AKVIS SmartMask

February 4, 2008. By Nataly Tikhonovich, MyphotoSoft

SmartMask is one of the latest releases of Akvis, the producer of Chameleon, LightShop, and Retoucher.

The program is after the same goal as all the other selection plug-ins – to make the selection progress smooth, easy, quick, and effective.

Depending on the type of source images the user can employ one of three algorithms or their combination to achieve best results.

This and the compatibility of SmartMask with quite a number of Photo Editing Programs makes this plug-in different from the others in the first place. But we shall look at what and how it can do on a number of images.

Installation

The installation of the program is smooth and easy. It only requires your attention when the working language (Akvis products traditionally support many languages, including Russian and Japanese) and later the photo editor should be chosen.
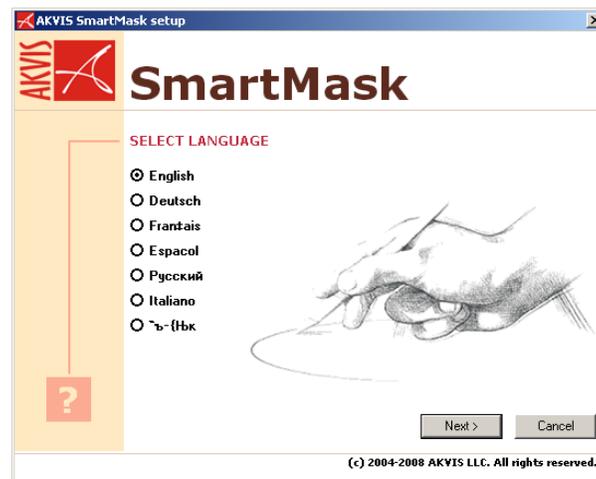
Interface and tools

The interface of the program is neat and user friendly. Most of the window is given to the image workspace, the left panel contains current tools together with zoom, and the right panel has navigator, parameters, and a small window with short explanations of the current tools or function. The latter is very convenient, especially at the learning stage. The navigator lets also to zoom the image in and out with a slider.
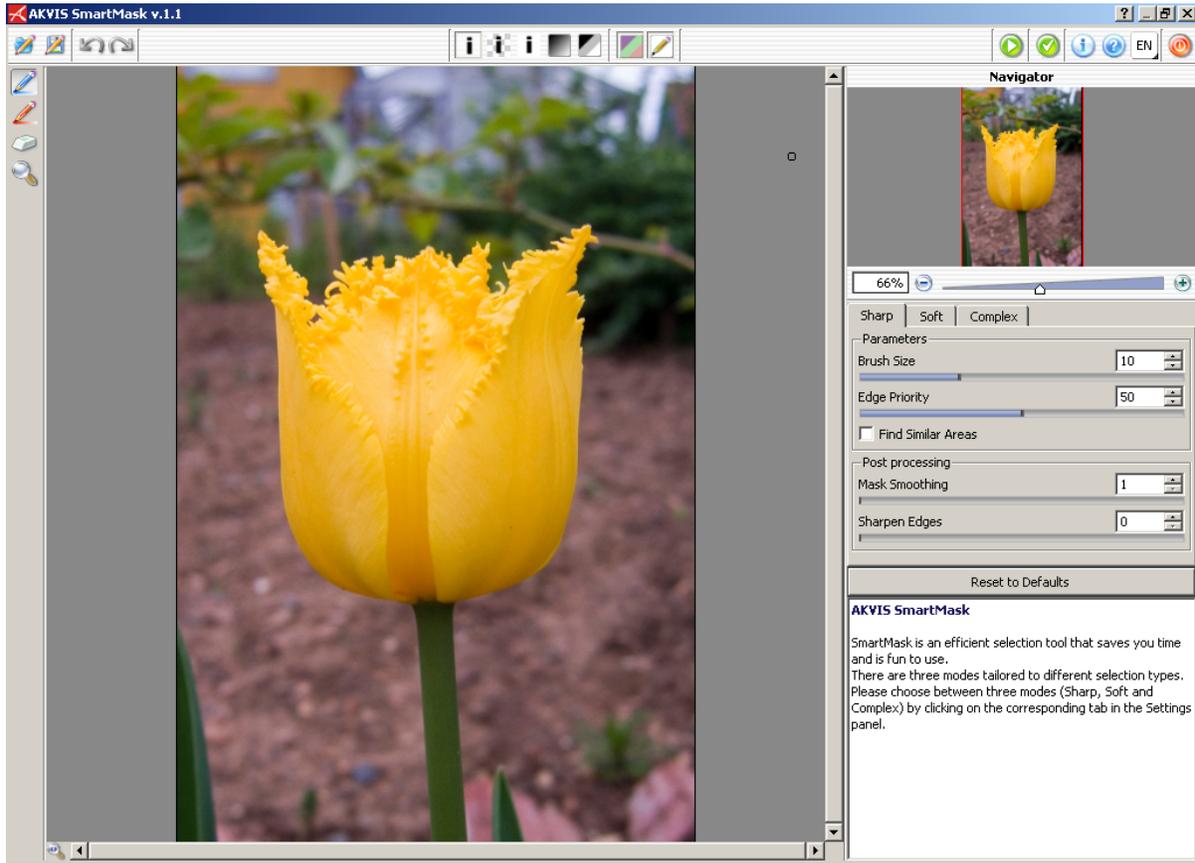
Zoom, it should be said quite conveniently organized. You can not only operate it from two different places in the screen, but use left and right mouse click with the zoom button active. The only puzzling thing about it, is that "fit to screen" button is present, but situated in the left bottom corner, far from all other zoom controls.

