

With the ability to lock the focus and the sweet spot, Lensbaby 3G is ready for commercial applications. And it's still fun to use.

BY STAN SHOLIK

Third-time's the *charm*

LENSBABY 3G



After two hits with Lensbaby and Lensbaby 2.0, photographer and inventor Craig Strong scores a home run with the Lensbaby 3G. With the latest version, now you can make small adjustments in the focus and the position of the “sweet spot” when your film or digital SLR camera is mounted on a tripod, without sacrificing quicker shooting. These new finer-tuned, repeatable capabilities make the Lensbaby 3G ideal for commercial, macro and landscape photography, in addition to unique, creative image-making.

The Lensbaby 3G is based on the same concept as the first Lensbaby, now called the “Original Lensbaby.” Both the focus and the position of the focus are adjusted by compressing and distorting the accordion bellows behind the lens element, allowing you to blur portions of the image while keeping an area—the sweet spot—in focus. The aperture is adjusted by inserting precisely drilled aperture disks at the front of the lens.

The Original Lensbaby, which is still available, features a single, uncoated optical glass element of 50mm focal length that’s reasonably sharp with the f/5.6 and f/8 disks inserted, but becomes softer and slightly diffused at f/4, and more diffused and impres-

sionistic at the maximum aperture, f/2.8. The rubber gasket that holds the aperture disk in place makes changes something of a chore, but at wide apertures it produces soft, beautifully impressionistic images with a bit of color fringing, which cannot be duplicated by modern multi-element, multicoated lenses.

The still-available Lensbaby 2.0, maximum aperture f/2, features a coated doublet rather than a single uncoated element for a sharper sweet spot. Minimum aperture is still f/8, but with the aperture disks held in place magnetically, changes are far easier to make.

The Lensbaby 3G has the same basic operating principle and lens design as the 2.0, as well as the same focusing range, about 18 inches (fully extended) to infinity (fully compressed). But there the similarity ends. Aperture now ranges from f/2 to f/22 in full stops, with the diameter of the sweet spot increasing as the aperture decreases. (With seven aperture disks available now, identifying the one you’re looking for would be handier if the aperture number were printed or engraved onto each disk.)

The dramatic difference with the Lensbaby 3G is the ability to lock focus and sweet spot position with the press of the small locking

Even though the Lensbaby 3G allows a more studied approach with its ability to lock focus and make fine adjustments, it can still be used like the previous-generation Lensbabies for candid shooting and quick grabs as with this photo of an aloe flower (f/5.6 aperture disk).

button on the front focusing collar. The front element locks into place on three focusing posts equally positioned around the Lensbaby. The three focusing guide knobs between the focusing posts enable fine focusing to clean up any shifting that might occur when you press the locking button.

The three focusing posts not only provide locking elements, but are also screws that allow you to fine-tune the position of the sweet spot; turning them moves the front element forward or back. Because they're positioned 120 degrees apart, adjusting one or more of them fine-tunes the sweet spot within a small area.

With the earlier models, you have to hold the lens in position while pressing the shutter release. This works fine for candid shooting and quick grabs, and you can still shoot in this manner with the Lensbaby 3G. But if you decide to change any camera settings, such as the ISO or white balance, you have to start the whole focusing process over again.

With the Lensbaby 3G locked and the camera on a tripod, you can change camera settings, even change the aperture disk, without disturbing the focus. For the first time, I felt confident enough to use a Lensbaby in the studio with a commercial shoot. (With no electrical coupling between lens and camera, your metering technique will depend on the camera model you're using with the Lensbaby 3G.)

The assignment was to shoot food for the new CookMe.com, set to come online this summer. For a shot of peanut butter cookies, I asked the client to allow me to do something different with the Lensbaby 3G. After locking focus and making a shot, we looked at the image on the monitor. The fork marks on the cookies weren't quite as sharp as I like, so I made an adjustment with the barrel focusing ring. The ring has a small turning range and is fairly loose, so it took a few exposures to get the focus perfect. The client loved the effect. We did several more food

shots with the 3G, which will be the lead photos on the site, and will be used in the client's promotions, for which they'll pay extra.

While the Lensbaby 3G will likely be a big hit with photographers, there's room for further improvement, such as having a cost-effective way to mount aperture blades and an aperture control ring in the unit. That

would solve several minor shortcomings, such as having to juggle a set of aperture disks. It would also allow you to focus at full aperture and shoot at a small aperture. I found it difficult to judge optimum focus with the f/11 or smaller aperture rings in place. But more important, it would allow you to adjust the size of the sweet spot to

LENSBABY ACCESSORY LENSES

Lensbabies LLC makes two accessory lens kits for all Lensbaby models: the Lensbaby Wide Angle/Telephoto Kit and the Lensbaby Macro Kit, both available directly through the company.

