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REVIEW: Akvis ArtWork 1.0

Plugin name: ArtWork 1.0
www.Akvis.com

Screenshots and Examples: http://www.pbase.com/dannyraphael/akvisartwork

The purpose of ArtWork 1.0 is to transform photos into "oil-paintings." Version 2.0 was recently announced which has the ability to apply a "Comics" look. This review is based on version 1.0.

The Basics

- Platforms: Windows, Mac
- Packaging: plug-in or standalone application (see site for options)
- Compatibility: ArtWork is compatible with Elements, Photoshop, Paintshop Pro and other popular image editing programs. See the Akvis site for system, host program and version requirements.
- Discount: available to NAPP members or through bundle options
- Trial period: 10-days, unrestricted and fully functional

Observations

- This is a specialty plug-in: version 1.0 only had the ability to render an "oil painting" look. Like *Akvis Sketch* I expect over time Artwork will be upgraded to include additional functionality. In the past the Akvis policy has been **not to charge** for upgrades. [see note above regarding version 2.0]
- I highly prefer the output of ArtWork over "oil painting" effects rendered by SnapArt and Virtual Painter.
- The user interface is fairly intuitive. Users of other Akvis plug-ins will recognize the similarities across products. I like the effect preview window (it can be sized to your liking) and the generally useful help text that appears when one hovers the mouse over a control.
- The online tutorial is helpful:
  http://akvis.com/en/artwork-tutorial/howwork/index.php
- Results vary considerably depending on the dimensions and resolution of the subject image.
- In some cases the output is a little too photo-realistic. Detail of eyes, edges, hair, beards, patterns, etc. is preserved almost to a fault. This can be overcome by simplifying a layer before applying ArtWork using filters like Median, Smart Blur, Surface Blur, Edge Preserving Smooth, etc.
- Original image colors are reproduced without a lot of variation unless one engages the Saturation control.
- Maximum setting values yield results that are a little bland (conservative) for my tastes. A more arty look can be achieved by applying ArtWork more than one time on a layer.
- Like most plug-ins, it renders fairly quickly on low-resolution images. But when applied to large (12 mp) high resolution (300 ppi) images some setting combinations can take *minutes* to render.

- The result of applying a given setting combination to an image does not vary from run to run. I would prefer run-to-run variation or at least the option for variation like SnapArt's *seed* function provides.
- There is no means to Import/Export custom presets at this time.
- ArtWork is Photoshop action compliant; custom preset settings can be shared via .atn files. Unfortunately actions written for version 1.0 do not work with 2.0: the ArtWork 1.0 commands are ignored.
- The workflow that works best for me is to apply the Photoshop action I recorded, then go from there. The action creates several versions (as separate layers) from which to choose. The Background is duplicated and a setting combination is applied; then a Layer Mask is added. This process is repeated several times, once for each setting combination I discovered and saved while experimenting. Upon action completion I decide which layers to combine with other layers using Layer Masks. I may or may not use of other programs or plugins in conjunction with ArtWork depending on the look I am trying to achieve.
- Saturation (global)
  - This control will be useful to those who use the standalone program. I prefer to apply saturation using a Photoshop adjustment layer.
- Text
  - This control will also be useful to those who use the standalone program. I prefer the flexibility of applying text to separate layers.
- Canvas (texture)
  - I prefer the flexibility of applying texture effects on a separate layer rather than onto the painted layer itself. This is possible with ArtWork by applying a texture to a separate layer filled with 50% gray and setting the layer blend mode to Overlay or Soft Light.
  - Unfortunately one cannot preview selected textures, some of which are quite good.

In addition to items noted previously, in future versions I would like:

- A few more built-in presets besides "Default" so new users (and potential buyers) can get up to speed quickly and appreciate the possibilities of this plugin.
- Brush/effect options such as dry brush, thick paint, thin paint, wet edges, etc. For examples see:
  http://library.thinkquest.org/C0124022/teaching/images/brush/threestroke.jpg
- The ability to select brush tips, e.g., square, angled, daubs, irregular, or even import a custom shape (.jpg files).
- Be able to preview canvas selections
- The ability to "jitter" hue, brightness and/or saturation
- The ability to get different results with each run against the same image using the same settings like what is poiiuble with SnapArt and Impressionist.
- The ability to specify a Photoshop or Corel Painter color swatch file as a color source.
- The ability to create a color palette from the current image.
- Color palettes included from which to choose.
- If the Coverage control value is set to 10, apply an effect to the entire image; as is, there is too much edge preservation. Alternatively include an Edge Preservation control where 1 = "go crazy" and 10 = "preserve edges as much as possible."
- Ability to Export/Import custom settings to enable sharing of custom presets
- When Run control is clicked, pressing Esc gives one the option to continue or cancel without exiting ArtWork. Add this Esc key responsiveness to plugin startup. Why? When invoked ArtWork automatically applies "the last settings." If the combination of settings and image dimensions and/or resolution result in a long render time (see above), the wait before being able to make setting changes is annoying.

- Anytime any setting value is changed, preview rendering occurs. This is annoying and time consuming if one wants to make several setting changes. Provide the option to apply setting changes on demand vs. automatically.
- Replacing/updating a custom preset requires one to delete the original, and then create a new preset, two separate operations. Not good.
- Multiple custom presets with the SAME NAME are permitted. This, too, is not a good thing. If a duplicate name is detected, a "Duplicate setting name. Replace or Cancel?" warning is in order.
- Custom preset entries are added "to the bottom (end of)" the preset dropdown menu. I would like to have the option to list presets alphabetically so one can group presets by name, e.g.

Oils 1
Oils 2
Oils 3
Watercolor 1
Watercolor 2
Watercolor 3

- ArtWork vs. Corel Painter
  - This is an apples and oranges comparison, somewhat like comparing a sandwich (artwork) to a buffet feast (Corel Painter). The scope of functionality and intended audience for each is very different.
  - ArtWork costs several hundred dollars less than Painter.
  - ArtWork: No painting or drawing skills are needed.
  - ArtWork's learning curve is trivial. It can be used within minutes of installation without additional training or expense.
  - Most people who acquire Painter incur additional expenses for training (books, DVDs, classes) and invest hundreds of hours trying to learn the program.

Bottom line

- I'll be honest: When I first tried ArtWork I was not impressed. I just didn't get it. BUT the more I used it, the MORE I LIKED IT. It is now among my favorite plugins. No kidding.
- ArtWork is not *the answer* to everyone's oil painting-look needs. For me it's just another tool in the toolbox. Most of the time I use it in conjunction with Impressionist, SnapArt, Virtual Painter, Paint Engine, and/or Corel Painter.
- The 10-day full use trial of Artwork should be ample time to make a purchase decision. Be sure to try it on images of various dimensions and resolutions.

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To see more **ArtWork** creations, please visit this pBase gallery:

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

http://www.retouchpro.com/forums/photo-art-resources/25235-review-akvis-artwork-1-0-a.html