

Casio EX-Z1080

A compact that seems to implement numerous creative devices. But are they practical?

Specifications

Manufacturer: Casio

Web: www.casio.co.uk

Price: £140/\$279.99

Spec: Manual focus

41 BEST SHOT modes

2.6-inch TFT colour LCD,
115,000 pixels

USB 2.0 Hi-Speed compatible

11.4MB internal memory

Auto, manual, 6 fixed mode
white balance

1/2-1/1,000sec shutter speed

7fps high-speed continuous
shooting (1,600 x 1,200)

Summary: A resourceful camera, with practical functions for all types of creative user. It doesn't fail to meet the ever-evolving standard of advancements in the popular EXILIM range.

Rating: **4/5**



ACTUAL SIZE:
These two images demonstrate just how small the camera is. The depth is just 24mm and it weighs only 125g

"CAPABLE FOR DISCIPLINES SUCH AS PHOTOMONTAGE AND TEXTURING FOR IMPORTING INTO DIGITAL PROJECTS"



COMPACT: Not only is the EX-Z1080 noticeably compact, but also notably lightweight making it instantly accessible everywhere you go

One of two new releases from Casio's paramount EXILIM range, the EX-Z1080 is a handheld camera packed with great range of creative functions for its compact size.

This camera has a wealth of features that should be suitable for creatives across the breadth of digital disciplines. Its obvious lustrous appearance, with black shell and metallic finish, screams professionalism (other colours are available), and it's an aesthetic as well as ergonomic pleasure when considering its smooth, easy-to-handle edges. Compact enough to fit the tightest of pockets and made for transportation, it's a product ready to use at all times. This means that artists should never again pass by that creative resource or inspiration.

Also apparent is the camera's 10.1 megapixels, splashed onto the front of the casing. Though less than its counterpart product, the EX-1200, it's quite capable of capturing and producing photography that can be printed at large sizes. Of course, this megapixel amount means that creatives can get a good-quality image for those more

intricate and professional-standard images, suitable for print projects such as gallery work and editorial design, and certainly capable for disciplines such as photomontage and texturing for importing into digital projects.

The camera is also capable of high-sensitivity photography up to a maximum of ISO 6400, combating blur caused by the shakes and ideal for photographing those darker scenes.

But lest not forget, pixels aren't everything. This camera also obtains some great internal options that provide even further creative licence. Those enthusiasts among you, perhaps not yet familiar with the fundamentals of photography, can access the newly updated BEST SHOT options. This is essentially the EXILIM's version of the standard scene mode, although presenting users with a vast range of specialised settings. Practical favourite presets still feature, providing sample scene thumbnails referring to your photo type and automatically applying settings upon selection. However, the option updates provided by this product display advancements and attention to contemporary

Test shots



consumers. Now users can select BEST SHOT options for movie-based capture as well as still, the most innovative of which being the For YouTube alternative. Corroborated by the EXILIM series' Engine 2.0 high-performance image-processing module, all video captures adhere to a high-compression rate. This serves up small file size at high visual quality. The modern H.264/AVC video encoding, together with this YouTube capture mode, ensure that users are able to shoot and save movies on this camera at optimum size, quality and other settings suitable to YouTube. Users can easily locate and access the BEST SHOT option by clicking the BS button on the back of the camera and it comes standard with the unique YouTube Uploader for Casio software, enabling users to upload movies to YouTube in as few as two steps.

Other standard options are the EX-Z1080's 11.4MB internal memory, which will get you a few shots before inputting a memory card. But considering the memory card device, coupled with this hardware's rechargeable lithium-ion battery technology, creative and traditional users alike will be able to record an impressive photography resource. This super-life addition, once fully charged, impressively allows users to take no less than 370 shots. So those supplying stock for online, royalty-free sites such as stock.xchng and iStockphoto.com can really get a good day's work in one shoot, benefiting the bank balance in turn.

Of course, we try to be subjective about all our products as to obtain a balanced review for our readership and so we took this hardware for a test run. After a photo shoot session in varied locations, we found

STYLISH FEATURES: *Anti-Shake DPS reduces blur that can be caused by shaky hands and subject movement by utilising high shutter speeds and sensitivity settings. It also offers a dedicated YouTube shooting mode. This is not a product without a sense of style, however. Implementing aesthetic choice, the EX-Z1080 comes in four standard colours: blue, black, grey and pink, so you can look good while out and about, whilst being reassured of good quality*

the results ultimately pleasing. Both in gloom and the brilliance of the bright day sun, the EX-Z1080 coped extremely well.

