AliveColors 2

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AliveColors is a photo editing program that also has a full set of painting and drawing tools. It has been designed to support the needs and user levels from the beginner to the pro user.

AliveColors comes in three versions: a limited Free version, a Home version that has most, but not all of the tools and effects, and the Pro version that has full functionality. You can buy a Perpetual (lifetime) license or a subscription license. FYI: This review will be based on the Pro version.

The Interface

If you have used Photoshop in the past, you will feel right at home with AliveColors. The user interface and tools are very similar. But don't get me wrong, AliveColors has a lot of its own bells & whistles. More about that later. AliveColors' user interface/window defaults to a light grey look, but there are options to change it to medium or dark looks (Figure 1) too.

Panels

Along the right side of the AliveColors window are the familiar: Layers, History, Navigator, Color, Actions, Channels, etc. panels/tabs. Here is a in-depth explanation for a couple of the Panels:

Layer Panel

The Layers Panel can be used to organize your work into grouped items, re-order your objects, etc. For example, in my drawing shown in Figure 1, I used a layer for the black outline drawing and different layers for the cat, hair, and dress. This way, if I made a mistake and wanted to erase it, it wouldn't erase the other underlying line-work or colors.

There are five different layer types that you can choose from when you are working on your document:

- **Raster**: A Raster Layer is a basic layer type which allows applying standard brushes and effects. Other layers can be rasterized by using the Rasterize Layer command.
- **Artistic**: The Artistic Layer is designed for drawing and painting using the Artistic Brushes (Figure 2). More about these brushes later.
- **Shape**: The Shape Layer is used to create and edit vector shapes. This layer is created automatically when using the Shape tool.

The available shapes are: Pie, Rectangle, Rounded Rectangle, Ellipse, Polygon, Star, Freeform (this allows you to create a variety of shapes by adding anchor points with a mouse click), and Freehand.

Figure 1. This image shows AliveColors' User Interface. The cartoon was drawn using a tethered iPad Pro (to mirror the Mac's desktop) and an Apple Pencil. This let me vary the outline widths - just like it would if I was using a Wacom tablet and stylus.

- **Adjustment Layer**: You can correct and enhance your images using nondestructive Adjustment Layers - meaning you can turn them on or off at any time. There are Adjustment Layers for Curves, Levels, Black and White, Brightness/Contrast, Hue/Saturation, Invert, Threshold, and Posterize.
- **Text**: The Text Layer is created automatically when you use the Text tool.

BTW: Learn from my mistake - which was really my fault for not double-checking how I was saving my file. But it is a good lesson none the less. I was part way through making my drawing - saving often and then quit for the day. I was horrified the next morning when I discovered that all yesterday I was saving my document as a JPEG. All of my layers were merged. Normally that would be fine to recover from, but not if you were outlining your image. It would be very hard not to paint over those lines. So I had to start all over again. But this time I made sure that I saved it in the AKVIS file format which preserved the layers. FYI: I complained to tech support telling them that
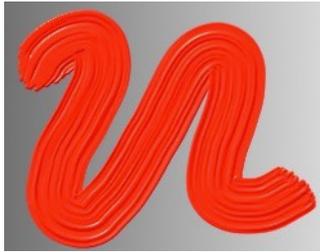

Figure 2. The "Artistic" Oil Brush imitates painting with an actual paint brush, e.g. it leaves raised strokes (reliefs) verses leaving a flat color. The image on the right was taken from the AliveColors web site. It is a good example of using the Artistic Oil brush.

most art programs will warn you if you are saving a file with layers as a single layered JPEG. They said that they would look into adding that alert in future versions. Kudos to them for understanding my frustration and being willing to fix it.

Actions & Batch Processing

AliveColors includes an Actions feature. For those that aren't familiar with Actions - they are like a script where you tell AiveColors to do something to your photo, e.g. Reduce its size, then tell it to do another step - like change the image from RGB to black & white, etc. Actions are a timesaver if you are constantly doing the same adjustments to your photos. On top of this, you can select a folder with multiple images and use the Batch Processing feature to run the same Action on all of the images at once (Figure 6).

Tools

Along the left side of the Image Window are the tools which include the typical Selection, Crop, Brush, Pencil, Spray Tool, Eraser, Bucket, Clone, Blur, Sharpen, Smudge, Text, and Eyedropper tools.

Here are a few of AliveColors' other tools:

Chameleon Brush: This is similar to the Clone Stamp, but instead of making an exact replica of the area that is cloned from, this preserves the characteristics of the underlying image that you are cloning to/over.

