

High Quality Skin Retouching Tutorial (takes 20-60 minutes)

Select the file that you want to work on and open in Photoshop in 16bit at the desired exposure settings.

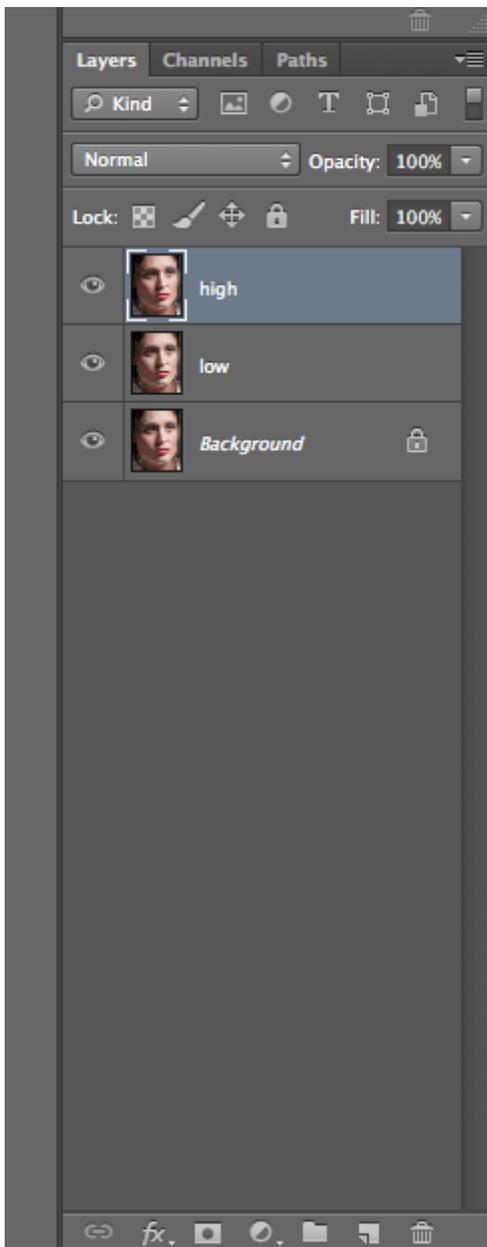
Skin Retouching steps:

1- Frequency Separation.

Frequency Separation is where we separate out the fine detail, like lines on the face from the “gross” details, like pale patch on cheek, shadow under ear etc. You can think of the low Frequency details as if looking through squinted eyes and the high frequency as looking through a magnifying glass.

-Duplicate original layer twice and rename layers 1 and 2 to “low” and “high” respectively.

To duplicate the layers, left-click on the “Background” layer and drag onto the new layer icon at the bottom of the layer palette (the one to the left of the dustbin).



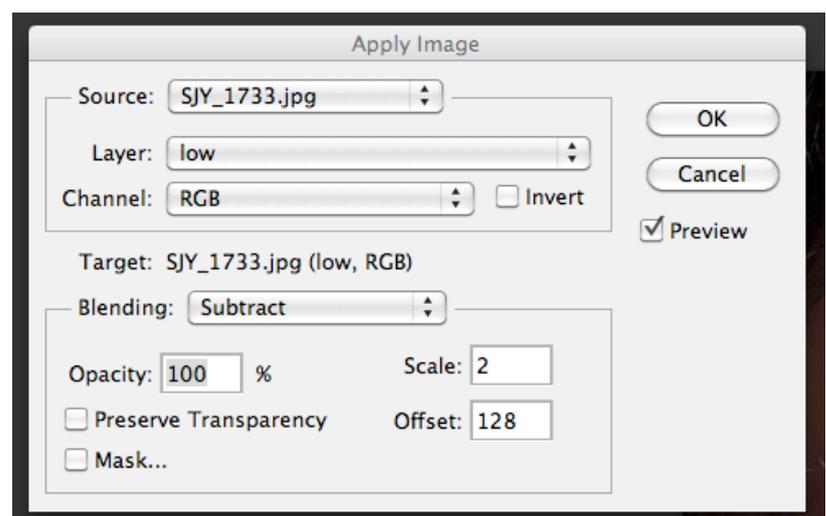
To Rename layers, double-left-click on the words to the right of the thumbnail in the layers palette and type in new name. It is good practise to rename layers for more complex Photoshop work.

Next, click on the thumbnail in the “low” layer, the layer should highlight. At the top menu, go to: Noise-Dust and Scratches option. Set the radius so that the skin looks smooth, set threshold to zero. In my example, I used a radius of 16 pixels.

