

Photokit Color

by Alexander Mustard

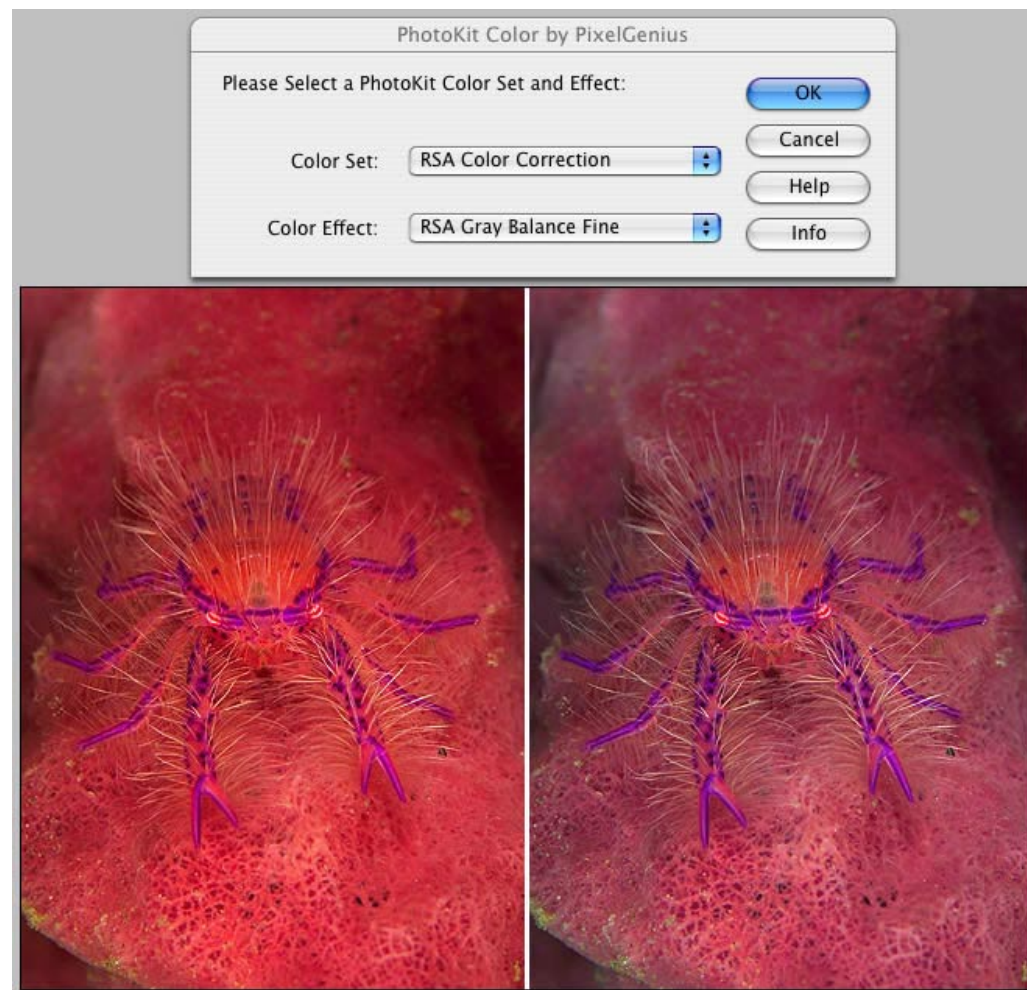
Martin Evening, Bruce Fraser, Seth Resnick, Andrew Rodney, Jeff Schewe and Mike Skurski. Type any of these names into Google and you will be left in no doubt that they leading lights in the world of digital imaging. Pixel Genius is the company that brings their many talents together, so I am sure that you can understand our interest when an invitation to try their latest software release, Photokit Color, popped up in the UWP inbox.

Photokit Color is software that makes precise colour adjustments, applies creative colour effects and automatically colour balances images using commands that accurately reproduce the effects of traditional in camera and darkroom photographic processes. The software works well and has been programmed by a group who really know their business, so the adjustments are accurate and are made with the utmost respect for image quality. The aim of this review is to discuss how applicable this software is for the underwater photographer. I do not intend to review all the effects, but I have tried to select the ones I think are most appropriate for the sorts of images we take.

Pixel Genius have shrewdly not

tried to re-invent the wheel, instead Photokit Color runs as a Plug-In within the industry standard and ubiquitous Adobe Photoshop (versions 7 and CS only). From start to finish I had no problems - the software was completely robust and is designed with a good slice of common sense. Importantly all the effects are applied as new layers, allowing the user to precisely control their strength by simply adjusting the opacity of each new layer. That said, taking on high resolution multilayered images in 16 bit/channel colour depth does require a healthy portion of RAM (note that 16 bit/channel compatibility is only available in CS). In addition the Pixel Genius website includes a comprehensive yet concise user guide, that includes helpful animated “mouse-over” examples of all the effects.