In a test, I picked an area from the middle of a pink and white Dahlia and then cloned from the green grassy area next to the flower. The flower turned to shades of green - matching the grass' colors.

FX Brushes: These are drawing and painting tools for creating amazing effects. The included brushes are: Fluffy, Hair, Bristle, Thread, Veil, Smoke, FX Sparkle, and Ener-

Figure 3. This is an example from the Akvis web site. It shows how thorough SmartMask was at removing the background from all of the nooks and crannies of this ladies' flowing hair.

gy.

Artistic Brushes: The Artistic brushes and filters allow you to stylize photos and create images from scratch. Here is a short explanation of each Artistic Brush:

- **Oil Brush**: This brush was designed to imitate painting with an oil brush by painting strokes with a relief. The density of the stroke varies across the entire line (Figure 2).
- **Roller**: This brush leaves flat, porous strokes and its paint's density varies along the line's length.
- **Felt-tip Marker**: This brush leaves constantly flowing paint and it draws smooth, elegant, translucent lines.
- **Chalk:** The Chalk brush draws soft, textured lines with porous edges.
- **Artistic Pencil**: This brush draws flat smooth lines with sharp boundaries.
- **Artistic Spray**: This brush simulates spray painting on an image. It applies paint in raised drops, scattered along the stroke.
- **Artistic Smudge:** This tool is designed for mixing different colors on artistic layers and changing the relief of painted strokes.

Gradient fills:

I really like that the Gradient tool not only lets you specify the start and finish colors, but you can also add additional colors (points) to the gradient. So you can make a slow transition between two colors or make a multicolored gradient resembling a rainbow (as seen at the top of Figure 4). The Gradient's colors can be set manually or you can choose from a wide variety of preset gradients. Your choices are: linear, radial, Angular, Reflected, and Diamond gradient fills.

Effects

AliveColors comes with a wide variety of Effects which are fully modifiable, plus you can see a real-time preview of the results before applying them.

- Noise: The Noise menu allows to add or remove graininess in your image.
- Shadows & Highlights: The Shadow & Highlight effect allows the user to reveal details in bright and dark areas of an image and reduce contrast.
- Sharpen: The Sharpen menu lets you increase the sharpness and enhance the image detail.
- Glamour: The Glamour effect helps you process your portrait photos. It allows you to brighten and even the skin tone, get rid of wrinkles, conceal minor flaws, etc
- Two Keys : The Two Keys effect lets you use two key colors to change the color tints, replace colors, adjust contrast and brightness etc.
- Page Curl: The Page Curl effect creates a page curl on an image.
- Drop Shadow: The Drop Shadow effect adds a perspective shadow to the selected area.
- Blur: You can use the Blur menu commands to blur the entire image or just a selected area, reduce its sharpness, reduce the amount of noise, as well as create a variety of effects.
- Distortion: The Distortion effects are used for creating geometric distortions of the selected layer or area, e.g you can increase/decrease an object's width or height, Twirl the image, Ripple it, Extrude it, etc.
- Channel Mixer: This effect lets you change the image's color tones, saturation, contrast, lightness, etc. using the: Red, Green and Blue channels.
- Pixelate: The Pixelate effects merge neighboring pixels of the image into small monochrome cells (similar to the pixelation used to hide someone's identity in a photo or video). There are two styles: Mosaic - which groups the neighboring pixels into square blocks and Crystalize, which changes them into various polygon shapes.

Advanced Shape Tools

AliveColors' Shape Tools enable you to create scalable vector-based objects that can be resized without quality loss. Create eye-catching info-graphic designs, unique logos, stunning digital illustrations, backgrounds, and mock-ups with ease!
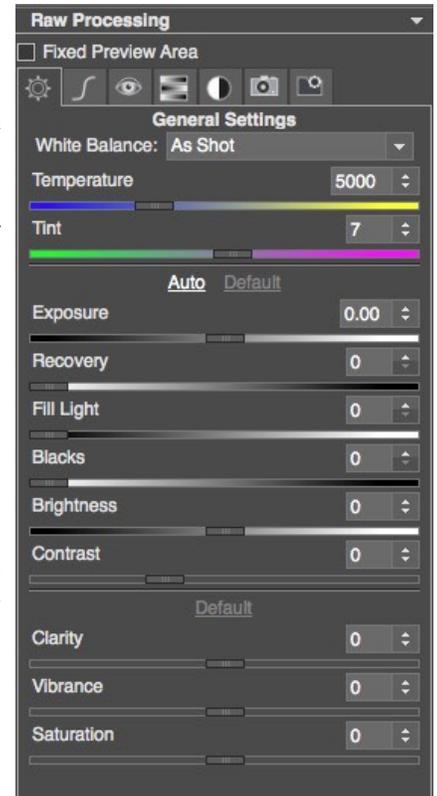

Figure 4. AliveColors supports Raw Photo Processing.

