

REVIEWS Cintiq 18sx

in Adobe Illustrator, then animated in Adobe After Effects. Because I didn't do any painting in After Effects on this project, I didn't get the benefit of using a pressure-sensitive tablet.

I usually work with two 21-inch monitors and a Wacom 6x8 Intuos. I like the smaller tablet because it reduces arm motion, which works because the tablet automatically scales from the small tablet to the big screen. But I found that the Cintiq 18sx can't remap the tablet to a smaller section of the screen like a traditional tablet—it requires a 1:1 relationship for the touch screen to work.

This lack of relative remapping also limits the Cintiq's use as a second display—including NTSC desktop displays, a vital part of all of my video workstations. If a second monitor is active, the tablet gets mapped for both displays and the cursor is offset on the Wacom display, which is counterintuitive. All of this effectively limits you to the Cintiq 18sx as your sole display, which becomes problematic for most desktop NLEs or compositing applications.

The Cintiq 18sx worked incredibly well with Pinnacle Systems Commotion 4's new brush engine. Frame-by-frame painting and cloning can be done naturally and accurately. Painstaking rotoscoping requires an ergonomic interface, which Commotion

facilitates by allowing you to hide everything and control the frames and tools with keyboard shortcuts.

This type of environment is perfect for the Cintiq 18sx because painting out a few seconds of film or video takes hours and you don't need to hunt through menus often. Commotion's FX Brushes also utilize the full range of pressure sensitivity, including pen tilt and pressure.

Alias|Wavefront Maya was also a natural fit with the Cintiq 18sx. It felt like I was holding 3D objects. Pulling on subdivision surfaces or painting with Artisan felt like I was sculpting clay. The only drawback was that Wacom's Mac driver doesn't allow the pen's button to act as a right and middle mouse button, which is essential for vital Maya functions such as zooming and panning (Wacom has a fix in the works).

Wacom sells a \$149 SGI adapter so the Cintiq 18sx can work with Discreet's advanced systems like flame or smoke. This is an interesting combination, as Discreet's advanced systems are designed to be used with a pen tablet and to operate on one monitor ergonomically. Every Discreet owner should take a serious look at the Cintiq 18sx.

Tabula rasa

Overall, the Cintiq 18sx is an amazing technological breakthrough, but it has

limitations because of its main strength: The input device is coupled with the display. It's nice to have your hand right on the screen, but then your hand gets in the way.

I had numerous designers try it out in Photoshop to see what they thought, and the response was unanimous: Everyone loved it. But as I learned from real-world experience, it is a very specialized device. If all I was doing was illustrating comic books, or inking and painting a cartoon, or dodging and burning photos, or painting out wires for feature films, then I would love to be working on a Cintiq 18sx.

However, for my day-to-day work using various desktop video and graphics applications, email, word processors, and utilities, the limitations outweigh the benefits. For the price, an Apple Cinema display with an Intuos tablet would be a better solution for my video-intensive needs. The most important thing I can recommend for anyone interested in the Cintiq is to sit down with one for a few hours and make sure it fits your needs. If it does, it's a wonderful device. ■

Matt Silverman divides his time between Phoenix Editorial, where he is visual effects supervisor, and Theory, LLC, where he designs software and training materials.

REVIEWS Studio Artist 2.0

Studio Artist 2.0

Painting and Rotoscoping Software • Synthetik, \$379

By Chris Manners



Studio Artist 2.0 by Synthetik (www.synthetik.com) is truly a joy to use. In fact, it's so much fun that you should set aside a few hours just to experiment. Studio Artist 2.0 is a painting and rotoscoping application that generates cel-style animation and applies painterly effects to video and still images.

As a resolution-independent program, Studio Artist 2.0 can import footage and files and up-res them (although it won't improve the clarity of the images). There are two main modes of painting—either freeform or

“intelligence-assisted.” What's unique is that Studio Artist 2.0 actually draws the brush strokes on the Canvas individually, and the process can be stopped at any stage. Studio Artist 2.0 runs on Mac OS 8 or later, and it's Mac OS X native as well.

With over 2000 presets, it's easy to get started without tweaking the paint parameters. The application ships with eight hours of video tutorials. However, the real power is in the Paint Action Sequences, where you can set up a series of brush strokes and a variety of styles, and apply a group of brush actions to every frame in your movie. These sequences can be saved for later use, and all of these effects can be keyframed in a limited, if serviceable, manner. One of the easiest ways to create movies is to turn the Canvas into a QuickTime movie, and start painting and recording each frame.

Many new features have been added since our last review (Jan. '00 DV), and a number of critical issues have been addressed. Studio Artist now supports all of the QuickTime codecs for exporting movies, and it can import multilayer Photoshop files. True layer

transparency is another overdue feature, and onion-skinning is a handy new tool. Synthetik added greater support for alpha channels, as well as warping and morphing tools. The Wacom pen support is outstanding.

Despite its impressiveness, there are a few shortcomings: You can't save a project file, only the individual layers, which then must be loaded back into the program to re-create your work-in-progress. In addition, only one level of Undo is supported. Nonetheless, you can use Studio Artist 2.0 to create professional-level animation work for a relatively inexpensive price. ■

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Score: ◆◆◆◆◆

Pros

Great presets. Records brush strokes and applies over time.

Cons

No project file. One level of Undo. Mac only.

Bottom Line

Fun and intuitive. Creates stunning and stylized animations.