

Color Efex Pro 3.0 Review by Darrel Priebe

Would you like an easy-to-use method to dramatically improve the appearance, color, beauty and creative style of your photographs? How about a program that is so easy to use, a beginner could do it without expensive lessons or time consuming tutorials to study?

Well Nik Software makes that program, and they've given it the misspelled moniker, *Color Efex Pro 3.0*. It's available for both the PC and the Mac. So what's the catch? What else but money! Is this program worth the hefty price tag? Read on to find out, but first a warning. If you're at all worried about the family budget, stop reading right now. When you see what *Color Efex Pro 3.0* can do, and how well it does it, you will want this program, so put this newsletter down, or walk away from that monitor now, before you get hooked.

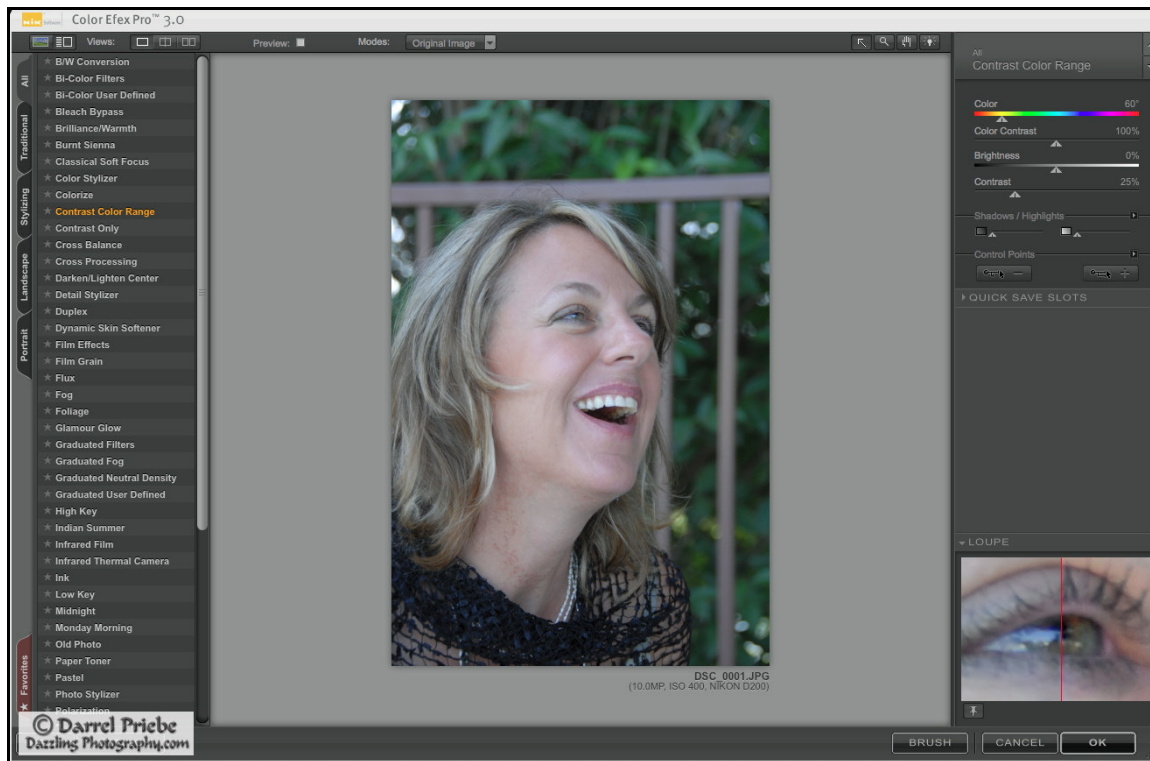
Oh, did I say there is a free 15 day, fully functional trial available? Nik definitely wants this program's magic to capture you, so you've been warned. Efex Envy is straight ahead. Here's why.

Nik Software's newly revised *Color Efex Pro 3.0 Complete* is for photographers using Photoshop (PS) and Photoshop Elements (PSE). It offers traditional and stylizing filters that provide almost endless possibilities to enhance and transform images.

