

Cheap Home Theater

For the past fifteen years our TV-less family has watched weekend videos on a tiny 13-inch monitor that was hardly bigger than most laptop screens. When DVDs came along we decided to upgrade the display to something a little bigger—like a wall-sized movie screen.

What we had in mind was an assemble-it-yourself home theater. I considered big TV screens and large flat panel displays, but in the end choose a projection system as the most reasonable way to go. Finding an inexpensive screen was not difficult; you can try eBay for a real bargain. We hung our huge screen on a wall; it rolls right up and disappears when not needed. To project the DVD image I bought the cheapest, smallest, computer projector I could find, the kind of portable conference projector you see advertised in airline magazines. This cost about \$2,300, which isn't cheap for a TV, but is amazingly cheap for a home theater. In addition to the small projector we also added surround sound to the room using five strategically placed Bose speakers, each no bigger than a softball, and one woofer hidden beneath a table. The result: With a good DVD offering 5.1 surround sound, the experience is as about as good as our rinky-dink local half-plex theater.

Is perfect? No. Our cheap home theater quality does not match the experience of viewing a good print on a large screen in a good theater. Also, because of the large windows in our room, we can't watch any time except at night. The projector has a fan in it so it is not as silent as a TV or a flat panel, but in a large room with the surround sound cranked up you won't notice the hum unless you sit right by it.

Our set-up includes our trusty old VCR that also plugs into the projector. The quality of a lot of tapes projected on this scale is, let me put it this way, less than one desires. But the total effect is still better than on a small screen. Another down side is that the bulbs in the projectors have a lifespan of several

hundred hours, and are reputed to be expensive to replace, but since we only run it for movies, we haven't had to replace it yet. It is, of course, possible to run your TV (if you have one) on the screen, too, say, for sports events.

When I first researched this idea I discovered a couple of things. First, salesmen of the projectors report that a lot of other people had the same idea: this was the low-rent way of making a home theater, even though the manufacturer's literature and the home theater publications have ignored this use. The cheapest "home theater projectors" I could find started at \$6,000, and these monsters needed expert "set up." Forget it.



Secondly, all you need is the cheapest projector. Essentially the quality of even the low-end projectors exceeds the quality of video. It's not necessary to get super-duper XGA, or whatever is next, because while this will improve a computer display's image, it won't do much for a signal from a DVD or VCR.

A good inexpensive but very small projector is the Sony VPL-CS1. It works fine for us. We have also used the Sanyo ProX-III, a little larger box, slightly more money, same result. I have not tried it, but Sony is now selling a portable projector, the CPJ-D500, for \$2,000 list price. I have seen good brands advertised in computer mail order sites for a less than \$2,000, new. The main distinguishing feature at the low end is

lumens—the brightness. The difference of a few hundred lumens will not be noticeable; the level has to double before you can perceive the increase. If you show at night, a lumen level of 600 is probably all you'll need.

We combined our Sony with a Pioneer Dolby DVD player and receiver with the aforementioned Bose 5.1 surround sound speaker system. Our screen is a Daylite model (www.daylite.com); I picked a mid-range quality screen (not flat white, but not the highest reflectivity either). From about 12 feet away the projector will completely fill a 6-foot high by 8-foot wide screen. This size screen is large enough that wide-screen mode (which doesn't fill the screen) is still plenty big.

All the electronic gear sits compactly hidden beneath a tiny end table, on the floor. (By design the projector angles upward slightly so it fills the screen from the floor perfectly.) Most visitors to the room don't have any idea that it can transform into a serviceable home theater in the time it takes to roll down the screen.

Now that most films can be rented or bought on DVD, we only venture into a movie house a couple of times a year, primarily when we want to see something early, while everyone else does. The rest of the year, the home theater is more than adequate.

And if you do need to project a computer, you've got a fine unit at your service. Just unplug and carry. —KK



Sony
VPL-CS1
\$2300
from
www.etrronics.com
www.sony.com

B&W

Black and White Magazine

As photography goes inexorably digital, the old techniques of silver printmaking are resurging in popularity, particularly for collectors. This is the best magazine (in print, with resolution to match) dedicated to artists, both new and established, who work primarily in glorious black and white. It is geared for those, even of modest means, who would like to own a fine, handmade print.

—KK



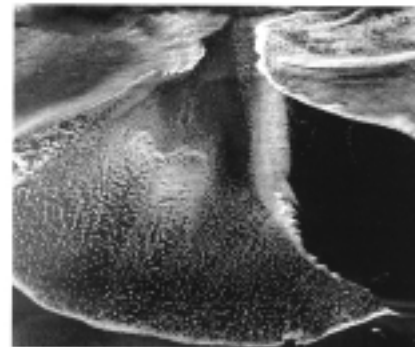
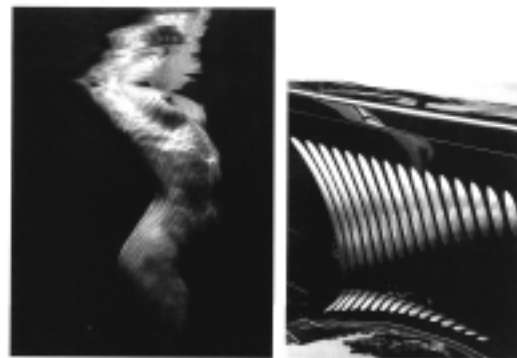
Richard Garrod
"Leaves and Log, Oregon," 1981. Silver gelatin,
8 X 10 inches.

Edward [Weston's] photographs of sand dunes, and especially the nudes of Charis in the sand, are so prominent in the history of Twentieth Century photography, and they are so strongly identified with Edward, that most people believe he made them first and that Brett [his son] followed. But that's not the case. Brett began to photograph the dunes in 1932—two years before his father—because he was taken there by his brother Chandler, who had already made photographs there himself.

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Black and White Magazine

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"Underwater Nude," 1980; "Car Abstraction," c. 1980s; "Shore Line, Hawaii," c. 1980s; all by Brett Weston.