

DA's Picture

Alan Bonsor examines the German entry in the Acorn professional photo-retouching stakes

Retouche, the Atari photo-retouching application upon which DA's Picture is based, has a rather entertaining background. It began life when a friend of the programmer-to-be, bragging about the Macintosh and an image processing package called Digital Darkroom, bet that the effects created with Digital Darkroom couldn't be done on the Atari - in very much the same way that we are inclined to boast about the Risc PC to Amiga and PC owners! Jochen Riekhof, the Atari-owning programmer, took up the challenge and went into seclusion with his computer. Two weeks later he emerged with the core of an image processing application that in 1987 went on sale as Retouche. Many versions and several thousand sales later, Retouche Professional today forms part of an Atari publishing package called the Dream Team, selling at a steep £299 for the black and white version and a staggering, as far as Acorn prices are concerned, £499 for the colour version!

Well over a year ago Acorn approached Digital Arts, the German company that grew out of Retouche's success, and gave the company another challenge - write a version of Retouche for RISC OS. It's taken the programmer, Marcus Juergens, a little bit longer than two weeks to create DA's Picture - fourteen months to be precise - but he's done it. Considering that fourteen months ago he had never written a single thing for RISC OS we'll forgive him the extra thirteen and a half months!

DA's Picture has arrived on the scene at the same time as Spacetechn's Photodesk. Digital Arts is a company with years of experience in professional photo-retouching on PCs, Ataris and Next computers. Spacetechn is well known for its weather satellite systems for Acorn computers. DA's Picture is a port of an image processing application that has been used successfully in the professional market for several years. Photodesk is a native RISC OS application, untried and untested in the

professional field, and in its very first incarnation.

If anyone had said to me before I'd seen either of these applications, 'Well it's obvious that DA's Picture is going to be the more powerful and professional of the two, I'd have been inclined to agree with them. Now that I've actually used both programs side by side for over a month, I'd respond differently.

DA's Picture and Photodesk perform very similar functions. They are both studio quality image processing and photo-retouching applications, supporting 24 and 32-bit true colour images. They import and export a variety of image formats, including TIFF, JPEG, PhotoCD and all the Acorn Sprite formats. Both use virtual memory so that, for example, several 20Mb scanned images can be edited at the same time. And they both provide extensive masking and cloning facilities.

In the conclusion to the Photodesk review last month, I wrote: Photodesk is the first graphics application that I have really enjoyed using on an Acorn computer. It's fast, incredibly flexible and has a highly intuitive user interface that makes it accessible to anyone.

DA's Picture is fast - slightly faster in fact than Photodesk at memory management. It's flexible as well, though not to the same extraordinary extent as Photodesk, which allows any operation to be performed with any tool. But a highly intuitive user interface? Unfortunately not!

THE USER INTERFACE

I believe, and I'm sure that many of you will agree, that RISC OS is one of the finest operating systems around. When you purchase any application that follows Acorn's RISC OS guidelines, you should be able to use the program and access the majority of its facilities without once having to refer to its manual. Photodesk, Impression, DataPower and ProArtisan 24 are just a few excellent examples of this.

DA's Picture's programmer has in his wisdom decided not to follow the guidelines. Its user interface is based on the original version and it demonstrates quite clearly the programmer's unfamiliarity with RISC OS. Not one of DA's Picture's dialogue boxes uses icons and buttons correctly. This is not to say that the manner in which they are used doesn't work, but it does make their functions more difficult to understand. In the save boxes for example, no matter whether you're saving a TIFF, JPEG or Targa file, it always displays a Sprite icon - inexcusable as there are standard icons for all these

filetypes. I raised this point with Ray Cross of CGS ComputerBild, Digital Arts UK distributors, and he guaranteed that this would be fixed immediately, now that the programmer actually knows that there are standard icons. It is also not always clear where you're supposed to click a mouse button to perform an action or open a menu, and depending on what tools are currently selected, the right Shift, Ctrl, left Shift and Alt keys all perform different functions when used in various combinations with each other and the mouse buttons.

Neither DA's Picture nor Photodesk support Acorn's interactive Help application. With Photodesk this isn't really a problem as it provides explanatory messages in its tool bar. DA's Picture would be considerably easier to learn and use if it supported the Help application.

DA's Picture is missing some basic but important features. I wanted to create a 15cm by 10cm image to fit inside an Impression frame. Unfortunately DA's Picture only works in pixels.