Upper panel contains icons for view modes – original, transparent background, color background, alpha and tricolor masks. Strokes button is also there. On the same panel to the right are apply, done, and info buttons.

The three tabs on the right panel have the three selection methods based on different algorithms. Let us see how they work.

Sharp mode

The first method under the tab "Sharp" has two main tools – red – drop and blue – keep pencils. To produce a selection you should mark the keep and drop areas with several strokes and run the program with "Apply" button. You don't have to follow the edge as precisely as possible but marking the main color areas is advisable.
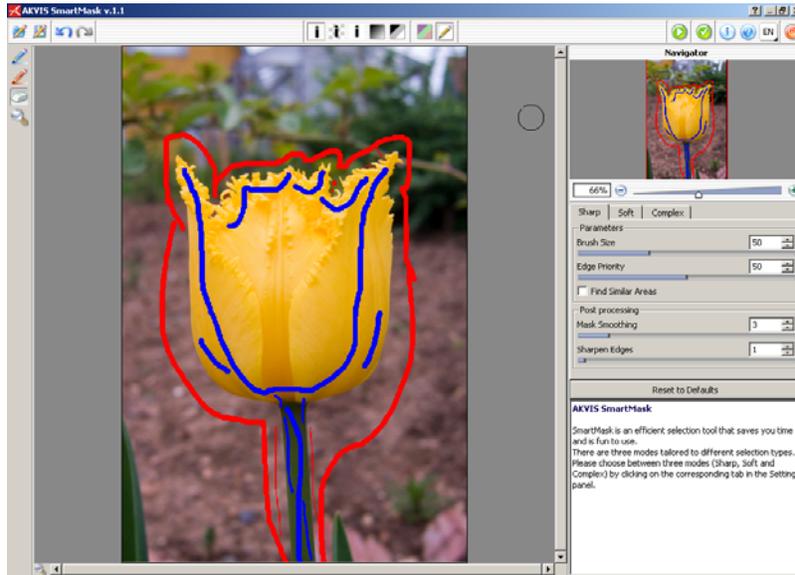
The algorithm is good for sharp images with a well defined edge and a good contrast between keep and drop areas. For most of them this one and only method will be enough.

Soft mode

Soft tab makes active a number of different tools. You have now Keep and Drop pencils and buckets. And an additional Green pencil and bucket appear. If blue marks the area to be kept and red – the area to be dropped, green should cover the area where the program will calculate the keep and drop colors taking into account the blue and red fields.
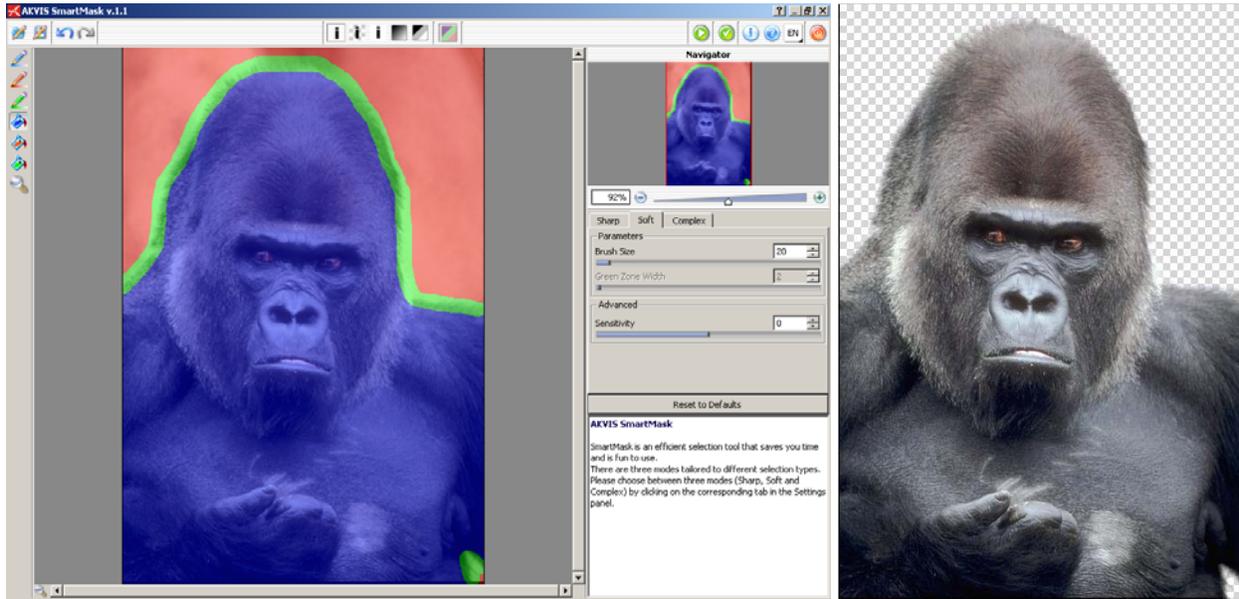
Here you should pay attention to Sensitivity parameter. The higher you make it the more detail would be taken into the cutout. But with more complex images, especially when background colors tend to leak into the foreground zone it's best to set Sensitivity to a negative value.


