Akvis *Sketch*

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Akvis *Sketch* turns your photograph into a pencil *Sketch*. Somehow that just doesn't cover all this plug-in does. Yes, with Akvis *Sketch* you can convert any photo into a very nice drawing, with graphite or colored pencils, or a watercolor. But that doesn't exactly tell the entire story. You can do so much more.

Once installed, *Sketch* runs as a stand-alone program or as a plug-in, invoked from inside a program such as *Photoshop* or *Photoshop Elements*. When using it as a plug-in, it's accessed from the Filter menu and operates on the currently active (open) image. The only difference in the interface when running stand-alone is a few more buttons (Save/Open) on the toolbar.

When I first launched it (as a stand-alone) the opening screen informed me I had 10 days to use the demo version. You can choose to buy the program right there (or register if you have the key) or continue with it in demo mode. Clicking OK opened the *Sketch* window.

The interface is remarkably simple and straightforward. The left and larger side displays the image, which can be viewed in "Before" or "After" mode. A small area surrounded by "marching ants" previews the effect. This is a huge time-saver. You can drag the box to any part of the image to preview the effect.

In the pane below on the right is a Navigator window with tabbed palettes that have slider controls. The Tabs are *Sketch*, Background, Text and Canvas. The "*Sketch*" palette's sliders are broken into Effects and Strokes.

Zooming in and out is done using the Navigator window. A slider zooms in and out. When you're zoomed in, a small red outline defines the current viewing area. Drag it around the image to change your view.

Creating a *Sketch* couldn't be easier. Start by clicking the green "Go" button at the top of the window. This processes the image using the default settings, and gives you an idea of the effect. The image slowly builds in the left pane, a fascinating process to watch. Then begin dragging the sliders.

I tried turning the Watercolor, Charcoal and Coloration sliders to 0 and working with Strokes with Color Pencil checked. This builds much more slowly and the effect is much softer than using the Effects alone.

As you work with the program, you begin to get a feel for how far to go to get the results you want. Some changes appear immediately, some you need to click the "Go" button. Adding a watercolor effect to the initial *Sketch* required a click. Adding/removing coloration was seen immediately.

Then there's the Background tab. This requires you to set the image up before processing it. Instead of immediately clicking the green "Go" button, you use one of two pencils. Use the blue one to outline what is affected, the red one any area(s) to be left untouched. Some striking effects can be achieved. You can choose between *Sketch* (no background effect), *Sketch* and Photo (part *Sketch*, part photo) or Drawing on Blur. In this last you mark what to leave as a *Sketch* and what to blur, the method of blur and how far to blur.

A textured surface can be applied to the image so it looks as if it were painted on a canvas or other material. Check the "Use Canvas" box, then double-click the displayed texture to see the Texture Library. Double-click your choice to close the library, then use the sliders to adjust its appearance. Click the "Go" button to see the results.

The Text tab allows you to add text to your image. You have access to the full range of your fonts and can set the color, point size and horizontal stretch. An outline and/or glow color can also be added. The text can only be placed around the perimeter. I found it difficult to center it along the edge rather than have it at a corner.
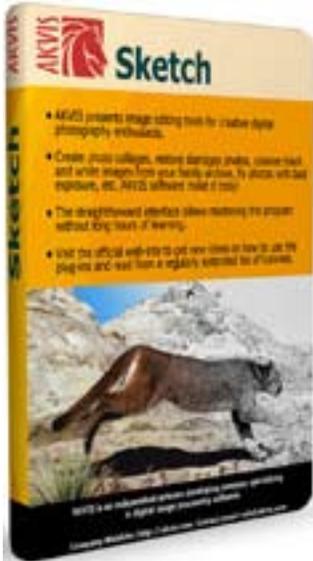
One feature I appreciated was what I called hover/help. As your cursor passes or hovers over a slider or setting, an explanation of that feature appears in the lower right-hand corner of the window. Quite useful.

What more can you expect? Quite a lot, really. In exploring the Akvis website I found a rich set of tutorials, from learning the workspace to seriously inventive uses. Many of them use both *Sketch* and *Photoshop* or *Photoshop Elements* in concert to achieve the results, frequently working with multiple layers.

I thoroughly enjoyed working with *Sketch*, both as a plug-in and as a stand-alone. I appreciated the fact that I didn't necessarily have to launch *Photoshop* just to do a quick image effect. Aside from a minor quibble about placing text, there was nothing that didn't work or that I found particularly difficult. It's a straight-forward interface and very easy to work with at whatever level you choose.

About: Akvis *Sketch v.8.5*

Vendor: Akvis
http://akvis.com/en/index.php

Price: Home - PlugIn ($55-72) Home - Standalone ($55-72)
Home Deluxe - PlugIn + Standalone ($68-89)
Business - PlugIn + Standalone ($139-108)

Requires: A photo editor that supports plug-ins installed on your computer using Windows 2000/XP/2003/Vista; Mac OS X 10.3.9-10.5.

"Oh, good, the treats are here. Let's call this meeting to order, now!" Photograph shared by TCS member **Patti Blezenski**.

The End