

Screen Savers as Artists' Medium

By MATTHEW MIRAPPAUL

JAMES BUCKHOUSE wants to brighten your office with a little art. But put away the thumbtacks. You will need an Internet-connected computer to install these works.

"Refresh: The Art of the Screen Saver" is an online exhibition of 22 artist-created screen-saver programs, all of which can be downloaded free. The exhibition, curated by Mr. Buckhouse, opened Nov. 4 on the ArtMuseum.net site.

Mr. Buckhouse, a San Francisco artist, said the prosaic nature of most screen savers inspired him to mount the exhibition. In the typical corporate cubicle, he said, "the only window out is your computer screen, and the only thing on your computer screen is poetically impoverished. My hope was to bring some small moment of art to the desktop."

The works in the exhibition differ from the usual screen saver fare of animated geometric patterns, postcard-pretty slide shows or cartoon characters perpetually engaged in cute antics.

In "Texas Moments," for example, Tarikh Korula presents photographs of 25 people executed in Texas this year, the grim images offset by the simple menus the prisoners requested for their last meals. (The site warns that some pieces may be inappropriate for children.) Mick and Ted Skolnick's entry is a rotating head on which the hair continually grows and recedes, a spoof of screen savers' repetitive content.

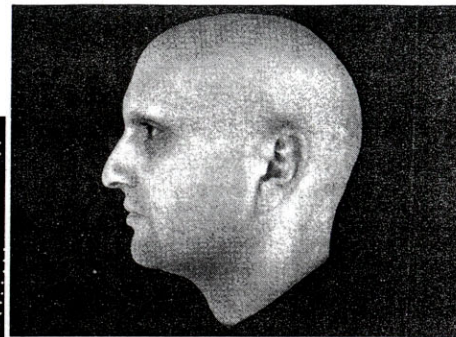
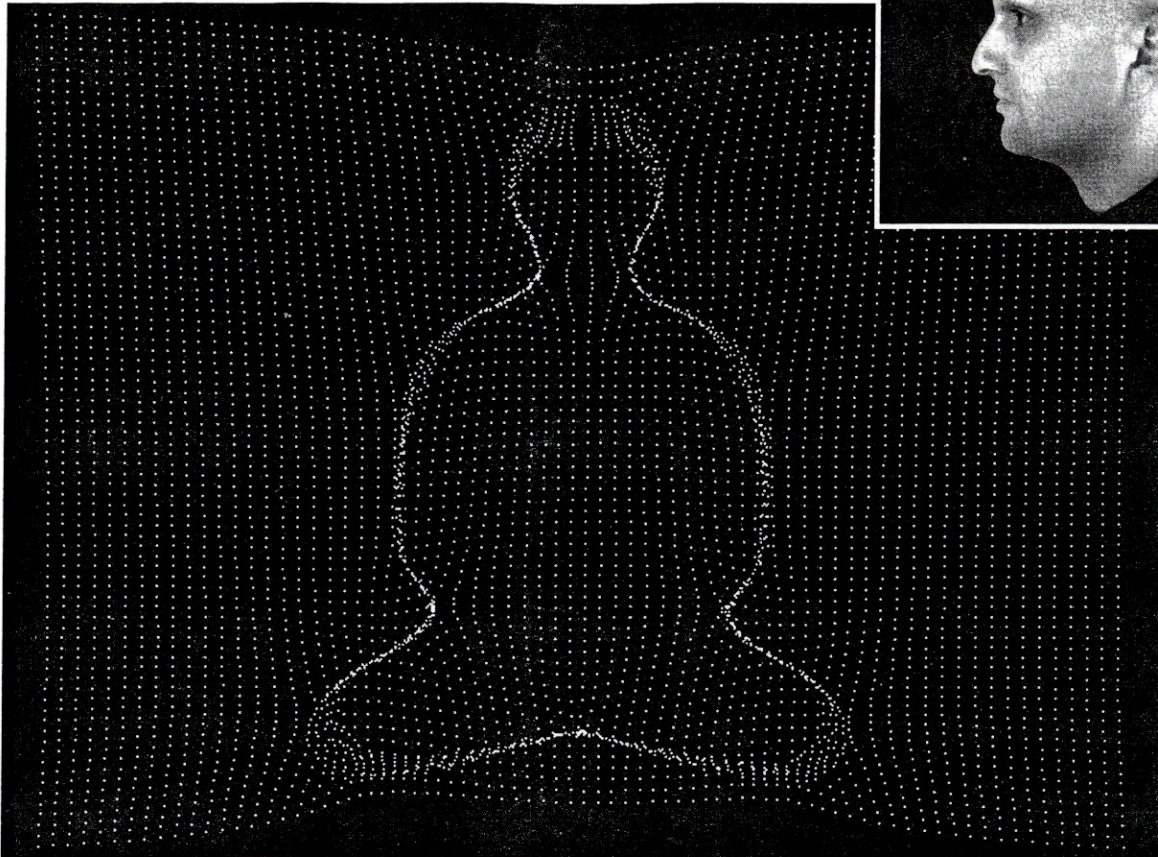
Many of the screen savers in the exhibition have been adapted from paintings or video works by artists like Jenny Holzer and Peter Halley. Paul Pfeiffer, one of the stars of this year's Whitney Biennial exhibition, offers a computer version of a video piece in which a basketball stays centered on the screen while the world revolves around it.

