

AKVIS Refocus V. 1.0 Home Deluxe Software \$49

Reviewed by Mike Hancock GGCS

Akvis Refocus improves the sharpness of images by working on local contrast. This means that it will not improve a badly out-of-focus picture, but it certainly improves the sharpness of images slightly out of focus or even in-focus. It also means that, during the sharpening process, some pixels will darken and some will lighten, but there is adjustment for this. The software is available as a Plug-in to a photo-editor such as Photoshop, or as a Standalone. This review addresses the Standalone. Minimum system requirements are Pentium III, 1 GB RAM, 100 MB HD, display 1024 x 768. Recommended requirements are Core Duo, 2 GB RAM, 2GB HD, display 1280 x 1024, 32 bits color depth.

Akvis provides a very useful tutorial (free) at <http://akvis.com/en/refocus-tutorial/howwork/index.php> and a video tutorial at <http://www.youtube.com/user/akvisvideo>

Loading the image you wish to improve is a very simple operation. The Image Window has two tabs: Before and After. It also has a Preview Area that can be moved around over the image, and can be increased or decreased in size by adjusting it in the Preferences dialog box. The part of the picture you wish to concentrate on can be made larger by using the Navigator slider function or it's associated +/- buttons.

I initially used the Akvis presets (3) to sharpen images and was not disappointed. Not only did the standard Default setting sharpen original pictures, it also sharpened pictures that had been previously sharpened in Adobe Camera Raw that I had thought well focused.

The other two presets are 'Strong' and 'Total'. I experimented with all three presets and found that 'Total' gave very sharp results without affecting pixels significantly, whereas 'Strong' tended to affect darker colors, at least in my test landscape with mountains. In shadow/dark areas you will find a greater tendency to create noise as you increase sharpness.

The default settings can be revised to suit your own preferences by using the Focus sliders. Manual focusing was fairly straightforward and judged by looking at the preview area in the image window. The Sensitivity slider sharpens details but, if used at high values, at the expense of noise. The last focus slider is Intensify and I found it to be very sensitive; since it intensifies the effects of both of the other focusing sliders, it should be used very carefully.

The Blending sliders' function is to mix your sharpening product with the original picture, in a certain proportion in two parameters: Darken and Lighten. I did not find these two sliders to be completely intuitive because the effect of focusing can lighten or darken pixels, and the Blending parameters are intended to modify these effects.

Personally, I found the Presets to be rather good. Each level of preset is fixed, regardless of the color or contrast of any picture being worked on. In this respect you need to be careful because sharpening a woman's face, for example, can result in the unintended sharpening of wrinkles, etc.! Well, Akvis has a solution for that in the Focus Area tool, which allows you to select specific areas for focusing, such as eyes, while excluding the rest of the face. This tool works in conjunction with the Background Area tool, which is used to delineate those areas not to be sharpened. These Background Areas can be blurred with the Defocus feature (Home Deluxe and Business versions only.) While the Blur feature may be useful in a general sense, it is not very powerful and does not match the blur capability of Photoshop. The paint strokes created by the Focus and Background tools can be removed/modified by using the Eraser tool. The paint stroke width and eraser size can be adjusted for thickness by right-clicking on the image window to get a pop-up.

Once you are satisfied with your efforts by checking in the Preview area, press the arrow button on the top right side to process the picture. This operation can take several minutes, so be patient! Arrows on

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the top left side reverse/return an operation, but these operations can also be slow. Your finalized image can then be saved to the file of your choice.

I tested this software on landscapes, general pictorial, and close-up portraits and found it very useful indeed. In particular, it was surprisingly effective with already-focused images. I also really liked the

capability to select specific areas for sharpening. In summary, for \$49, I think it is a very useful tool for photographers.

