

Lensbabies! Can an Ingeniously Simple Optical Accessory Enhance Your Bottom Line?

by Jason Schneider

Woodbury, NY—In today's excruciatingly electronic, high-tech, digital world, Lensbabies is an intriguing anachronism, a throwback to the bygone era when photography was simple, mechanical and fun. A paragon of low-tech ingenuity, Lensbabies are basically simple 50mm SLR-mount lenses in pleated, flexible mounts of high-grade industrial plastic. They let you position the sharp image "sweet spot" and surrounding area of graduated blur anywhere in the frame you want it.

You can "fluidify the effect" and move the sharp area around by simply bending the flexible lens tubing. They also feature "manual fingertip focusing"—that is focus from about 10 inches to "infinity and beyond" by pushing and pulling the lens in and out on its flexible barrel until you see what you want in the viewfinder! It's the complete antithesis of the current crop of multi-zone autofocus systems. But it's the very essence of the hands-on creative process that appeals to many serious shooters.

A Strong Foundation

Lensbabies, launched at the Wedding and Portrait Photographers International (WPPI) trade show in February 2004, is the brainchild of Craig Strong, an active pro photographer specializing in photojournalistic documentary of weddings, events and families. Strong, now co-CEO of the company, came up with the idea as a way of creating a digital SLR equivalent of the Holga film camera—a mediocre plastic medium-format box camera that's created a cult following among art photographers, who prize its soft, low-contrast imaging.

Professional photographers responded enthusiastically to early Lensbaby prototypes, which were demonstrated at digital photography workshops hosted by Kevin Kubota. Shortly thereafter, Craig Strong and co-CEO Sam Pardue, a marketing professional who formerly worked for Intel, took the corporate plunge, formed

Lensbabies LLC of Portland, Oregon, and went into full-scale production.

Now there are two Lensbabies, the Original (MSRP \$96) and Lensbaby 2.0 (MSRP \$150), both using the same basic patent-applied-for design. And both are available in mounts to fit all popular digital and film SLRs, including Canon EF and FD, Nikon, Pentax K, Olympus E-1, Konica Minolta Maxxum and MD, Olympus OM, Leica R, Sigma, Contax/Yashica and M-42 screw mount.

The Original Lensbaby is an uncoated, single-element, optical glass 50mm *f*/2.8 lens that comes with *f*/4.0, *f*/5.6 and *f*/8.0 aperture discs that mount over the front of the lens and are held in place with a friction-fit rubber gasket. Its yields soft, dreamy effects and its "sweet spot" is sharp, but not too sharp.

A Second Offspring

At the March 2005 WPPI Show in Las Vegas, Lensbabies launched Lensbaby 2.0, a second-generation, selective-focus SLR lens that provides a brighter, sharper image that's easier and quicker to focus. It also offers greater control over the "sweet spot" by

changing the aperture. Lensbaby 2.0 features a coated 50mm *f*/2 optical glass doublet lens made of high refractive index, low-dispersion optical glass. It employs embedded magnets to hold "levitating, magnetically receptive aperture discs" made of metallized plastic that "float above the optic." They can be easily removed with the complimentary Cel-Klear Lenspen that's furnished along with *f*/2.8, *f*/4.0, *f*/5.6 and *f*/8.0 aperture discs as part of the outfit.

"Responsiveness is the essential element of our corporate culture," says Sam Pardue, "and when many photographers said they wanted to create Lensbaby images that had an even sharper sweet spot, we created Lensbaby 2.0 with a much sweeter sweet spot, allowing photographers to print large photos and see fine details like eyelashes and fabric threads."

"Photographers will also find that Lensbaby 2.0 has minimal diffusion even at the *f*/2.0 aperture setting," adds Craig Strong.

Way back in the beginning (that is, a year ago!) Lensbabies relied primarily on direct Internet marketing, but now a large percentage of their sales are made through 60 photo specialty dealers in the U.S. as well as Intro2020, their international representative in the UK.

"This is a unique, high markup item that gives photo specialty retailers a chance to make a healthy profit," notes Sam Pardue, "and we're going all out to establish a brand identity in the marketplace, and to protect our market position by continuing innovation and outstanding customer service. Over the next year we're planning to grow Lensbabies into one of the most recognized and appreciated brands in the photographic



Craig Strong



industry. In the coming months, we want to develop solid relationships with many more specialty photo supply stores throughout North America. Nothing sells a Lensbaby like a hands-on demo, and that's why photo specialty stores should do exceptionally well with our products.

"To sustain and deepen interest in the Lensbabies brand, we will continue to launch innovative new products that are unique, highly useful and above all fun. Of course, everyone claims to be in favor of motherhood and customer service," Pardue wryly observes, "but we have a secret weapon, Kirsten Hunter, whose title is director of Customer Happiness."

With an attitude like that, and a line of fascinating niche products that unleash creativity, we predict a bright future for Lensbabies. And to answer the question posed at the top of the page—yes. This is an ingenious accessory that can enhance your bottom line. Indeed, you can probably make more profit selling a Lensbaby 2.0 than you can by selling a mid-level digital camera! To contact Lensbabies, call 1-877-536-7222 or e-mail kirsten@lensbabies.com. □