

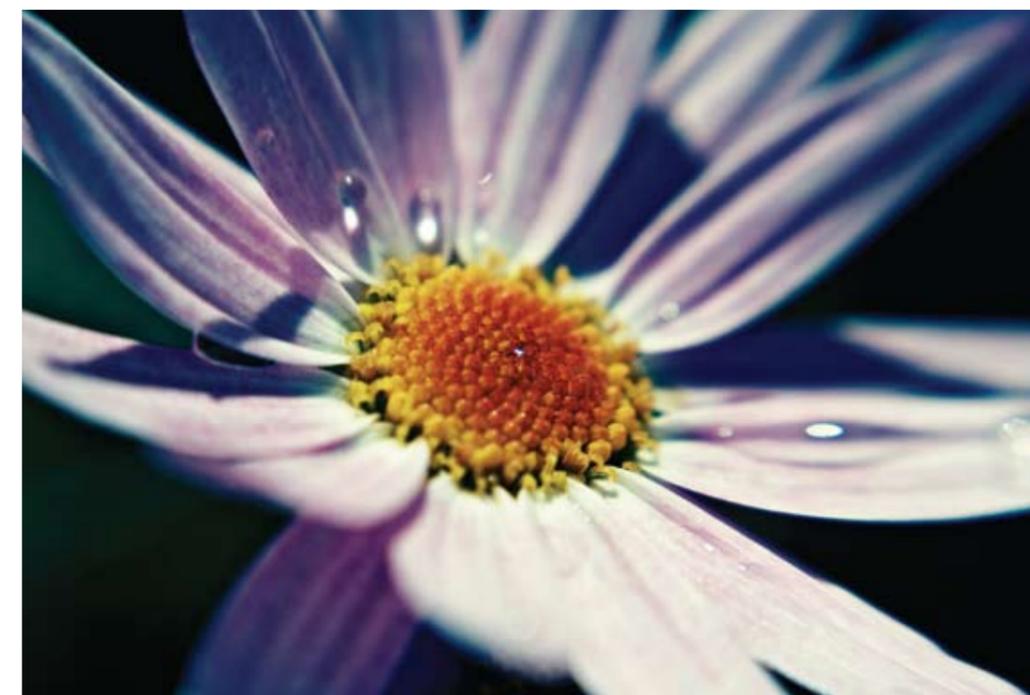


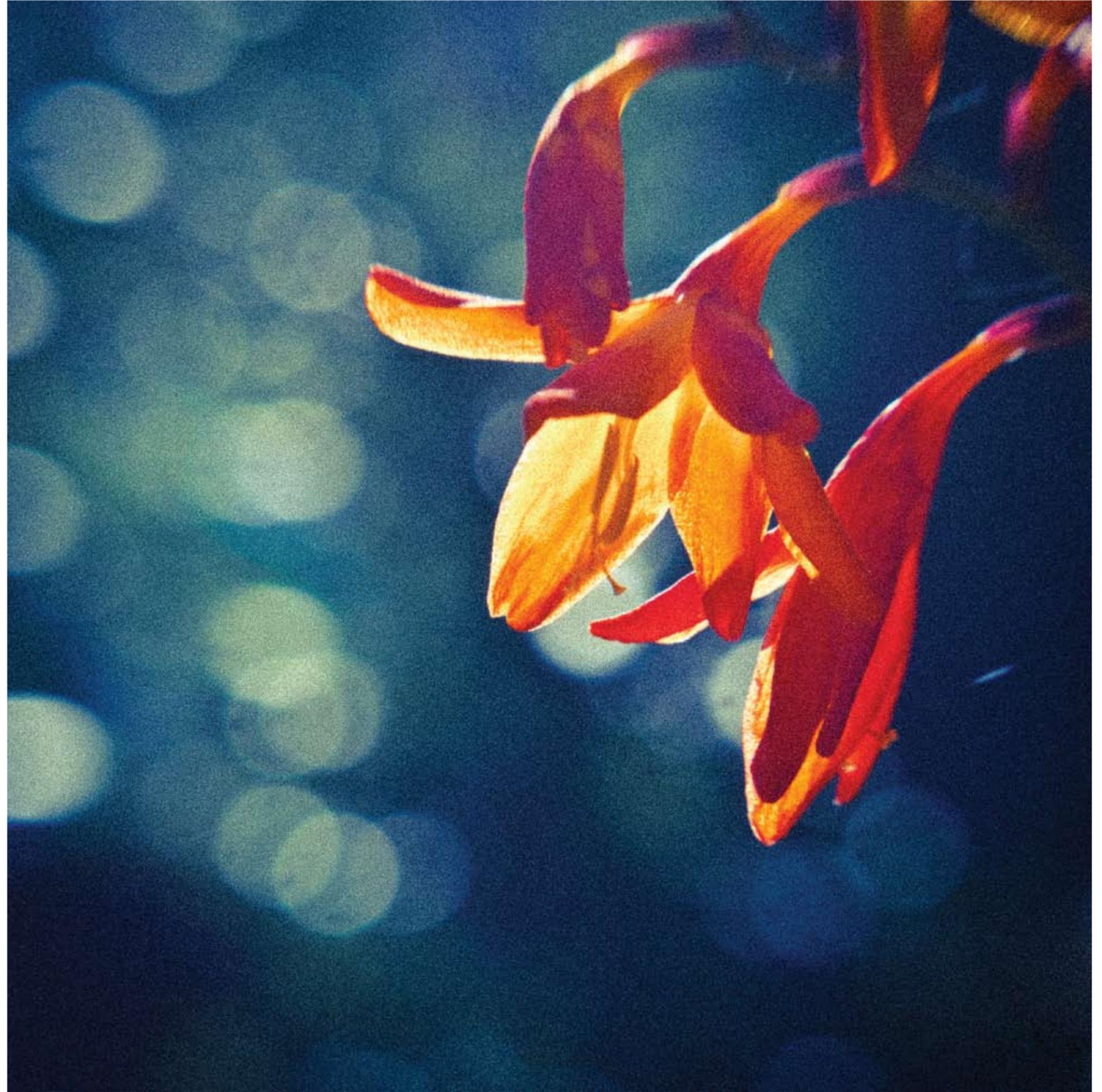
IN-DEPTH GUIDE TO...