On the positive side, DA's Picture does have a very useful feature lacking in Photodesk. When you quit DA's Picture, all settings, such as window positions, selected tools, etc., are saved. Thus when you reload it, you can continue exactly where you left off.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Work your way through the unfamiliar exterior and you will, after quite a steep learning experience, find that DA's Picture can do almost everything that Photodesk can do. DA's Picture does not currently support textures and effects, and has no text facilities, but these are supposedly being written as extension modules which should be available at the Acorn World Show in October. Ray told me that the effects module will provide similar functionality to Kai Power Tools, an add-on module for Photoshop on the Macintosh.

IMAGE PROCESSING

DA's Picture provides 13 image processing functions, each of which can have a strength from 0 to 100% in 1% steps. This does not compare favourably to Photodesk's 34 or so, and you can't apply the effects with the various painting tools either. DA's Picture follows the more traditional approach of using a frame block which you drag over the area you wish to apply the effect to and then click on the function you wish to apply. The area contained by the frame block can include a mask or part of one, in which case the area masked out will not be

affected by the image processing. Thus using a combination of the frame block and mask, any irregular shape can have image processing functions applied to it. Although this is more complicated than Photodesk's system, once you've got the hang of it, it is reasonably fast and easy to use.

CLONING

DA's Picture's cloning facility is excellent. Once you've selected a point from which to start the clone, a square outline on the image being cloned follows the mouse movements precisely, giving you a very useful visual indicator of which part of the image you are actually cloning. With Photodesk cloning can be a bit of a hit-and-miss exercise.

MASKING

The masking facilities in DA's Picture are possibly more powerful than those in Photodesk, although I did find them more difficult to use. Like Photodesk, DA's Picture allows you to create a mask with any tool, be it an airbrush or the magic wand. Unlike Photodesk however, a mask in DA's Picture can be created, edited and manipulated as if it were an image in its own right. A mask can be created by cloning an image - see the example sequence - and any of the image processing functions can be applied to it, including Clear, Invert, Noise, Grey Noise, Blur, Sharpen, Contour, Erode, Laplace, Edges, Relief, Vibrate, Hipass and HPRing. I do wonder whether anyone will really need to apply edge detection to a mask.

THE NAVIGATION BOX

Unique to DA's Picture is the navigation box. This little box, which forms the bottom half of the Imagelist window, consists of a thumbnail of the image being edited and a dotted outline that encloses the visible part of the image. Dragging the dotted outline around allows you to access any part of the image very quickly without having to resort to the horizontal and vertical scroll bars on the window itself. This is very useful when working with large images that spend much of their lives in the virtual memory, as trying to find part of an image with the scroll bars can be very tedious as the application loads and stores sections of the image. It's even more of a time saver when you

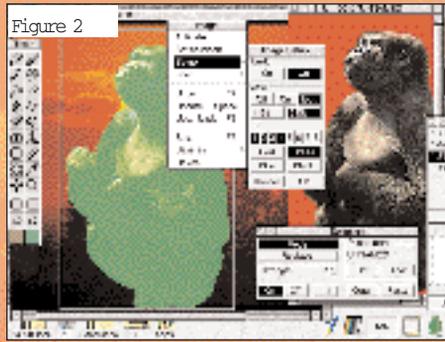
PRODUCT INFO

Product	DA's Picture
Supplier	CGS ComputerBild 231 Northborough Road Norbury London SW16 4TU Tel. 081 679 7307 Fax 081 764 7898

This sequence of 6 images demonstrates one of DA's Picture's best features: the ability to perform the same image processing and manipulation on a mask that you can do on the image



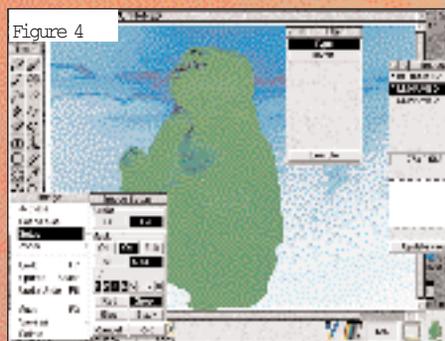
In figure 1, a mask (the red area) has been created by first masking out the gorilla - the gorilla is a fairly solid object that masks well with the magic wand - and then inverting the mask using the



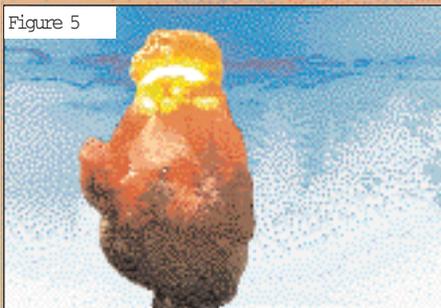
Invert option on the Filter menu. A rectangular area containing the gorilla and part of the mask (the right-hand image) was copied onto the clipboard (known as the Pasteboard in DA's Picture) using the Selection dialogue box. A block frame (a rectangle which constrains all image processing to the area inside the frame) was then created on the left-hand image containing the sunset, and forced to the size of the image in the clipboard by clicking on the 1:1 button in the Selection window. The gorilla in