Figure 5. The Neon plug-in lets you create amazing glowing line effects. The software transforms a photo into a neon image that looks like it was drawn with luminescent ink.

Adjustment Layers

You can optimize and enhance your digital images by applying Levels, Curves, Brightness/Contrast, Hue/Saturation, Black & White, etc. You can experiment with color and tonal adjustments without damaging the original photo!

Built-in Plug-ins

Quite a few Akvis plug-ins (that can be bought separately) are included in the AliveColors Home and Pro versions. The number of available plugins and their functionality depend on the license type. I will include brief descriptions of each plugh-in. I will also add web links to the plug-in names so you can read their full descriptions from the Akvis web site.

Akvis AliveColors Home license's included plugins:

- **AirBrush**: The AirBrush plug-in lets you transform your photos into works of airbrushed art (Figure 7).
- **Enhancer**: AKVIS Enhancer is image enhancement software that offers a fast method to fix a dark picture, improve detail on an image, increase contrast and brightness, and adjust tones.
- **HDRFactory**: You can use the HDRFactory plug-in to create High Dynamic Range images from single or multiple photos. The included Ghost Removal tool helps you remove so-called ghosts (double images) that sometimes appear when creating an HDR image. There are additional Effects tools that you can use to change the coloring of the photo plus add white or black Vignettes to the photo's outer edges.
- **MakeUp**: Have you noticed that models or actresses in magazine photographs seem to look a lot better in print versus seeing them in person? This is usually attributed to airbrush touch up done on their photos before printing them. The average person can now do the same thing with his/her photographs using the MakeUp plug-in. Gone are the wrinkles, acne, pock-marks etc. after only a few minutes of tweaking.
- **NatureArt**: In a perfect world you would be able to get that "perfect" shot/photo every time. But this isn't a perfect world, so sometimes your photo needs a little tweaking to get the look that you want. That's where the NatureArt plug-in comes in handy. Need a rainy sky with lightning bolts - no problem. Need a burning field or fire for your camp fire pit - again no problem. NatureArt can add these plus many other nature effects to your photos: Night Sky, Sun, Fire, Rain, Snow, various Cloud shapes, Rainbows,Water, and Ice.
- **Neon**: The Neon plug-in lets you create amazing glowing line effects. The software transforms a photo into a neon image that looks like it was drawn with luminescent ink (Figure 5).
- **Noise Buster**: The Noise Buster is a Digital Noise Reduction plug-in that reduces noise and grain in your images.
- **Points**: The Points plug-in lets you transform your photos into paintings using the technique called pointillism (Figure 9). Pointillism is characterized by applying a multitude of colored dots to the canvas. A complex hue is decomposed into individual colors, which are displayed on the canvas as small dabs of paint of pure color. The optical mixing of these dots gives us the visual perception of an entire painting.
- **SmartMask**: Have you ever tried to remove a person/animal/item from one photo so that you can super-impose it over another photo - to make it look like you were someplace that you never were, or to create a collage? What a pain! Trying to select all of those un-even edges. Well that's where the SmartMask plug-in
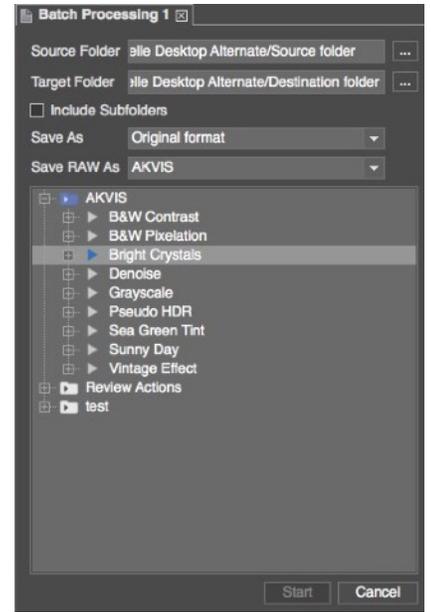

Figure 6. You can use AliveColor's Batch Processing option to run an Action on a folder full of images.