CREATIVE STILL LIFE

At this rather chilly time of year, you can visit the nearest florist for all sorts of natural photographic subjects that you can shoot in the warmth of your home. However, you might want to take a more creative approach and invest in a gadget like a Lensbaby for images with a difference. It works brilliantly on subjects, indoors and out, as you can see here

STUDY FLOWERS IN A NEW WAY WITH JASON SWAINS' LENSBABY WORK







JASON SWAIN

Living on the Isle of Wight gives photographer Jason Swain the inspiration he needs for his natural still-life images shot with a Lensbaby

WORDS CHARLOTTE GRIFFITHS PICTURES JASON SWAIN

Location: Isle of Wight Shooting with: Canon EOS 7D

The first time Jason Swain took a photograph that he considered interesting was while travelling the Inca trail in Peru. As a landscape artist Jason would often use pictures as the basis for oil and watercolour paintings, but upon viewing the roll of 35mm that he'd shot in the Peruvian mountains the artist came to the conclusion that the original shots of the landscape had already said what he wanted to say about the place, and there was no real need to say it over again with brushes. "Then slowly over the years, [photography] grew on me as an art form in its own right," he explained. "Now I love the immediacy and energy of the medium."

Jason's background in the arts helped to develop his eye for colour and composition that is clearly evident in the images on the preceding pages. Completely self-taught through trial and error, purchasing a digital camera greatly accelerated his learning and the Panasonic point-and-shoot that was Jason's first device hooked him into the hobby. "I loved the fact that there was no longer any delay between taking shots and being able to see and work with the results – never having had the space, time, patience, money or knowledge required to have my own darkroom," he said, and also cited membership of Flickr as playing a large part in his development. "The ability to discuss technique and kit with like-minded people around the globe has been priceless." Flickr also introduced Jason to Lensbaby optics and the possibilities presented by these unusual pieces of plastic. Having bought a Canon EOS 400D for himself after a 'Eureka' moment in response to borrowing a friend's DSLR, Jason picked up a Sigma 10-20mm for landscapes, a 300mm telephoto for surfing shots and a Lensbaby for more creative macro work.

"Having seen the Lensbaby optics used on Flickr, I immediately wanted to have a play with them myself," Jason said. "I still use my old manual focus Lensbaby Muse. I've thought about all the new versions offering more control but I've grown to like working the hard way and the little extra bit of unpredictability from this early model."

“I still use my old manual focus Lensbaby. I've thought about all the new versions but I've grown to like working the hard way and the unpredictability of this early model”

Although Jason immediately loved the experience of working with the Lensbaby it was maybe a few weeks before he started to be happy with his pictures and a few months more before he was confidently working with the lens and getting the pictures imagined when picturing the shots. "I've had people tell me that they just can't get on with the Lensbaby, but my only advice would be to experiment and try to keep it fun," he said.

Jason's Canon EOS 400D served him well for years before the photographer upgraded his kit to the EOS 7D and a 500mm telephoto lens about 18 months ago. "I chose the EOS 7D for a number of reasons: mainly because I needed higher resolution images for the work I do for stock libraries and better low light performance with more frames-per-second for sporting action," Jason said. "To be honest, it probably wasn't necessary for the Lensbaby use, but of course it's great to have those pictures at higher resolution too."

Still using the original Optic Kit that came in the box with his Lensbaby (now called the Plastic Optic), Jason's work is the perfect demonstration of what can be achieved once you know your kit inside out.

"I also use a set of manual screw-on macro adapters which are really good value for money when compared with what I paid for a true macro lens and the wide-angle. The macro gets used all the time, the wide-angle hardly ever," he admits.