The Soft mode can be used both independently and with the sharp mode as a preparatory stage.

The Sharp mode can be used as a first stage then you have both well defined and smooth edges and some intricate areas as fur or hair to select. In this case you paint your strokes, press apply; get an overlay with blue and red areas and a green border between them. Then you switch to smooth mode, correct the green zone so that it covers the difficult edge (there's an option of increasing the green zone width by a certain degree of pixels) and press apply again.
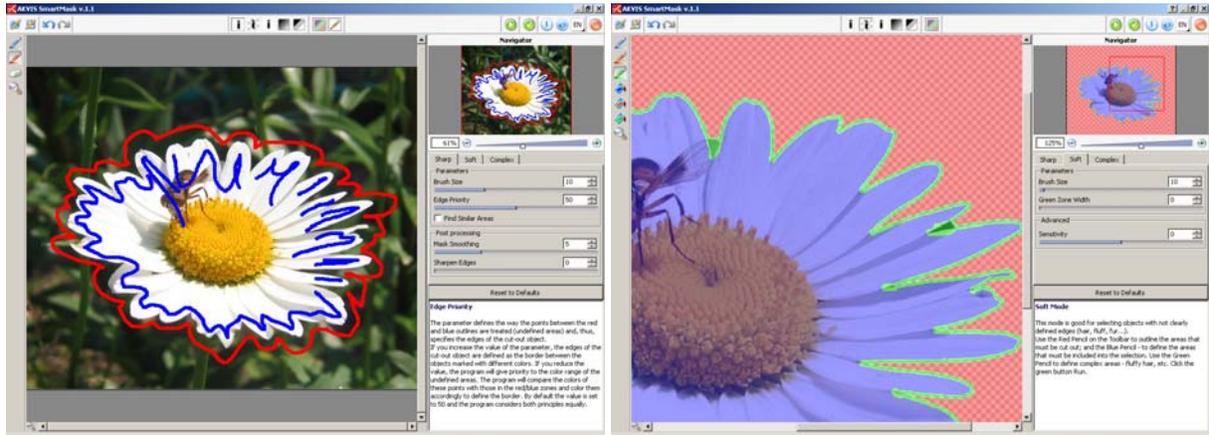
The resulted selection has smooth, half transparent edges. The degree of smoothness can be regulated by Smooth control. Sometimes you need to correct the green zone though.
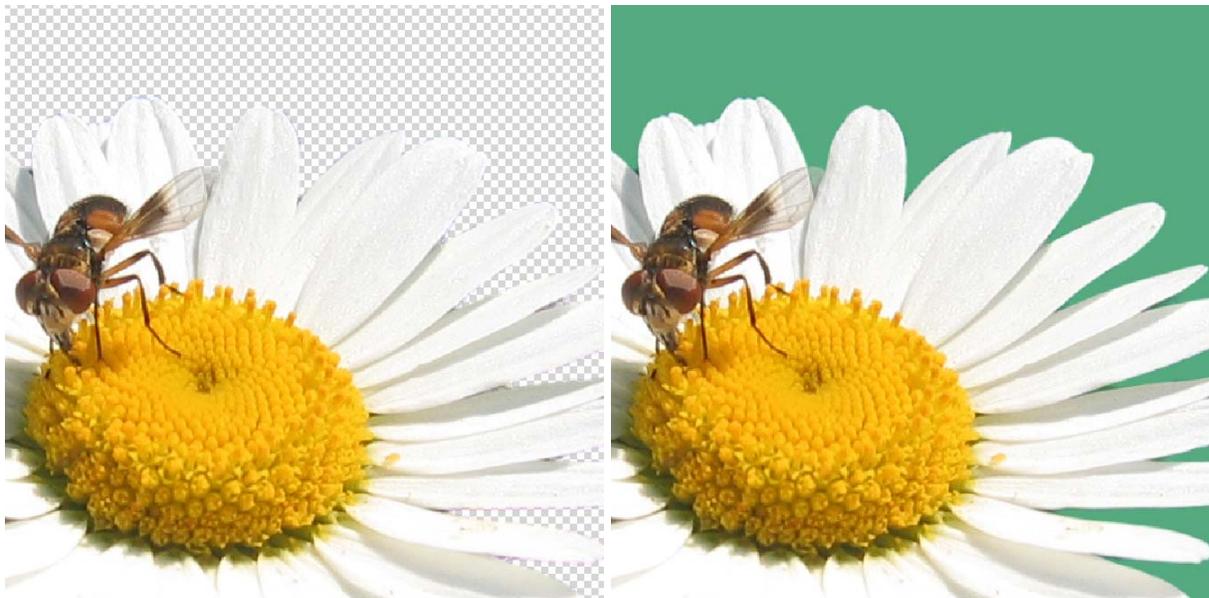
Of course, you can start with Smooth mode right away. In this case you usually draw with green pencil over the edges and then fill the red and blue zones with the buckets. It's justifiable when there is not much of the edge, though.

