

The Modern Man from Mars action is almost the signature move of the Picture Postcard Workflow. It adds color and contrast variation, as opposed to simply intensifying everything. As with the original curve-based Man from Mars Method, the MMM works in LAB (the conversion is automatic) and assumes that no major color cast exists. It remains the most powerful method when confronted by dominance by a single color. The general rule is: if color variation in the critical object(s) is more important than hue fidelity, MMM will shine.

MMM works hand in hand with the Color Boost action, which intensifies color without changing hue. For convenience, most experienced users prefer to combine the two into a single action called MMM + CB. Each action can also be run separately, however.

**Figures 1, 2, and 3.** The original, a screen grab showing the quick selection of the lake, and the results of playing the MMM Action at its default settings.

It may seem simpler at first to do it that way. Also, an important addition to the MMM action in v3 of the PPW panel (2013) lets us do creative experimentation somewhat more flexibly than in MMM + CB.

Each of the three actions—MMM, CB, MMM + CB—has its own documentation. Right now, therefore, we will assume that we have decided to use MMM only. The procedure is as follows:

- Using the lasso tool or any other method of your choice, including Select All, make a selection indicating the area(s) of greatest importance. *The effect of this action is global. It is not limited to the selected area. It does not have to correspond to any object, but can be as rough as you please.* The selection is only to give Photoshop an idea of what the ranges of the important areas are.





- Play the action.
- Adjust a couple of sliders as you see fit.

Figures 1-3 show how it works. Figure 1 is the original. In my opinion, the water is the key area. That's where I'd like to see the most variation. Therefore, in Figure 2, I lasso a selection of what I consider to be the most significant part of the lake.

Now, just play the action. Figure 3, the result, is very similar to a traditional Man from Mars move. There's now exceptional color variation in the lake, which was the whole idea.

Three quick advisories that also apply to traditional Man from Mars: first, eliminate obvious color problems. To show why this is a necessary rule, I deliberately did not do so here. The original's background has a mild blue cast. In Figure 3 it now has a *big* blue cast that will require needless attention later.

Second, both modern and traditional Man from Mars are violent moves. The A and B channels of LAB, which the method attacks, are often noisy. Before applying the action, you should check them to see if you should hit them with the Surface Blur or Dust & Scratches filter.

Third, every picture responds to this technique differently. The defaults allow room to play with the opacity of both color and detail. They'll get you in the neighborhood, but you shouldn't accept them as gospel—particularly if, you plan to intensify color further using the Color Boost action or something similar.

Finally, this action converts to LAB by itself if you are not there already. So, if you apply it in RGB, the Action works (it will prompt you immediately to flatten the file, if necessary) but the final result will be LAB. Also, the action deselects the area that you have chosen, to prevent awkwardness later.

To repeat: *an initial selection is required*. If you want the action to use the entire file as the source of its calculation, do a Select All. In fact, if you are applying the action through the PPW panel and have forgotten to make a selection, the panel will remind you and ask whether you wish to use Select All.

*Tip:* The MMM Luminosity (detail) layer has a mask that reduces loss in shadows and highlights. Nevertheless, it's often wise to run the Shadows/Highlights command after this action.

**Figures 4 and 5.** The original image and the lassoed selection that deliberately includes the yellow stamens.



## The White Flower

The ability to specify a range of tone rather than a single pivot point has important advantages. Figure 4 is not a good candidate for traditional Man from Mars. Since overall the flower must be neutral, a single pivot point would have to be at 0A0B. If so, there would be little difference from running the Color Boost Action or any standard LAB correction, all of which normally hold neutrality.

Although one would describe the flower as neutral, it is in fact not neutral throughout. The stamens in the center are distinctly yellow. An appropriate selection (Figure 5) allows the Action to force the petals and stamens apart. Figures 6 and 7 compare the MMM Action with as close as I can come to it using the Color Boost action. Note the superior color variation in Figure 6 within the flower itself. If we look at the whole picture and not just the flower, however, Figure 7 is actually more colorful. Notice the bright red at top, and the brighter greens. This extra brightness in the background isn't helpful.