Next select the “High” layer, it should highlight (as the picture on the left).

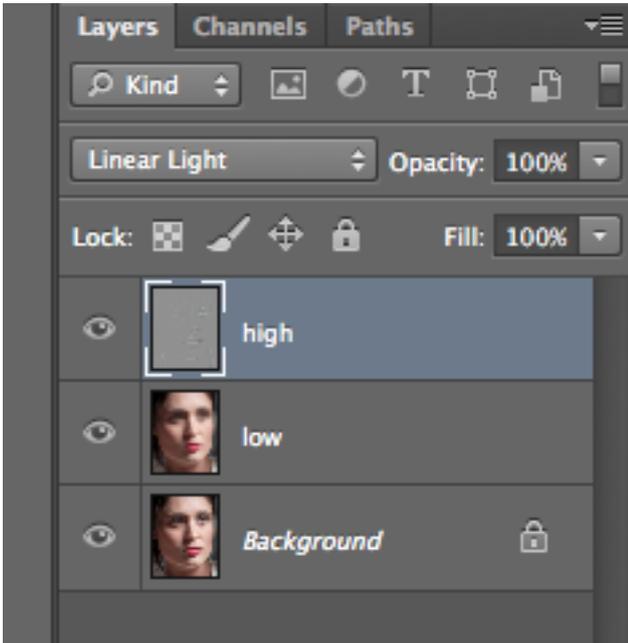
At the top menu go to:

Image-Apply image, set the layer to low, blending mode to subtract, the scale to 2 and the offset to 128. (I know this sounds complicated but it isn't)



The picture should look a little weird now, a sort of grey outline image.

Next change the blend mode of the “high” layer to linear light in the drop down menu at the top of the Layers Palette.



The picture should look like the original. What we have done is separate the “high” and “low” frequencies so that we can work on them independently.

Let’s start with the “low” layer. Click the eye next to the “high” layer to deactivate it. Then click on the “low layer to highlight it.

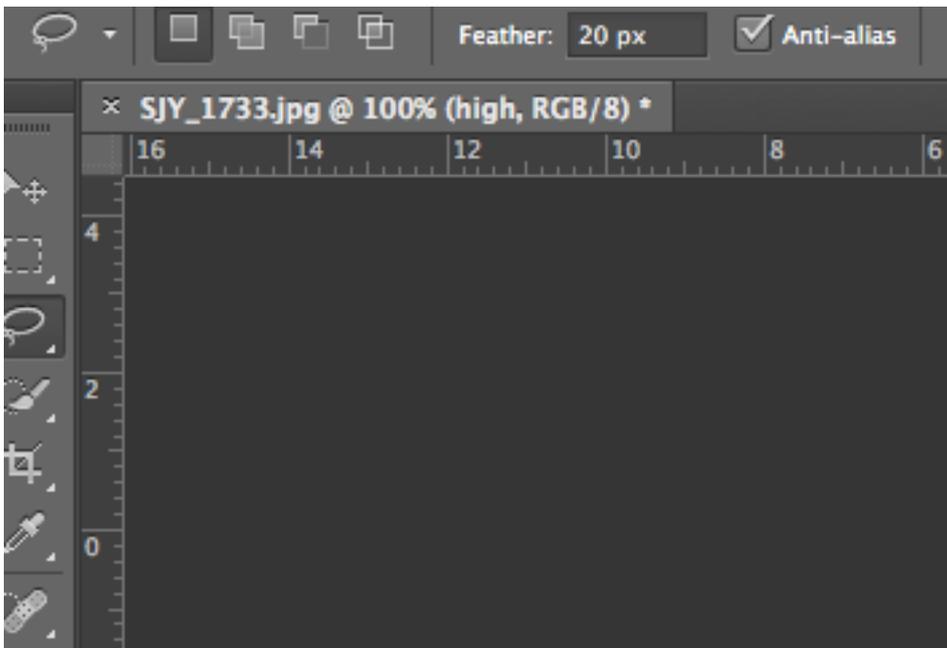
The goal of this step is to smooth out any lumps and bumps and also reduce highlights and shadows that we don’t want. We do this by selecting the Lasso tool from the toolbar, setting the Pixel feather to around 20 and tick the anti-alias box.

