

FREE! 250 BRUSHES TO MAKE UNIQUE ARTWORK + 30 MINUTES OF EXPERT NARRATED TRAINING

NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS

ImagineFX

50

PROCREATE TIPS & TRICKS

- SPEED UP YOUR WORKFLOW
- CREATE CUSTOM BRUSHES
- TRY OUT NEW TECHNIQUES

WORKSHOP

COLOUR WITH ELIZA IVANOVA

Bring your drawings to life without losing traditional charm



FUTURE
ISSUE 255

GET MESSY!

LAUNCH YOUR IMAGINATION

Use the power of charcoal for spontaneous creativity

ART & ADVICE

PAINT A STRIKING ROCK 'N' ROLL SINGER IN PHOTOSHOP

LESSONS LEARNED FROM A DECADE-LONG ART CAREER

EXPLORE INSIDE A BLIZZARD ARTIST'S TOY-FILLED STUDIO

CASTLEVANIA: NOCTURNE DISCOVER THE DARK ARTS OF A FANG-TASTIC ANIME

GO ON. BE SAVVY.



GO.
COMPARE

Step this way for satisfying savings.
Go.Compare

Welcome to... NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS ImagineFX



For many of us, we're reaching the middle of summer, with longer daytime hours that bring more opportunities to get outdoors and enjoy the world. With that in mind, we've left our desks behind this issue to look at arguably the single best art app out there: Procreate.

Armed with your iPad, Procreate and this issue, you can be up a mountain, in the forest, taking in some sea air, or laid back on the sofa as we bring you a bumper selection of expert tips to help you get the most out of your favourite portable tools. You can also follow along with the colouring process Eliza Ivanova used for our dazzling cover.

Elsewhere in the issue we take you behind the scenes of the anime series Castlevania: Nocturne, exploring how the narrative, character traits and animation interlink to produce stunning visuals.

For more learning, head to the workshop section to find out how to create characters bursting with personality. And for advice on where to spend your money, flip over to our expert reviews section.

Enjoy the issue!

Rob

Editor

Rob.Redman@futurenet.com

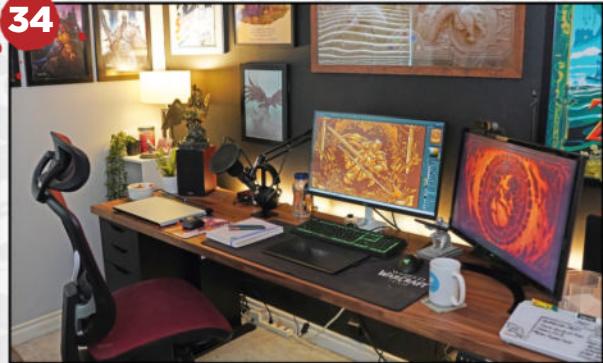
- [@imaginefxmagazine](https://www.instagram.com/imaginefxmagazine)
- [@imaginefx](https://twitter.com/imaginefx)
- facebook.com/imaginefx
- [@imaginefxmagazine](https://twitter.com/imaginefxmagazine)
- imaginefx.creativebloq.com



EDITOR'S CHOICE

Three of my top picks this month...

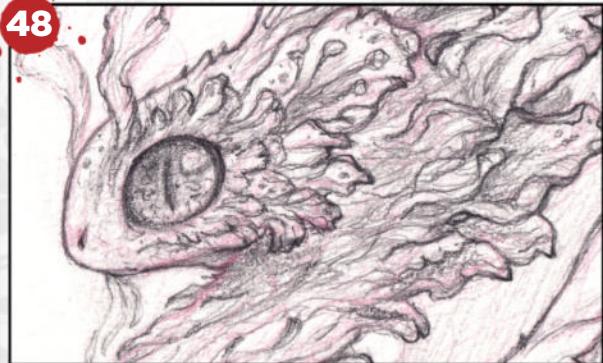
34



Visit a Blizzard artist's workspace

Forrest Imel guides you on a tour through his studio, introducing his pets and endless video game nostalgia.