Downloading the software is very simple - I just filled in my credit card details, paid \$100 USD and clicked my mouse a few times. You can download the software for a free 7 day trial from www.pixelgenius.com. The Macintosh version is 6.2MB, and takes about the same time as UWP to download! Then I simply clicked a few more times to install it and just started up Photoshop and found the software ready and waiting under the FILE>AUTOMATE menu.



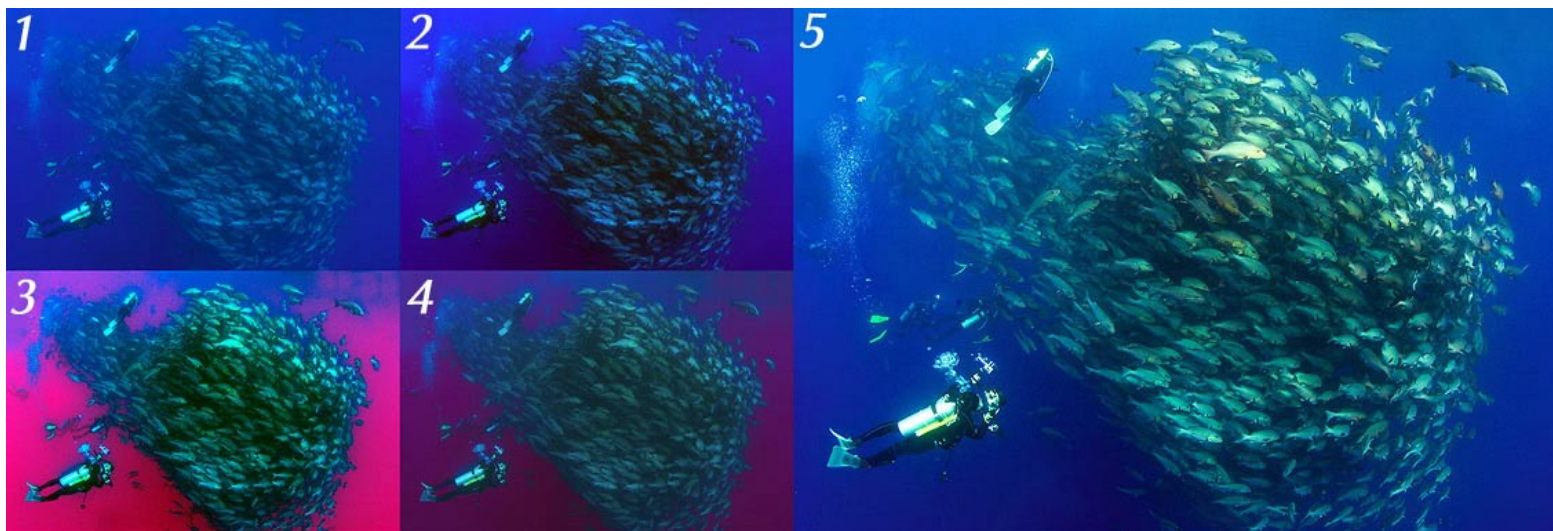
Macro shots on strongly coloured backgrounds can easily pick up a colour cast from reflected light, such as the left hand image of this hairy squat lobster. The RSA Gray Balance tool is very effective for correcting the colour balance in a single application.

The Photokit Effects

The 115 effects are divided into 8 colour sets. I doubt any user would use them all, but most would soon find a several favourites that they

would use regularly.

Probably the simplest set to understand is “Tone Enhance”, which is where I started. These effects adjust tone, either lightening or darkening the image in standard f-stop related



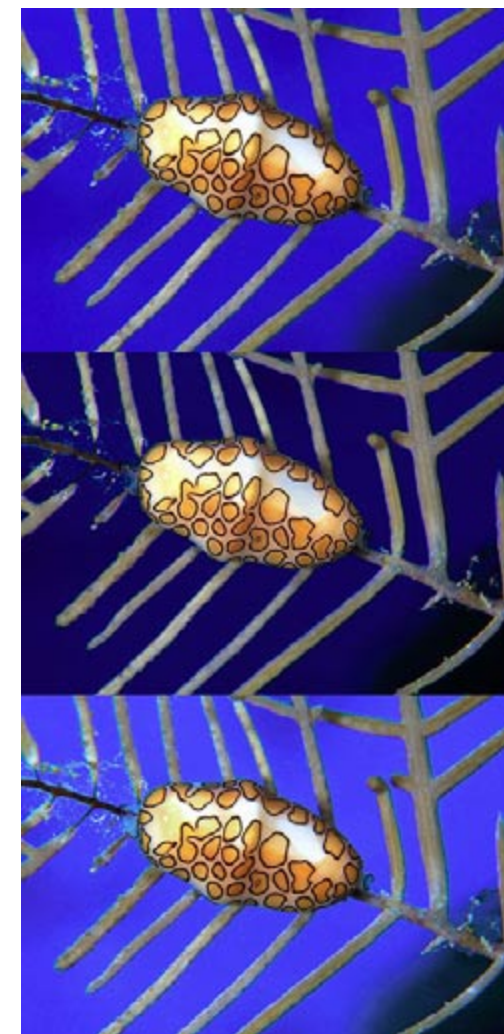
This image as shot (1) of a school of snappers is far too blue and offers an extreme test for auto colour balancing. 2) shows the application of Photoshop's Auto-Colour, 3) the application of Photoshop's Auto-Levels and 4) RSA Gray Balance. All struggle with the blue and all add too much red. 5) is processed manually only in Adobe RAW Converter, which seems the best solution for this type of image.

