

PHOTO COURTESY NIK SOFTWARE

Nik Sharpener Pro 3.0

By Stan Sholik

Everyone who understands and is totally comfortable using Photoshop's Unsharp Mask raise your hand. OK, you 10 photographers can turn to the next article. For the rest of us, Nik Software, Inc. has created Sharpener Pro 3.0. With a new interface, new tools and presets, Nik has demystified output sharpening for photographers.

For me, and probably for most photographers, the most important new feature of version 3.0 is the Sharpening Soft Proof view. We have all tried to guess the relationship between what Photoshop presents on screen in the Unsharp Mask preview and how the sharpening will actually look in an inkjet or halftone output. It usually takes some amount of trial and error to get it right.

Nik Sharpener Pro 3.0 (SP3) eliminates the guesswork with its Sharpening Soft Proof view. SP3 adjusts the sharpening and resolution displayed on the screen to closely match what the printer will produce in terms of sharpness and detail. It takes into account the image (output) size, output resolution, standard viewing distance, the

sharpening parameters you have set, as well as the resolution and standard viewing distance of the monitor. If you don't like what you see, you can adjust the sharpening while the soft proof is displayed. I found that it really does give a pretty accurate representation of the way the image would reproduce when printed to inkjet and photographic (Noritsu) printers. The images accompanying this article will be a test of how well the default presets in SP3 work for halftone output.

While to me this is the major news in the new version, users of Sharpener Pro 2 will notice many other improvements and innovations. For one, the interface has been totally revised and

made consistent with other programs in the Nik family. It is completely resizable and color neutral, with your choice of a light, medium or dark gray background behind the image. View mode and Preview mode icons are grouped, consistent with other Nik plug-ins, as are the Select, Pan and Zoom tools as with other Nik products, the sharpening tools are locked to the right side of the interface.

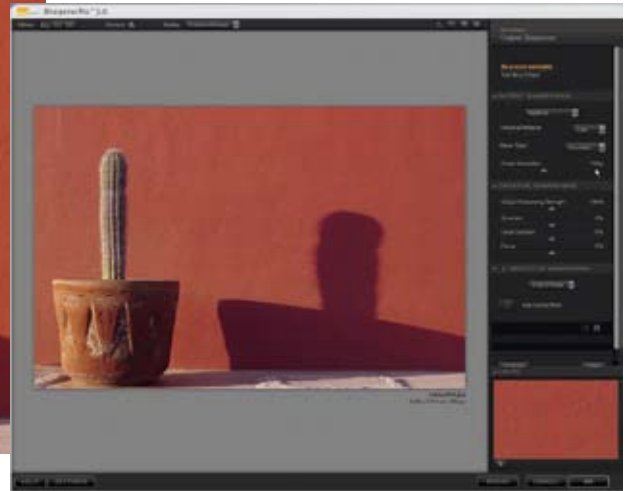


The original unsharpened image.

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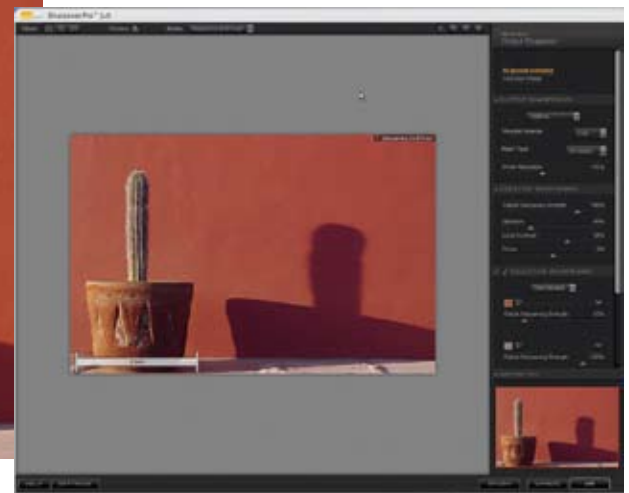
1



The original image sharpened with default Halftone settings of 150 lines per inch printer resolution and uncoated paper. I felt that this didn't emphasize the needles on the cactus enough and overemphasized the texture of the wall.