*Tip:* The MMM Color layer has a mask that sup-

presses color changes in neutral areas. Without it, unpleasant things such as pink clouds in a shot of a green landscape are likely to occur. Suppressing neutral changes is correct nine times out of ten. The tenth is when the interest object is itself nearly neutral, as this flower is. In that case, the mask should be disabled (to do so, Shift-click its icon in the Layers palette.)

## Noncontiguous Selections

The action does not require that the area(s) selected be contiguous. That's helpful when dealing with multiple objects, especially shots of people of different ethnicity, but even children of the same parents can have radically different skintones, as Figure 8 shows.

Readers may be aware that my late mother's ancestry was Scots (Wallace clan, if you must know). She was born in Oklahoma in 1924, twelve years after that state was admitted into the Union. Previously, the region had been known as Indian Territory. Her ancestors had lived there since about 1840.

In that area and that era, intermarriage was com-

**Figures 6 and 7.** The results of the MMM Action compared to those of the Color Boost Action.



mon, so my mother had somewhere between 15 and 20 percent Indian blood, mostly Chickasaw, to go along with the lighter-skinned Scots component. As Figure 8 shows, her son inherited one type of skin-tone, and her daughter, seated at right, another.

Cameras don't put as much color variation in flesh-tones as we would like. The original Man from Mars Method was based on a skintone example, and some of its most impressive results come with people. Nevertheless, having this much variety in individuals can be problematic.

Yet to be investigated is the use of Select: Select

Color Range or some blended channel as the required selection for the MMM Action. Simpler, however, is the method shown in Figure 9: multiple lasso selections, choosing an area from each person with enough exposed skin to do so.

The default settings produce Figure 10. Let's now consider options.

## The Layering Options

Playing the Action produces a document with three layers, two of which are grouped.



**Figures 8 through 12.** The original; the multiple selections; the default result of the MMM action; the L channel layer is turned off to restore the original contrast; the opacity of the Color layer is doubled to see what the layer is doing. Right, the Layers palette immediately after the action runs.

8



9



10



11



12



Top to bottom, the structure is:

- A group containing the two layers beneath, allowing us to toggle the entire effect back to the original.
- The MMM Color layer, with a saturation mask that prevents changes in neutrals, set to 30% opacity.
- The MMM Luminosity layer, set to 30% opacity. There is a mask to deter blowing out highlights and/or plugging of shadows.
- The original.

The options are obvious: you can adjust the opacity of the two layers, up or down; you can alter or disable the layer masks.

Play around with these settings however and in whatever order you like. My own current practices are as follows:

- Check out the impact of turning off the luminosity layer. Unless you've made a poor selection, you're probably going to make some use of the MMM Color layer. The MMM Luminosity layer is usually helpful, but not always. In my opinion, it isn't in this image. Figure 11 has the luminosity turned off. You could split the difference between it and Figure 10 if you like, but as far as I'm concerned we're better off sticking with Figure 11.
- After making the luminosity decision, I always check the impact of an unreasonable increase in opacity of the color layer. In Figure 12 I have done this, hiking opacity to 60%. I want to see what sort of trouble this MMM is going to get me into, if exaggerated. So I am looking for specific problem areas in Figure 12, to help me decide whether I should back off

**Figures 13 through 16.** The original; the Action run using Select All as the selection; run instead with fleshtone selected as shown; run a third time with face and dress selected as shown.



the original opacity and rely more on the Color Boost action.

## The Impact of the Selection

It's easy to lasso the desired area. The problem is deciding what the desired area is.

This action is new. However, it is based on an ancient command, one that has been neglected as useless for nearly two decades.

Those familiar with my writings know of my contempt for the use of the histogram in color correction. It has no value in any of the methods I've taught. I am convinced that, in view of all the misunderstandings the histogram has caused, that we would all have been far better off if no histogram had ever been included in Photoshop in the first place.