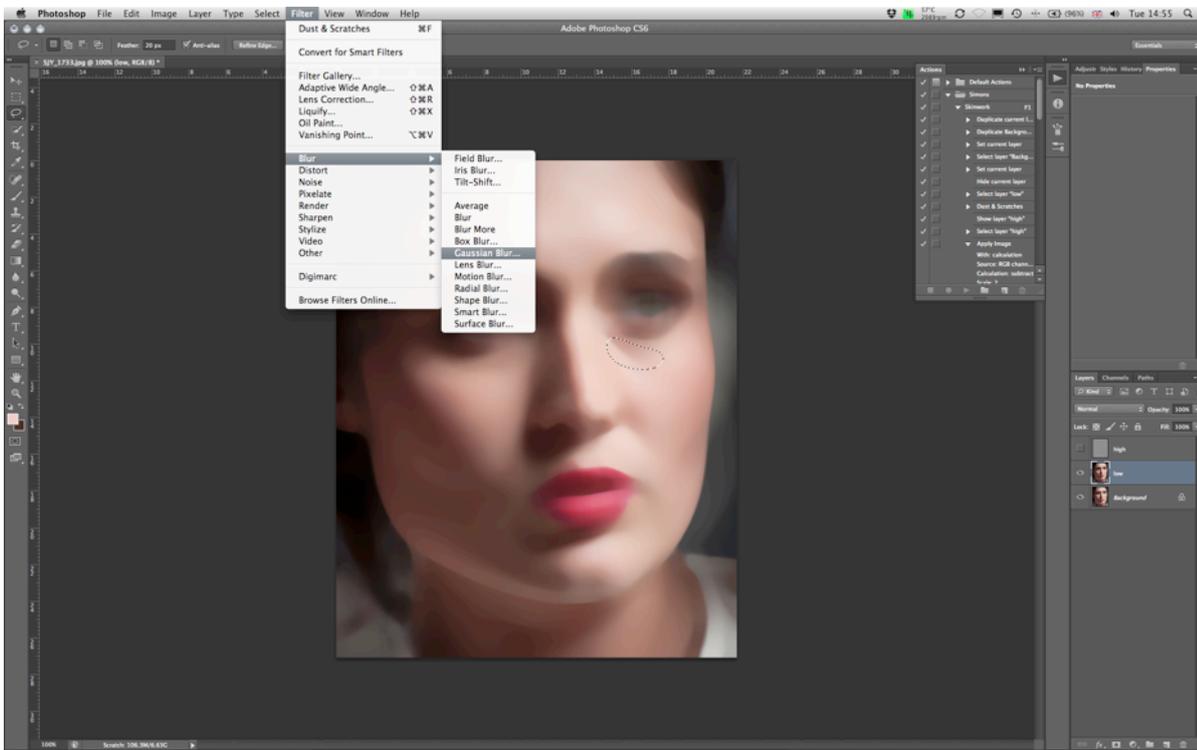
We can then draw around sections of skin on the face to select them and then blur it

using Filter-Blur-Gaussian blur set to around 15.

Remember that the last filter used can be replicated by the shortcut cmd-F on a Mac and Ctl-F on a PC, this saves loads of time.

Keep doing this until all edges of tones on the skin have been softened. Try not to go outside of the face and remember to do necks, hands etc.





Your picture should look something like this. Just keep lassoing the bits that you want to blur and hit Cmd-F. This stage should take around 5-10 minutes. If you need to lower the feather to 10 pixels for smaller areas, this is fine.

