

Get bent

Cut loose with a truly flexible lens

Ad agency and editorial art directors aren't particularly interested in seeing conventional images. Plenty of those are available from stock agencies and on royalty-free CDs. They're looking for photographers who can deliver a new look, or photographers with a new technique that will stand out in the clutter of images that inundate consumers. The Lensbaby, brainchild of Portland, Oregon, professional photographer Craig Strong, can help you create such a look. These lenses not only open up new creative avenues, they're lots of fun to use.

Imagine a cross between a bellows-mounted lens with Holga-like image quality and hand-controlled tilt-shift lens, then you have a good idea of what a Lensbaby is. It consists of a single, uncoated lens element mounted in a flexible, accordion bellows. There are versions available for Canon and Nikon film SLRs. They also work with most digital cameras that accept Canon EF-mount or Nikon F-mount lenses. I tested the lens on a Nikon D1X, which is not on the approved list, but it worked fine in Manual mode, or in Aperture priority with +1.0-EV exposure compensation. Of course, checking the histogram with this or any lens is always a good idea.

In "resting" position, the Lensbaby focuses at about 12 inches. Focal length is right around 50mm. To focus at other distances, you use your fingertips to extend the bellows for closer focusing (to about eight inches) or compress it to achieve infinity focus.

Waterhouse stops, held in place in front of the lens element with a rubber washer, provide control over lens aperture. Four openings are available: f/2.8 if the rubber washer is used alone; f/4, f/5.6 and f/8 with different Waterhouse stops.

The unique nature of this lens becomes apparent when you bend the flexible lens tubing to move the sharp central focus area around the image plane. Now those soft edges become soft, blurry streaks, drawing the eye to the sharper area of focus. Distracting details easily blur or blend. Highlights take on a subtle glow, and chromatic aberration forms prismatic color streaks at the edges of the frame. Every bend and twist of the tubing produces a different effect.

Accessories enhance these effects further. The front of the Lensbaby has a 37mm thread, so it accepts filters, close-up lenses and, my favorite, a wide-angle conversion lens. The Sony 0.6 wide-converter camcorder lens (product number VCL-0637H) screws directly onto the Lensbaby. It decreases the focal length to approximately 30mm, but greatly enhances the distortion effect. Chromatic aberration becomes quite visible at the edges of the frame. For something interesting and unique, focus on a distant object with the lens tubing unbent and observe how the sharp focus is no longer on a flat plane, but only in a small area at the center of the image.

While the Lensbaby works on film cameras, it seems better adapted to digital capture. It is, after all, a single-element, uncoated lens.



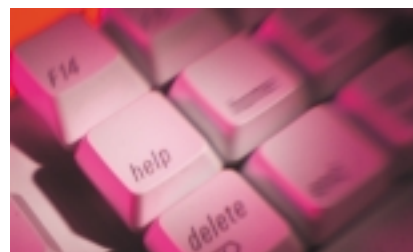
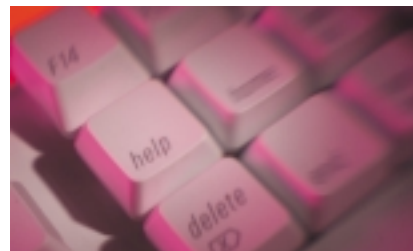
Many photographers, while relishing the ability to control the area of focus, will want to go in and tweak exposure, saturation and contrast to their own taste.

Is it possible to duplicate the look of a Lensbaby image with an image-processing program or third-party digital filters in a conventional photo? Sure, with some effort. But Lensbabies are made for photographers who enjoy creating images in their cameras, who are seeking ways to set themselves apart from their competition with a new look, and who are willing to have fun and experiment with picture making. Lensbabies are available on-line at www.lensbabies.com for \$96 in either Canon or Nikon mount. The company is so sure that you will love it, they offer a 30-day money-back guarantee.

— Stan Sholik



The Lensbaby lets you play with the sweet spot before you take a photo, opening up avenues for your playful creative side.



Because of the simple uncoated lens construction of the Lensbaby, image captures direct from the camera (top) can generally be improved with a boost in saturation and an S-shaped curves adjustment (bottom) in an image-processing program.