ProArt for Art s Sake

Mike Williams assesses the latest developments in Clares ProArtisan family: Photo-CD and 24-bit colour

Clares have released two new variants of their popular ProArtisan art and image processing package. These are ProArtisan2CD and ProArtisan24. The differences between these two developments may not be imme-diately obvious, especially as ProArtisan24 also contains Photo-CD support identical to that in ProArt24. However, the distinctions are clear enough once you know. ProArt2CD is essentially ProArt2 with built-in Photo-CD support, but like ProArt2 it uses 8-bit colour for sprites, and as such will run on all Acorn 32-bit systems.

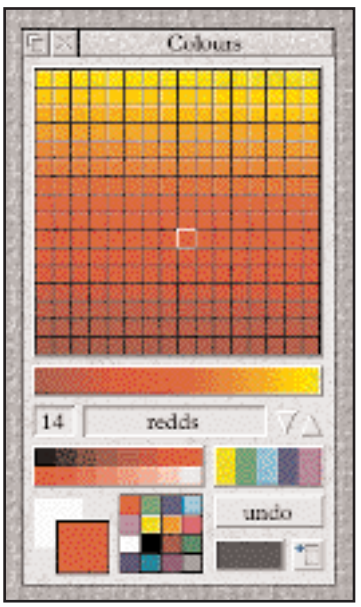

Figure 1.
The ProArtisan24 colour picker

ProArt24, on the other hand, not only has support for 24-bit colour, but will only work on the new Risc PC. While ProArt2CD effectively represents the end of the line for ProArt as far as older machines are concerned, ProArt24 marks the start of a new generation of art packages by Clares.

In this review we shall look first at ProArt 2CD, to see what the CD enhancement has to offer, and then we shall take a first look at ProArt24.

P roA rtisan2 CD

If purchased outright you get the complete ProArtisan2 package (two discs and a 78 page manual), plus two CD-ROMs and a manual supplement. ProArtisan2 has already been reviewed in RISC User (7:1), so we shall concentrate on the CD add-ons. You may also like to refer to the RISC User survey of image processing packages in 7:2.

The fact that two CD-ROMs are included in the plastic case is not immediately obvious. The CD immediately visible is Clares ProArt CD ROM with the new ProArt software and other resources; the second (almost hidden) is Cumana s Photo-CD collection Volume 1, containing 82 Photo-CD images. In use, the CD-ROM drive can be treated like any other filing system, and ProArt2CD can be loaded direct from the CD-ROM without any special installation or registration procedure.

Figure 2.
Display of miniature Photo-CD images from the Cumana collection

ProArt2CD s icon bar menu now has three extra options relating to CD-ROM usage: Show CD Album, Photo CD Info and Eject CD. These are for accessing Photo-CD images which can be loaded directly into ProArt2CD with its built-in Photo-CD support. Inserting Cumana s Photo-CD album into the drive and selecting Show CD

Figure 3.
Sample of ProArt24 artistry

Album opens a window showing, in miniature format, the first ten images on the disc (see figure 1). Controls across the top allow different groups of images to be selected up to an apparent maximum of 200 (using the Shift key). Double-clicking on any miniature loads it into ProArt2CD, while clicking on the Transfer button in the Album window will load all the visible images into ProArt s sprite pool. Remember that the original image is in Photo-CD format. When loaded into ProArt, an image is converted into 8-bit sprite format (all handled by Acorn s Photo-CD module). You can control the conversion in a number of ways, using a Control panel window. The choice of resolution will depend as much as anything on how much memory you have available. The Diffuse option, which is recommended, uses dithering techniques in the PhotoCD module to provide the best conversion for colour. The Clip option allows part of a picture to be loaded, and is useful in selecting just part of a higher resolution image.

There is one irritating feature built into this control panel. Selecting Greyscale conversion alters ProArt s palette so that all images, including the Photo-CD Album display, appear in grey s c a l e s . Unfortunately, the only way of restoring a normal colour palette is by loading a colour image - the manual supplement does tell you this, but it s still annoying.

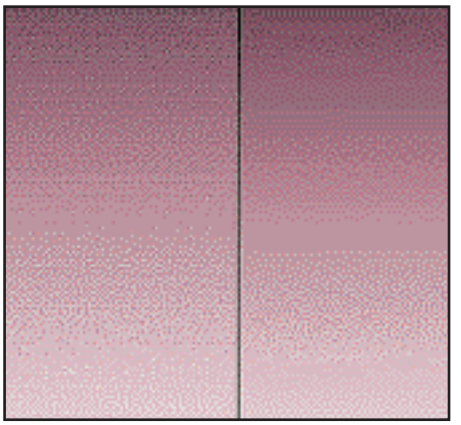

Figure 4.
A graduated colour fill in ProArt2 (8-bit colour) and ProArt24 (24-bit colour)

What else does the ProArt CD-ROM contain? In addition to the examples and other applications from the ProArt2 Resources disc, there s also a directory containing over a hundred photos in sprite format. These are mostly of the holiday snapshot variety, good

enough as far as quality is concerned, but otherwise a fairly random selection from various sources.

Is it all worth it? In a nutshell, yes. The point about ProArt2CD, is not I feel so much in the fact that it s on CD-ROM, nor that you get a collection of eighty plus Photo-CD images, but the simple fact that it accepts the Photo-CD format. Any photographs can now be readily converted into CD-ROM format, and a collection on CD-ROM can be built up over a period of time (though your CD-ROM drive must be of the multi-session variety for this to work properly). Think what schools and colleges can do with that, and the graphic designer and artist. Mind you, I am sure that endless holiday snaps can be just as boring in Photo-CD format!