Nevertheless, when given a tool, we should exploit it if possible, and if it turns out that we have stupidly not been exploiting it for twenty years, then it doesn't help to blame Photoshop.

Anyhow: the Image: Adjust>Equalize command tries for a balanced histogram: equal numbers of



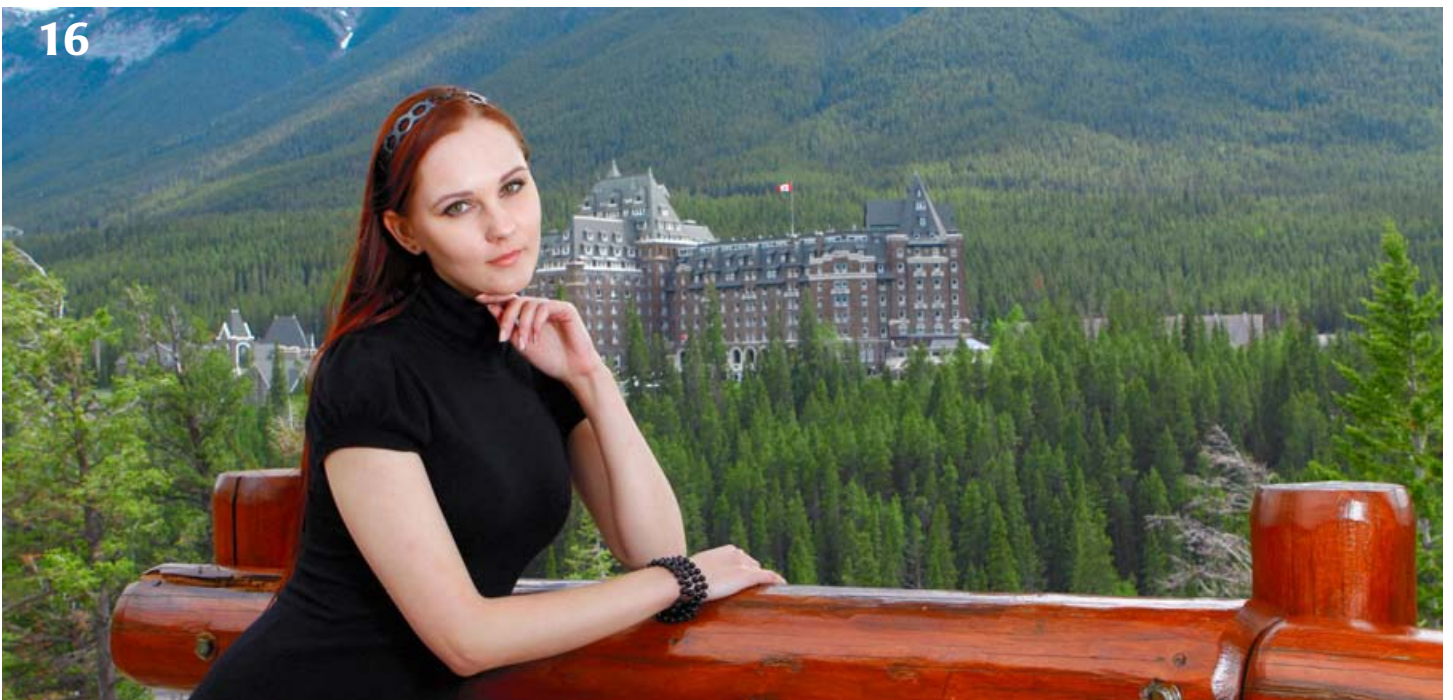
14



15



16



pixels at every point. Just as many pixels at a value of 10% as at 40%, 70%, or 98%. If applied in RGB, the balanced histogram occurs in terms of the darkness of the image, not channel by channel.