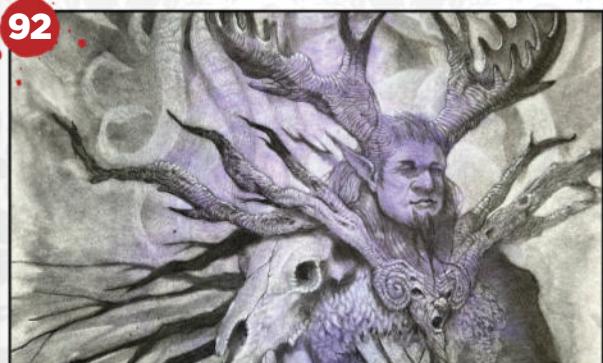
48



Explore a sketchbook of magical mischief

If you enjoy adorable dragons and whimsical faeries, you'll love checking out Amanda Esplugues' sketches.

92



Create characters from an abstract

Explore your intuition as Eric Messinger reveals his process for crafting mysterious beasts from charcoal.

Subscribe today!

Save up to 45% on a new subscription, and receive the magazine direct to your door each month. [See page 8 for details](#)

Save up to 45% by starting a
new subscription to ImagineFX
See page 8 for details



SUBSCRIBE & SAVE!

Contents

Your art

10 FXPosé

A round-up of digital art, submitted by you!

22 The Rookies

Up-and-coming talents share their work.

News and events

24 A decade in art

We speak with a group of artists about how their intertwined lives and careers have changed over the past 10 years.

30 Digital art news round-up

Trojan Horse was a Unicorn gears up for an event in Japan, plus info on the latest Wacom Cintiq tablets and a Sonic debate.

32 The mind of Tim Miller

How the acclaimed Deadpool director first developed his passion for creativity.

34 Artist in Residence: Forrest Imel

Visit the games artist's workspace and peruse his awesome nostalgic goodies.

Features

40 Inside the art of Castlevania: Nocturne

Find out how a suitably vampiric second season of the undead anime was made.

48 Sketchbook: Amanda Esplugues

Explore a collection of fantastical delights as the artist lets us into her magical world.

Reviews

82 Hardware

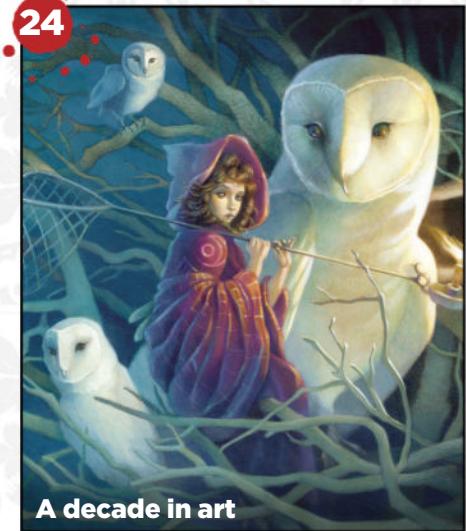
Books, courses and brushes

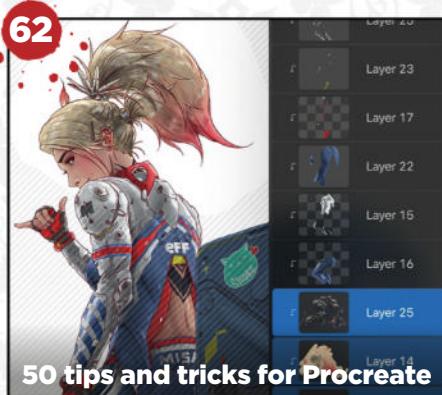
Regulars

6 Next month

8 Subscriptions

39 Letters





Workshops

54 Add colour with traditional feel

Eliza Ivanova reveals how she ensures a sense of gorgeous traditional charm when digitally colouring her sketches.

60 Let your inner child run wild

Ivan Shavrin channels the youngster inside him for an exciting book cover.

62 50 tips and tricks for Procreate

Up your game on the popular iPad app with advice from five professional artists.

72 Easy exercises for fresh ideas

Try out a little word association with Ognjen Sporin and see what you create.

74 Build character designs that sing

Lera Kiryakova turns up the volume as she designs a character full of personality.

80 Simplify the complex forms

A self-imposed challenge for Ruxing Gao.

