Helpdesk

Five more readers' problems solved by our in-house expert, including sharpening techniques and optimising Photoshop BY **ADAM SMITH**
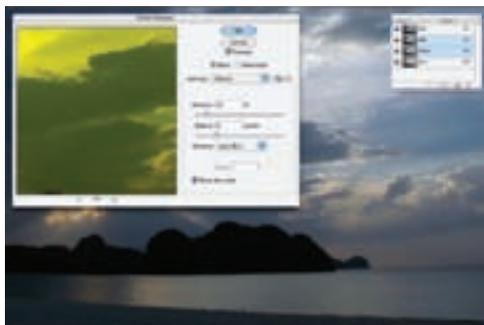

PRE-CS: *Those who use earlier versions than CS can obtain similar effects by using the Unsharp Mask filter*

SHARPEST TOOL IN THE BOX

I'm compiling a set of photographs for my end-of-year show at university and am looking for some handy skills to tidy up my collection. I've been experimenting with contemporary techniques such as draganizing and sharpening my images. But I've found that in some cases these effects severely heighten the amount of noise in an image. Is there a good way to get rid of this?

Charlotte Smith, Portsmouth

Well there is a way to reduce noise simply Charlotte; its effects are noticeable before you apply these types of special effects, but they will still help resolve the majority of issues afterwards. Simply open the photo in question and then select your Channels palette. Activate your Red and Green (RGB) or Magenta, Yellow and Black (CMYK) by Shift-clicking these. Blue/Cyan is the noisiest channel so it has been excluded. Of course, we still wish to see the effects applied to the whole image, so press the '~' key. Now, with all but Blue channel active, select Filter>Sharpen>Smart Sharpen. Your Radius will apply your sharpen effect and Amount will apply the strength of the effect. Set Remove to Lens Blur and activate the More Accurate option. Upon satisfaction your image will seem sharper and less grained.
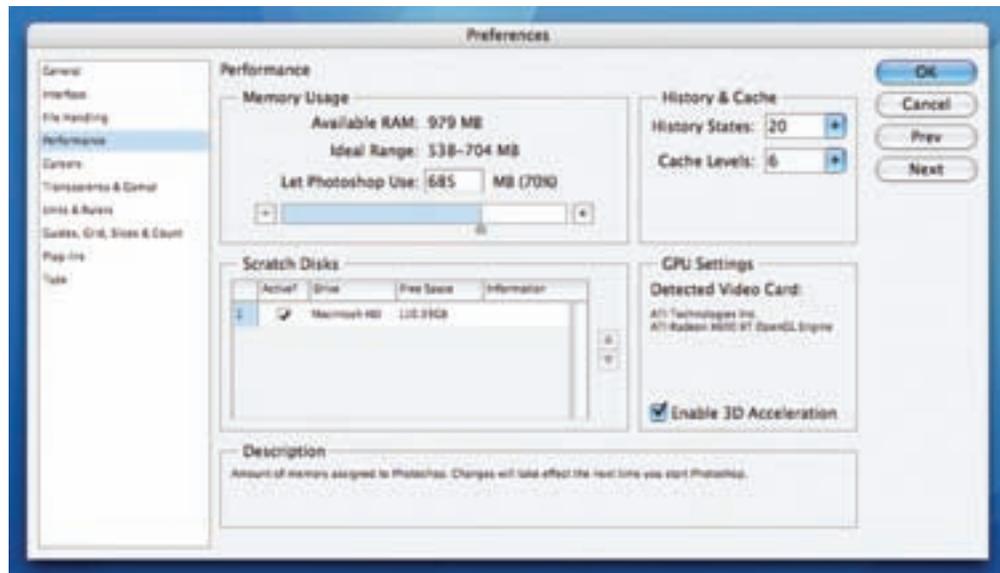
PERFORMANCE

I'm one of those artists who loves experimentation, hating to discard any work I do just in case it could come in handy later. This definitely applies to all my digital work, as Photoshop makes the integration of other imagery so easy. But sometimes my images can be pretty big with loads of layers, and I am bouncing between Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop. Not surprisingly I'm concerned with the performance of my

TOP UP: *If your efficiency percentage runs below 75% maybe think about investing in a bit more RAM*

Photoshop. Is there a way to keep a tab on how it's doing, after designating scratch disk procedures and safeguarding against workflow stalling in hindsight?