This is a surpassingly stupid way to correct an image. It forces contrast into whatever occupies the largest area, which is often a worthless background. It is also a great way to add noise to areas of similar darkness, like skies, as it attempts to spread them out to fill its preconceived notion of what a histogram should look like.

The above comments apply if nothing is selected, or if the selection is a Select: Select All. However, when there is a selection of something other than the whole picture, and Equalize is invoked, it offers the option of balancing the histogram within the selected area *but applying the same move to the entire image*.

This again sounds like idiocy. If, for example, we select the faces as shown in Figure 9 and then apply Equalize, the lightest parts of the skin become pure white, the darkest pure black, and the rest evenly distributed between the two. Everything else in the picture gets either blown out or becomes pure black, unless it happens to be in the same tonal range as the skin.

If, however, the move is made at a very low opacity, it can be effective, particularly when color and luminosity are treated as separate items. Testing shows a decisive advantage to applying the move in LAB rather than RGB, so the action automatically converts files to LAB if they are not there already.

Figure 13, an uncorrected image, can help explain the impact of the choice of selection. In the three variants that follow, I've doubled the opacities of the color and luminosity layers to 60% apiece so that the differences will be more visible.

In Figure 14, the selection was simply a Select All (remember, some selection is always required, even if you intend the action to take its bearings from the entire image). The result demonstrates the futility of relying on histograms in standard color correction. Trees cover much more area than anything else. Therefore, the action presumes they are the most important part of the picture. They get great contrast and color variation. What happens to the woman's face is not so attractive.

It's clear that we should select something other than the whole image, but several options present themselves, of which I'll show two. The most obvious choice is to select the fleshtone, which produces Figure 15. If holding detail in the dress is important,

then Figure 16 may be a better alternative, based on a selection that is half face, half dress. Depending upon your objectives, you might also consider selecting some of the hair, or the background hotel.

Leaving those options aside, compare Figures 15 and 16. The luminosity variation is easiest to understand. Figure 16 has added detail to the dress. The face has gained depth as well, but not to the extent of Figure 15, where the action did not worry about holding the dress. In both, the additional contrast comes at the expense of the background trees. Compare them to the detail found in Figure 14.

## Woman From Mars, Traditional and Modern

The color variation is trickier and merits more examination. First, consider the average color of each selected area, remembering that spreading it out will cause most other things to move away from it, usually in what we would call the opposite direction.

- In Figure 14, where the selection is the entire image, the A channel is slightly more green than magenta. There are a lot of trees, yes, but the fence, the face, and the hotel partially offset them. The B channel, however, is strongly more yellow than blue, because the trees, the fence, the hotel, and the face are all significantly yellow. Consequently we expect a slight shift toward magenta and a stronger one toward blue. The model's face became purpler as a result.
- Figure 15 considers only the fleshtone, which is much more magenta than green, and almost as much more yellow than blue. The effect should be to cool the background—it gets more green and more blue, to drive it away from the reds of the fleshtone. Note the strong color variation now in the face. The forehead becomes cooler, the lips and cheeks warmer. Note also the massive gain in depth of the face—enough so to be objectionable. Bringing out that much detail is OK in almost any kind of picture except a young person's face. The added detail suggests ruggedness, age, which I doubt that this professional model wants us to suggest.

- Figure 16 is half flesh and half black dress. The average color of the selection is therefore the same as in Figure 15, except only about half as red. In principle the color shift of the background should be the same but not as intense; in practice it seems *more* intense.

To understand why, think of what Equalize is trying to accomplish. Suppose that the selection in Figure 16 consists of exactly half black pixels and half flesh-colored. Equalize attempts to have a balanced histogram, and the dress is clearly more green, less ma-

genta, than the flesh is. So, before all the toning down that the action imposes, the dress would occupy the entire green half of the A channel, and the flesh the entire magenta half. Similarly, the dress would occupy the entire blue half of the B, and the flesh the entire yellow half.

Figure 15, however, is based only on the flesh, without the contaminating effect of the dress. The balanced histogram therefore requires that half of the flesh fall on the green/blue side and half on the magenta/yellow.

