there is only rebirth – where a dying flower becomes a noble 'Samurai' and a wildflower has so many feet she dances herself blue... welcome to *Alien Nature*."

The artistic marriage between Rodrigo F. Pedrolli and W Michael Murphree created RAM Art Photography, which was formed after the two art directors met and realised that their photographs were similar in context and style. "One day I showed him [Pedrolli] a picture of a flower that I had taken. He then showed me one that he had taken. We discovered we had the same passion for macro photography and nature," Murphree emphatically conveys.

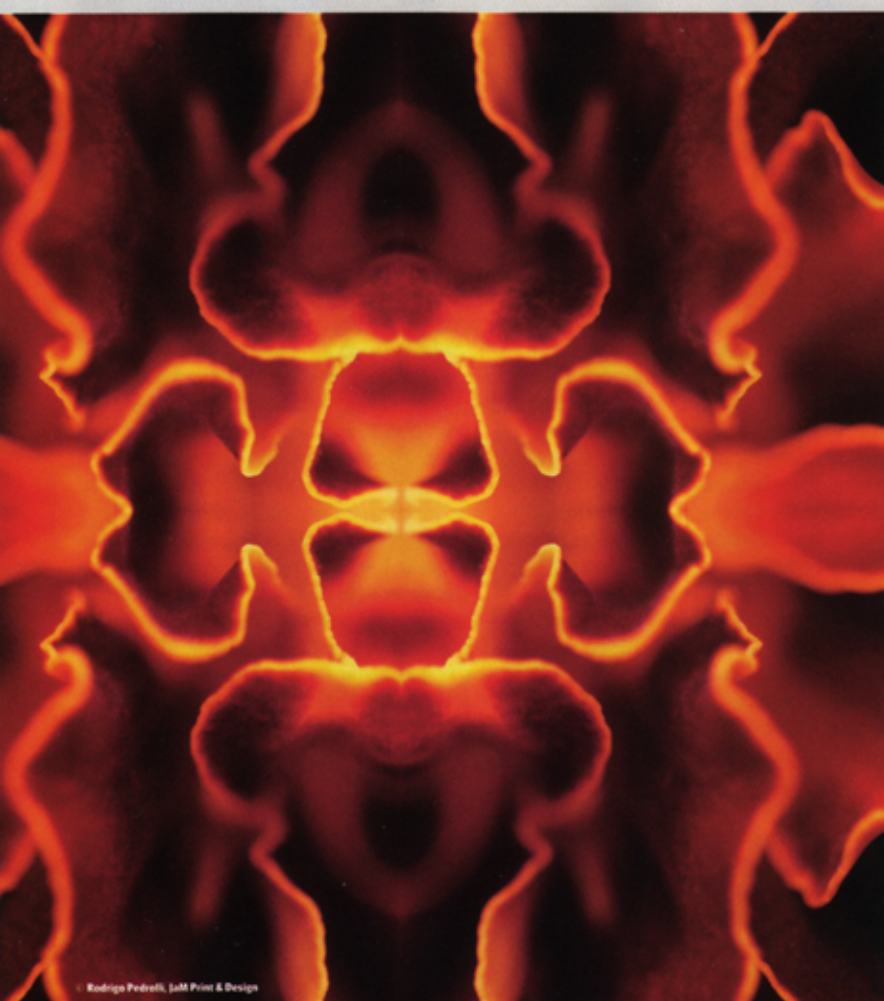
"Our intent with *Alien Nature* is to spark your imagination and place you in our kingdom"

Discovering this mutual love of digital macro photography gave them the perfect motive for capturing the mood, colour and temperament of mysterious moments in nature. "The pictures were so similar in context and design we decided to spend a day taking pictures together in the Catskill Mountains [two hours north of Manhattan]," Pedrolli excitedly informs us. "This day, and many other days of capturing images, resulted in our first photography exhibit: *Catskill Textures I*. This exhibit was a success, so we decided to do another exhibit: *Catskill Textures II*. Then one evening, while experimenting with Photoshop and our flower photography, the *Alien Nature* exhibit was created."

