

http://www.pbase.com/dannyraphael/akvis_sketch

* Akvis SKETCH EVALUATION and GALLERY

EVALUATION OF AKVIS SKETCH 2.0

November 2006

SKETCH, developed and distributed by Akvis (<http://akvis.com>), is a Photoshop compatible plugin that simulates sketches drawn with graphite pencil, charcoal or watercolors. In addition to Photoshop it can be used with Paint Shop Pro, Elements, Corel Painter, etc., or any other program that allows one to install Photoshop plugins.

[This gallery displays side by side examples](#) that enable one to compare the output of Akvis SKETCH to effects achieved by other filters, plugins and Photoshop actions with similar goals.

The following comments and observations are based on approximately 10 weeks of nearly daily use of SKETCH. They will be most useful to those who have downloaded and installed this plugin and done a little experimenting.

For the record I am not affiliated in any way with Akvis.

==> *COMMENTS / QUESTIONS: Please e-mail them to "PhotoshopActions at yahoo dot com".*

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DEVELOPED AND DISTRIBUTED BY: Akvis, <http://akvis.com>

TESTING ENVIRONMENT:

- * Windows 2000, Intel P4 (1.5 Ghz), 1 GB RAM
- * Photoshop 7.01

PLATFORMS, PACKAGING AND COST

- * PC and Mac versions are available.
- * Multiple languages supported.
- * SKETCH is available as a standalone plugin or as part of the "Akvis Alchemy" bundle.
- * The price depends on packaging. Check the Akvis site for current price information.
- * NAPP members: Check the NAPP site for a discount code.

EVALUATION

- * Once installed SKETCH is fully functional for 10 days. There are no restrictions on use.

INSTALLATION

The installation went smoothly and took less than two minutes. The installer found and listed my image editing programs (Photoshop 7 and Painter IX) and offered to install SKETCH in their respective plugin folders. I opted to install SKETCH in my folder dedicated to third party plugins (\My Plugins), which can be accessed by either program.

After the installation completed I discovered the installation/registration process had taken over an open Internet Explorer session. A few clicks of IE's Back button got me back to the web page I had been reading.

To uninstall SKETCH, one needs to execute the installer program again. (There was no entry in Windows' 2000 "Add/Remove Program" control panel.) This is not a problem, just an interesting implementation.

TO INVOKE SKETCH: Choose AKVIS > Sketch from the image editor's Filter or Effects menu.

TUTORIALS:

* The "How it works" tutorial provided by Akvis is quite good. See: <http://akvis.com/en/sketch-tutorial/index.php>

* There are a number of customer submitted step-by-step tutorials available at the Akvis site too.

DIALOG LAYOUT

* Overall the layout is straight forward and logically organized.

* Although there are no "OK" or "Cancel" buttons, these functions are available by clicking unlabeled buttons — probably to accommodate distribution in multiple languages.

* The Navigator zoom control settings range from 5% to a whopping 1600%.

* Hovering the mouse over any control displays additional, and for the most part, useful information in a separate pane.

* There are controls that allow one to vary stroke thickness, minimum/maximum stroke length, angle, midtones density, etc.

* It would be more intuitive if some controls were labeled differently. For example "Size" should be [Stroke Thickness], "Midtones Intensity" [Midtones Darkness] and "Midtones Hatching" [Midtones Density]

PROS AND OBSERVATIONS

* The 10 day evaluation period is ample time to see what SKETCH can (and can't) do. Unrestricted use means just that: all options and settings are available and layers are rendered cleanly as opposed to some plugins demos that cripple some controls, pepper the final result with "DEMO" (or other distracting artifacts) or merely populate a small preview window.

* The default settings render a very pleasing and useful one-of-a-kind pencil sketch effect. (See gallery examples.) In my opinion, the default results are FAR BETTER than what's possible using any of the following filters or plugins — regardless of settings used: Photoshop's and Photoshop Elements' Find Edges, Colored Pencil, Glowing Edges (inverted), Smart Blur > Edge only (inverted), Crosshatch or Angled Strokes filters, any of the Pencil Sketch variants of the Impressionist plugin, Buzz Pro's Edges Mono, Redfield Sketch Master, The Sketcher plugin from Little Ink Pot, Xero Lineart, Corel Painter's Surface Effects > Sketch function or any Photoshop action I have ever written or used, including Mike Finn's InstaSketch Pro.

* SKETCH's default pencil sketch can be used "as is" or converted to an "edges only" drawing by applying Levels to eliminate midtone noise.

* When one clicks the Default button, controls are reset to values that cause SKETCH to render its pleasing pencil sketch effect.

* The built-in HELP is quite informative and useful.

* SKETCH generally does a very good job bringing out shadow detail.

