

A Touch of Magic?



At £69 ex. VAT, Oregon's PhotoTouch is the least expensive of the new 24-bit graphics packages to be launched for the Risc PC and Archimedes. It is the commercial successor to the very popular and powerful 8-bit image processing application Process, which has been available as shareware for quite some time now, and has been viewed by many as the best image processing application available for the Arc.

The advertising and packaging for PhotoTouch, and even the very first sentence in its manual's introduction, declare that

PhotoTouch is a painting, professional prepress, and image processing system all in one powerful package. This sweeping statement has already caused Oregon some grief as reviewers for other Acorn magazines have been less than enthusiastic about the professional tag.

This has been due to one thing only - selling an application before it's finished. PhotoTouch has been purchasable since April this year. Yet the version that I am reviewing - v1.08 supplied in September - still lacks the following key features (they are all promised, but they're not yet available):

- 1) Virtual memory management. Unless your Arc or Risc PC has around 24Mb of RAM, you can forget doing any professional photo-retouching with PhotoTouch.
- 2) 8-bit masking (the same comment applies).
- 3) A usable airbrush. Take a look at the Airbrush image.
- 4) Feathered edges on all the tools. Basically anti-aliasing, this eliminates jagged edges.
- 5) Cloning between images.

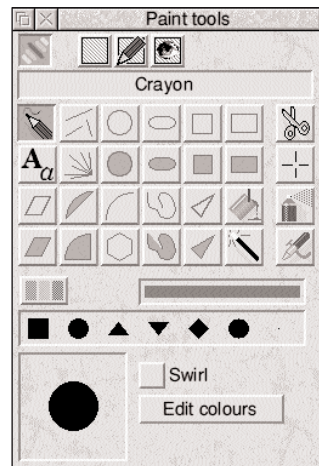
Not mentioned at all in the still-to-come list is a magic wand, to enable an area of colour to be manipulated.

The user Interface

Process devotees will feel immediately at home with PhotoTouch as its user interface is very similar. It is reasonably easy to use and follows most Acorn RISC OS guidelines. I'd even go so far as to say that it's more user-friendly than DA's Picture.

PhotoTouch follows the unfortunate trend of not using Acorn's new Colour Selector. The manual claims that its colour selector is very similar to the Acorn standard, so you should have no problems using it..

Alan Bonsor examines Oregon Software's entry in the professional photo-retouching stakes



PhotoTouch's ToolBox, with the crayon selected

However, it's not nearly as good as Acorn's. It doesn't allow you to enter any colour values via the keyboard and it only supports RGB and CMY colour models as opposed to RGB, CMYK and HSV.

Image processing

PhotoTouch provides a very extensive range of image processing functions, divided into four areas: contrast/colour control, processes, arithmetic operations and filters. The contrast and colour control options include the ability to alter the contrast, saturation and



Something is very wrong with PhotoTouch's airbrush! Magnified to 500%, the above three blobs are airbrushings from, left to right, PhotoTouch, DA's Picture and Photodesk

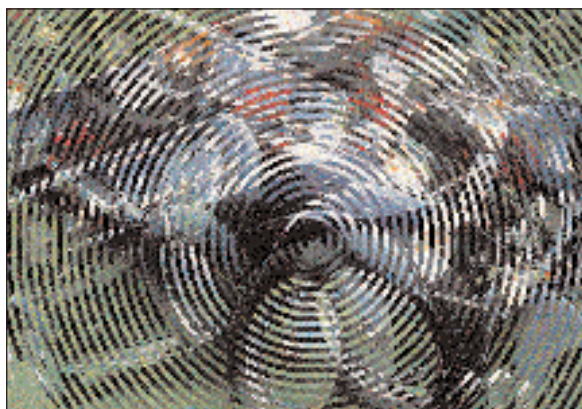
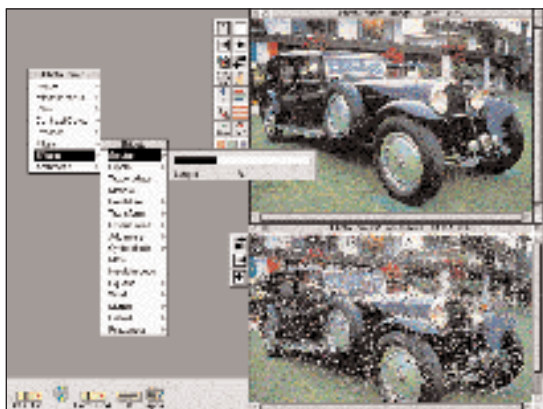
brightness of any part of the image. These all perform as one would expect from any image processing package. The processes include quantization, thresholding, colour addition and subtraction, and various other colour translation and isolation options, all of which do what they're supposed to do. The

these creations justice - take a look at the examples instead.