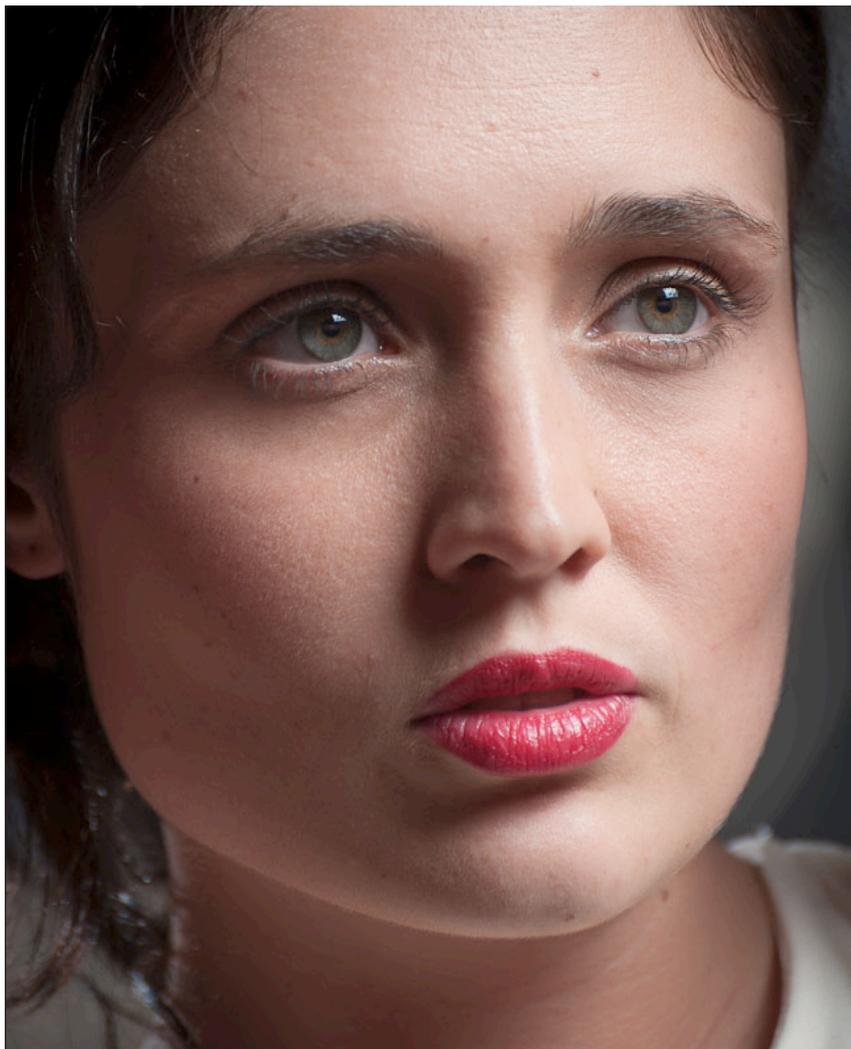
When you are happy click the “high” layer back on and you should be able to see the difference already.

Next we work on the High layer using the Spot healing Brush. Because we have already separated out the large details, you should find this much easier than using Healing brushes on a straight picture.

Before low layer editing..



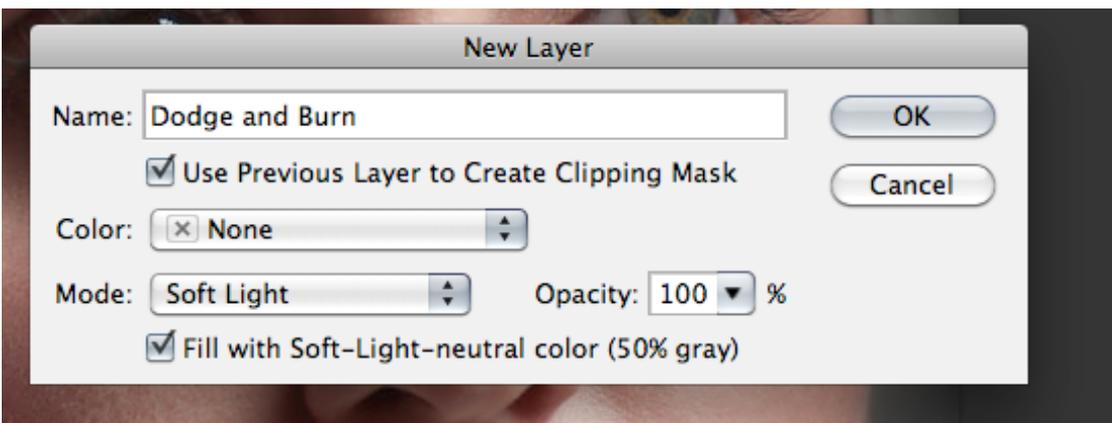
After Low layer editing...



The overall skintone and face is smoother at a “gross” level.. We now need to work on the details.

Select Spot healing brush, zoom in and work on the wrinkles and blemishes on the “high” layer. Take your time with this.

If you want you can add a clipping layer (to this layer set to blend mode of soft-light and filled with 50% grey. You can then paint white and black (soft brush set to around 15%) to lift unwanted shadows (say under the eyes) and tone down highlights. This is a “Dodge and Burn” layer.