The Lensbaby Macro Kit features one +4 diopter lens and one +10 diopter lens. They can be screwed onto the front of a Lensbaby lens individually or together. Without a macro lens, the Lensbaby will focus to about 18 inches; with the +4 mounted, 6 to 14 inches; with the +10, 3 to 6 inches; with the +4 stacked on top of the +10, 2 to 3 inches.

With the ability to lock focus, the Lensbaby 3G and macro lens kit make a great creative macro photography team. Macro lenses from the major lens makers are optimized for maximum sharpness across a flat field at a specific aperture; the 3G and Lensbaby macro lenses take the opposite tack, delivering good sharpness in small areas with surrounding soft streaks. Changing the aperture and adjusting the focus and sweet spot opens possibilities for the creative interpretation of the photographer. Lensbaby Macro Kit, \$33.

The Lensbaby Wide Angle/Telephoto Kit includes a 0.6X wide-angle conversion lens and a 1.6X telephoto conversion lens. When mounted on a Lensbaby, they change the effective focal length to 30- or 80mm, respectively. The Lensbaby 0.6X lens has a unique optical design that widens the field of view while keeping the size of the sweet spot constant relative to the size of the photo. Standard wide-angle conversion lenses shrink the sweet spot when used with a Lensbaby.

Mounted on the 3G, both lenses somewhat limit your ability to adjust the position of the sweet spot. Major adjustments to the bellows can cause vignetting. The wide-angle conversion lens creates something of a fisheye effect at the edge of the field, which may or may not be appealing, depending on the subject. Lensbaby Wide Angle/Telephoto Kit, \$89.

The Lensbaby +4 and +10 macro accessory lenses and a carrying case are included in the Macro Kit.



specs:

Lensbaby 3G coated optical glass doublet

FOCAL LENGTH: about 50mm

FOCUS TYPE: Manual/Fingertip with 2 additional types of fine focusing

APERTURE TYPE: interchangeable magnetic aperture disks

APERTURES: f/2, f/2.8, f/4, f/5.6, f/8, f/11, f/16, f/22

MINIMUM FOCUS: about 18 inches (30 cm)
Maximum Focus: infinity

SIZE: 3 inches (7.6 cm) x 3.25 inches (9 cm)

WEIGHT: 5.7 ounces (161.59g)

No electronic communication between the lens and the camera body

Available in mounts for virtually all digital and film SLR cameras, including Canon EF (EOS), Nikon F, Minolta Maxxum/Sony Alpha A, Pentax K / Samsung GX, Olympus E1 / Panasonic Lumix DMC, Leica R, Olympus OM, Canon FD, Minolta Manual, Contax/Yashica, and Screw mounts

Automatic light metering is possible by shooting in aperture priority mode for almost all digital and film SLR camera bodies, except certain Nikon bodies (including the D50, D70, D70S, D80, D100, N50, N55, N65, N70, N75, N80), Kodak Professional DCS 14n and DCS Pro SLR/n and Fujifilm FinePix S1, S2, and S3.



Fine adjustments to the position of the sweet spot are made by adjusting the focusing post knobs.

your liking as you look through the lens and adjust the aperture ring.

I'd also like to see an improvement in the use of the Lensbaby accessory macro lenses with the 3G (see sidebar). The locking mechanism of the Lensbaby 3G makes it ideal for macro photography. Even handheld, with the focus and sweet spot locked, it's easy to rock back and forth to achieve sharp focus. With the camera

on a tripod it's even easier. But the threads for attaching the macro lenses are too deeply recessed, so it's difficult to attach and remove the lenses. Perhaps the macro lenses need to be slightly longer. It's not a problem with the larger wide-angle and telephoto accessory lenses.

Priced \$270, the Lensbaby 3G is available from select retailers and at www.lensbabies.com. ■



The Lensbaby 3G incorporates a multi-coated doublet lens design with a focal length of 50mm. Adding the 1.6X telephoto conversion lens to the Lensbaby 3G converts it to an 80mm focal length (Nikon D2X, f/4 aperture disk).



With the +4 macro accessory lens mounted on the 3G and the camera mounted on a tripod, producing Lensbaby signature macro photos with sharp and diffused areas is a pleasure (left). Making small adjustments are essential to macro photography and the Lensbaby 3G is designed to do just that (Nikon D2X, f/2.8 aperture disk). The Lensbaby +10 macro accessory lens introduces some chromatic aberration to the diffusion around the "sweet spot" that adds to the beauty of the photo (Nikon D2X, f/2.8 aperture disk).