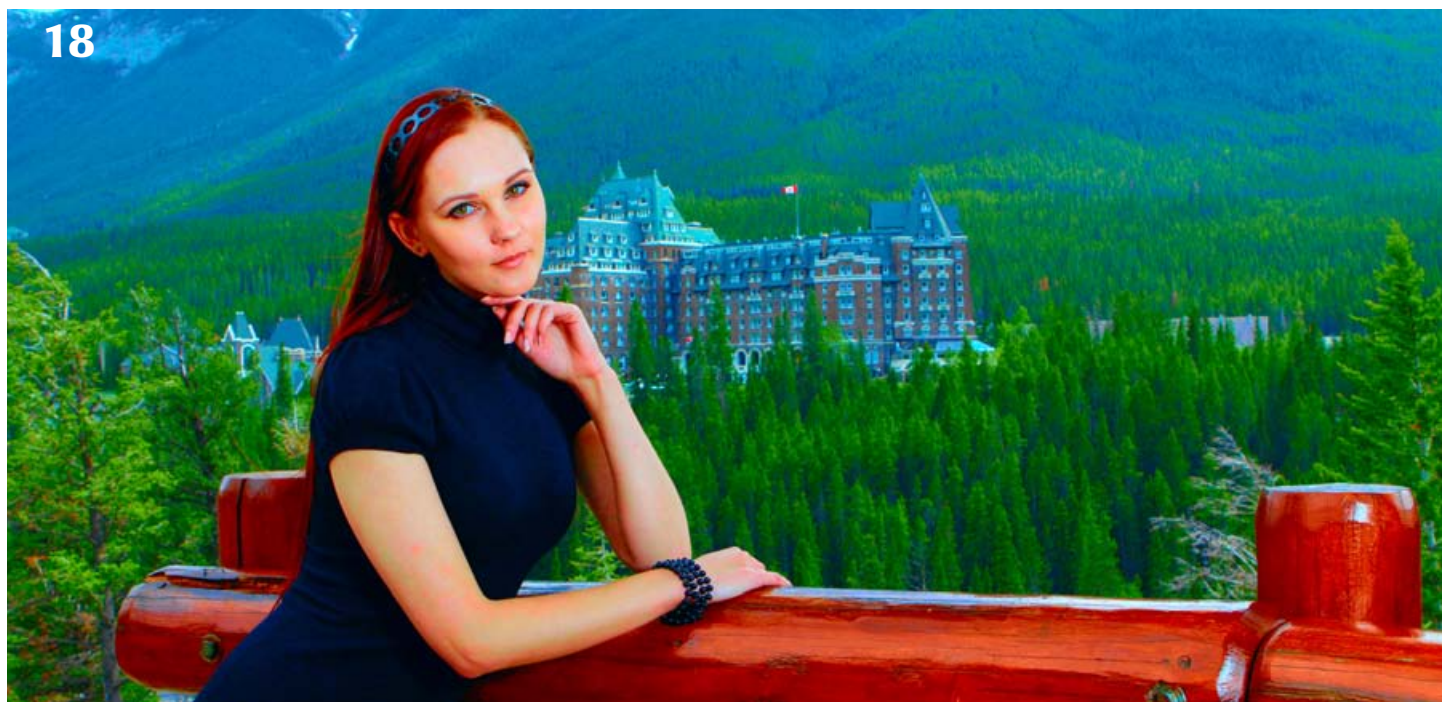
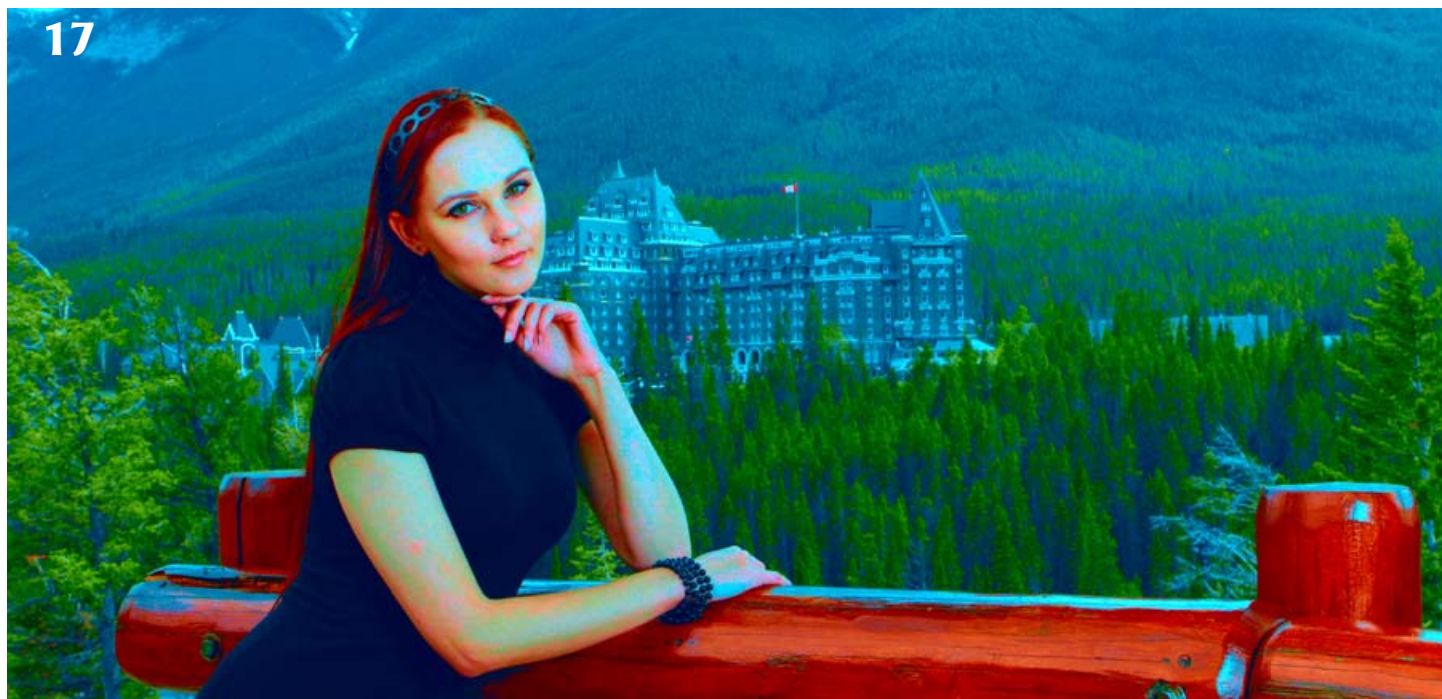
Figures 17 and 18 show what's going on behind the scenes. They are color-only variants, the luminosity changes having been discarded. The color effect is

