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Retired Sgt. Michael Streed, of Corona, is an expert police sketch artist who has developed computer software that provides a sketch based on physical characteristics entered. Streed hopes the advance can help law-enforcement agencies that cannot afford their own in-house artists.

Adding precision to forensic tool

HIGH-TECH: A retired officer contributes 5,000 facial components to software that can more accurately depict suspects.

BY PAUL LaROCCO
THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

On consecutive days last month, Michael Streed contributed to the hunt for Riverside and Rubidoux child predators.

This was nothing new. The Corona resident has long provided suspect sketches in high-profile cases such as the abduction and murders of youngsters Anthony

Martinez and Samantha Runnion.

But after 30 years as a forensic artist, one of his January works was something of a personal landmark. It wasn't the hand-penciled recreation of a man who abducted and raped a girl in La Sierra.

Rather, it was a sketch depicting a suspect who tried to kidnap a Rubidoux student, created with Streed nowhere in sight — and



Computerized sketch

Using 5,000 of Streed's hand-drawn facial components — such

marking his entrance into the long-standing market of computerized composite programs.

"Exactly what we were looking for," said the retired Orange police sergeant. "They both looked like sketches."

as a dimpled chin or chubby cheeks — a European software company has designed a platform for an officer or layman to develop suspect sketches without the aid of an artist.

The Riverside County Sheriff's Department recently became the first to try out the program, SketchCop Facette's Face Design System.

In the Rubidoux case, investigators worked directly with the

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SKETCH

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young victim and witnesses to develop something they said better represented the work of a trained forensic artist.

"With this particular program, the details are a little more crisp," said Peter Williams, a sheriff's supervising forensic technician. "It gives people a better idea."

Williams said that many similar programs lack precision and often are unable to make subtle changes to a pre-existing database of facial features, like adjust the depth of someone's cheeks or tweak the bushiness of someone's eyebrows.

Streed, 52, said he didn't want software that spit out images that appeared "cartoonish," his word for what he has seen.

BUILDING FROM SCRATCH

As an example of how his program works, he starts with a facial shape that looks like a piece of clay — there are 58 variations just for an oval. He then overlays each aspect, such as ears, chin, eyes and Adam's apple.

He chooses a specific shape of moustache but then massages how far it curls around the lip.

"We didn't want to turn people into police sketch artists," he said, "but we did want to give them simple tools."

SKETCHES PREFERRED

Karen Taylor, a well-known forensic artist based in Austin, Texas, said she

respects Streed's work and had yet to see his program. But speaking generally, she said she believes that utilizing a live artist is always preferable.

"The misconception is that anyone can take a computer-based program and do a composite," Taylor said.

"But (sketches) should be in the hands of an interviewer trained in cognition, perception and retrieving memory from a traumatized mind."

NUANCE NEEDED

Riverside police, who used Streed to hand-draw the La Sierra abductor, said the computer programs they have seen, to date, haven't offered enough nuanced facial components to come up with an accurate portrayal.

"You tend to have a drawing of an individual who may not closely enough resemble a suspect," said Sgt. Mark Rossi.

Todd Matthews, a regional director for the U.S. Department of Justice's program to identify deceased John and Jane Does, often utilizes forensic artists to create facial sketches using skeletal remains.

He said that digital programs are "a very big time-saving and cost-saving measure." An artist's hand-drawn work often costs nearly \$1,000 for several hours of time.

Single-computer licensing, training and software updates to Streed's program run roughly \$2,000. A department can then utilize it as much as it wants.

While it's hard to replicate the human eye and the human hand, Matthews said he appreciates that a program is coming from someone on the artistic side.

"It's taking it beyond a Mr. Potato Head-type thing," he said. "This sounds a little beyond that, which is essential."

CAN SAVE ON COSTS

Streed still expects to provide his actual sketches in high-profile cases but hoped that many departments without enough in their budgets for in-house artists or freelance sessions would consider the software.

"We think this gives them a better chance of catching people," he said. "And that's the goal."

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