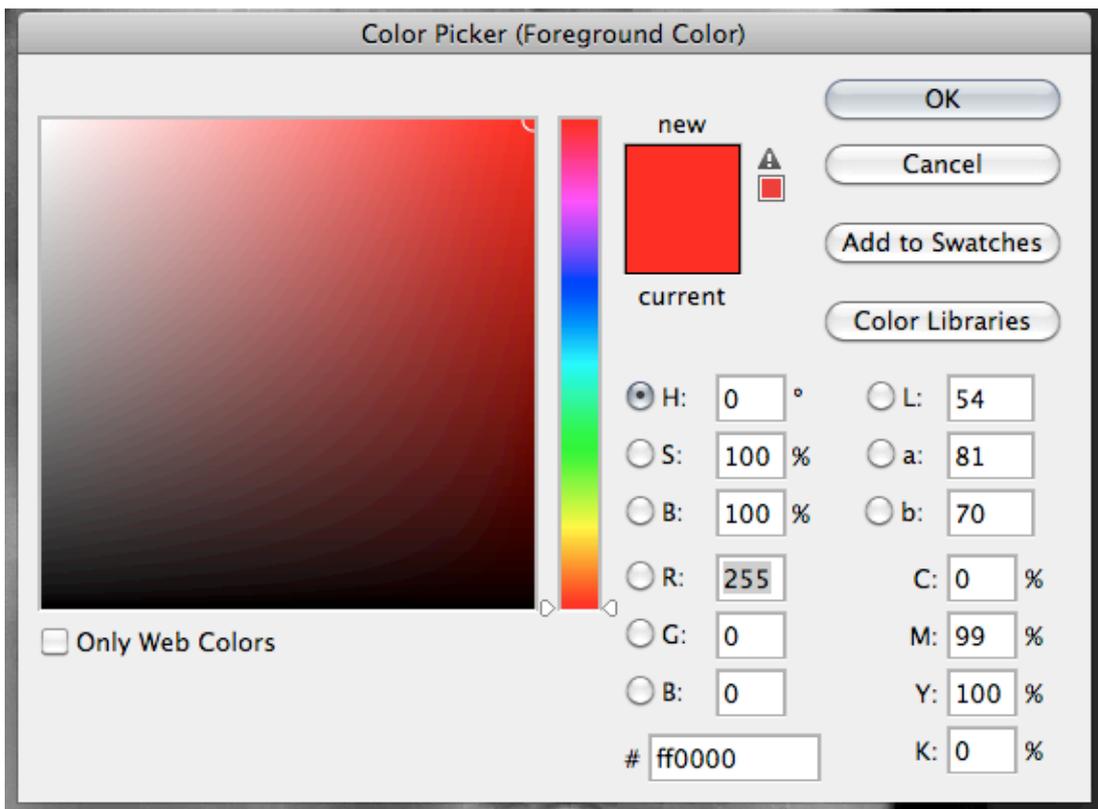


The next step is to look at the saturation levels across the skin. On my example image, the skin saturation is pretty even so we won't gain much of a benefit. Changes from here become more and more subtle and are often unnecessary. There are patches of shine on the forehead and nose that will benefit slightly so here goes.

The first step is to create some layers:

Empty paint layer and rename it to Saturation. Set the blend mode to saturation.

This is the layer that we will paint in our saturation changes. You must set the foreground and background colours to 100% saturation (don't worry about the colour, this is just for saturation of whatever colour is already on the original picture) and 0% saturation respectively. Black is usually 0% saturation, so double-click the white box and set saturation to 100% and brightness to 100%.

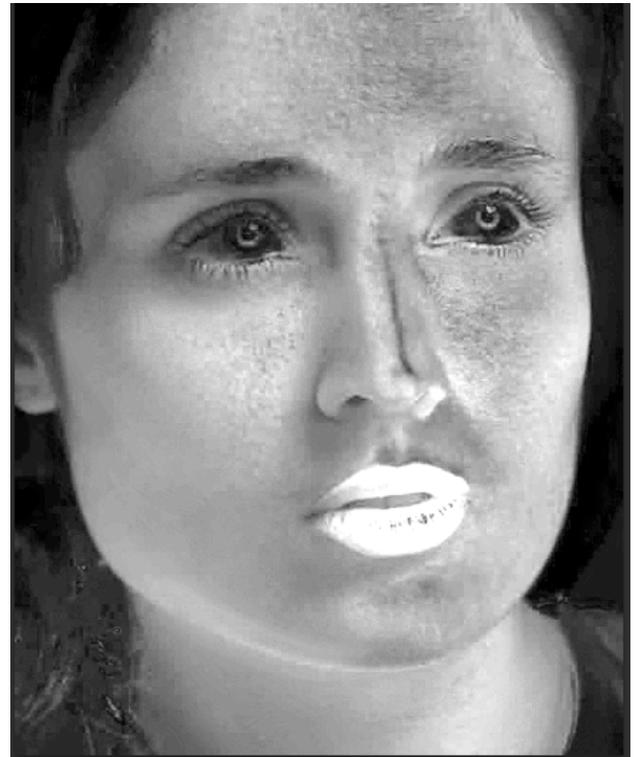


Now it isn't easy to see the subtle variations in saturation so we can use a couple of layers to help us. Remember that when we want to paint, the "Saturation" layer must be selected. First is to add a "Selective Colour" adjustment layer. Go through all of the colours in the drop down menu and set Black to -100% and make sure the Absolute box is ticked. Then for the neutral tones, white, neutrals, black, make sure that black is set to +100%. When you have done this, it's worth saving these settings as a preset than you can recall and load at anytime.

