

Create Photo-Realistic Shadows

by Kris Fong

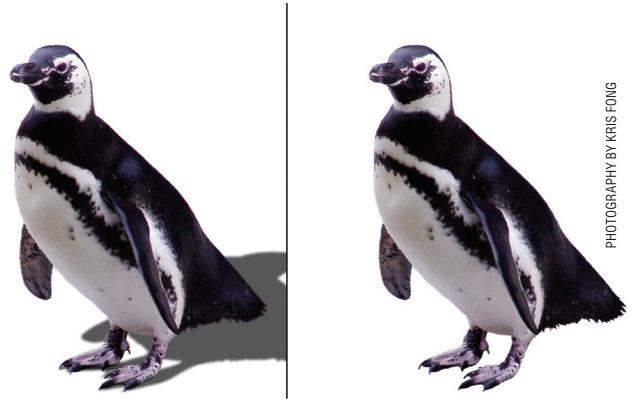


WHAT YOU NEED

- An image editor that supports layers, such as Adobe Photoshop Elements (\$99, www.adobe.com) or Photoshop (\$609)
- A digital photo of a subject



Getting great-looking shadows in your digital pics is easy—just go outside and shoot something on a sunny day. Barring an outdoor excursion, though, creating digital shadows is tricky but essential if you want to swap out a subject’s background and replace it with a

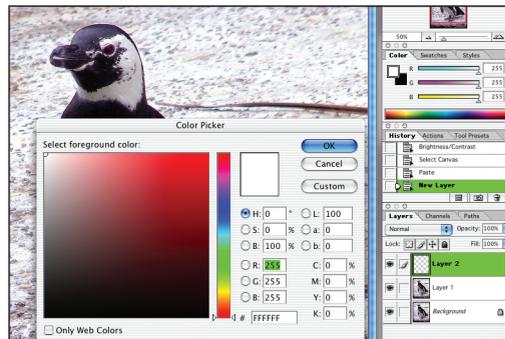


PHOTOGRAPHY BY KRIS FONG

With and without: If you want to keep a subject grounded in a photo composite, create a shadow.

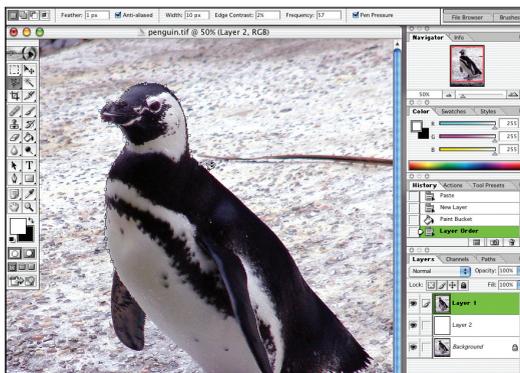
clean backdrop. Without shadows, subjects float against their backdrops instead of appearing grounded, calling more attention to your obvious image manipulation. If you want to make the trickery inconspicuous, create a shadow. Here’s one way to do so in Photoshop.

1 Create a Clean Backdrop Open your photo or `penguin.tif` (on the Disc) in Photoshop, select all (Command-A), copy the layer (Command-C), and paste it into a new layer (Command-V) to create Layer 1. To create a seamless white backdrop, from the Layer menu select New, then Layer, and click OK in the resulting dialog to set up Layer 2. In the tool palette, click the foreground color swatch to open the Color Picker, select white from the palette, and click OK. Then select the paint bucket tool and click the canvas to fill Layer 2 with white. Drag Layer 2 between Layer 1 and the Background layer in the Layers palette.



Because our original background was distracting, we created a layer of white to serve as a replacement.

2 Bye-Bye, Background To get rid of the background, select the magnetic lasso tool. In the tool options palette, check the Anti-aliased box and enter 1 in the Feather field. If the subject’s coloring is similar to that of its background, enter between 1 and 3 percent in the Edge Contrast field; use a higher percentage if they contrast more sharply. Then select Layer 1 and carefully click around the subject’s edges until you’ve fully selected it (the lasso’s selection lines will snap onto the edges). When finished, select Inverse from the Select menu to change the selection from subject to background, and press Delete to banish it; this will reveal the clean white backdrop underneath. Use the eraser tool to remove residual gunk.



Using the magnetic lasso tool is one of the easiest and quickest ways to separate subject from background.