PhotoTouch even provides a morphing function. However, before you rush out and purchase PhotoTouch instead of a fully fledged morphing application such as Morpheus, this morphing function simply creates a single specified frame based on the start

and the airbrush, Oregon claims that an 8-bit mask will be implemented in the release version.

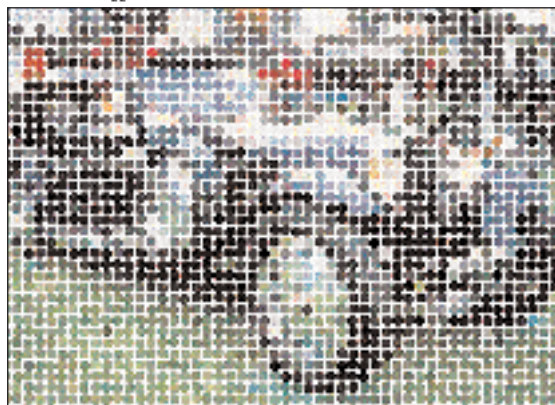
Creating a mask with PhotoTouch is reasonably simple. Three buttons at the top of the Paint tools dialogue box allow you to specify whether you want to create or use the mask, and



PhotoTouch provides an extensive range of special effects ...of which the Ripple is one...



..Distort is another...



..and Pointillise yet another

arithmetic operations include such charming functions as Source EOR Dest and ABS(Source-Dest).

It is when you reach the Filters and Effects menus, however, that PhotoTouch begins to shine. A range of weird, wonderful and wacky effects can be created at the click of a button, ranging from mosaics and ripples to corkscrews and bubbles. Words cannot do

and end images. Masking

Unlike Photodesk and DAS Picture, PhotoTouch does not provide an 8-bit mask. An 8-bit mask allows you, for example, to adjust the light areas of an image more than the dark areas.

PhotoTouch's 1-bit mask can be in one of two states - either on or off. However, as with virtual memory

whether or not the mask should be displayed. Masks can be created with most of the drawing and painting tools, airbrush and spraycan excluded. They cannot be used in conjunction with any of the cut and paste tools however - a serious shortcoming.

And as PhotoTouch does not provide any form of 'magic wand' - another essential item for a

professional photo-retouching package - it is not really possible to perform any operation over a range of colours - for example changing several shades of one colour to another colour.

Importing and Exporting

Of all the graphics packages released over the last few months, PhotoTouch provides the most comprehensive range of image importing and exporting facilities. It makes use of Acorn's ChangeFSI to transparently import over 40 image formats, including JPEG, Clear, TIFF, GIF, Targa, PBM etc., and can export images in the full range of sprite formats, as well as Clear, TIFF, JPEG, AIM, PBM and Targa. No support is provided for saving CMYK colour separations, although you can save individual RGB channels.

System Requirements

The programmer has put a lot of effort into ensuring that PhotoTouch works as well on the Archimedes as it does on the Risc PC, and PhotoTouch is the only graphics application out of the current crop that provides support for the various colour cards available for the Arc. Thus if you own a Computer Concepts, Serial Port or State Machine graphics enhancer board, you'll be able to take advantage of the 16-bit and 24-bit non-desktop modes provided by them.

The version of PhotoTouch supplied for this review did not



Adjusting an image's contrast by stretching part of its colour histogram



With PhotoTouch, things like this are possible, but only with a lot of effort when compared to Photodesk or DA's Picture

provide any form of virtual memory management, rendering it, in one fell swoop, of little use for professional work, unless you have huge quantities of memory. The 24-bit scanned images I work with range in size from a measly 4Mb up to a hefty 24Mb - rather difficult to handle with 8Mb of DRAM!

If you're happy working with 8-bit 256 colour images, PhotoTouch will just run on a 2Mb Archimedes with hard drive and Risc OS 3.10.

Conclusion

I'm afraid I don't believe that Oregon can sell PhotoTouch in its current incarnation into the same market as DA's Picture and

Photodesk. If they provide the promised extras - virtual memory management, 8-bit masking, a usable airbrush, decent cloning and blending, and support for multiple images, they will certainly have an application which can compete on price and features with Studio 24 and maybe ProArtisan 24 - both of which lack virtual memory. Otherwise the references to the word professional at the moment are rather misleading.

On price alone, though, PhotoTouch is considerably cheaper than the other 24-bit packages reviewed recently. If you don't need a professional package, the fancy and



PRODUCT INFO

Product	PhotoTouch
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