A lens with a view to view the “Imagon” lens

> *“Perfection is achieved, not when there is nothing more to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.”*
> ***Antoine de Saint-Exupery (1900 - 1944)***

In other words less is best, no more words to take away….
In this in digital age I feel a little reluctant when I use a lens that was possibly designed about 100 years ago to take away “the flaws” that were visible on the face when making portraits. But a classic never dies, and no matter how hard we try, sometimes we cannot redesign with our modern lenses and techniques what old-fashioned craftmanship did do better.
Several readers have expressed to me in the past their interest in knowing more about the Imagon soft focus portrait lens. Well, here is my experience.
It was designed as a portrait lens, in those early days most negatives were heavily retouched. That is why a soft focus lens would be quite a good starting point because the image on the negative could be rather nice and soft. I do not take many portraits, I use this soft focus lens for commercial purposes, or figure studies (especially on 10x12cms infrared film!). I can imagine that you think - why should you buy a lens for this purpose when you can just do with a filter? Especially when you are from Dutch origin….
I quite like the soft focus filter with concentric rings that B.W. produces, they come in various strengths to produce effects from very soft to soft focus. The Cokin and Hoya filters have too various degrees of soft focus filters, but when I look at the effects of all these filters, none of them come close to the effects of the Imagon lens.
This lens is available in 3 focal lengths; 200, 250 and 300 mm. Ideal for a view camera, you can use either 10 by 12cms or 120 film with this lens.
It is very hard to describe the visual effect of this lens on the image, but I'll try anyway.
It is a luminous image, with a good clarity or sharpness with softened outlines, for the techno geeks, it has been corrected for all aberrations apart from the spherical aberrations. As I understand it works like this: the lens does not focus accurately for some light rays. The light rays entering the lens at the edges meet in a different focal plane compared to those that enter the lens in the centre. At wide open aperture, the image is very blurry, as you stop down (my lens has an aperture build in as well – see photo)

to the smallest aperture the image becomes very sharp, but the focal plane of sharpness has shifted slightly. So in effect this lens fulfils a dual purpose, you can take pinsharp images at a very small aperture. Or any degree of softness with a rather amazing depth of focus as you keep a wide open aperture, (inserting the different diaphragms disks with the different widest opening and surrounding small openings creates the softness in varying degrees.)

These different aperture discs as I may call (see image below) them

can be individually adjusted to open and close the surrounding little aperture holes around the fixed central aperture opening in the middle.
The effects of the little surrounding openings create a different degree of softness, as they are made smaller, they change from circular to spherical to nothing, the softness provided by the differentiation in opening size create a different softening effect.. This is especially noticeable when you are photographing objects with many specular highlights, like working with metal or glass. Sometimes you can almost see the shapes of the aperture discs reflected in your final image.
I have been lucky enough to find one of these lenses, it is older then me ☺, and the shutter does not work anymore. At least I have old fashioned quality! See image one. Because I use it in my Sinar view camera I do not worry about the shutter, because I use the behind the lens shutter.
The traditional aperture settings are almost impossible to work out with this type of lens. They are in effect H (Helligkeit= luminosity) H 5.8 – 7.7 (the higher number indicates all outer little apertures/holes closed), H7.7-9.5 and H9.5-11.5. Each disc represents a smaller opening and it is very hard to put a value on that although each disc has a number on at that indicates its approximate lightness of value. In reality I do not care about these values, I use the lens and place the appropriate disc on the lens until I see the required softness in my image. To expose the image I use my behind the lens TTL spot meter in front of the film plane to measure selected areas of my image for highlights, midrange and shadows, and base my exposure on the

appropriate importance of the value I like. It sounds a little mystical, but when you work with this lens it is best not to take a reading of a grey card, you better measure for the optical effect that this lens provides. The use of instant film material will give you an indication of your shutter speed or light intensity too. The lens comes with a neutral density filter to cut off any excess light, working with the widest open aperture or the biggest disc opening creates in most instances the best effect and at such a wide open aperture of approximately F. 5.6 it is very handy to be able to cut down too much light.
To start - use an image that has a good contrast. The classic contrast of white pearls against a black background is a good reference point. If you would photograph these pearls against such dark background they seem to radiate light from within.

Imagine a rather white face against a dark background, a very similar effect will happen, the skin seems to have that elusive quality that many manufacturers of various expensive creams claim to create by applying the cream on the face. If the users were photographed with this lens you would believe it.

The sample photograph I can show you on this page is of an artificial flower.
For this assignment I selected this lens for two purposes:

1. The softness and romantic image of the rose would be symbolically translated by the lens.
2. Most of the artificial aspects of this artificial flower would be hidden by the softness of this lens.

I used the widest open aperture disc for this image and it has been a very successful image in dollar terms. By the way, Mamyia produces a soft focus lens based on this principle, it is the 180mm F.4 VSF and is used on the RZ67 series.
If there are any bodies out there that would like to receive the “Imagon treatment” contact me at hotshot@ihug.co.nz, digital manipulation does not come close, in effect it is very different. Undoubtedly, one day somebody will come up with a “Imagon filter” for an image editing program.

Viewing you with radiant wishes for an exuberant future in 2004, thank you for all your feedback and comments, cheers