

MZ Soft Focus

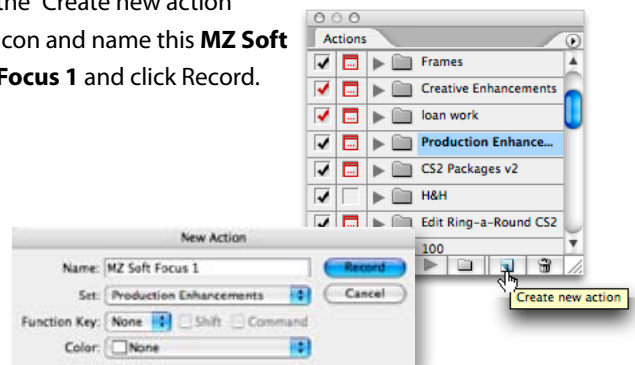
January 1976, day trip to Yosemite Valley. Snow covered most of the earth as I drove Ole Gray, a friends Chevy van missing the driver's window along with no heater, in the freezing cold air to a location near Yosemite. Stopped the van to create images with my Hasselblad using my *chrome ringed* Softar 1 filter that had the perfect amount of scratches to yield unmatched results... Getting back to Modesto and checking my equipment, I noticed that my Softar 1 filter was missing, it wasn't on the lens, case or anywhere in the van. Realizing I must have dropped it at the only location I stopped, my heart sank knowing that losing this one of a kind soft focus filter would bring a certain style of my work to an end.

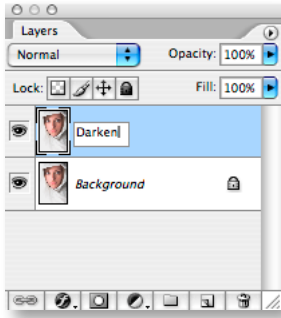


Several decades later, I was teaching a Photoshop workshop at Winona where legendary photographer Monte Zucker had signed up and as Monte was leaving to catch a plane early on Friday, he turned and said "Why doesn't Photoshop have a built in soft focus filter". Well, I took that as a challenge to create what I call the MZ Soft Focus filter technique and for the first time in nearly 20 years, discovered that special Softar 1 (with the perfect amount of scratches) look again, but this time using Photoshop to yield superb results.

In the following steps we'll look at creating an action so first open an image and flatten the layers if needed, bring out your Layers and Action palettes and create a new action set (such as Production Enhancements in the March Issue article x) start to record a new action by selecting the "Create new action"

icon and name this **MZ Soft Focus 1** and click Record.