The picture probably looks a bit weird. This is normal. All dull and murky. Next add a levels adjustment layer and brighten the murkiness up so that you can see the weird picture better.

Making sure that we have the "Saturation" layer selected and the paintbrush turned down to around 10%, we can paint in extra separation or paint out too much separation using foreground and background respectively (Black will reduce saturation).

Below the black indicates no saturation and the white indicates high saturation. Once we are happy with the editing, we can deactivate the Selective colour and levels layers revealing the picture again. Before and after below. I often give the layer a small blur to soften any edges.



Hue adjustments

Quite often, people will have a variety of skin hues across their face, from rosy cheeks to sallow necks. We can even out these hues in a number of ways but as this is a tutorial about high-end retouching, I'll explain a subtle approach.

Let's create some layers.

We want two hue and saturation adjustment layers with black masks. Set one of the Hue/Sat layers to +12 Hue and the other to -12 Hue and rename them accordingly.

New adjustment layer "Invert", set opacity to 50% (this will give you a grey picture as it cancels out the original, effectively unifying the luminosity).

Next clip a new hue and saturation adjustment layer to the "Invert" layer and set hue to +180 degrees (effectively opposite the original). The picture will look odd but don't worry.

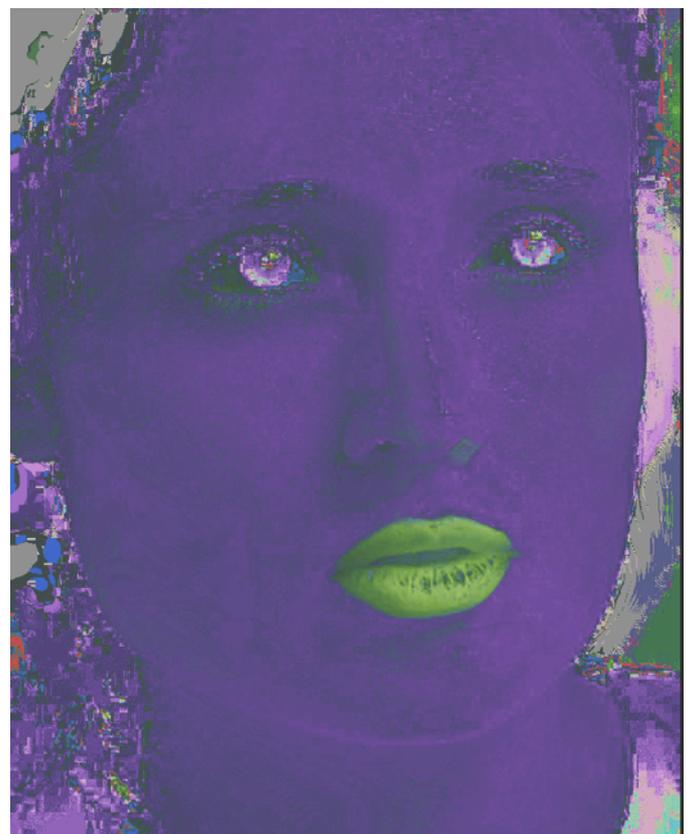
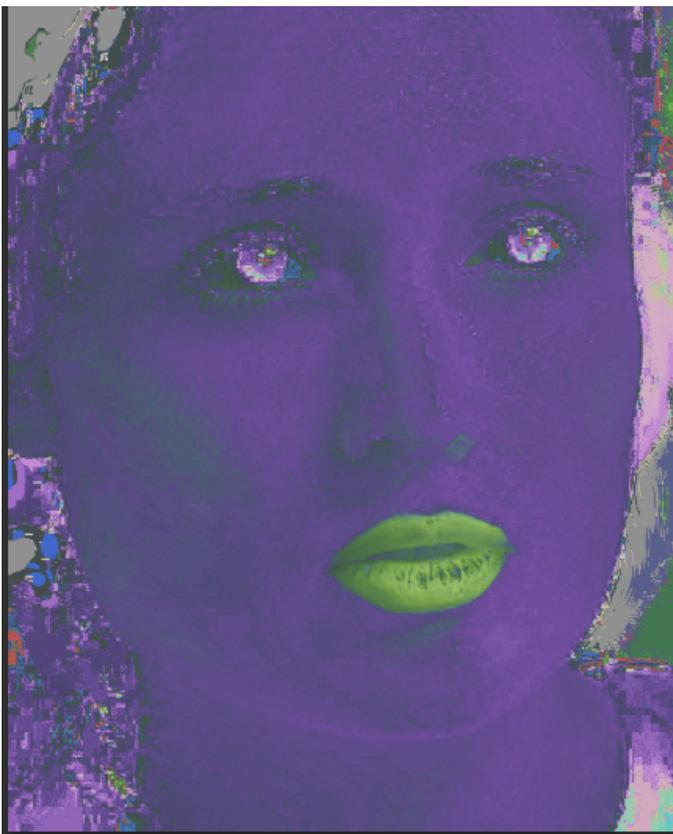
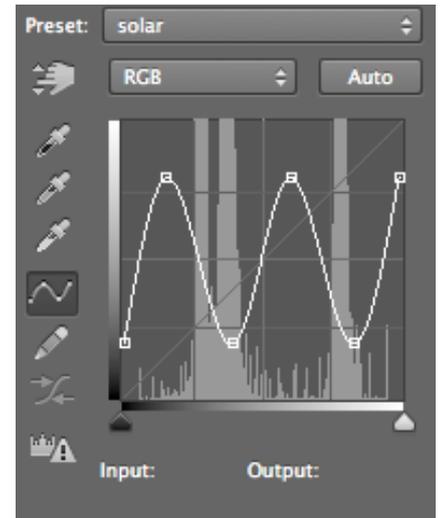
Add a new solid colour adjustment layer with brightness at 100% and Saturation at 50% (this unifies the saturation). Set blend-mode to Saturation. The picture will look something like this..