NOTE

All the images on Cumana s disc are in standard Photo-CD format, and can be displayed in 24-bit colour if this is supported by your machine and the software you are using. ProArt2CD only supports 8-bit colour, so the images are converted using

If you already have ProArt2 and now need Photo-CD capability, buy it. If you want ProArt2 buy. But there are and will be other, cheaper ways (for example, PhotoView supplied with Acorn s CDFS 2.2 or later) of merely accessing Photo-CD, which seems destined to become a standard input format for all art and image processing packages in the future.

ProArtisan24

As with ProArtisan2, ProArt24 is supplied on two discs, for the moment with the ProArt2 manual and a 16 page supplement. In due course a full ProArt24 manual will be published. The version available for review included only a single 24-bit sample image, plus the set of 8-bit images supplied with ProArt2. Remember, though, that ProArt24 does included support for the Kodak Photo-CD format, as with ProArt2CD reviewed above.

However, it is not merely in its ability to handle 24-bit sprites that ProArt24 differs from its forebears: there are many other consequential changes as well. In good old 256-colour days one palette window was sufficient to show all colours, but with 32 thousand or 16 million colours that is clearly no longer possible. RISC OS 3.5 (on the Risc PC) provides its own colour picker, as used in Draw, but ProArt24 uses its own form of colour picker as well as giving access to Acorn s.

THE COLOUR PICKER

ProArt24 s picker is quite complex (see figure 3), and takes some getting used to. It displays individual 256-colour palettes, and there are currently sixteen such palettes supplied, with names like Earth, flesh, and villa which are suggestive of particular types of scene, and others such as redds, magyell, and magcyanyell which gives a range of shades as suggested by the name.

There is also a Picker palette which you can use to select and mix your own palette of colours. A sixteen block working palette can be used to transfer colours from palette to palette, and a graduated palette can be created between any two colours. This can be used for blended fills as in ProArt2, but with so many colours the dither option is no longer needed. So use the colour picker to create your own colour fill and apply to the image. With 32 thousand colours in use the results were disappointing, with a degree of obvious banding, and comparing somewhat unfavourably with dithered colour fills in 256-colour modes. Change to 16 million colours and the true differences are revealed: ProArt24 s colour graduated fill is now superb, that from ProArt2 shows its true dithered origins (see figure 4).

The colour picker window also gives immediate access to Acorn s standard version, and I found this essential for locating colours distinctively different to any previously used. Acorn clearly hopes (and expects?) that applications will use their standard picker, so that users have a uniform approach to colour selection within the desktop. Clares obviously believe their approach to be superior, and it certainly has its merits in the context of ProArt24. However, I feel the Acorn version is also an essential tool for ProArt24 users, and I feel that ProArt s documentation should give

more prominence to it.

REALISTIC PAINTING

With painting under ProArt24, the options have become much more oriented towards traditional materials, a move which will no doubt please computer-based artists, and which is in line with art packages on other platforms (such as Painter on the Apple Macintosh). Excellent though this trend is, what is missing is the opportunity to select from a wide variety of papers and other materials on which to paint - this is one potential area for future development.

The naming of the painting functions can potentially lead to confusion as to the end result. For example, if you create your picture in oil colour and then apply water to this, the outline will still become blurred, which is not necessarily what you would expect. However, it must be remembered that at present ProArt24 is a purely pixel-based package - the tools and other features merely determine how colour is applied to the page. Once colour is there it has no other attributes at all.

Control of brush size and style has also changed, now using slider bars rather than a menu of shapes and sizes, and a third slider controls the intensity, or opacity, with which the selected colour (or pattern) is applied.

PATH POOL

ProArt2 already worked with a so-called sprite pool, allowing sprites to be loaded and used as required. ProArt24 now also has a path pool, in which path type objects (Draw files) can be stored, and all text created is also added automatically to the path pool. However, the path pool is more limited, and there appears to be no way of saving the path pool as there is with the sprite pool, more s the pity.

OTHER NEW FEATURES

A number of other features within ProArtisan have been modified or added. The previous use of a magic pen and transparent colours for picking up irregularly shaped sprites become impractical with 24-bit colour, so these options have been removed. The magic wand now remains the primary tool for such purposes.

Cloning has been extended to clone from screen, sprite, sprite colour or sprite texture, the latter allowing you to import any existing greyscale textures into the sprite pool for use in ProArt24. Save modes also reflects the new screen mode approach in terms of number of colours and resolution, but the use of pixels per inch by ProArt24 may not relate too readily to most users knowledge of screen resolution.

SUMMING UP

ProArtisan24 is a clear indicator of Clares intentions for the future development of ProArtisan. However, one cannot but feel that the release of ProArt24 in its present form has been a little premature. Apart from its obvious 24-bit colour capability and some consequent revisions and extensions, this version of ProArtisan has few more features to offer than its immediate predecessor, ProArtisan2. That said, ProArtisan has always been rated very highly for its creative features. It undoubtedly scores as a means of originating high-class pixel-based artwork, and its filters and effects go some way to making it an image processing package as well. However, as far as the latter is concerned, other products now emerging (DA Picture, PhotoDesk,

PRODUCT INFO

Product	ProArtisan
Supplier	Clares Micro Supplies 98 Middlewich Road, Northwich, Cheshire CW9 7DA. tel. 0606 48511
Prices	ProArtisan2 £135 ProArtisan2CD £160 Upgrade from ProArt2 £29.95 ProArtisan24 £169.95 Upgrade from ProArt2/