The dramatically provocative shots were manufactured in two creative parts. The first relied on macro photography, focusing on unusual parts of the flower. Implementing a larger aperture, the photographers had a shorter depth of field to work with, creatively blurring out backgrounds to convey a painted effect. "I take close-up pictures of flowers because I want people to see the small details most of them have not seen before or never thought to look at," urges Murphree, who uses a Canon EOS Rebel XT with Canon EF Macro 100mm lens. "It is really incredible to get so close to a subject that its image

■ **[Near left]** Known as *Alien Passion*, this image is as bright and vivid as it is stimulating
Shot details: Canon EOS Rebel XT with Canon Macro 100mm lens

■ **[This page]** *Alien Brimstone* is alight with passion and intensity, signifying the creative extent the photographers have gone to produce such refined and electrifying pieces of art
Shot details: Canon EOS Rebel XT with Canon Macro 100mm lens



■ Rodrigo Pedrolli, J&M Print & Design

► becomes almost abstract. I crave the texture and vibrant colours that nature has to offer." Once Murphree and Pedrolli have taken the desired shots they call upon Photoshop and their arsenal of high-calibre equipment – Power Macs, multiple hard drives, Wacom tablet and Canoscan Lide 60 scanner – to manipulate the flower in a way Mother Nature could have only dreamt of. "We crop a portion of that image, mirror it, adjust the hue and contrast, curves and saturation, to achieve what we want. Reshaping the flowers is essential for making them into a primeval, organic alien beings. With our common everyday flowers we created creatures: some funny, some erotic and some quite scary," Pedrolli explains. "Photoshop is indispensable. The software is much more powerful now with its layers, which is an integral part of creating our *Alien Nature* images." The pair are self-confessed Photoshop addicts and have exploited it as long as it has been in existence. "We have both been using Photoshop from the very beginning of the computer era, around 1991," Murphree explains. "You could suddenly retouch the colour and content of a photograph or advertisement layout right there on a screen. The results were immediate and time efficient. I was hooked." It's a similar story with the photography side of their enterprise. "We have both been photographing since film photography," Pedrolli says. "Mike has seen the industry change from fading colour prints to vivid giclée digital printing. First we had instant film, now we have instant imagery. The evolution is incredible – from glass negatives to pixel of light."

A large proportion of the art and photographic community has had their attention seized by the striking force of the *Alien Nature* show, with the pair benefiting from rave responses from interior decorators, fashion designers and even opera directors. "Based on *Alien Nature* we were invited to design the backdrop projections for two operas that were performed at the Dahesh Museum on Madison Avenue in New York City," Murphree happily boasts. "We have completed *Alien Nature* inspired textile designs for Talbot's Women and Men, Steve Madden Dresses, Maggy London, Bahari Group, Glen Raven Textiles, Gum Tree Fabrics and Premier Prints." In addition to this, the project has spearheaded the team into America's artistic elite, winning a place on the prestigious list of American Artists in the highly coveted annual



■ [Above] All of the images in the *Alien Nature* collection are a kaleidoscope of colours mixing a perfect macro of a flower with some subtle Photoshop work in post-production
Shot details: Canon EOS Rebel XT with Canon Macro 100mm lens

of *Art in America* magazine for 2007. "Being in touch with other artists is the best way to get constructive feedback," Murphree boasts. "The feeling of the pride that we get when other artists appreciate what we do is second to none. We love being at the exhibitions and listening to the comments from the crowds."

Although undeniably talented as individuals, it was only through the amalgamation of their respective visions and techniques that inspired the successful hybrid of photographic excellence and creative digital manipulation. This combined enthusiasm for the technology as well as the subject has spawned this uniquely stimulating art. "We are always surrounding ourselves with beautiful and exotic flowers – even the smells are good," Brazilian Pedrolli explains. "We take all this back to the computer with us to create the images. Our love of the digital technology keeps us on the computer for hours and hours. An incredible outing for us is a photo session in a botanical garden, then strolling to the computer store and looking at the technology and software. And just when we

think the image is completed, it is now the time to name it and see what it has developed into." Murphree expresses his point of view with a big smile: "Computer technology gives me the spontaneity I have always needed with the ability to see the world using light and pixels, while macro photography gives me a new world of subjects. The computer is nothing but an electric recorder waiting to be fed information and I use my camera to feed it."