2



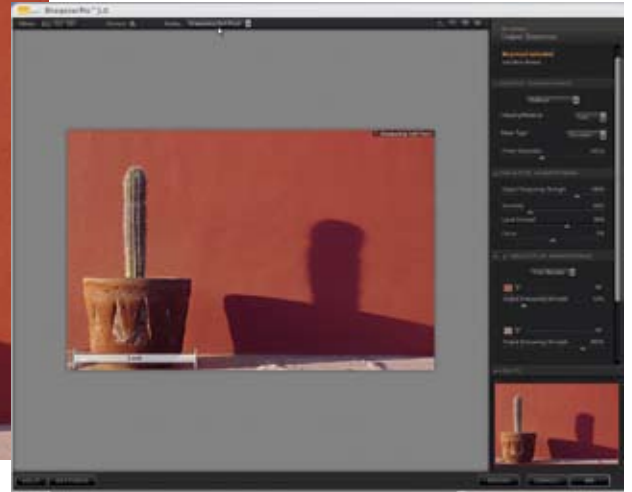
I reopened the original image and increased the overall sharpening, which helped the cactus some, but made the wall texture even more pronounced. Decreasing the Structure slider (inset) helped remove texture from the wall. Increasing the local contrast improved the look of the cactus and cactus pot, but added some contrast to the wall that I didn't want. Since the wall was basically one hue, I used the eyedropper in the Color Range tool to select the wall color and decreased the sharpening of the wall dramatically. I selected the highlight side of the cactus with the eyedropper of the second color box and increased the sharpening.

Most of the other major changes are found in the sharpening tools, with updated output-sharpening choices, new Creative Sharpening Tools and the addition of Nik's U Point-powered Control Points.

With an image open in a compatible imaging program, you open SP3 from the Filters (or appropriate) menu. It opens in a new window with the suggested workflow running from top to bottom in the tools palette on the right.

You first choose your output device from the Output Sharpening section. Each choice of Display, Inkjet, Continuous Tone, Halftone or Hybrid Device opens a set of options appropriate to the selection.

For Display, the only option is Adaptive Sharpening, with the default being 50%. Sharpening increases by moving the slider to the right and decreases to the left, but it takes into account the image size and other factors so it is not effectively linear.



This is the result of using my default Unsharp Mask halftone sharpening settings in Photoshop. **Inset:** Selecting Sharpening Soft Proof from the Mode dropdown gives you a good idea of how the sharpened image will look when output with the settings selected in the tools menus.

The other output choices include many more options. These options are needed in order to match the sharpening to the image resolution and the characteristics of the output device as well as the paper on which it will be printed. Once you make these selections, you can click OK and apply the settings, or you can further customize the sharpening using the new Creative Sharpening Tools.

Three of the four Creative Sharpening tools are new in SP3. The carryover from version 2 is the Output Sharpening slider. The default setting is 100%, with a range from 0% to 200%. According to Nik, the recommended starting point, 100%, is based on photographer feedback from previous versions. Increasing or decreasing this amount applies more or less sharpening to the image.

The three new tools are: Structure, Local Contrast and Focus. The Structure slider increases the sharpness of smooth surfaces and textures, the image information between lines and edges. To increase the sharpness of fine edges and small details, you use the Local Contrast slider. The Focus slider adaptively sharpens the out-of-focus areas more than the in-focus areas. The slider for each of these new tools is set to 0, with a range of -100 to +100. The effects are

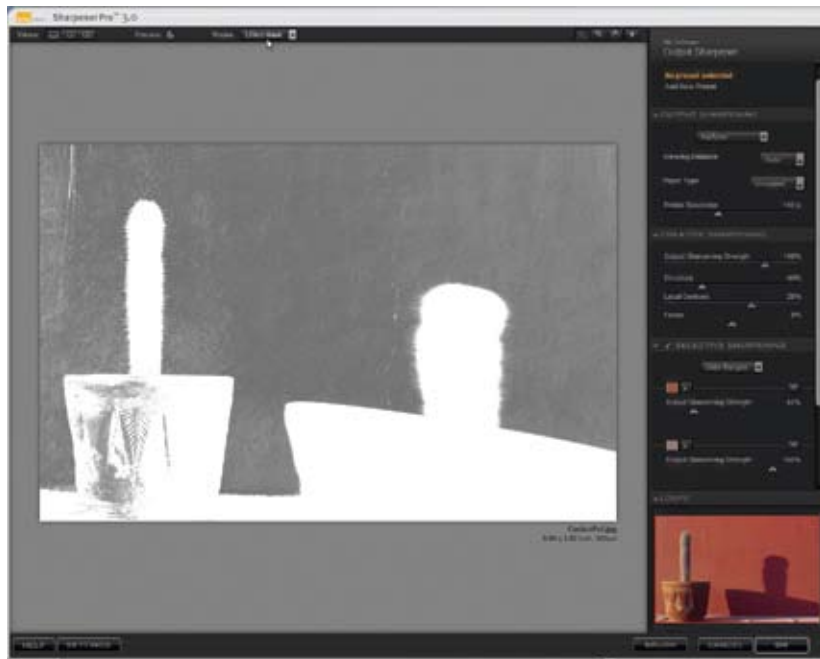
dramatic from one end of the scale to the other.