Screen-saver programs were originally developed to extend the life of computer monitors. As the choices expanded, they became a way to splash a little color inside a beige plastic frame. But they also served as a form of expression. Were you a Disney-character traditionalist or a "Bloom County" radical? Serious about outer space or a free spirit who favored flying toasters? And the toughest call of all: Cindy Crawford or Elle MacPherson?

Because a screen saver runs when a computer is inactive, its greatest impact may be on others. Although it signals to office mates that you are away from your desk, Mr. Buckhouse said, it can also tell them what you think about when you are not discussing work. "That's a really strong statement," he said.

As a result, Mr. Buckhouse said, the screen saver has evolved into a medium for public art, not unlike the mural on an abandoned building's wall. "The utilitarian function of the screen saver is dying out," he said, "which makes it even more interesting to transform into a venue for art."

The exhibition's title refers to the rate at which a screen is refreshed, or electronically painted with images. If the same picture is repeatedly repainted, the light-emitting phosphors on the inside of a cathode ray tube can burn out, leaving shadowy on-screen artifacts.



SCREEN SHOCK

Images from "Refresh: The Art of the Screen Saver," a collection of free programs: from Scott Snibbe's "Emptiness Is Form," left; from Mick and Ted Skolnick's "Dreamingmedia," above, a rotating head that grows hair; and one of 25 executed prisoners from Tarikh Korula's "Texas Moments."

Screen savers were created to protect monitors by constantly changing the images, but advances in display technology made screens less susceptible to "phosphor burn." At the same time, to save energy, many computers monitors can be programmed to turn themselves off when not in use. But if screen savers are less necessary for screen protection, according to Ray-

Original works designed for 'poetically impoverished' desktops.

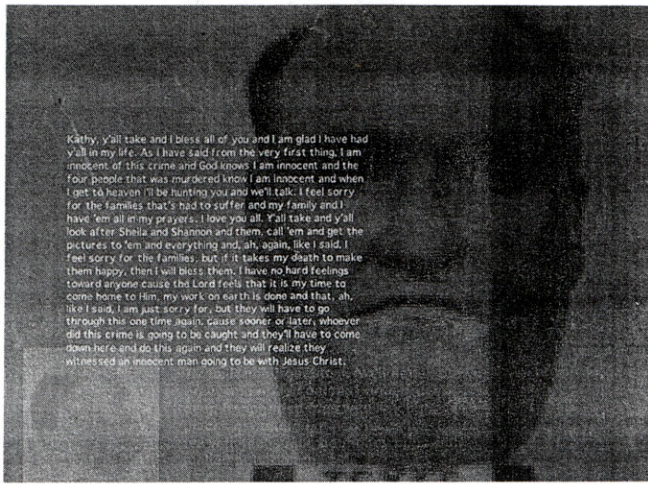
mond Soneira, they can still help preserve the life of a display.

Mr. Soneira is the president of Display-Mate Technologies in Amherst, N.H., which sells software for optimizing computer-display performance. He said that monitors can emit only a certain number of photons before the phosphors begin to dim. "The more you hit them with electrons, the less efficient they are," he said.

So as not to tire the phosphors, Mr. Soneira recommends Flying Through Space, a screen saver bundled with Microsoft's operating systems that splatters tiny white starlike dots on a display-preserving field of black.

Visitors to Mr. Buckhouse's exhibition should be cautious about which screen saver they select, since some might challenge monitors as well as viewers. Despite the confrontational message of Glenn Ligon's "White #14," its drab gray text should be fairly screen-friendly. On the other hand, "The Thief" by Francis Alys could steal some of your screen's life because of the bright white square at its center.

Mr. Buckhouse said the relentless energy of screen savers drew him to the medium but that he now appreciates such unhurried offerings as Scott Snibbe's "Emptiness Is Form," in which a human shape emerges from a grid of twitching dots. But he remains fascinated by the screen saver's glowing paradox: "It exists while it's being ignored, but as soon as you come back to work, you click it away. You develop a strange relationship with your screen saver."



Ruthy, y'all take and I bless all of you and I am glad I have had y'all in my life. As I have said from the very first thing I am innocent of this crime and God knows I am innocent and the four people that was murdered know I am innocent and when I get to heaven I'll be hunting you and we'll talk. I feel sorry for the families that's had to suffer and my family and I have 'em all in my prayers. I love you all. I'll take and I'll look after Sheila and Shannon and them, call 'em and get the pictures to 'em and everything and, ah, again, like I said, I feel sorry for the families, but if it takes my death to make them happy, then I will bless them. I have no hard feelings toward anyone cause the Lord feels that it is my time to come home to Him, my work on earth is done and that, ah, like I said, I am just sorry for, but they will have to go through this one time again, cause sooner or later, whoever did this crime is going to be caught and they'll have to come down here and do this again and they will realize they witnessed an innocent man going to be with Jesus Christ.