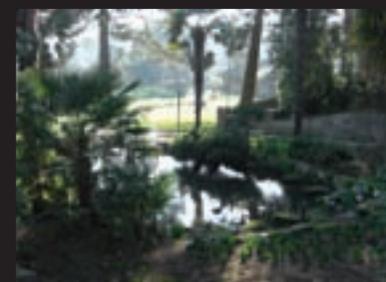
This camera controls harsh highlights and exposure, allowing the vibrancy of colour to shine through. Exposure is not blown and shadows are detailed. The colours produced were fantastic and vibrant in green and blues especially. No barrel distortion or pincushion distortion is noticeable at either end of the zoom range either.

The one reservation that some artists may have, especially those perhaps using heavily textured resources, is that again this camera's zoom is somewhat wanting. This was apparent in its counterpart product, the EX-1200. It provides a 3x optical zoom, which in all fairness isn't brilliant in scope, but it does still combine this with a 4x digital zoom to supply a 12x zoom in all, though digital zoom does lead to increased pixelation. However, the capability of the zoom will suit most creatives and those of you with interest in digital painting may well find this camera also productive.

Styles such as figurative and portrait are complemented alike by more of the EX-Z1080's face-detection technology. Combine this with the auto-tracking AF system using motion analysis technology, and you have photography that maintains both sharp focus and correct exposure for a human face. ■



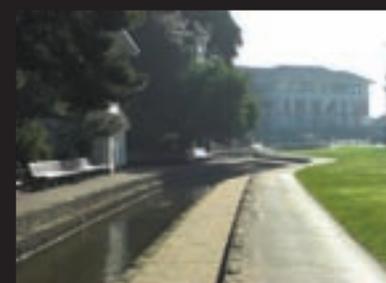
ZOOMING IN: *While the 3x optical zoom may seem a little limited, you don't get any of the distortion related to longer lengths*



WIDE: *Again, there are no distortions at the wide end of the zoom range, and images are sharp right to the very edges*



COLOURS: *Saturation is generally very good and there is little magenta fringing to be seen in high-contrast areas of the scene*



SCENE MODES: *Pick the right BEST SHOT mode for the scene that you are shooting to get the right spread of tones and contrast*

Image Doctor 2

The latest upgrade to Alien Skin's retouching software

Manufacturer: Alien Skin Software

Web: www.alienskin.com

Price: £101.60/\$199

Req: Photoshop CS2 or later, Photoshop Elements 4 or later (Mac), Photoshop Elements 5 or later (Win)

1,024 x 768 or greater monitor resolution

Intel Pentium 4 processor, Windows XP or later (Win)

PowerPC G5 processor or Intel processor, Mac OS X 10.4.0 or later (Mac)

Alien Skin Software is one of the better Photoshop plug-in manufacturers around, making tedious tasks much easier by combining the functions you would usually use in Photoshop into easy all-in-one packages.

Image Doctor 2 promises to provide users with algorithms that "can save what would be the perfect photo from the trash bin, while saving you hour upon hour of Photoshop work trying to fix it". A rather big promise, as retouching photos in Photoshop can be time-consuming but effective. Therefore, for this to take over from manual controls, the results have to excel in a short space of time.

So does Image Doctor 2 really deliver on such promises? Well, you'll notice that upon installation, the plug-in provides five filter options in the Photoshop Filters sub-menu. Each delivers specialist treatment helping improve any photo library.

All filters are compatible with 8- and 16-bit images, meaning this software is RAW compatible, functioning in Grayscale or RGB modes. On-screen navigation is effortless with the obvious interface; Move, Zoom and Navigation thumbnails are all standard and there are useful interactive options, such as the Show Original button, which allows users to toggle between filtered and unfiltered versions of the image. There's also the Split Screen Preview function, which allows users to view the original and filtered image in half, providing many convenient types of visual orientation.

A Setting list is offered with each filter applied. These are presented in two varieties – Factory Setting and User Settings – which are saveable as easy as in Photoshop. A folder icon

identifies each specialised category, for instance 'Soften deep wrinkles or oily skin' (Skin Softener filter). Upon activation, the selected setting will apply its own remembered controls. These can, of course, be manipulated further in the Basic menu through a set of easy-to-manoeuvre slide bars. All seemingly effortless you may well think, however this is still a software with a few teething problems when concerning performance.