increments. Also within this set are contrast effects that selectively increase or decrease the contrast either in the shadows and highlights or in the mid tones of the image. I found that the Boost Contrast effect was particularly good at hiding shadow noise in high ISO, available light images that I had taken with a digital compact camera. In general, though, while this is a convenient interface and effective tool, I felt that knowing that I was adjusting tone by a 1/2 f-stop was a little irrelevant, and I would rarely feel the need for these tools in place of the standard Photoshop commands. Anyway, that gave me the excuse to move on to the feature I was most keen to try out:

the "RSA (Rule Seeking Algorithm) Colour Correction" set. Underwater our images can pick up colour casts in many ways: shooting through too much water gives a blue/cyan cast, taking a macro image on a strong coloured background (e.g a sponge) causes a cast from the light reflected from it, and digital photographers have the additional problem that incorrect white balance settings also create a colour cast. The RSA Color Correction tool appealed to me because unlike using Levels in Photoshop, RSA will correct the colour balance of the image without adjusting the tone or contrast. I found that this tool worked very well for flash dominated images, and blue

backgrounds were left blue so long as they didn't fill too much of the frame. However, as the area of blue in the image increased the more the software struggled, and the more I had to fade the opacity of the effect to get a pleasing result. When the images were too blue, like the extreme example fish school, the software really struggled and ended up painting the water red (note that Auto-Levels made a similar mess)!

I was also keen to try the "Colour Compensation Filter Correction" and the "Colour Temperature Filter Correction" sets, which both replicate the effect of photographic filters. I use both these types of filters underwater for available light photography



The flamingo tongue original image is top. The other two show single applications of Darken Blue and Lighten Blue effects. Lightening of blues is not as easy as darkening colours.

This is clearly an effective post processing tool for controlling the background of underwater images.

Split Toning effects are a quick way of livening up black and white images, such as this image of the Wreck of the Giannis D. I have chosen strong tones here, to show the difference with the original black and white image on the left. But as with all the Photokit effects the strength can be controlled by varying layer opacity.



and I wanted to test if the software was a substitute for doing it in situ. Unsurprisingly it wasn't. It is much more effective to filter real light than the colours in a Photoshop file! I guess this wasn't a very fair test because we use very strong filters when shooting in available light underwater. These filters were effective for adding extra warmth to normal flash lit underwater images. I was not expecting to find much interest in the "Color Enhance" set, but actually these effects are a very easy way of selectively lightening and darkening colours in an image. I found them an excellent way to control the brightness and saturation of blue water backgrounds, without altering the fall off of light with depth. Darkening was generally easier than lightening, but for both this is a quick and effective fix. In addition, the saturation control was particularly useful for boosting reds in images. This set provides some useful tools for the underwater photographer,

some of which would become firm favourites.

The "Cross Processing" set replicates the effect of developing either C41 film or E6 film in the incorrect chemicals. While this technique was always popular with land photographers keen to produce a new interpretation of subjects familiar to their audience, it has never been a popular technique underwater, I guess because we find getting the correct colours much harder in the first place and having done so we are less likely to want to mess with them! Similarly the "Color Overlays" set that applies strong colour tints to images is also unlikely to be popular. I feel that both these sets are more of a curiosity for underwater photographers, but they may appeal in creative work such as swimming pool/model shoots. The final set, "Split Toning" turned out

to be another favourite. Split Toning is a chemical darkroom technique for adding colours to monochrome images, and this set recreates the effect in the computer. Julian Calverley made a big impact on British underwater photography when his split toned scenic pictures first appeared (see UWP Issue 1). Well this tool is probably best described as one-click-Calverley, since it only takes one application of Photokit to create your own look-a-likes. I found the blue/cyan, cyan/green and cyan/sepia splits the most applicable for underwater images. Easy to do and fun. I guess my only concern is that since Julian's style is so well known, it is difficult to recreate this technique without getting that Xerox feeling.

Photokit Color provides a very extensive set of effects for image manipulation, a decent number of

which are well suited for optimising underwater images. The main addition I would like to see is that the commands were accessible through short-cut keys, rather than only with the mouse. Other than that, these tools should appeal to both the Photoshop addict, who enjoys the hours in front of the computer creating new images, and also for the Photoshop-phobe, who is looking for a more photographer friendly interface to unlock the power of Photoshop. I think that this product will appeal less to those who already know how to fly Photoshop - and feel that they can create any of these effects for themselves without spending 100 Dollars. I admit that I would place myself in this later group. But wait! Stop the press! It is now a week after I wrote this review and I have to own up to the fact that I keep going back and using Photokit Color. Not because I have to, but because it is just so easy and it just works when you need to get a Photoshop job done. I'd recommend to everyone to download and try a week's free trial of this software, but be warned you might find it hard to say goodbye!

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