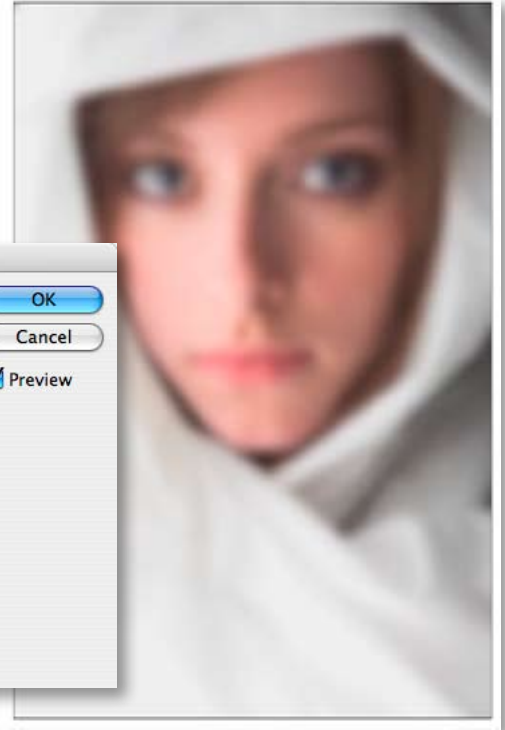




Step 1

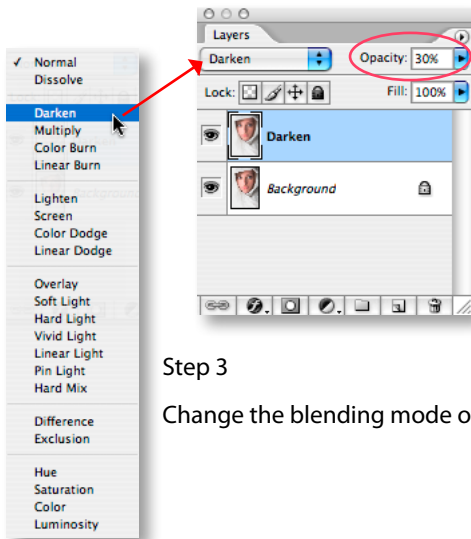
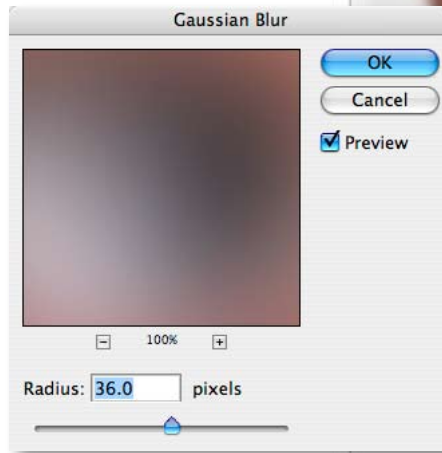
From the Layers palette, select the *Background* layer and type Command J (Mac) or Control J (Windows), this will duplicate the Background layer as **Layer 1**. Double click on the name Layer 1, highlight the name and re-name it "Darken".

Note: Naming the layers is important when recording an Action so there is no conflict if you play the action on a layered file that already had the name "Layer 1".



Step 2

From the Filter menu select Filter > Gaussian Blur. Set the pixel Radius approximately to the size of the file. This file of model Kate Gorney (photographed by Jack Reznicki using a Canon EOS 5D) is about 36 megs, so I used 36 pixel Radius. However, this is one of the optional areas that can be changed in the action later if you prefer a different result.



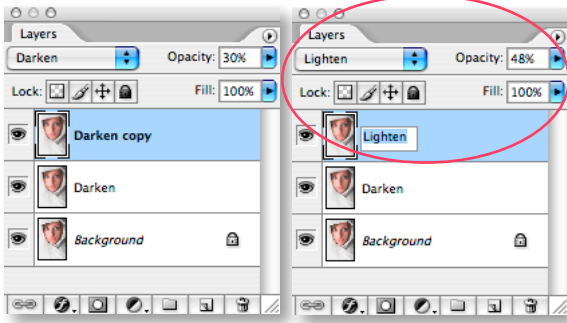
Step 3

Change the blending mode of the Darken layer to Darken and set the opacity to 30%.

Step 4

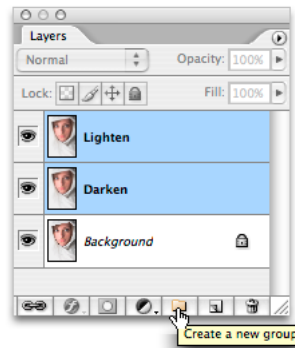
Type Command J (Mac) or Control J (Windows) to duplicate the Darken Layer, double click on the name Darken copy and rename it Lighten. Set the Opacity to around 50% and switch the blend mode to Lighten.

At this point you're starting to see the real beauty of this technique.



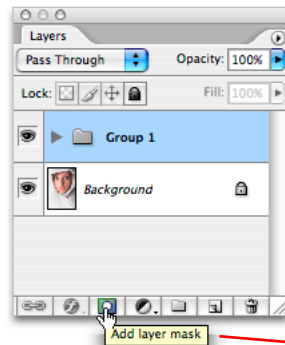
Step 5

Next, hold the Shift key and select both the Lighten and Darken layers, continue to hold the Shift key and click on the **Create a new group** icon at the bottom of the Layers palette. This will position both layers into a Group. It's also a good idea to rename the Group for the sake of the Action.