A prime example is the Smart Fill filter. What we felt may well be a real defining factor for this product, eventually failed to deliver. On promise was a filter that intelligently samples patches around the selected area, smoothly recombining to create a contiguous background texture in the object's place. In all fairness this was provided, however to our regret not as smoothly as first imagined. This filter performs to a substantial level when presented with an image of continuous or symmetrical background. However, when presented with a more complex background it struggles to deliver desired effects.

The Dust and Scratch Remover filter did, however, deliver to a high standard. Making active selections, it instantly samples surrounding textures, recombining them inside your selection. This is not to say that this cannot be achieved efficiently in Photoshop, but considering you can then make further selections, simply pressing Ctrl/Cmd+F to reapply this filter time and again, this option truly provides one of the market's fastest texture-repair solutions.

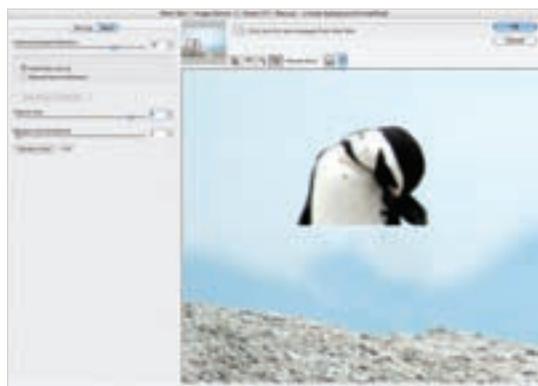
Blemish Concealer and Skin Softener work equally as well, although we did encounter a few mishaps when using the latter, so be mindful. It works to optimum effect when running the filter separately on homogeneous areas. The JPEG Repair filter seemed, much like the Smart Fill filter, a selling point for this product, but unlike its mentioned counterpart, it provides the desired solution. With a few clicks of the Deblocking and Blur Amount options its application really does combat compression artefacts. It won't restore lost detail, but will create pleasing aesthetics.

The plug-in does work, but at £100, you need to be doing a lot of retouching to make it worth it. ■



Summary: After comprehensive use Image Doctor 2 is an intuitive product that delivers proficient standards. Perhaps not quite as responsive as first imagined, if applying the appropriate selections it is particularly competent.

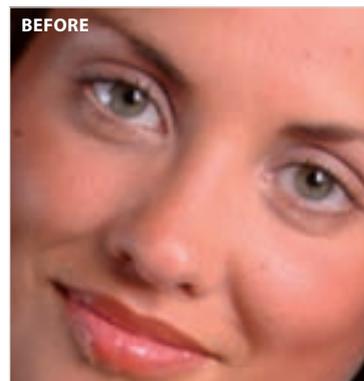
Rating: **3/5**



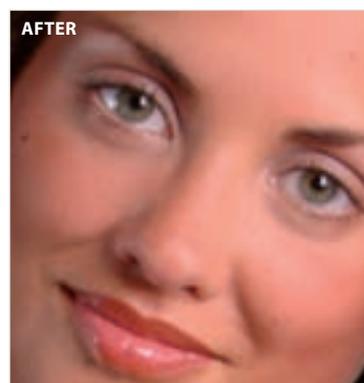
SOLUTION: When you want to remove an object from a transverse background, use multiple selections for best effects



SMOOTH BLENDING: This software does excel in providing solutions that offer smooth blending with the balance of the photo



SOFT TOUCH: Retouching capabilities are expansive, with Skin Softener and Blemish Concealer providing beautifying techniques



CD-Art: Innovation in CD Packaging Design

Discover both creative and technical disciplines of CD art creation

Manufacturer: Rotovision
Web: www.rotovision.com
Price: £12.99/\$25.67
Spec: Full-colour design examples
Four specialist sections covering traditional and contemporary practice
Updated to include interactive and downloadable artwork
Designer contact list

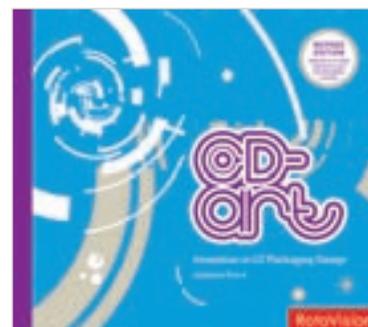
CD-Art: Innovation in CD Packaging Design is a best-selling title that presents some of the finest CD covers from around the globe. From the introduction, the newest innovations and changes in this design industry are addressed and incorporated. It deals with developments in the music industry in terms of presentation, packaging material and new work produced, all presented in depth in the inclusive chapters.