roughly ten times as much as in their counterparts.

Although both versions were produced by the action, Figure 17 is most faithful to the original Man from Mars Method. The skin coloring is forced apart, not simply made redder. Parts have become ridiculously red, yes, but others have become Martian green. When the effect is drastically reduced, the sensation is lifelike.

Figure 18 bears the same relationship to Figure 16 as 17 does to 15. The blue and green areas of the skin are gone, because the Action has reserved the entire blue/green half of the picture for the dress. True, certain parts of the face are now slightly less red than in the original, but on the whole the face must now

**Figures 17 and 18.** Greatly exaggerated, these two show the direction of the color moves in Figures 15 and 16, respectively. Luminosity changes have been excluded.



be considered more red. Also, the trees are much more colorful. They have a strong yellow component, and it is being driven to be more saturated for the same reason that the face is.

Figure 17's face is *not* more red. Parts are, yes, but overall it's close to the original color. The background is quite a bit colder than Figure 18, which gives the trees less of an overpowering color.

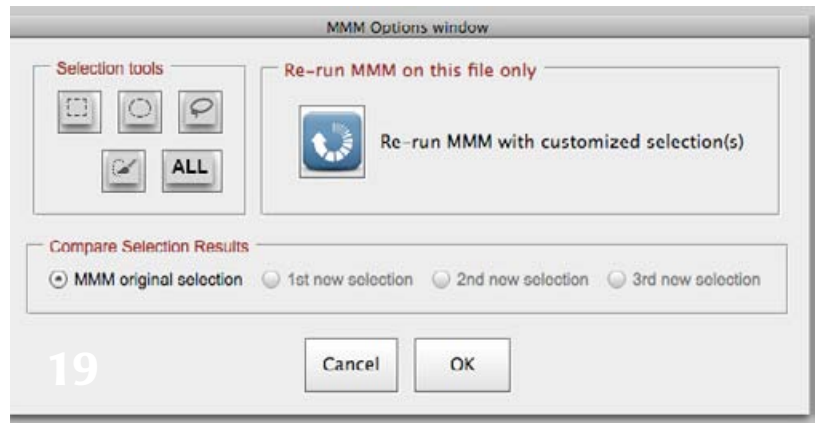
Now that we understand the difference between the two versions, we can start to make subjective decisions. Remember, neither Figures 15 nor 16 is supposed to represent a final version. We would apply the Color Boost action, or something similar, later to intensify everything. When we do that, some of the defects, if you can call them that, of these two versions may be magnified.

This model has a pale complexion. Studies have made clear that many prefer, and consider more accurate, a more golden skintone, perhaps something along the road to Figure 18. As for the forest, I have played with this picture on the Applied Color Theory list, and produced a much more colorful version of Figure 16. I commented that the greens had become unrealistic, but attractive. The photographer agreed, saying that the vivid greens didn't match the original scene, but gave a fairy-tale appearance that he personally liked better. Other viewers disagreed. Your own views, of course, may vary, which is why color correction can be so much fun.

## Current Impressions

This action can improve a lot of images, some of them decisively. Anybody should be able to get good results from it. Exploiting it fully takes study. I've gotten several surprises over the years in working with it. Here's my current advice from the school of hard knocks, use at your own risk.

- I trash the MMM Luminosity layer around a quarter of the time. I don't chuck the MMM Color layer as frequently, but I often reduce its opacity sharply.
- The biggest mistake I made when first using this was trying to get too much out of it. This is not an action designed to give a final result. Be conservative with the settings and plan to boost color in a more conventional method later.
- Beware the MMM Luminosity layer in skintone images, it can make them too harsh, as I think it did in Figure 15.
- Always remember that MMM can shift colors. It's



**Figure 19.** The MMM options window, new in v3 of the PPW panel.

a good idea to test by swinging the MMM Color slider out to 75% or so to see what dangers are lurking.

- Objects with a lot of detail accept this action better than relatively flat ones. The detail seems to disguise the unrealistic colors, just as it disguises halos from various sharpening methods. Skies, and large areas of pavement, can be particular problems.
- The action is easy enough for almost anyone to get reasonable results with it. If you are looking for something better than reasonable, we have enough experience now to say that even people who are very experienced with this action have trouble predicting the impact of changes in the selection. In response, version 3 of the PPW panel introduces a major improvement, the dialog shown in Figure 19, accessed by Option-clicking the MMM button. It allows you to preview the effect of using a different selection, without losing the ability to revert to the first. In fact, you can store as many as four trial selections. When ready for a new preview, click the Re-run button. This procedure can transform MMM into a powerful creative tool for high-value images where it is unclear what look you or the client really wants.
- The presence of significant shadow detail is an argument in favor of using a higher opacity for the MMM Luminosity layer, or for altering the layer mask to permit more of an effect in the shadows.
- When in doubt as to what area to select, do a Select All.

Enjoy!