Soft mode is good for moderately complex, well contrasted images with more intricate edges, including not wispy hair and fur (note the example of selecting hair from a green screen image above), transparent glass, tracery objects with one color background.
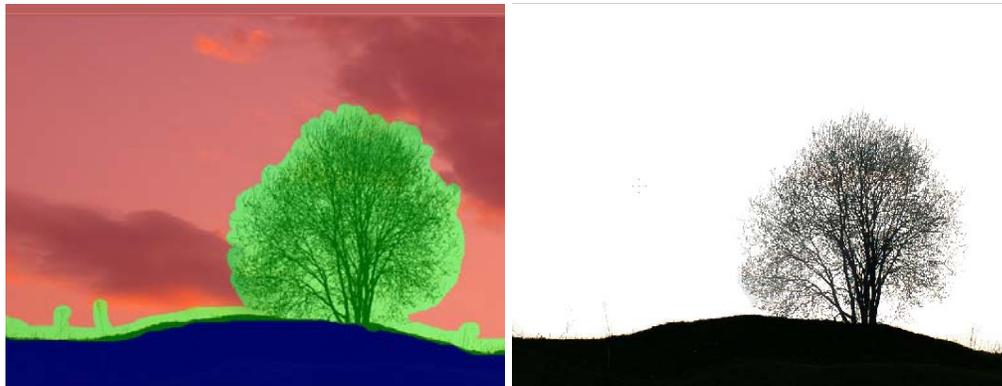
Complex mode

The problems that can arise at Soft mode include rough edge, extra background colors, and too much transparency in the edges. While rough edge can be smoothed by simple blur tool (present in the tools panel) or corrected with eraser, especially in the places that are not very critical, too much of transparency in hair or, say, tree brunches, is difficult to repair with restore tool. In this case we can turn to the third, Complex mode with its Magic Brush and Restore Foreground tools.

Complex mode can be used both independently or after one or both of the Sharp and Smooth modes. The main tool here is Magic brush working with the colors you choose to drop or keep with the Red and Blue eyedroppers.

Magic brush impact can be restricted with the green zone or be applied to the whole image (when you've decided to use the mode independently).

The best strategy here is to work in small segments, choosing three-four keep and drop colors. This mode of action is helped by the possibility to group the colors in the pallets and activate and deactivate them as needed.

A rather useful option, especially for hair selection, is the Foreground Recovery.

SmartMask has good help and support. First of all you have a special hints window in the right bottom corner. It gives you a brief clue on what the control or tool is doing. Where's a help in a usual format. On the Akvis.com site you can find tutorials. And, finally, the support team can answer your specific questions.

You can buy SmartMask Home edition for $120 (with a license extendable to two computers) and SmartMask Business edition for $240 at akvis.com

Home users can enjoy the full line of AKVIS plugins in the AKVIS Alchemy bundle (Enhancer, Chameleon, Stamp, Retoucher, Coloriage, Noise Buster, SmartMask, Decorator, Sketch, LightShop, ArtSuite, Magnifier, ArtWork) only for USD $325 USD (saving more than 60%)!