Figure 7. You can use the built-in AirBrush plug-in to make stunning airbrushed color or black & white images from your photos FYI: the top two images were taken from the Akvis web site and all of these screenshots look a lot more impressive when seen at full size.
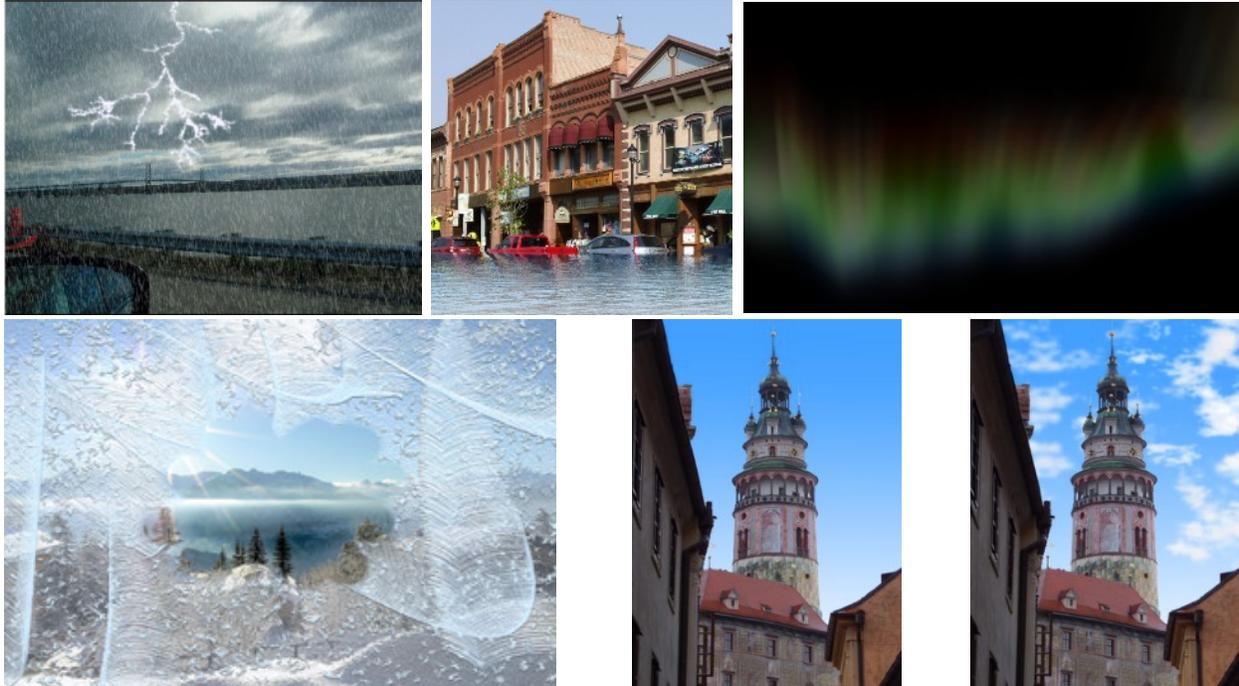
Figure 8. The NatureArt built-in plug-in lets you add a variety of natural effects to your photos, e.g. Rain & lightening, Bodies of water (like my simulating a downtown area being flooded), Auroras, Frost, and Clouds. Effects not shown are Fire, Sun, Ice, and Rainbows.

becomes an invaluable tool. It simplifies the selection and masking process for both simple or complex images (Figure 3).

Akvis AliveColors Pro license. In addition to the plug-ins previously mentioned, the following plug-in and the extra options added to the other plug-ins are available in the Pro version:

- **LightShop**: LightShop includes various glow elements for creating stars and light effects. You can move and change each element of the effect as well as the entire effect, adjust the blending mode, and the effect area.
- AirBrush (+ Original Colors mode, Post-Processing Tools)
- Enhancer (+ Prepress Processing)
- HDRFactory (+ Local Correction)
- MakeUp (+ Mask Editing Tools)
- NatureArt (+ effects: Lightning, Frost, Aurora, History Brush tool)
- Neon (+ Colorize option, Deformation, Post-Processing Tools)
- Noise Buster (+ Remove Moiré)
- Points (+ Post-Processing Tools)
- SmartMask: (+Chroma Key: The Chroma Key mode allows you to quickly and accurately remove a monochrome background so you can combine multiple images into a single composition. +Refine Edges: The Refine Edges feature is extremely helpful for quickly editing the edges of selections or cutout objects. Very helpful for edges with fur or hair strands.)