What we are seeing is differences in Hue across the picture as we've effectively cancelled out the luminosity and saturation differences. As you can see the eyes and lips stand out but the skin looks roughly the same (this model has good even skin but on other people, you'd see more skin variation at this point). In order to make the picture easier to work on we need to be able to see the differences in skin hue more easily. This is what we can do:

Create a "Solar Curve".

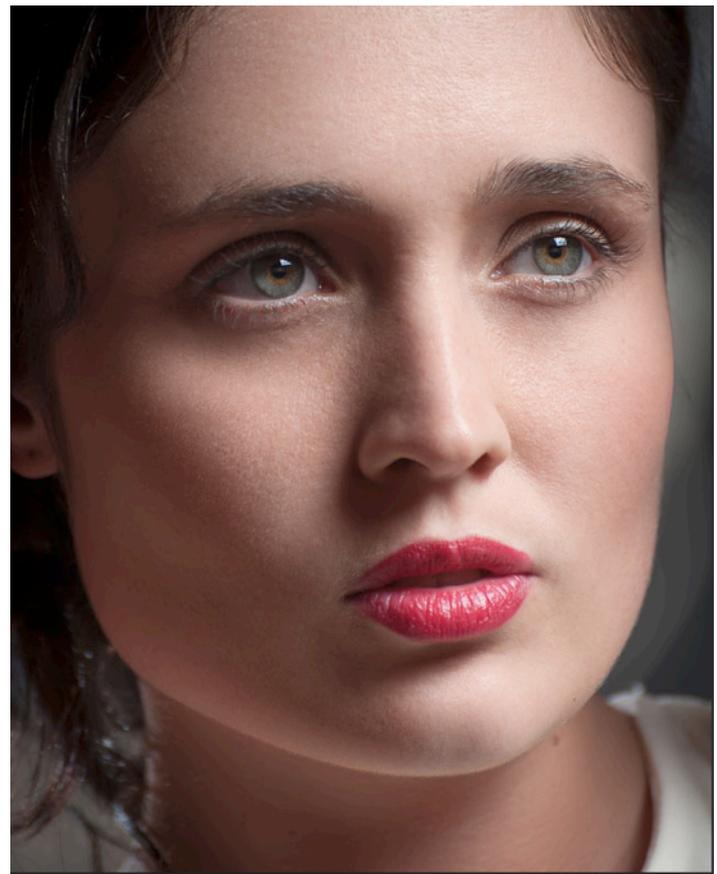
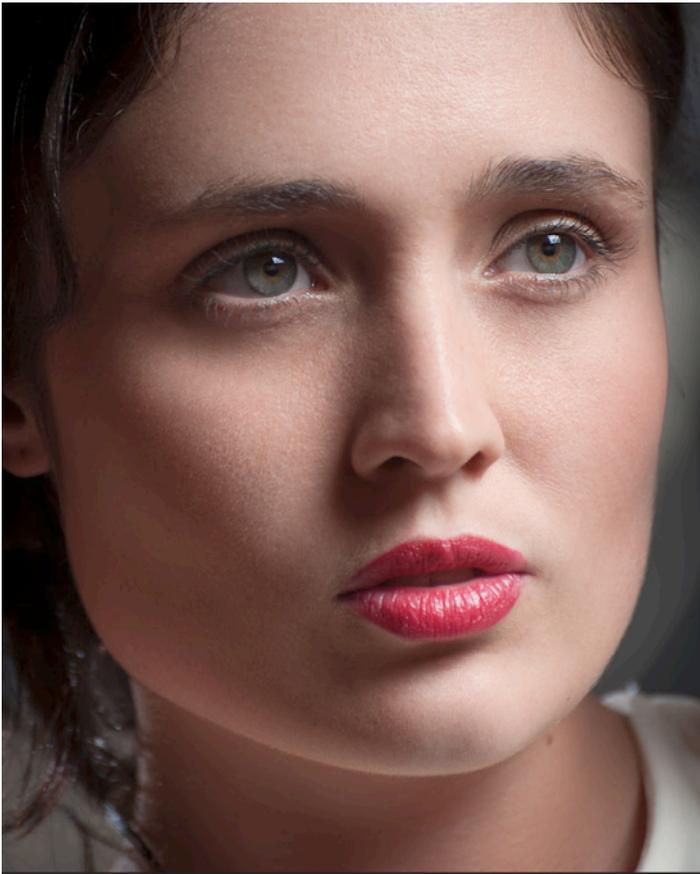
Open a new curves adjustment layer and create a wave pattern on it (as shown below). Once you have this, it is worth saving as a preset as it is useful in other areas. You will see much more clearly the subtle differences in skin hue represented by the different shades of purple going through to green. (before and after below).



