

# Baby love



It might look like a relic from the Dalek scrap yard, but the Lensbaby can

bring a whole new element of creativity – and enjoyment – to your photography, as **Jerry Lebens** reveals



**A**TTENDING DAN Burkholder's lecture (*B&W no.35, July 2004, p55*), my attention was drawn to the thing that was stuck to the front of his camera, a Kodak DCS Pro 14n. If it was a lens, then it was the ugliest pup ever to leave the Nikkor kennel – in fact, it looked like something that might drive gentlemen Daleks of a certain age into erotic torments.

Unfortunately, asking what it was

only served to make things worse. In retrospect Dan's response, as I heard it ('It's my lens, baby'), was perfectly reasonable. However, delivered with a soft Texan lilt and imposed upon delicate English sensibilities, it seemed, let's say, a bit over-familiar. Maybe I've watched too many Tennessee Williams screenplays, but you might understand my desire not to question any further. Fortunately, Dan persevered and pushed the offending

**Above** The Lensbaby, as seen on a Nikon F90X (it also fits Canon). It wouldn't look out of place as a washing machine hosepipe, but the concertina effect allows the photographer to move the focus spot around to the appropriate area of the frame

instrument into my hands... and everything became wonderfully clear, if a little out of focus.

The Lensbaby is a lens with supremely iffy optics and, as if that wasn't bad enough, it bends in the middle to boot. It really doesn't sound very promising, does it? But it succeeded in doing the trick of getting me, an old cynic, out and about rediscovering the simple joys of taking pictures just to see how they come out. Heavens – I've even used it on a couple of jobs.



**Left** While shooting promotional images for Circa restaurant, Lewes, I noticed that the view onto the street was busy and distracting. The Lensbaby allowed me to blur the background completely, and create an atmospheric picture of the restaurant itself

## But what IS it?

In a nutshell, the Lensbaby combines the appeal of the uncorrected plastic lens (as with Holga cameras) with the swing/ tilt movements of a large format camera – all in a well constructed package that fits both Nikon or Canon SLRs, film or digital. The 50mm plastic lens gives a delicate ethereal quality to the subject while the ‘bendyness’ allows you to throw the spot of the focus around the frame and, with practise, to throw the plane of focus along unusual directions.

The aperture controls ( $f/4$ ,  $f/5.6$  and  $f/8$ ) are provided in the form of a glorious throwback to the 19th century – little washers, or Waterhouse Stops, that fit over the front element. The stops in turn are held in place, in the opening of the lens barrel, with another thick rubber washer acting as a keeper. Maximum aperture *sans* stops is a creditable  $f/2.8$ , which provides the most ‘impressionistic’ effect. Changing apertures increases sharpness up to  $f/8$ , where fuzziness can just be detected creeping in at the edges of the frame. And I guess there’s nothing to stop you making even smaller apertures if you wish.

Focus is achieved with your fingers pushing and pulling the lens on its flexible mounting. A few minutes practise and you too can be swinging and tilting with the best. A slightly more demanding manoeuvre, pushing the lens away from the camera body, and voila – instant macro... Someday when life is slow I’m going to stick it on an extension tube, just for kicks.

Personally, I’ve used the  $f/2.8$  option for most of the time I’ve had the Lensbaby. I just love the way that objects simply melt away at this setting. (Please, don’t mention this to



**Above** This photograph of model Holly not only was shot with the Lensbaby at  $f/2.8$ , but suffered from a bit of camera shake, too – not that it matters with this device!

Ailsa, but it’s absolutely magic with colour images too – even the fringing caused by the colour aberration looks interesting).

The odd thing is that nobody ‘gets it’ until they’ve had a go, and then you can’t get your camera back. Within moments of looking at the Lensbaby with a barely concealed curled lip, Meister Photographer Joe Cornish was rolling around the floor of Ailsa’s flat with his head stuck into a vase of tulips, taking pictures as if there were no tomorrow. There wasn’t an English

landscape for miles – and they say you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.

According to the packaging, my Lensbaby was born in Portland, Oregon, USA. Whoever is the brains behind it deserves an award for understanding the concept of lateral thinking, and bravely taking a mad, leap further to the left – Bravo! ○

● To find out more about Lensbabies (or even buy one – they’re very reasonably priced at US\$96), visit [www.lensbabies.com](http://www.lensbabies.com)

