

The Picture Postcard Workflow caters to the human preference for vivid, happy colors. It deliberately forces in too much color and then has several strategies for keeping the most appealing areas while toning down the rest.

The idea is successful because generally people accept colors more intense in print than in nature. This is particularly so in landscape photography, where greenery seems too dull unless we ramp up the saturation.

The glaring exception is in portrayal of human skin. We have almost no tolerance for adding redness beyond what nature put there.

In the workflow's first three years I took the position that faces should be treated like anything else: if making it colorful is too obnoxious, figure out how to make a layer mask to tone it down.

That position was too doctrinaire. Its results weren't bad, but I now know that I should have said that skintone should be desaturated as a matter of course so that the rest of the workflow doesn't make it too red.

The timing of this action is open for discussion. It operates in LAB, so I think at this point that the logical place to apply it is prior to the Modern Man from Mars and Color Boost actions that enhance color in all PPW images.

I wanted to have an action strong enough to have the desired effect yet weak enough that the default settings would not be excessive. Figure 1 is the original; 2 is the action's default. Figure 3 shows how far the action can be pushed without altering the basic settings that let it identify what a fleshtone is.

Notice that the identification is not perfect. It has achieved the difficult task of distinguishing the skin (excepting the lips) from the hat, which is also red. It has unfortunately included the hair, though.

That's about what might be expected. A similar action that isolates skies is much more successful at excluding other things. Then again, when the sky was young, it did not have to worry about predators coming along and eating it. Our ancestors did, and they wisely chose for us a color we share with a number of other things in nature.

Nevertheless, the action, which has not changed

in version 3 of the PPW panel, is sophisticated. You are unlikely to be bothered by its imperfections unless you start trying to apply it after the correction is complete, as in the case of an extremely important portrait.

The action consists of a Hue/Saturation adjustment layer in LAB. The definition of Reds is customized to favor pinker tones and that color is then desaturated. There are also Blend If alterations to the A and B channels to exclude objects that are too strongly or too weakly red or yellow to be likely flesh-tones. The layer arrives with a default opacity of 60%, so there is room to maneuver without having to open the H/S dialog.

Personally, however, I don't think it's a worthwhile use of time to adjust these settings. There's ample flexibility later on, so I just use the defaults each time I encounter a picture featuring skintones.

The Case for Desaturation

Consider Figure 4 which, like Figure 1, is professional photography. One expects the color to be reasonable out of the box, and it is in both cases. But of course we always look to improve it.

Figure 5 slams Figure 4 with a hefty dose of the MMM + CB action. This version is obviously done to prove a point, and in fact it proves two. The first is that although it seems counterintuitive to desaturate, there is no disadvantage in doing so, even when the original skin is as pale as this woman's. The PPW is capable of producing vastly more color than anyone would ever want. It laughs off the desaturation; it's still possible to make the image much too colorful.

The second is simply to reinforce the idea that redness is bad in fleshtones. Figure 5 introduces color variation, which can be a Very Good Thing in faces. Certainly we don't want this much of it; it's going to be reduced drastically. But try to imagine how that will look. Would you guess that the added redness will seem more offensive than the move toward blue in, say, the forehead?

I certainly would. Therefore, I would run the Skin Desaturation action on the original, producing Figure 6. From that, we can produce Figure 7, using the same



Figures 1, 2, and 3. The original, a default application of the Skin Desaturation action, and a version where the desaturation is pushed to the max.

techniques as in Figure 5 albeit at enormously lower settings.

The comparison should now be the original, Figure 4, to Figure 7. I find Figure 7 more realistic. It makes Figure 4 look flat. However, Figure 7 is already on the verge of going too red, in my opinion. And remember, the move was applied not to Figure 4 but to the grayer Figure 6. Without that desaturation step, we might still have been able to produce some attractive variation but nothing like what is shown in Figure 7.

In both of the portraits shown here, there wasn't any need to worry about intensifying the background color. Everything in the background of Figure 1 is already bright and everything in the background of Figure 4 should look subdued. So neither background benefits from a PPW treatment.

We will now look at one that does. It also shows faces much smaller than these first two. Smaller faces don't benefit much from color variation, but they are if anything even more subject to the danger of getting too red.

The original is Figure 8, and we will apply the entire







Figures 8–11. The original; curves applied to minimize a mild red cast; curves and blending applied to alter luminosity; the Skin Desaturation action is applied. **Figures 12, 13, and 14** (next pages): the original repeated; a final PPW correction; the same correction repeated for convenience; and a version prepared in exactly the same way except using Figure 10 rather than 11 as a base.

PPW. Figure 9 uses RGB curves in Color mode to adjust a mild pink cast found in the original. The scene suggests warmth, so I wouldn't want to eliminate the redness altogether.

Figure 10 uses the color of 9 as a base, and blending and curving to achieve better detail. And now we have reached the moment of truth.

Since there are fleshtones present, I say we should run the Skin Desaturation action to produce Figure 11. Temporarily this makes the picture look worse, but the question is how things look at the end.

Going to a larger size for easier evaluation, Figure 12 repeats the original. Figure 13 is the full PPW correction, including the Skin Desaturation action. Then Figure 13 is repeated for convenience in comparing it to Figure 14, which was produced in precisely the same way except that the action was omitted. That is, Figure 14 applies MMM and Color Boost to Figure 10,

while Figure 13 applies them to Figure 11.

The original greenery was rather dull. In most contexts we prefer something more romantic and colorful. Both Figures 13 and 14 provide that—but in Figure 14 the price is very high. Unless you're willing to accept its fleshtones, you should give thought to using this action before attacking overall color.

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For the first three years of the PPW, I tried to deal with overly red fleshtones on an ad hoc basis during the application of the Color Boost action. I would like to thank Stephen Marsh for suggesting the better alternative of a generalized action to desaturate fleshtones.

Figures 4–8 (opposite). The original; an exaggerated version showing how much color variation the PPW can put into that original; the action defaults applied to the original; and a version placing more color variation into 6.



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