

Improve details of your images' exposure and tones

Software: Akvis Enhancer v. 12.0, Standalone
\$69 (Home License)

Rating: ★★ ★

Akvis Enhancer is plug-in or standalone software that can improve images and bring out detail in under-exposed, over-exposed, and mid-tone areas of a photo. Its three modes: Improve Detail, Prepress, and Tone Correction are in this the order on the screen, but Akvis suggests using Prepress last—a suggestion I found valid if you need to use all three modes.

In Improve Detail mode, the software brings out details by intensifying color transition. It strengthens the difference (contrast) between adjacent pixels having different color gradation, which helps reveal details in shadows and mid-tone areas and, to a degree, over-exposed areas (more on this later.)

The Tone Correction mode captured my interest because it corrects the brightness of points in light and dark areas. Prepress mode, the final adjustment to pictures, increases sharpness and contrast.

Figure 1 shows the Enhancer workspace. Importing images and saving those you have

corrected is easy and intuitive, as are the functions of the other buttons on the task bar, which are explained in the Enhancer tutorial, along with the Navigator and Image Window.

Below the Navigator is the Settings Panel where, with a button, you select the mode. Each mode has a number of parameter sliders for adjustment, and an Akvis Default setting. Additionally, in the Standalone version only, a Post-Processing tab presents a histogram for tonal range and associated sliders for brightness, contrast, gamma, and saturation, all of which, presumably, would be in a host program with the plug-in version.

In the Improve Detail mode, each change you make shows immediately in the Image Window. In the other two modes, though, you can adjust a Preview Window in size to immediately show

the effect of the change, you can then move around the image to evaluate its different areas. A left click inside the Preview Window reverts that part of the image to its pre-corrected state.

I evaluated 12 images with the software and, though pleased with some of the results, was disappointed with others. This software doesn't

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Figure 1. Enhancer workspace.

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challenge the expensive Photoshop CS nor is it a substitute for Photoshop Elements, which has a similar price tag, but offers more features. Rather, it attempts to provide additional capability in sharpening and correcting exposure. Akvis already offers its excellent Refocus for sharpening (Feb. NL, \$49) so the emphasis is on the exposure correction.

The Improve Detail mode gave me nice results, after considerable practice with the sliders, having started each time with the Default setting and progressed from that point. I found you have to be careful not to amplify digital 'noise' and endeavor not to create a 'muddy' effect on the image, caused by the algorithm darkening some pixels in order to create contrast.

The area of most interest to me, Tone Correction, has a 'color set' of seven colors and a 'color indicator' which, when you place your cursor on an area of interest, indicates up to three colors that compose that specific area. You then drag down the three colors from the original color set to form a subsidiary color set. Next, by placing the Preview Window over the area of interest, you can see the effect your new color set has on the image.

You can modify the intensity of the effect with three sliders: Radius, Shadows, and Highlights. Although the concept is good, it can be frustrating because areas of the picture

not under scrutiny also may contain one or more of the subsidiary color set colors, with the result that they too, undergo color change, often unwanted. The Color Indicator is so sensitive to where you place the cursor that a slight movement can result in a different set of colors. Also, although the software tackles dark areas competently, it is no panacea for 'burnt-out' areas where, rather than fruitlessly attempting to obtain detail, you are better 'filling' the burnt-out area with a single light gray in the subsidiary color set.



Be careful in the Enhancer software not to create halos, which can be evident at times, particularly in the PrePress mode. This mode is optional, to the extent that it tends to amplify adjustments made in the Improve Detail mode.

I found the Post Processing capability useful to correct problems introduced by one or all the modes. The associated sliders, however, are sensitive.

Although some of this review sounds negative, there is no doubt that 'practice makes perfect.' The software can be effective, but be patient. Enhancer has better utility as a standalone than as a plug-in to comprehensive and capable programs such as Photoshop CS or Photoshop Elements.

Minimum system requirements: Pentium III, 1GB RAM, 100 MB HDD; display 1024x768; video card: Direct X8 compatible, 32 MB, color depth 32 bits.

—By Mike Hancock, GGCS

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