IMPROVING A MESSY BACKGROUND – Ashley Hoff

Below are the steps that we used to improve the messy background in the studio shot of my nieces. This is not the definitive answer, but it is quick and easy. We are using duplicate layers as this helps us to see what we have done in an instant and also allows us to quickly start again if we make too big a mistake. We are also using the clone tool, Gaussian Blur and masks to achieve our objectives.

Crop the image

Select the crop tool, by either pressing 'C' or selecting it with your mouse
To crop and keep the same aspect and proportions, hold down the shift key when dragging from the corner

Duplicate layer for spot healing and cloning

- Creating Duplicate layers can be done in the following ways (Make sure the layer you are duplicating is active):
- Via the menu, select Layer => duplicate layer.
- Using the keyboard, Hold down 'Ctrl' and press 'J'
- In the layers menu, right click the layer you wish to duplicate and select 'duplicate layer'

You can name the layer if you wish.

Cloning

We are going to use the clone tool to clone out the big flaws, especially the power cord and the light stand.

- To select the clone tool you can either press 's' or click on it with your mouse pointer
- Adjust brush size to suit and set the brush for a medium hardness (40%).
- Choose a good spot that you thing will fit the area you are going to repair, by using holding down Alt and clicking.
- Clone the area by either clicking or dragging. Don't be afraid to zoom right in and adjust the brush size as needed.

Duplicate Layer for blurring background

Once done with our cloning, create another duplicate layer, but this time the duplicate will be of our cloning layer we created above

Blurring background

We are going to blur our newly created background. As you are about to see, its going to be VERY blurry!

- From Menu, select filter => Blur => Gaussian Blur
- From dialog box, move pointer until lines are blurred – around 40 to 45% in this example. Always play with the sliders to see what suits each individual image

Adding a mask to our Blurred Layer

To cleanup what is not needed to be blurry, we will create a 'Layer Mask'

- In the layers dialog box, ensure that the blurred layer is selected, click on the Add Layer Mask. In the layer, you will get a second all white Icon
- Make sure the canvass is active by making sure the foreground colour is black.
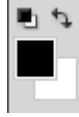
This can be toggled by clicking on the arrow - Or by clicking 'X'

Choose brush tool and cleanup

We are now going to use the standard brush tool to cleanup the parts of the image we don't want blurry

- Select the Brush tool, by pressing 'b' or selecting it with mouse. Adjust to suit (but make it reasonably large) and set hardness to zero
- In the layer we have blurred and added a mask to, make sure you have clicked on the mask.
- Using the brush, brush over the sections that you don't want blurred. Overlap with the sections that will be blurry
- We can check our progress by holding down 'Alt' and clicking on the mask canvas. This will show in black and white what we have brushed over.
- If you go to far, toggle the foreground back to white and brush over the area have gone too far with will reverse the action.
- Again, don't be afraid to zoom in and out to check your progress and don't be afraid to change your brush size as required

Finish off

Once you have finished and you are happy with what you have done, flatten the layers, resize, add some unsharp mask to taste and save.

Some Handy Hints

Changing your brush size – You can quickly and easily change your brush size, by using the '[' and ']' (square brackets) keys. '[' will make your brush smaller, ']' will make it larger.

Zooming in and out – Again, there is a quick and easy way to zoom in and out. Hold down the 'ctrl' key and press either '+' to zoom in or '-' to zoom out (don't worry, you don't need to hold down the shift key to get '+' active)