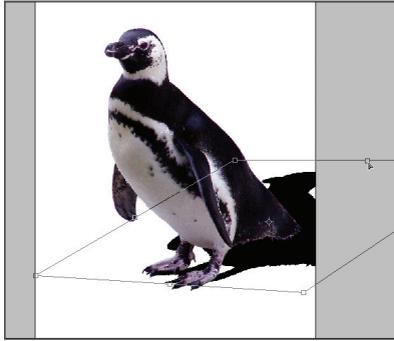
3 Create a Silhouette Select the magic wand tool, set Tolerance to 1, and click Layer 1’s nonexistent background to select it all. From the Select menu, choose Inverse to reverse the selection onto the entire subject. Choose black as the foreground color, and then create a new layer (Layer 3). From the Edit menu, select Fill, and in the resulting dialog, click OK to create a black silhouette in the form of your subject. Drag Layer 3 between Layer 1 and Layer 2 in the Layers palette.



To make a realistic shadow, create a black silhouette in the subject’s form.

4 Cast the Shadow Select Layer 3 (the silhouette/shadow). From the Edit menu, select Transform, then Distort; a bounding box surrounds the shape (currently concealed by the real subject). Grab the box's top-center handle and drag it in the direction opposite your subject's light source. For example, if there's a highlight on the right side of the subject, drag the box handle left so that the light (coming from the right) appears to be casting a shadow to the left. If the light source is high, drag the handle downward to squash the form. Use the other handles to mold the shadow in reference to the light's direction. If there's no detectable light source, cast the shadow in any direction you please. Double-click inside the bounding box to apply the transformation.

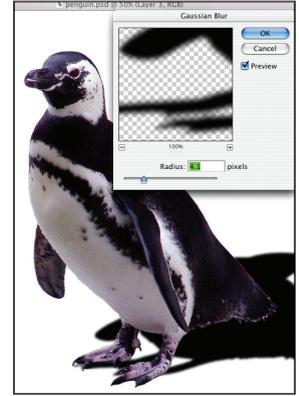
Add realism by distorting the shadow so that its ultimate shape responds directly to the subject's lighting.



5 Make It Shady To add realism, from the Filter menu select Blur, then Gaussian Blur. In the resulting dialog, check the Preview box. Move the Radius slider until the shadow edges are soft but not overdistrorted so that the subject looks disconnected from the shadow. When satisfied, click OK. In the Layers palette, click the Opacity triangle and move the resulting slider down until you get a complementary gray shading. Use the move tool to make final adjustments. When satisfied, select Flatten Image from the Layers menu and save your file.

Add blur to soften the shadow's edges, and then lower the opacity to give it some translucency.

Senior Editor Kris Fong woke up this morning and saw her shadow—darn broken blinds.



CAST SOME SHADY CHARACTERS

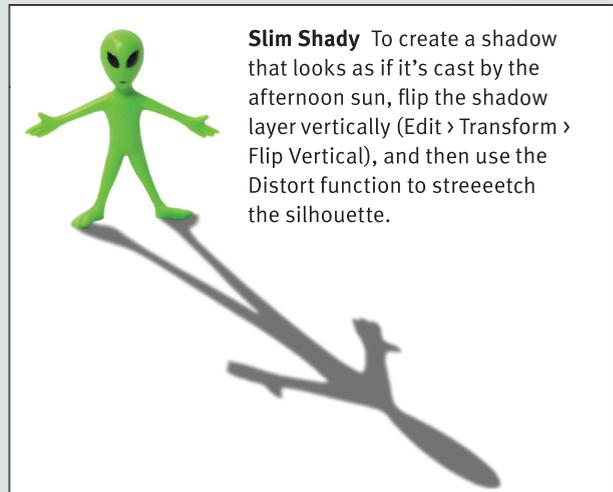
How you cast a shadow can change the look and mood of a photo, giving you the opportunity to flex your creative muscle. Here are a few examples of alternative ways to cast shadows.



Dark Shadow Stretching the silhouette and keeping the opacity higher creates an intriguing film-noir shadow (especially if you convert the image to black and white). Using the Distort function, squash down the shadow and elongate the sides dramatically.



Role Reversal Make a photo interesting by flipping the shadow horizontally (Edit > Transform > Flip Horizontal), and then separating it from the subject so that it becomes a stand-alone item. For added appeal, manipulate the shadow so that it appears to interact with the subject.



Slim Shady To create a shadow that looks as if it's cast by the afternoon sun, flip the shadow layer vertically (Edit > Transform > Flip Vertical), and then use the Distort function to stretch the silhouette.



Bunny Rabbit This one's a classic. Make a peace sign with one hand in front of a light source (old film projectors are a favorite), and view your work on an opposing wall or screen.