Editing Selected Areas- Part II

by Dennis Wilkins

Picture Window and Picture Window Pro provide two functions that enable combining images, or parts of images. These are the **Composite** transformation and **Stack Images** transformation. In some cases, you can choose one or the other method to obtain the same result, but other situations will require choosing only one. The **Stack Images** tool is new to Picture Window Pro 3.5 and provides combining two or more images (up to five at once) based on Density Masks (these use a form of brightness curve control) and Amount Masks (like used with the Rocky Mountain creek image to control the intensity of the effect or totally mask off parts of an image).

The **Stack Images** tool is intended to combine two otherwise identical images that have different brightness ranges, such as two different exposures captured with a digital camera, one capturing shadow detail but "burning out" highlights, the other capturing the highlights. It can also be used for creative "graphic-arts" effects to blend images.

The **Composite** transformation is a general purpose image combining tool that includes Amount Masks to isolate what area of an image is used, but does not have Density Masks. On the other hand, the **Composite** transformation has very flexible Alignment capabilities that enables shifting the position of one image relative to the other. In fact there are six different alignment methods in addition to "none" ("none" simply combines the two images directly over one another, aligned at the lower left corner if the Overlay image is smaller than the Input image).

The image below was captured in the Rocky Mountains above Vail, Colorado, and suffers from overexposed clouds and compressed tones in what were very bright Aspen leaves. Digital cameras and slide film have limited dynamic range and often force you to either overexpose bright areas or underexpose the darker areas of an image.



Although this seems like a perfect candidate for the **Stack Images** tool, in this case it was not. The reason is that another, darker exposure was not made right away. The clouds changed position between exposures, which could be taken care of with Amount Masks, but worse, the two images are not framed exactly the same way. Here is the dark exposure . . .



Although they look identical in these small-scale views, upon close inspection, the dark image is slightly higher and shifted to the right compared to the light image. Since the **Stack Images** tool does not allow shifting images, the **Composite** transformation is the way to put the darker sky & clouds with the lighter trees & mountains.

To combine these two images with the **Composite** transformation tool will require making a mask to separate sky from land. Since the tree line is very complex, the paint tool with "Apply to Similar Pixels (Track)" is the best approach. You could paint either the sky or the tree line – the tree line was chosen here.



Next you need to fill in the rest of the frame using either a large paintbrush (with "Apply to All Pixels" set) or the Freehand Outline tool. This has been done as shown below. The resulting mask should be saved since you may need it for several operations.



Once a mask is made, you are ready to combine the two images. With one image selected as the "Input Image", clicking the **Composite** transformation tool will show the following desktop . . .



Here we see the light image as the Input Image and no images selected for the Overlay or Amount Masks. Remember, you need to have any window you wish to use for a mask or for the overlay opened on the desktop in order for it to show up in the selection list when you click the mask or overlay button. In this case, both the mask made above and the dark image were open, so they may be selected by the appropriate buttons as shown below . . .



The Amount Mask was selected for the Overlay image rather than for the Input Image so that the sky area of the darker image will be "on top" of the Input Image. We need this so that the images can be shifted to cover the difference in the framing of the two images. Note that the black Overlay Amount slider was moved to 100% and the white slider moved to 0%. Also, the Alignment window has been changed from "None" to 1-point (shift)". This will show handles on the Input Image as can be seen in the lower left corner of the image above. This allows the offset of the two images to be adjusted by moving one relative to the other.

It is best to select "Auto" preview and enlarge the preview image (use the + button after selecting the preview window) to 1:1 or even 2:1 so you can see the "edge" where the two images are overlapping. When the alignment is good, click OK in the **Composite** window and a new window will be created with the combined images . . .



Since the images were shifted a little, you can see a light blue line on the top and at the right of the composited image. This can be removed by cropping or using the clone tool (which I did as will be seen in "Untitled 4 – Vail_063" in the next desktop view). The image is nearly finished, but the Aspen trees when I took the original picture were very bright, although they were in partial shade of some clouds. I want to make them brighter and improve the detail in the leaves. There are several ways to do this, but I'll use a "contrast mask" as was shown in the first section on masking. Such a mask, made using the Brightness Curve mode of the Mask window, can provide fine nonlinear control of brightness and saturation.

To make a "contrast mask" open the Mask tool window and select the Brightness Curve button (right-most mask tool button). You can click the "eyedropper" button on the Brightness Curve tool set and then view the brightness range of the foreground trees – I found it fell between the top (rightmost) levels and about three divisions of the histogram down from the top. I then moved the bottom right of the histogram transformation line to the right, almost to the third division down from the right side (as seen below). This should provide a continuous tone mask that separates the tone of the tree area well.



Remember to click Apply so you see a mask image over the image before clicking OK to save the mask . . .



The screen above shows the mask overlay on the image ready to be used or saved – clicking **OK** produces the mask in its own window . . .



We need to consider how we're going to use this mask – since the mask has ended up a "positive" (light tree areas are light, dark areas are dark), I'd use the white slider (when we open a transformation window) for 100% amount and set black to 0%. The sky, however will be a problem. We don't want to modify the sky, but it is not "black" in the mask. This is easy to fix, just paint black over this mask image in the sky area using the normal Paint tool. . .



The mask is looking dark, but now shows the foreground Aspens in shades of gray with about everything else black. Let's try it with a Gray / Brightness Curve transformation . . .



The preview window shows this has emphasized the trees and left the sky alone. You could also use this contrast mask with the Color / Saturation transformation for color enhancement, but the colors look pretty intense in this image already.

Here is the new image after contrast masking.



There are some small shrubs in the image that I noted were very red-orange when I took the photo, but they look subtle here. This is a good job for the "toolbox" (officially the Miscellaneous Retouching Tools, the button next to the **?** on the main tool bar). This little toolbox has some wonderful tools in it, and any of these can be used in conjunction with a mask if you need to protect an area from editing. In this case, I used the Increase Saturation tool with a medium size radius, 50% Transparency, and 50% Softness setting to bring back some of the red bark on the peripheral shrubs . . .



With a few tools and a few minutes (it's much faster to actually make the edits shown than it is to read about doing so), a raw photographic image, limited by the constraints of technology or by the available lighting of the subject, can be transformed into an image that better expresses the emotion of viewing the original scene.