I evaluated the Complete Edition which contains 52 different filters. To give this program a real workout, I planned to take some plain, so-so, unretouched pictures that I didn't consider worthy of printing (at least not without a significant amount of time spent in Photoshop's digital darkroom), and give them the one-click test in *Color Efex Pro 3.0*. If Nik's filters could save these pictures, and save me the time I would have spent processing them, then I knew we had a partnership.

But first I had to install the program. That seemed easy enough, and the install program said it would place the *Color Efex 3.0* filters in the correct Photoshop folder. Uh-oh, a glitch. After installation, *Color Efex 3.0* didn't appear in my list of available filters in CS3. Wasting no time, I called the phone number listed for Nik Software. The tech guy was easy to reach, and provided a solution in a fast, efficient and courteous manner, rather shocking for software phone support these days, wouldn't you say? Turns out the install program did not put the Nik filter folder in the right place for CS3 on my Mac. I suggest if you install it, you choose the manual option for placing the filters in the correct PS folder. It was easy to do following the installation program's guidance.

After opening my first so-so image in PS, I went to Filter > Nik Software > Color Efex Pro 3.0 Complete. This opens up a large new window with my image, and a list of 52 different filters on the left. You can view all the filters at once, or see smaller groups of them with the provided tabs, "Traditional," "Stylizing," "Landscape," and "Portrait." You can even put your favorite filters in a "Favorites" tab.



(IMAGE 1 – Filter List)

You can click your way down the list of available filters, seeing each one rendered in just a few seconds. This program just works. It’s fast, smooth and very reliable in operation. Of course many of the filters didn’t look right for my particular portrait of a wedding guest, but I found one that did, “Contrast Color Range.” In fact, with one click it cleaned up this picture in several important ways. First, it darkened and blurred the background, so it was less busy and intrusive. Second, it gave the woman a beautiful glow to her skin, which minimized the complexion “issues” on her neck. The overall color, saturation and contrast of the image was tastefully enhanced. Finally, it shifted the lighting in the picture to emphasize the female guest, which put the viewer’s focus on her and her alone. The woman’s image really “popped” out of the picture in an eye-catching way. I was impressed. All this, with just one mouse-click!



(IMAGE 2 – Original: Model)



(IMAGE 3 – Model with Contrast Color Range filter)

After clicking the “OK” button, the *Color Efex Pro (CEP) 3.0* window closed, and a new layer was placed in Photoshop above the Background layer. If I wanted to, I could place a layer mask on the CEP 3.0 layer, and reduce the effect in selected areas, or just reduce this layers opacity level to make an overall reduction in the effect. But I didn’t want to, because the effect was fantastic!

Next I tried the same picture, adding the Glamour Glow filter. This adds that high fashion “glow” to a portrait, which lightens and softens the skin and highlights in the hair, creating a soft glow to the model’s face. A very impressive one-click change! To reduce the effect in some areas, *CEP* has a very convenient feature, especially for Photoshop Elements users. You can click the *Brush* button instead of the *OK* button, and a black layer mask appears on the new *CEP* layer, so you can paint the effect in with a white brush, just where you want it to appear. When you are finished brushing in the effect, click *Apply* and the layer is added to the Photoshop or Photoshop Elements layers stack. This will be a great work-around for Elements users, who don’t have the advantage applying a layer mask on every type of layer.

Now be sure you’re sitting down, because Nik goes Photoshop one-better. You don’t need layer masks anymore, because of their clever U-Point technology which allows you to add one or more “control” points to the picture, and easily change how much of the filter’s effect is present on those specific color pixels, and over how large an area of the photograph that change takes place. To test this new technology, I applied the Glamour Glow filter, and set three different control-points. First, I removed the effect from the eyes. Second, I set the opacity at about 50% for the glow on the face. Third, I set the background foliage to 100% opacity, to make it more blurred and dark, as a portrait background should look. All of this was done without any masks or selections. Is there anybody who really enjoys the tedious work of making selections? Wow, this

U-Point Technology is definitely the coming thing in digital darkroom tools. If you haven't tried it, you owe it to yourself to give this program a spin with the free 15-day trial.



(IMAGE 4 – Model with Glamour Glow added to Contrast Color Range filter)

Every filter also has several specific controls to fine tune the appearance of the effect on your particular image, and you can save up to four particular sets of adjustments for each effect. There is a magnifying loop, which moves with the cursor over the image, enlarging it to reveal great detail. If you double-click on the image, the image enlarges and the loop becomes a navigator. Very convenient!

