PhotoLift

PhotoLift takes a much simpler approach than ContrastMaster, but it's highly effective. There are only seven controls —six sliders and one drop-down menu — that operate in straightforward and intuitive ways. The manual explains clearly what each of the controls is for. It won't take you more than a double handful of minutes to learn how to use all of them well.

PhotoLift works best as an interactive program. There are Brush, Eraser, and Paint Bucket tools for applying the contrast adjustments you want to make to the photograph. One common way to use this program is to make an overall modest adjustment to local and global contrast and detail enhancement using the Paint Bucket. Then you can go back and reduce the degree of alteration selectively with the Eraser or change it entirely using the Paintbrush with different settings. As the Paintbrush moves over the plug-in's viewing window, the photograph underneath changes as a preview of what will happen when you apply the brush there, so you're not working blindly. The plug-in also has an unlimited number of undos, should you find yourself somewhere you don't want to be.

It's particularly nice to have a plug-in that combines local and global contrast changes into one easy-to-set tool. Enhancing local contrast frequently pushes tones toward black or white, and clipping can occur if the user isn't careful. By setting the sliders to simultaneously enhance local contrast while slightly decreasing global contrast, you can prevent that from happening.

The interactive brush isn't very speedy. There's a noticeable lag between moving the mouse and the brush following, but changes under the brush are visible almost instantaneously, and the filter works very quickly once you tell it to apply the alterations to the original photograph.