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New UC Berkeley Web Site An Eerie Quake 'Memento'

By Charles Burress
Chronicle Staff Writer

The killer earthquake looming in the East Bay hills has just been given a macabre face, or interface, by the University of California at Berkeley.

In a strange marriage of electronic art and alarm over the dangers of the Hayward Fault, UC scientists have launched a stripped-down online seismograph adorned with a skull above the Latin phrase, "Memento Mori," meaning "reminder of death."

The eerie web page, located at <http://memento.ieor.berkeley.edu>, calls itself "a web interface with the earth." It is wired to underground instruments measuring micro-movements on the fault, which cuts through campus and which UC spokesman Robert Sanders called "the state's most dangerous rift."

On the computer screen, the quivering of the ground shows up as rising and falling white traces reminiscent of a heart monitor or slow shooting stars.

UC geology Professor Barbara Romanowicz called it "the first time seismic data has been

displayed in such poetic fashion."

The opening page at the Web site, which was launched Thursday, features a large skull and a quote from Joseph Conrad: "Vanity plays lurid tricks with our memory."

The skull pays homage to a tradition in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in which works of art incorporated a skull as a reminder of mortality, said Ken Goldberg, associate professor of industrial engineering and operations research.

This motif, called memento mori by art historians, often included skulls and skeletons in paintings of lush interiors, young maidens or fresh fruit.

"We wanted to show it's not just data — it's a matter of life and death," said Goldberg, who created the site with computer science student Wojciech Matysik. "We also wanted to remind people to take time out and smell the roses."

The launch of the project, developed in collaboration with UC Berkeley's Seismological Laboratory, coincides with today's anniversary of the 1906 San Francisco quake.