You can also “stack” the CEP filter effects one after another. Look how nice the same picture above looks with two more filters, for a total of four filters, including the Contrast Color Range, Glamour Glow, Reflector and Vignette filters.



(IMAGE 5 – Model with Contrast Color Range, Glamour Glow, Reflector and Vignette filters)

I tried several more of the filters, and found many favorites, including these:

- Skylight, which adds a lovely effect to the skin in portraits, among other things
- Reflector Effects, which adds a warm bounce light from a reflector to the shadow areas on the image
- Black/White Conversion – which immediately renders a strong, crisp B&W image that would take time to create in PS
- Duplex, for an interesting Duo-Tone look with added color elements
- Color Stylizer – for a rich Sepia-like effect with muted colors throughout the image
- Other interesting filters include Dynamic Skin Softener, Darken/Lighten Center, Vignette, Film Effects, High Key, Tonal Contrast, Bleach Bypass, and many more.

Below are images with just some of the many beautiful and useful filter effects I have tried. I am still discovering new filters I love, or new uses for familiar filters. For a complete list, check out the Nik Software web site listed below.



(IMAGE 6 – Musicians Original)



(IMAGE 7 – Musicians with Duplex Filter)



(IMAGE 8 – Landscape Original)



(IMAGE 9 – Landscape with Graduated Fog and Hi-Key Filter)



(IMAGE 10 – Bridesmaid Original)



(IMAGE 11 – Bridesmaid with Color Stylizer)

Summary Nik Software's *Color Efex Pro 3.0* filters are said to be the leading photographic filters for digital photography, and are widely used by many of today's professional photographers to save time and obtain professional quality results. The patented U-Point technology gives the user easy control to selectively apply the enhancements without the need for any complicated masks, layers or selections. *Color Efex Pro 3.0* provides control of color, light and tonality in your images and creates effects that would be difficult and time consuming to create in Photoshop, even if you knew how to make them.

This program really rocks! With 52 filters and, according to Nik, over 250 effects found in *Color Efex Pro 3.0 Complete*, you can perform high quality retouching, color correction, and endless creative enhancements to your photographs. CEP is an easy, fun, creative and powerful set of filter effects for Photoshop and Photoshop Elements that will take your images and digital darkroom work to a new level of excellence.

Nik claims *Color Efex Pro 3.0* is the most complete, most useful collection of photographic filters you can add to your toolkit. I haven't measured that claim against the competition, but I'm definitely not letting this photo-enhancing-tool-kit out of my digital darkroom!

Versions & Pricing Color Efex Pro 3.0 comes in three different versions, each offering a different number of filters. The Standard Edition has 15 filters for \$ 99.95. The Select Edition has 35 filters and costs \$159.95. The Complete Edition has all 52 filters and costs \$299.95.

On Amazon.com I found the Select Edition with 35 filters for \$149, an \$11 discount. The Complete Edition with 52 filters was \$279 on Amazon, a \$20 savings.

The Nik Software site lists upgrade options for previous owners of Color Efex. The Complete Edition is \$149.95, if you own the CEP 2.0 Complete Edition. Other options are available as well.

The Professional Suite for \$449.95 bundles three programs, Color Efex Pro 3.0 Complete, along with the noise reduction program, Dfine 2.0 (which I reviewed in October 2007), and Nik Sharpener Pro 2.0. Amazon sells the Suite for \$399, a \$50 savings.

There are deep discounts for students and teachers. Academic Superstore has the Complete Edition for only \$174.95. That's \$105 off Amazon's price; a bargain for all 52 filters. The Professional Suite for teachers/students is only \$379.95, a \$20 savings from Amazon's discounted price.

Support Nik offers free email support for registered users. I was in a hurry, and called them for phone support with a minor installation problem, and they took care of it fast.

Free Trial Nik Software offers a free, 15 day trial of a fully functional Mac or PC version of their software. If you want to see the program in action, try the free tutorials on this site: <http://www.niksoftware.com/learnmore/usa/entry.php> Give it a try; I think you'll be impressed. I know I am now that I've found a talented partner in the digital darkroom.

Nik Software

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