

## Squeeze it, stretch it, bend it

### The Lensbaby throws a curve right into the sweet spot

Technology is playing an ever increasing role in the process of creating images, almost to the point of technology overload.

That's why it's refreshing to come across a new product that's simple and fun to use. The Lensbaby, brainchild of professional photographer Craig Strong, of Portland, Ore., is just such a product. Moreover, this lens can help you boost profits by providing a unique perspective in portrait, seniors and wedding photography.

If you can imagine a cross between a bellows-mounted lens with Holga-like image quality and a hand-controlled tilt-

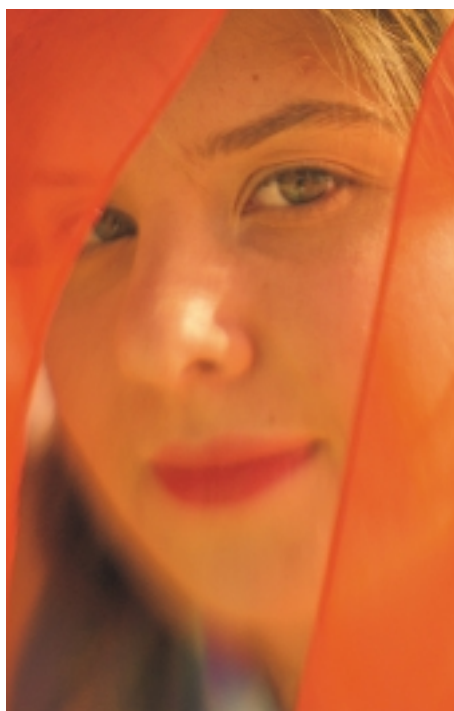
shift lens, you'll have a good idea how the Lensbaby works. It's a single uncoated lens element mounted in a flexible accordion bellows that can be used with all Canon and Nikon film SLRs, as well as most digital cameras that accept Canon EF-mount or Nikon F-mount lenses. I tested the lens on a Nikon D1X—which is not on the approved list—and it worked fine in manual and aperture priority modes with +1.0-EV exposure compensation. As with any lens, checking the histogram when using this product is always a good idea.

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

compress it for focusing at distances out to infinity. You adjust the aperture with a set of Waterhouse stops held in place in front of the lens element with a rubber washer. Four apertures 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 Lensbaby comes with a plastic tool for removing and replacing the rubber gasket and holding the stops in place.

The widest aperture produces an overall diffused, almost impressionistic image, while the minimum aperture produces an image that's fairly sharp at the center and soft at the edges. The lens ships with the  $f/5.6$  stop in place, which is a good place to start. It also comes with a booklet that includes suggestions for using the lens, but once you've looked through the Lensbaby

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The Lensbaby is ideal for encouraging experimentation and creativity. Move the sweet spot at will to create portrait shots that stand out in a crowd.



The Lensbaby works best with digital capture, where it's easy to make post-production tweaks in exposure, saturation and contrast.



on your camera, you'll be looking for subjects to shoot, not reading booklets.

Working with the Lensbaby takes some practice, but even the practice is fun. It begins when you start moving the sharp central focus area around the image plane by bending the flexible lens tubing. Those soft edges now become soft blurs, thus drawing the eye to the area in sharper focus. It's easy to blur or blend distracting details with this lens. Highlights take on a subtle glow, and a chromatic aberration forms prismatic color streaks at the edges of the frame. Every bend and twist of the tubing produces a different effect.

Because no part of the image is as sharp as with a modern multi-element, multi-coated camera lens, the Lensbaby gives your images a completely unique look. They are ideal for portrait photography, as they soften and smooth the skin. In a full-length shot, the viewer's attention is drawn to the face, where the image is sharper; in a closer portrait, the viewer's attention is drawn to the subject's eyes. The possibilities are virtually endless— that is, if your subject will give you time to experiment.

Though you can use the Lensbaby on film cameras, it seems to adapt better to digital capture. For one thing, with all the creative opportunities it presents, you'll tend to shoot copious images. From a practical standpoint, the image quality can be significantly improved post-capture with a digital boost in contrast and saturation. As the Lensbaby is, after all, a single-element, uncoated lens, many photographers— while relishing the ability to control the area of focus—will want to tweak exposure, saturation and contrast to their own taste in post-production.

Is it possible to duplicate the look of a Lensbaby image digitally? Certainly. But the Lensbaby is made for photographers who enjoy creating images in-camera, and who, seeking ways to set themselves apart from their competition, are willing to have fun and experiment with their picture-making.

Available with either a Nikon or Canon mount, the Lensbaby sells for \$96 at [www.lensbabies.com](http://www.lensbabies.com). The company is so sure that you'll love their product, they offer a 30-day money-back guarantee. □