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Art collector Ken Freed stands in the middle of his darkened library, showing a new acquisition called "Text Rain." On a white wall 10 feet away, a projector connected to a computer connected to a video camera beams back Freed's image. Letters generated by software dance on his head. He raises an arm, collects a few phrases, lowers it. They drizzle away.

A short walk from Freed's Back Bay brownstone, Marjorie Jacobson recently hung light art in her living room. A box entitled "Your Own Intuitive Sky" plugs into the wall, tapping electricity to simulate sunlight filtered through constantly shifting clouds.

In Brookline, collectors Ivan Moskowitz and Rena Conti have a video installation in the entrance hall of their apartment. A non-stop loop of passing basketballs greets visitors through the glass-paned door.

Freed, Conti, Moskowitz, and Jacobson are among the Boston-area collectors dabbling in high-tech art. Work that plugs in, lights up, or makes noise has taken the art world by storm in recent decades. Only in the last few years, however, has it gone beyond the domain of the old Hanna-Barbera cartoon "The Jetsons" and into the homes of real people.

"The bottom line is, if you are interested in contemporary art today, you are interested in all media," Conti says. Her husband, Moskowitz, adds, "Having a video is no big deal, but it does challenge the idea of art as something you put over your sofa."

Conti, 30, a graduate student at Harvard University, and Moskowitz, 35, a research fellow at Children's Hospital, started acquiring art by young, emerging artists about five years ago, after they met as college students in Madison, Wis. Yet, most of the art that fills their second story of a two-family Brookline house is what electronic pioneers call "old media." The same is true for Freed, whose Beacon Street home is brimming with art. A visitor must carefully navigate so as not to trip over the installations and other pieces covering the floors, walls, and every other surface.

"I have a large collection of contemporary art and a very small collection of video pieces," says Freed.

Video art beckons (literally)

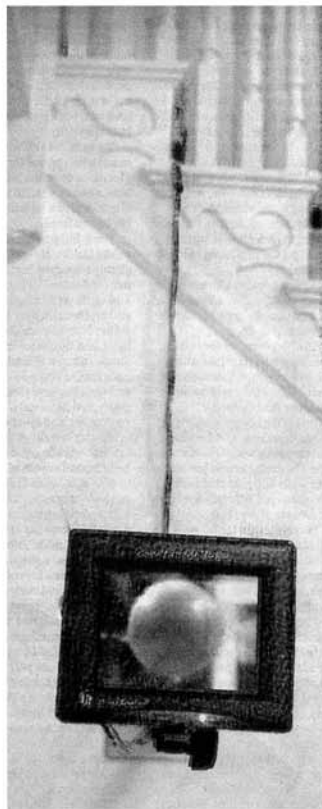
These Boston art lovers, following trendsetters in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and other cities, are turned on to electronic art that for decades was considered uncollectable because of its relatively high cost, technical hassles, and demands on the senses.

They are part of a small group of Boston art collectors who make the rounds of the world's art hubs, then gather to show off new purchases and discuss the latest art news. Other enthusiasts are more like Jeanne Dietsch, chief executive of a New Hampshire robotics company, who calls her collection "scattered and hodgepodge." The former art school student turned computer scientist says she was drawn to a three-dimensional print depicting a 1950s movie set in outer space.

"This was very apt to my view of the world," Dietsch said of the print she convinced her husband to buy for her birthday last year. Artist Dan Younger composed the scene on a computer using "stereo-vision" technology. When viewed with 3-D glasses, the figures jump off the paper like an old Godzilla movie. Dietsch, whose work sometimes explores questions of optical illusion, already owned a pair of the glasses.

Today's collectors are mostly art lovers seeking the best work of their times and computer-savvy "early adopters." Yet, in a technology-immersed world, some say it is natural to bring home art that moves and installations that let viewers play in their virtual worlds.

Mary Ann Kearns, who runs



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the online 911 gallery from her 19th-century Colonial home in Chelmsford, said she has sold more than 100 high-tech artworks to collectors nationwide in recent years and sees a growing market.

"Most of the people I sell to are digital savvy," she says. "They are comfortable with the technology. It's not what attracts them to the art, but it doesn't detract either."

Catching up

Brookline video artist Denise Marika sees people catching up

with technology.

"People are becoming more interested in having things in their home that go beyond the static," says Marika, mentioning new, flat-screen computer monitors that can hang on the wall. Marika remembers when video projectors were cumbersome, prohibitively expensive, and difficult to calibrate. "Now, they've got projectors that you can hold in your hand and turn on and off like a TV set," she says. "It's an exciting transition time."

George Fifield, director of the Boston Cyberarts Festival, says advances in projector technology gave artists a tool for "basically sculpting with light," leading to work that blurs the lines between old-school video art and the emerging computer variety. Pointing to "Text Rain" by Camille Utterback, a Lynnfield native turned New York artist, Fifield asked, "Is that a video piece or a computer piece? It's a wonderful hybrid."

Fifield's collection includes kinetic art by Marcel Duchamp, an early influence on technology art, and a triptych by Marika based on a mid-1990s video installation she exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

In his 1995 book, "The Road Ahead," Microsoft Corp. founder Bill Gates envisioned a day when everyone would use computer technology to display family photos and reproductions of famous

High-tech collectors plugging into electronic art

paintings. Gates's book describes a wall of video monitors and smaller screens in his Washington state home. Guests wear electronic pins that register their preferences for, say, landscape versus figurative art.