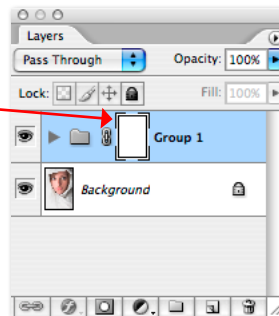
Step 6

Create a layer mask for the Group by selecting the **Add layer mask** icon at the bottom of the Layers palette.



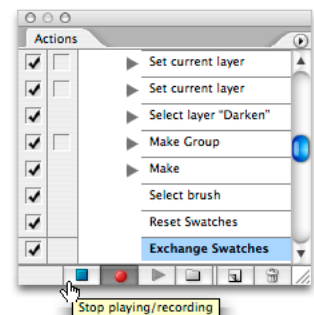
Step 7

In the Tools palette, select the Move tool and then select the Brush Tool, this will allow the Action to select the Brush tool when you play the action and ready to paint back sharpness as in Step 9.



Step 8

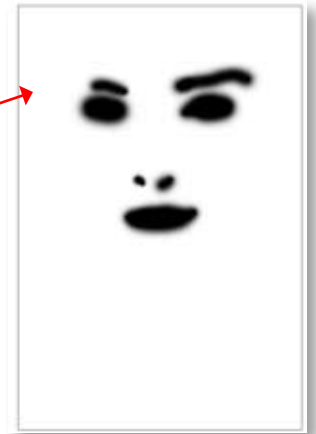
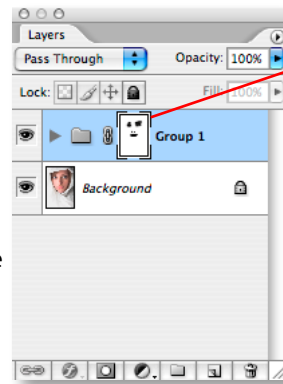
Type the "d" key to default the colors and then type the letter "x" to switch black to the front. Stop recording the Action by selecting the square to the left of the red circle in the Actions palette. At least this is all you need the Action to do as the next step requires using the Brush tool.





Step 9

Zoom your image to the 100% zoom ratio (double click on the Zoom tool in the Tool palette, or use keyboard short cuts) and paint black on the white mask, you can paint over areas that you want to have extra sharpness such as the eyes, nostrils, lips and as Monte suggest, sometimes hair highlights and jewelry. Here you can experiment a bit by using various opacities, brush size and edge and if you use a Wacom tablet you'll find it fast and easy to vary brush size with your brush stroke when painting these areas.



At this point, you have successfully created a beautiful MZ Soft Focus 1 effect that rivals my lost Softar 1 filter.

MZ Soft Focus 1, 2 & 3:

With some images you may want to decrease the opacity setting of the group and with other images you may want to increase the amount of soft focus. To create the MZ Soft Focus 2 and MZ Soft Focus 3 filter effects, all you have to do is duplicate the Group. Drag the soft focus Group to the icon next to the little trash can to make a copy, and once again to make a 2nd copy if you want to increase the soft focus effect.

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What's so different about this technique is using the two blending modes, darken and lighten at various opacities that, by the way, can certainly be adjusted one way or the other if you edit your action (or modify after the Action using the Group Opacity control. Back when we shot film, a soft focus filter would diffuse the highlight region and if you printed using a diffused printing technique (diffusing under the enlarger lens), it would diffuse primarily the shadow region. The MZ Soft Focus filter serves both regions with optional controls.

Shooting with soft focus filter when using a digital camera can cause the digital file to be too flat and irratreaveably diffused, and if you wanted to sharpen up areas such as the eyes, it would mandate having to apply advanced techniques that would not yield as good of pixel quality as it would using the MZ technique. Oh, and by the way, I think you'll love the results especially when you see the actual print.

Yes, each time I visit Yosemite Valley these days I attempt to find the exact location I shot from to look for that Softar 1 filter, I know it must still be there and one day hope to find it, not to use but to frame.