All of the above tools apply their effects globally to the image and that will be all you need for most images. But SP3 gives you several ways to apply sharpening selectively using the Selective Sharpening tools.

The first option utilizes Nik Software's U Point technology. By adding control points to the image you can apply any or all of the

Creative Sharpening tools to selected areas without creating a mask. For example, if the sky starts looking "grainy" when you have applied your global sharpening, you can add a control point to lower the output sharpening and structure.

Actually, SP3 provides an even better way to change the sharpening of the sky or any three-color/gray values in the image. Clicking on the Control Points dropdown menu allows you to select the second option, Color Ranges. The screen redraws and presents you with three boxes, associated eyedroppers for



The Effect Mask view shows what areas are effected with the selection of the wall I made.

selecting a color/value from the image and Output Sharpening Strength sliders, again set at 100%. Using one of the eyedroppers to select the sky, you can change the amount of sharpening, but the other creative sharpening tools are not available. Perhaps they will appear in the next version. By using all three

boxes, or adding additional ones, you can target a range of hues/gray values.


It is possible to view the targeted areas you selected using control points or color ranges by choosing the Effect Mask view from the Mode menu along the top border. This view shows the mask that the software saved you from having to create. With color images I found it much more useful than the orange Effect Overlay that is also designed to preview the mask. With monochrome images, however, the Effect Overlay worked far better than the Effect Mask. It's good to have both available.

There is yet another way to selectively apply sharpening. By clicking the Brush button next to the Cancel and OK buttons at the bottom right of the interface, SP3 applies your sharpening to the image, drops you back into Photoshop with the sharpened image on a new layer with a layer mask, and opens the Nik Selective Tool from the File > Automate menu. At this point you can Paint the layer mask with white to selectively apply the sharpening. Or, you can use the Fill option to apply the sharpening to the entire image, and then use the Erase tool to remove the sharpening from certain areas.

Sharpener Pro 3.0 has many other features, including a RAW Pre-Sharpener tool, the ability to copy and paste adjustments between images in Apple Aperture, and compatibility with Photoshop's Smart Objects, allowing you to adjust sharpening after applying Sharpener Pro. You can also create

up to 10 of your own presets if you are repeatedly printing the same size image to the same size on the same output device. It is very sophisticated software, but intuitive to use thanks to the Sharpening Soft Proof viewing mode. Once you try it, I'm betting you'll forget where to find the Unsharp Mask tool in Photoshop.

The suggested retail price of Sharpener Pro 3.0 is \$199.95. Sharpener Pro 2.0 users can upgrade for \$99.95. More information about SP3, including video tutorials showing the software running within Photoshop and Aperture and a free 15-day fully functional trial version is available from the Nik Software, Inc. website, www.niksoftware.com.

Microsoft Windows users must have an AMD or Intel processor with 1GB RAM recommended, Windows 2000, XP or Vista and Photoshop 7 through CS3, Photoshop Elements 2.0 through 6.0, or Adobe Photoshop plug-in compatible application. Apple users must have G4, G5, Intel Core Solo, Intel Core Duo, Intel Core 2 Duo, or Intel Xeon processor (Universal Binary compatible) with 1GB RAM recommended, Mac OS X 10.4 or later and Photoshop CS2 and CS3, Photoshop Elements 4.0 and 6.0, or Adobe Photoshop plug-in compatible application or Apple Aperture 2 (version 2.1 or later). 

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