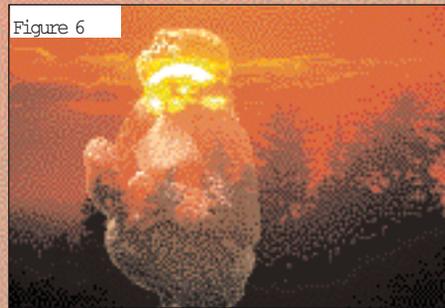
the clipboard was then pasted into the block frame using the Clip-Add paste mode and a strength of 84%. (Clip-Add is one of several pasting modes available including Replace, Subtract, Multiply, etc.)



In figure 2, mask editing was turned on in the Image Setup window and the gorilla was again pasted into the block frame, in the same position,



but this time using the Replace paste mode at 100%. This had the effect of creating a mask identical to the gorilla, and covering the pasted gorilla perfectly, thus allowing both the



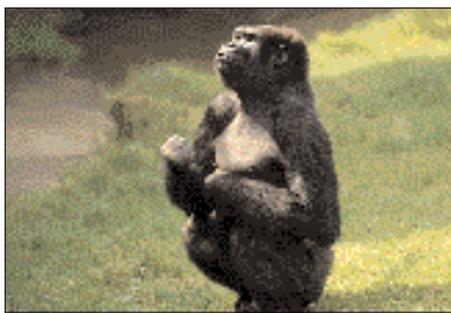
gorilla and the surrounding sunset to be edited independently.

Figures 3 and 4 demonstrate the difference between editing a mask and editing the image itself. In figure 3, with mask

discover that either of the scroll bars are covered by other windows and dialogue boxes.

IMPORTING AND EXPORTING

DA s Picture has the edge on image importing and exporting, especially when it comes to the TIFF format. Photodesk only allows you to save uncompressed TIFF files and doesn't allow you to save mask information at all - a very serious omission. (How is one supposed to write a review when new versions of the programs keep arriving on one's desk? This morning Photodesk V1.12 popped through the letter box. It now has full support for saving and loading masks!) DA s Picture on the other hand



These are the two images with which the various effects and examples were created. They are supplied as part of the Risc PC's images collection.



can't get it back except by quitting the application.



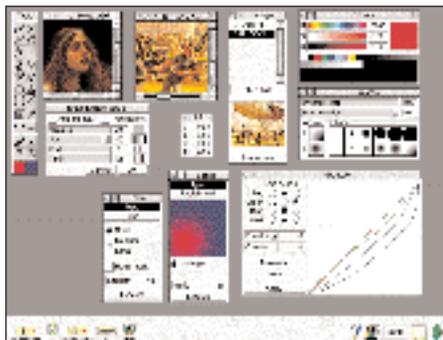
This gorilla wasn't cut out from the original image. The image was simply saved with the mask as a 32-bit Sprite file and loaded directly into Impression Publisher.

supports TIFF LZW compression, the saving of images in either RGB or CMYK format, the saving of halftones and masks, and both Motorola (Macintosh and Acorn) and Intel (PC) TIFF formats. DA s Picture also imports Targa files, while Photodesk can handle Acorn Clear files. As for loading and saving speeds, both programs perform almost identically - on the Risc PC a 7Mb Sprite file took 64 seconds to load into DA s Picture and 59 seconds to load into Photodesk.

SYSTEM

REQUIREMENTS

As with Photodesk, you will need a reasonably powerful system to get the most out of DA s Picture. Unlike Photodesk, DA s Picture does not allow you to adjust the amount of memory it uses dynamically. You can tell it how much RAM and virtual memory you want it to use, and it won't take any more than this, but it won't release any either. While Photodesk allows you to adjust its memory allocation in the Task Manager, forcing it to cache more or less of the image on the hard drive and thus freeing computer RAM for other temporary purposes, once DA s Picture has taken the memory, you



Most of DA s Picture's windows and dialogue boxes. From left to right, top to bottom: the 24 icon toolbar; two image windows; the image list and navigation window; the HSB colour selector; the tool setup window; an information display; the brushes window; the filter window; the blends window; and the gradation window.

DA s Picture works best on a Risc PC. You will be able to run it on a souped-up Archimedes, but as with Photodesk, your Arc will need at least the following: RISC OS 3.1, a 40Mb hard drive, 4Mb memory, an ARM3 processor and, if you want to appreciate its colour capabilities, a 16-bit colour card and a high resolution **R**