Figure 9. The Points plug-in lets you transform your photos into paintings using the technique of pointillism, e.g. small, distinct dots of color are applied in patterns to form an image.

External plugins

You can extend the editor's functionality by adding external plugins. AliveColors is compatible with 23 (including the 10 built in versions) of the 27 existing Akvis plug-ins (separately sold). It is also compatible with the 3rd Party plug-ins: Corel ParticleShop plug-ins and the Auto FX Software plug-ins.

Languages and Ultra HD Resolution

AliveColors supports 8 different interface languages and you can change the language at any time in the Preferences. AliveColors also supports 4k

& 5k displays.

Compatibility

AliveColors has its own Akvis file format which works just fine. But for those who need it, Alive-Colors also supports the following file formats:

- **Import formats**: AliveColors can import over 28 file formats including many camera formats. The most common are: TIFF, BMP, JPEG, PNG, RAW, PSD, SVG, TIFF, BMP, AKVIS (some of the camera RAW formats) Canon, Panasonic, Olympus, Nikon, Sony, & Fujifilm.
- **Export formats**: Documents can also be saved/exported as: Akvis file format, PNG, JPG, TIFF, PSB, .HDR (High Dynamic Range image), BMP, TIFF, SVG, ODI, Akvis, and Photoshop's PSD formats.

Graphics Tablet Support

You can use a Graphics Tablet for creating or editing your images. This lets you dynamically change the appearance of your strokes based on how much pressure you apply to your stylus when drawing as well as how you tilt and rotate your stylus. You can also use a stylus to perform mouse functions such as tool selection, color selection, and parameter changes.

Testing: (Years ago I performed this test using my Wacom Tablet and Stylus - it worked perfectly). Since my Wacom tablet's driver is no longer compatible with some of my programs, I stopped using it. So I decided to try drawing with a stylus in a different way. I connected my iPad Pro to my Mac and activated my Astro Pad program & iOS app (this mirrored my Mac's desktop onto my iPad). I

Figure 10. You can create your own multi-colored gradient or use one of the predefined Gradients.

opened AliveColors on the Mac (which instantly appeared on my iPad), opened a new document and then I used the Apple pencil to draw the cartoon shown in Figure 1. I am pleased to say that AliveColors accepted the input from my Apple pencil, so I was able to make varying width strokes for my cartoon's outline. BTW: I like using the iPad (over using the Wacom) since you can see exactly where the tip of your cursor is as you make each stroke. It feels more natural.

The Skinny

Evaluation: AliveColors is a feature rich art and photo editing program that would be a good tool for most artists. I like that ten of Akvis' separately sold plug-ins are built into the AliveColors program. I already owned six of these plug-ins and I was pleased to see that the built-in ones were not crippled versions. So I took this as an opportunity to not only get AliveColors, but to also get the latest versions of my six plugins. The only difference between the built-in plug-ins compared to the separately bought plug-ins is that the separately bought plug-ins can be immediately updated whereas the built-in plug-ins have to wait until AliveColors is updated for the plug-ins to be updated at the same time. But I can live with this limitation.

If you are in the market for getting a graphics/photo editor or if you are interested in cutting the cord to Photoshop - I suggest that you take Alive-Colors' trial copy for a test run to see if all of the features that you need are included in the program. If they are, it's a no-brainer -- dump your Photoshop subscription and get AliveColors!

Minimum System Requirements: 64-bit Intel, Mac OS X 10.10 - 10.15, 4 Gb RAM; Recommended: 64-bit Intel, 16 Gb RAM, NVIDIA CUDA/AMD [ATI] - Stream/App

Company: **Akvis**

Prices: Free (*with limited functionality*)

> **AliveColors Home:** $49 (*this is a lifetime license; some filters and effects are not available; can be used on only one computer and it is only for non-commercial use*)
>
> **AliveColors Pro**: $160 (*this is a lifetime license with Full functionality; you have one year of updates; it can be used on two computers and commercial use is allowed*)
>
> **Senior & Academic Discount**: 30% off
>
> **Subscription Option**: AliveColors Home: $2 month / $18 year
>
> AliveColors Pro: $5 month / $45 year

There is a **comparison chart** on the AliveColors web site that you can use to decided which version best suits your needs.

BTW: If you bought all 10 of the built-in plugins separately, they would cost around $566. So you can see that buying the AliveColors Pro version (that includes all 10 plug-ins) at $160 is quite a savings.

Available 10 day trial