As well as being inspired by the intoxicating scents of nature and the trademark activation sound of the Mac, the couple share a passion for sci-fi movies, robots and videogames, fusing imaginations influenced by generations of extra-terrestrial stimuli. In terms of technique, both claim to have been affected by Cubists and Impressionists of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. "Their use of the abstract and colour makes the mind and eye work to see what the artist is conveying," Murphree puts forward. "Their images were not straightforward, it took your imagination to see what they felt. They used colour to create



CONTACT DETAILS

Mike Murphree & Rodrigo Pedrolli
Web: www.aliennature.com

The visually expressive website runs a presentation of the *Alien Nature* signature images intercepted with explanatory narrative.



© Michael Murphree, JaM Print & Design

"It is really incredible to get so close to a subject that its image becomes almost abstract. I crave the texture and vibrant colours that nature has to offer"

mood and we do the same thing." Pedrolli joins the debates: "We have taken common flowers and created images that do not look like what they are, but the beauty of the flower is still there. The images spark many different responses. We have been compared to Georgia O'Keefe – what she did with flowers and paint, we have done with flowers and pixels."

From an objective perspective, shrewd observers of *Alien Nature* can extract each of the photographer's individual nature and nurture influences. Born in Wyoming and raised in Mississippi during the Fifties, the slow-moving south is reflected in Murphree's subtle and mellow approach to photography, which was nurtured by his older sister, who gave him his first camera aged 11: "I would use my friends as models, set against the backdrop of the Mississippi landscape. When I arrived at college I continued with my photography, taking as many academic and extracurricular courses at LSU, and during the summer months [I went to] Mississippi State University, where I took classes in

■ [Above] In *Alien Cherokee* the vivid colours have been gently enhanced and the image has been reflected to create extraordinary lines of reflection

Shot details: Canon EOS Rebel XT with Canon Macro 100mm lens

■ [Above right] *Alien Squid*, so-called because of its elongated luminous yellow tentacles. The use of light draws the viewer's eye to its base, which exhibits a heart-shaped element

Shot details: Canon EOS Rebel XT with Canon Macro 100mm lens

cinematography, as well as still photography. I would volunteer for the college newspapers as a photo journalist. I then studied advertising design and could use my knowledge of photography to art direct the shoots for many campaigns." Later in life he photographed such legends as David Bowie and Chaka Khan, and was the only American ever to photograph the late Russian composer Alfred Schnittke. In 1986, Murphree went solo setting up his own creative studio, JaM Print and Design (<http://jamprintdesign.com>), in New York feeding on its art culture and abounding energy, and later hired Pedrolli as an art director in 2003.

Pedrolli was new to the city, having lived the majority of his life in Minas Gerais, Brazil, a region ablaze with colour and Latin culture infused by the psychedelic tour de force of the Sixties. "I have always looked at the world with a lust and fascination for ingenuity," he says, proud of a cultivated edgy style that has won him the Prêmio Colunistas de Propaganda award for art direction three years running. "I got my first camera when I was 13, and by 19 I landed my first job as an art director at a small



© Rodrigo Pedrolli, JaM Print & Design

advertising agency in Brazil. This was the first contact I had with professional photographers and professional equipment. Even though I was not releasing the shutter, I was behind the lens directing the photographers for my advertising campaigns. Since then I have become more interested in having total control of capturing the images myself." Murphree has similar advice for photographers wanting to follow in their footsteps. "Never take things for granted; you need to push yourself, because no one else will," he claims. "Always look for something deeper than what you see on the surface. Have confidence and believe in your work, and if you do, others will feel your excitement and it will be realised in your work."

The stimulating range of photographs can be viewed at www.aliennature.com, where limited and signed editions of the prints are sold directly. "We are constantly photographing new images, but our *Alien Nature* exhibit keeps us very busy," Pedrolli tells us. "We are currently showing at Piola in South Beach, Florida, then to Hallandale, Florida, and on to the Botanical Garden in St. Louis, Missouri. *Alien Nature* is booked to tour throughout June 2007 and then we go on to Washington DC in the Fall." If that wasn't enough the duo are now in discussions with a publisher regarding the publishing of an *Alien Nature* art book, so watch this space.

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