Simon Trigg, Leicester

This can be a common problem when multitasking and there are ways of checking that your software, namely Photoshop, is performing to its optimum capacity. It's not uncommon for Photoshop to get a bit slow when involved in large-scale imagery. This could well be due to your machine using more than its capable RAM, spilling into your scratch discs. Basically this means it slows your response time and limits your creative capabilities, as you are aware, Simon.

Designating scratch disks serves a purpose but there are also other options in Photoshop to consider. You can select Preferences>Performance and in this option assign the required RAM preferable to your Photoshop use. The higher the percentage, the more essential Photoshop should be to all other software. Also, when working on your design you can keep an eye on performance by accessing the Document drop-options, selected from the foot of your image. Usually displaying file dimensions, selecting Show>Efficiency

OPACITY LEVELS: *Altering the Opacity of your brush, applied to the Alpha Channel, is essential for precise effects*

MOUSE PROBLEMS

I've been saving up my pennies now for some time and am thinking about changing my office computer to suit my creative needs. I'm looking for a high-end performance mouse to go with it, as a lot of my work is labour-intensive, producing quite a bit of commercial design. I suppose I'm looking for something practical, comfortable with a few new additions to show off to my creative buddies. Any ideas?

Adam T, Manchester

There are plenty of cool, contemporary mouse technologies on the market at the present time, but it is essential to know what suits. The Kensington SlimBlade Trackball Mouse is a great piece of hardware, designed to work anywhere, at any time and on any surface. However, its functions are minimal and for more work-intensive purposes you may wish to purchase the Logitech MX Air Rechargeable Cordless Air Mouse. Sleek and sexy this mouse will complement any expert workstation. It sports maximum comfort through its ergonomic form and offers an alternative to the scroll wheel, a touch-sensitive scroll panel, which offers amazingly fast and accurate scrolling. Its 'Freespace motion sensing' technology allows it to operate in mid-air much like a remote control. Snazzy.

will reveal if Photoshop is running at maximum capacity. 100% will mean certainly, 75% is minimum in such cases.

WORST-KEPT SECRET

I've recently started illustrating using Photoshop. Using its many types of filter effects and brushes, it's really easy and so much fun. However, I am struggling with the Pen tool a bit when I want to create solid and precise shapes. I am practising all the time, but are there ways to master this tool quickly?

Adriel Garcia, San Fernando, LA

Well Adriel, practice makes perfect in the case of the Pen tool. This seemingly simple tool can become a special advantage when digitally illustrating, useful for practices such as cartoon animation and technical illustration among others. However, saying this, there is a slight way to cheat that enthusiasts may not yet be aware of. The Pen tool options do provide a Magnetic Pen tool. This feature isn't presented in the Pen type option. Instead, to access, select the Freeform Pen tool from the Toolbox options. You should then see the Magnetic checkbox. Activate this and you can use this function to intuitively select desired edges.

DEPTH OF FIELD

I am working on some product photography for a friend's website. I am trying to get a good effect when focusing on the product and blurring the boundaries. I have tried the Blur tools, but the effects leave a lot to be desired. I'm sure you guys can think of a more professional effect?

Jake, Swansea

Well, there is one technique Jake, which is simple but effective. Cmd/Ctrl-click your layer thumbnail and then activate your Channels palette. Click the 'Save selection as a channel' button, creating an Alpha Channel. Cmd/Ctrl+D to deactivate your selection and then select a soft-edged brush set to black. Now with your Alpha Channel layer active paint out your product and any other visual value you wish to keep. Activate your Background layer in the Layers palette and select Filter>Blur>Lens Blur. Simply set the Depth Map Source drop option to your Alpha Channel and alter other settings for desired effects. You should now have achieved the technique known as depth of field.