Free focusing

Working hand-held almost 100 per cent of the time, Jason enjoys the freedom afforded from not working with a tripod. "They definitely feel too limiting when you've got a Lensbaby macro in your hand," he said, and he applies the same relaxed approach to his hunt for photographic inspiration. "I shoot everything from sports to landscapes to portraits, but I've found that floral and macro just seem to really suit the Lensbaby more than any other genre for me – so I've shot flowers from the beginning."

One of the many positives of living in a beautiful rural location is the multitude of photographic subjects around him, and though Jason agrees that you could buy plants and flowers to use as subjects when the weather's less accommodating, most of his subjects are serendipitously discovered. "Flowers and plants are everywhere around me, but even when I'm not in the countryside they do seem to be everywhere: hotel lobbies, wedding receptions, front gardens, parks and so on."

Jason's artistic sensibilities enable him to look at a subject and instinctively know what he wants to achieve, an extension of his 'experiment and have fun' approach to working with the Lensbaby. "If you're using digital and it's not costing you to develop each shot, take lots and see what works for you best," he advises. "I usually leave the f/5.6 aperture ring in place as it's the most versatile, and I never know what I'll be shooting next because I don't really plan shoots – I just shoot what I find."

He tries to work with natural light and enjoys bright sunny days for the bright sparkling bokeh that can be achieved with a shallow depth-of-field, but having looked at his favourite images for this interview it appeared that the 'watery' early morning light of autumn and spring featured heavily. The watery theme continues with surfer Jason's other preferred bit of kit: "I use a really big reflector called the English Channel for my coastal landscapes," he joked. "The reflected light off the sea is one of the things that makes photography on the Isle of Wight special. I don't have one for my Lensbaby work: I like the shadows

to feel real and not contrived, like they are a piece of product photography. I just tend to follow the sun around the house during the day and shoot where the light is best at any given time. I wouldn't have said I had a style, but if I had to, I'd say that I try to keep it natural – I want a photograph to feel real."

Minute man

Having spent just minutes capturing his photos, Jason then tries to spend the same minimal time on his post-production, having moved from almost 100 per cent Photoshop to less than five per cent and doing as much as possible in Lightroom. "I try to keep that to a minimum, as part of the challenge for me is to recreate my visions straight out of camera wherever possible," he said. "Coming from a painting background where I would spend weeks on a canvas and never quite know if I was finished, I love the instant nature of digital and try not to get hung up chasing a particular look."

Now a professional photographer, Jason has held several solo exhibitions with the next one scheduled for summer 2012 at Dimbola Lodge on the Isle of Wight. He also sells images from his own website, via Moo and the Getty Collection on Flickr – yet is insistent that the simplest of accessories is all he needs to realise his ideas for images. "I started with the most basic set-up, and haven't really felt yet that I've reached the limits of its creative potential," he said. "I would say you don't necessarily need all the expensive bells and whistles, and would even consider looking at a used lens to see if the style of shooting suits you."

Next up for the photographer comes more still-life work, but perhaps one with more of a humorous nature. "I haven't done a 'tiny people' series yet, but I have found that toy cars and train sets and other things not to scale also work really well with the Lensbaby, so I might take to carrying a bunch of little people around in my bag – just in case..." O



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THE STORIES BEHIND THE PICTURES



THIRD ROCK FROM THE SUN

The texture of the poppy seed heads and the semi-circular composition made me think of planets in orbit – a bit of creative depth-of-field and use of negative space completes the illusion.

Canon EOS 400D, 1/400sec at f/5.6, ISO 100



SPIRAL LENSBABY ACID MACRO

Exaggerating the bend on the Lensbaby here to create some unique distortions on this rose shot from above.

Canon EOS 400D, 1/320sec at f/5.6, ISO 200



SLEEP DEPRIVATION LENSBABY BOKEH

Shot with strong backlighting and shallow depth-of-field to make the most of the bokeh opportunity. Grain added in Lightroom to help create the arty abstract feel I wanted.

Canon EOS 400D, 1/500sec at f/5.6, ISO 100



SUNSHINE ON A RAINY DAY

A rainy day in Portugal, taken when a break in the clouds let enough light through to illuminate this wild flower.

Canon EOS 400D, 1/1000sec at f/5.6, ISO 100



WEATHER FORECAST POPPY

This was all about catching the light in the raindrops – the small Lensbaby focus sweet spot is perfect for isolating a point of interest.

Canon EOS 400D, 1/400sec at f/5.6, ISO 100

WAKE UP BOO: LENSBABY GRAPE HYACINTH

Use of negative space and a creative crop add to the overall effect of this Lensbaby macro of a Grape hyacinth.

Canon EOS 400D, 1/200sec at f/5.6, ISO 200

REMEMBRANCE DAY

The hardest shot of the lot: using a relatively slow shutter speed to capture blur of the bee's wings, it's very tricky to get focus just right – more than a few out-takes on the way.

Canon EOS 7D, 1/320sec at f/5.6, ISO 100