Other techno-visionaries such as John Seely Brown, chief scientist at Xerox Corp., say computers eventually will disappear, incorporating their computational power into the walls and roads around us. Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Michael Dertouzos, at the lab for computer science, says his colleagues are developing a Jetsonian system that will have the hot cocoa and cookies on the table when the family gets home from an afternoon of ice skating.

With such future cityscapes on the horizon, adventurous collectors are conducting parallel experiments.

A couple of San Francisco Bay-area collectors have built a home specifically to showcase video installations and other contemporary work. While nothing so grand is afoot in Boston, Freed says converting his library into a projection room has opened new collecting possibilities. Jacobson, who is selling her Boston home, says she plans to build a "modest" projection room in her next abode. Bill Arning, curator at MIT's List gallery, says these developments are bound to prompt more.

"Collectors talk and see each other's collections," Arning says. "That is fueling more collecting."

Stressing that their passion is for the art not the technology, collectors say it is part of a conversation that has propelled art forever.

Conti says her basketball video, entitled "John 3:16" by artist Paul Pfeiffer, deals with the passage of time, a common theme in art. However, she and Moskowitz say what really drew them to it was Pfeiffer's use of digital media as a tool to create work akin to a moving painting.

Jacobson is researching a book on digital art. She owns work by Bruce Nauman and former Massachusetts College of Art professor Tony Oursler, besides the light installation by Olafur Eliasson, whose work is at the Institute of

'Video . . . does challenge the idea of art as something you put over your sofa.'

IVAN
MOSKOWITZ

Contemporary Art through Sunday.

"Boston is always a little behind the times," she says. "It's a very conservative city. But video is part of the mainstream. I think that will come to the collecting world."

She likens the shift to the introduction of perspective in the 1400s.

"It wasn't the discovery of perspective that changed the religious-based society to humanist-based society," she says. "It was because everything was changing in the world. It was a scientific evolution expressing something that was in the culture already. The same thing is true now. It's not the technology that is changing art. Artists are using technology to explore and reflect these changes. Obviously, they are going to use it or react against it."

Camille Utterback, who created "Text Rain" with fellow artist Romy Achituv, sees a century-old parallel.

"The idea of interaction can be traced back to the Surrealists and the games they would come up with," she said. "People have the idea that interactive work began with computers. But, really that's not true."

Utterback taught herself to write software as a schoolgirl then gave up computers for painting. She earned an undergraduate degree in studio art at Williams College in Western Massachusetts, then rediscovered programming as a telecommunications graduate

student. Eventually, she joined the two interests in the installation that landed in Manhattan's Postmasters Gallery, where Freed saw it.

To date, collectors have purchased two of three "limited editions" of "Text Rain." Bostonians can see the piece when Utterback brings her copy to the Boston Cyberarts Festival this spring.

"I feel like maybe people felt at the beginning of photography," she said, "before people realized how it would change things."

Art for the masses

Today's technology art may be hardwired into an age-old discussion, but Bridget Murphy, whose video pieces are owned by Conti and Moskowitz, says it's hard to ignore its ties to the public art movement of the 1960s and 1970s. That movement emphasized bringing art to the masses and out of the collectors' high-brow, deep-pocketed world. Video artists flocked to an experimental television center at WGBH in Boston and formed artist collectives nationwide. Some collectives, such as The Kitchen in Manhattan, are still open. Others succumbed to cuts in arts funding over the years.

Still, rapidly developing and ever-cheaper technology continued to inspire artists and spawn new hybrids. Video art and installation is now widely shown in museums, while Internet art faces the growing pains that characterized video art's early days. For decades, video art, which started as tapes viewable on TV monitors, held little interest for collectors, seemingly turned off by its mass-producible

and literally "plastic" nature. Today's CD-ROM art faces similar obstacles, said ICA curator Jessica Morgan.

"There are fetishes around collecting," Morgan said. "It's just not so easy to get excited about collecting a disc," Morgan said.

The philosophical tension between collected art vs. public art continues to complicate matters as well. Conti and Moskowitz, however, said they aren't concerned about reproduction issues. "The whole notion of an original, precious work of art has been really challenged in the last 20 or 30 years," said Conti.

"You just have to know what you are buying. You can't buy something that is a reproduction," said Moskowitz.

"Unless," continued Conti, "that's the point."

Still, the art has issues.

Freed said he spent almost as much money on the technology and revamping his library as he did on purchasing "Text Rain." If it weren't for his assistant's help, Freed said, "to have installed the piece myself would have been beyond my capabilities."

Also, it may not last as long as, say, the Mona Lisa.

Early video art already has become obsolete, requiring outmoded tape players for viewing. Videotape also disintegrates after a few years. Digital tape and disc makers say new storage formats last much longer. Skeptics say it is too soon to know exactly how long that will be, a situation that both appeals to and repels Murphy.

'Exciting and scary'

"It's exciting and a little scary to know that whatever tape I'm shooting on now may be nonexistent in 10 years," said Murphy, 25, a graduate student at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. "Ten years from now, there's probably not going to be any tape."

Arning, the List curator, said this new art can jar the nerves.

"Essentially, it's like having the TV on and loud all day," he said, though he doesn't expect the noise to dampen collectors' enthusiasm.

Utterback revels in the collectors' "stamp of approval." She praises them as risk-takers.

"These collectors are also pioneers," she said.



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/JANET KNOTT

Collector Ken Freed's image is captured by an acquisition called "Text Rain," by Camille Utterback.