- * I particularly like the Minimum/Maximum stroke length control. Set Minimum between 18-20 and Maximum to 20 for a loose sketch look.
- * The default value of the Angle control is 45 (degrees). I preferred results rendered by specifying unusual settings such as 13, 83, 117, etc. Altering the value of this control lengthens rendering times.
- * I was able to achieve hatching effects by applying the same settings (except the one for Angle) to multiple copies of the same layer. By using layer masks and the Darken layer blend mode, a crossing stroke effect can be achieved.
- * Image highlights, i.e., areas of white, light skin tones and light colors in general are rendered as "blank spots" (no hatching), which is undesirable in some cases. To overcome this one can modify a copy of the Background by painting (or cloning over) highlight areas before applying SKETCH or apply SKETCH twice, once to an unmodified copy of the original Background and again to a copy of the Background that has been darkened intentionally using the Burn tool, Curves or other means.
- * Given the underlying calculations that enable SKETCH to do its very unique thing, it should come as no surprise that it takes longer for SKETCH to render a layer than simple filters. This is especially true when it is applied to images of relatively large height, width and resolution. Listed are times to render an 8"x10", 300 PPI single layer image: Photoshop > Find Edges (6 sec), BuzzPro > Edges Mono (26 sec), Impressionist > Pencil Sketch > Detailed Mono (53 sec), Akvis SKETCH (2 min, 2 sec)
- * The long rendering times make experimenting -- trying various setting combinations -- a tedious exercise. After launching SKETCH I would often switch to another window to read e-mail or check a forum thread.
- * I found rendering times acceptable on 12"H x18"W images with resolutions of 150 ppi.
- * One of SKETCH's strengths is its ability to capture detail, sometimes to a fault. To reduce the likelihood of a noisy result on high resolution images, prior to applying SKETCH it may be helpful to apply a plugin like Smart Blur > Normal, Edge Preserving Smooth, Noise Ninja or one of the Buzz > Simplifier options.
- * The Charcoal control adds thicker, soft-edged strokes to the output, however I did not find the effect particularly useful.
- * In some cases, SKETCH renders impressive works of art by itself. For most people, however, SKETCH will more likely become "another tool in the toolbox" used in conjunction with other filters and plugins and selectively applied with layer masks. I especially liked the results of combining the output of SKETCH with layers rendered by Photoshop's Colored Pencil, Virtual Painter's Oil Painting filter and various effects rendered by Impressionist (<http://www.Trimoon.com> - Downloads) and Paint Engine (<http://www.FantasticMachines.com>).
- * SKETCH settings can be recorded in Paint Shop Pro scripts and Photoshop actions.
- * Although there are no controls in the dialog to save and subsequently load control setting combinations, the ability to record an action or PSP script provides adequate functionality in this regard.

CONS AND LIMITATIONS

- * When the SKETCH dialog opens, controls are reset to their default values. I wish it opened

with the controls in their "last used" positions. Default control settings are just a click of the Default button away.

* Lack of a fast rendering preview. To see the results of any setting combination, one needs to wait for SKETCH to fully render the target layer.

* With many plugins one can make a selection in advance to limit the scope of application. This is not the case with SKETCH which renders the entire layer even when an active selection is in effect when it is invoked. I discovered this while looking for a fast preview method.

* SKETCH does not respond to the Esc key to terminate rendering. With long render times, this could be an issue for some, like me, who frequently change their minds after launching a long running plugin.

* While I appreciate the effort of developers to include a "Watercolor" control, I found this function to be of little value. To me the difference is insignificant when comparing "before" and "after" the Watercolor control is applied. One can get a far better watercolor look by applying SKETCH and following that by using Paint Engine with custom settings such as "Wetness," "Wetter2" or "Watercolour3", or Virtual Painter's Oil Painting filter.

* Although the intent of the "Colorization" control is noble, there are more flexible ways to manipulate colors than SKETCH's control. Given the time it takes for SKETCH to render a layer, it's much more time expedient to manipulate colors outside the plugin using Photoshop adjustment layers, layer blend modes, layer masks and fine tuning layer opacity settings.

* Finally, the price of this plugin -- about what one would pay for two inkjet printer cartridges at today's prices -- will put off some who will consider it too expensive for its perceived value. I'll be honest: When I first looked into SKETCH, I thought the asking price was too high. But now that I have used it extensively, I like it so much I CANNOT imagine not having it at my fingertips for the type of work I do.

CONCLUSIONS

SKETCH definitely stands out among its peers in terms of its ability to render a unique and high quality "pencil sketch look" by simply applying the default settings. Results achieved using the charcoal and watercolor settings, however, were thoroughly underwhelming.

Although not inexpensive, relatively slow to render and lacking in the ability to quickly preview an effect, if you like what you see in the [examples in this pBase gallery](#) and at the Akvis site, do yourself a favor: Install SKETCH and give it a thorough 10 day workout. It may grow on you like it did on me.

Thanks to Kent Christiansen, Janet Petty and Catherine Bounds for their feedback on the content and format of this evaluation.

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