These sections provide a true wealth of case studies, each accompanied by dynamic and attractive imagery and annotations, revealing processes, equipment used, record labels and the responsible design studios. Each example provides insight into how the designers involved in these disciplines truly excite the senses of sight and touch.

The attractive and clear-cut layout of this title enables a totally enjoyable and understandable aesthetic experience, with evident learning along the way. But it seems to be a bit more concerned with relation and inspiration than education. It's a real keepsake that will keep the creative juices flowing. After all, the album cover has provided some of the graphic design industry's finest examples and this book puts them out

there for all to see. Each section concerns itself with contemporary creative opportunities, such as Materials, providing examples on how to utilise materials such as wood, steel, zinc surfacing, acetate printing, foil-embossing and much more. There's also Interaction, which presents dynamic ways that consumers can interact with opening or using the CD packaging physically.

This updated version certainly doesn't fail to provide lavish traditional examples, yet also goes beyond the exterior and involves another innovative section, Extending the Experience. This concerns innovative examples of furthering the consumer's CD experience, through contemporary creative modes such as changing the insert booklet into a full-blown book or computer-readable imagery on the disc. ■



Summary: A lavishly presented title that provides so many fine, inspirational visuals and work processes. With its informative and aesthetic nature, it's a real tour-de-force concerning CD art.

Rating: **5/5**



Brainworks

Meditation & Mind-Hacks For Creatives

Manufacturer: Headstuff Books, SIMIAN
Web: www.headstuffbooks.com/www.amazon.co.uk
Price: £12.95/\$25.59
Spec: 182 pages packed with psychological techniques
15 insightful chapters
Covering key lifestyle issues such as diet, relaxation, sitting and meditation
Practical exercises presented for practice

One of numerous new-age titles by Isle of Wight publishing house Headstuff Books, this is a book that at first glance seems rudimentary. A seemingly simple paperback, with particularly uninspiring layout and black-and-white print, you'd be forgiven for thinking this was a less desirable title on the market. Then again it's more likely down to preference.

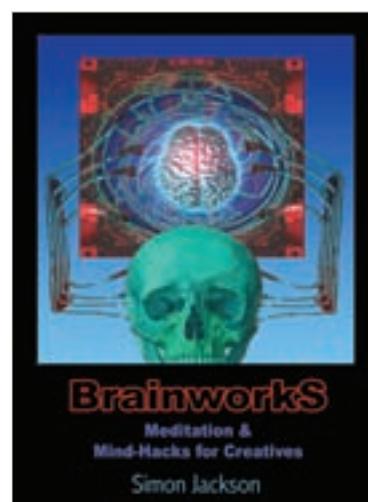
Brainworks: Meditation & Mind-Hacks For Creatives is no doubt less attractive than many of its counterpart publications, however we found it to be quite an enthralling read once started. This title is presented by the informative

and authoritative Simon Jackson, who has 25 years' meditation, hypnosis and NLP experience to match his 30 years in the creative industry in the gaming, journalism and PR industries, making him the perfect candidate to delve inside our minds.

Each case study is related to aspects of stress, the adversity it causes and Jackson's advisory solutions. Fundamentally it's a title that rationalises and resolves such issues for the benefit of those involved in creativity on a daily basis, be it professional or students on an intensive education course. All 15 chapters provide something new, relating topics such as The Loop, showing creatives how to overcome prevarication, seeing creativity in new terms as a flow of interlinked ideas.

There is plenty of scientific credibility to support techniques such as meditation, dieting and relaxation techniques or Chakra, as well as perhaps more exotic techniques such as The Paper Ball Test and generating Metta.

Of course, this will always be a title open to subjectivity and some may feel it's good in theory, less so in practice but again dependent on how much you believe in the practices related. It is definitely not a title for the cynics out there! In all, productivity depends on you, the reader, so if this is a title that seems the answer to all your woes, it's a particular bargain at £12.95 (\$25.59). ■



Summary: This 'lifestyle manual' provides creatives with an informative read. Perhaps not everyone's cup of tea and seemingly subjective it's susceptible to certain responsive readership.

Rating: **3/5**