Now select one of the Hue and Saturation adjustment layers, say Hue+12. With a soft paintbrush set to a low value (say 10%), paint in the green bits (greens turn to purple), but only the skin, not the lips or eyes etc.

Then do the same with the Hue-12 layer where brighter/paler purples can be darkened. I usually give both masks a bit of a blur afterwards to make sure the edges are soft and there are no joins. The amount of blur will depend on how accurate you have been with your painting. I tend to do this quite roughly as the differences to the final image are pretty subtle unless the skin has very different hues on it. When finished, you can deactivate (and delete if you want) all of the layers down to the two hue adjustment layers which we want to keep.

Below is after the hue and saturation changes that we've made to this point and then a slight eye boost.



What we have done so far tends to flatten the image so it's time to boost it up a bit (should that be our desire).

First I want to lift the eyes a bit. I'll do this with a simple curves layer to add more contrast and slightly brighten the eyes. We can use a black mask and then paint in just the iris and pupil of each eye. The adjustment of the curve is down to taste but remember we're going for a natural look here.

Next, create an empty paint layer. Setting the paintbrush to soft and around 30%, I will paint black on parts of the face that I want to recede into the picture and white on the parts I want to bring out. I'll blur this layer to get soft edges and change the blend mode to soft-light. This helps add some dimensionality (3-Dness) to the face.

There are other things we could do but I think this is a good place to stop and look at finishing off the picture.

With the top layer selected and all of the non operating layers turned off or deleted, hit Cmd-Alt-Shift-E (change Cmd to Ctl for a PC). This will make a new layer from all underlying layers, effectively this is your "After" image and that's as good a name as any to rename it to.

Duplicate this layer twice, then rename the duplicates "Sharpen1 and 2" respectively. Turn off the top layer and select the first sharpen layer. Go to Filters-other-High Pass. I set the radius so that the gross level details are coming out, like eyes and lips (usually around 15 pixels). Change the blend mode to soft-light, if there are any areas that look oversharpened you can add a mask and paint them away. I then reduce the opacity to around 30% (adjust to suit) and clip a hue/sat adjustment layer to it with the saturation turned all the way down (this stops false colour artefacts appearing). Do the same with the second sharpen layer to bring out the fine detail, usually around 0.9 pixels radius.

Finally open a curves adjustment layer and change the blend mode to soft-light. I usually lift the black point of the curve and drop the white point. Then reduce the opacity to suit (usually around 25-50%). This gives the image a bit of oomph!

And we're done... The original jpg and the finished jpg below. Usually I'd work on full-sized 16 bit files.

