How to retouch skin

IN DEPTH

Pat David shares the secret to stopping his subjects from turning into mannequins

The wavelet decompose plug-in for GIMP is great for skin retouching. It breaks down your images to multiple layers, each containing a specific set of details based on their relative size, and a residual layer with colour/ tonal information. This means we can modify details on one layer without affecting details from other layers, or adjust colours/tones without modifying details.

My normal workflow is to have all layers visible so that I can constantly see the overall image results. Then I simply select each wavelet scale as I work on it. For each area, I work with detail scales first, and follow up with touch-ups on the residual scale if needed.

MY METHODS

There are three main processes I follow:

1 Area selection with Gaussian blur to even out overall tones at a particular scale

2 Paint with grey, clone and heal on wavelet scales to modify specific details

3 Clone/heal on wavelet residual scale to modify underlying skin tones/colours (but leave details intact)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
PAT DAVID
He writes photography tutorials focusing on free and open-source software. Read more at pixls.us

BEFORE

Face-to-face challenge

I usually work in sections, considering the forehead, nose, cheeks to smile lines, chin, and upper lip one by one

LIGHTEN UP
With the dark tones under and around the eyes I work on the residual layer, using the heal tool to sample from a brighter area of skin near the eye, then carefully paint into the dark tones to brighten them up, and to even out the colours with the surrounding skin. The same can be done for red tones on the cheek, and at the edge of her jaw
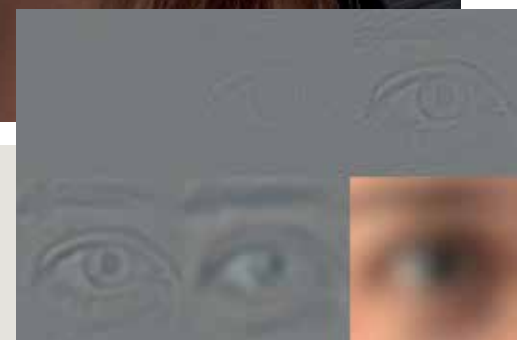
SMOOTH TONES
With an area selected, for example, the forehead, I'll often run a Gaussian blur over the skin to smooth out imperfections. The radius you use is dependent on how strongly you want to smooth out the tones. Too much, and you'll obliterate the details on that scale, so start small

DOWN THE LINES
I'll look at specific areas of the skin that I may want to touch up, such as frown lines. I may not want to remove them completely, but just downplay how visible they are. Wavelet scales are perfect for this, as you can paint with medium grey RGB(128,128,128) to completely remove something from a detail layer

AFTER

With a few other minor adjustments, a polished but natural portrait is complete

WHAT WAVELET SCALES LOOK LIKE
Wavelets are great for retouching skin because you can make changes to certain details on certain layers without losing others that you may wish to preserve – and save your subject from becoming a mannequin