Traditional Artist

88 Traditional FXPosé

The finest traditional art, sent in by you! This month we showcase artwork from Rodrigo Gil Chávez and Jongun Yun.

92 Create characters from an abstract

Prepare to get dusty with Eric Messinger and his mysterious charcoal creatures.

98 First Impressions: Laura Aldofredi

The artist and animator talks about the importance of life experience in her work.



You're three steps away from this issue's resource files...

1 Go to the website

Type this into your browser's address bar.

<https://ifxm.ag/Procreate>

2 Click the download link

Find your files ready for download.

3 Download what you need...

Save the files or watch the videos.

Next month

© Fernanda Suarez



Next month in...
NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS
ImagineFX

FANTASY BOOK ILLUSTRATION

We talk to the artists behind some of our favourite covers of the past few years

Paint eye-catching masterpieces

Illustrator Fernanda Suarez reveals how to make your book designs a success

Out-of-this-world character concepts

Explore bone-clad figure sketches from Guerrilla Games artist Choro Choi

Ink at speed with comic inspiration

Art director Matt Sanz reveals his process for rapid game art rendering

**ISSUE 256 ON SALE 29TH JULY
IN PRINT & DIGITAL**

NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS
ImagineFX

Editorial

Editor **Rob Redman** rob.redman@futurenet.com

Art Editor **Daniel Vincent**

Production Editor **Henry Burridge**

Contributors

Dominic Carter, Tanya Combrinck, Tim Miller, Forrest Imel, Trevor Hogg, Amanda Espluga, Eliza Ivanova, Ivan Shavrin, Nelson Tai, Daniel Włodarski, Florian Herold, Pauline Voss, Antony Ward, Ognjen Sporin, Lera Kiryakova, Ruxing Gao, Ian Evenden, Jeremy Laird, Mike Griggs, Eric Messinger, Laura Aldofredi

Advertising

UK Group Commercial Director **Clare Dove**

Advertising Director **Matt Johnston**

matthew.johnston@futurenet.com, 01225 442244

International Licensing

ImagineFX is available for licensing and syndication. To find out more contact us at licensing@futurenet.com or view our available content at www.futurecontenthub.com. Head of Print Licensing **Rachel Shaw**

Subscriptions - turn to page 8!

Online orders www.magazinesdirect.com

Customer service email help@magazinesdirect.com

Consumer Revenues Director **Sharon Todd**

Disruption remains within UK and International delivery networks. Please allow up to 7 days before contacting us about a late delivery to help@magazinesdirect.com.

Manage your subscription online with MyMagazine. View frequently asked questions at www.mymagazine.co.uk. FAQ log in at www.mymagazine.co.uk.

Past issues: Active subscribers have instant access to past issues through their iOS or Android device/s. Your digital magazine entitlement is available at no additional cost and no further action is required. PocketMags library may not have access to the full archive of digital back issues. You will only be able to access the digital back issues as long as you are an active subscriber. To purchase single back issues (print format only) visit magazinesdirect.com.

Production

Group Head of Production **Mark Constance**

Senior Production Manager **Matt Eglington**

Senior Ad Production Manager **Jo Crosby**

Production Manager **Vivienne Calvert**

Digital Editions Manager **Jason Hudson**

Management

Head of Design **Brad Merrett**

Content Director **Chris George**

Global Head of Design **Rodney Dive**

Managing Director **Stuart Williams**

Commercial Finance Director **Tania Bruning**

Printed by Buxton Press Limited, Palace Rd, Buxton, SK17 6AE

Distributed by Marketforce, 121-141 Westbourne Terrace, London, W2 6JR. www.marketforce.co.uk. Enquiries email: mfcommunications@futurenet.com

ISSN 1748-930X

All contents © 2025 Future Publishing Limited or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited (company number 2009885) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.

If you submit material to us, you warrant that you own the material and/or have the necessary rights/permissions to supply the material and you automatically grant Future and its licensees a licence to publish your submission in whole or in part in any/all issues and/or editions of publications, in any format published worldwide and on associated websites, social media channels and associated products. Any material you submit is sent at your own risk and, although every care is taken, neither Future nor its employees, agents, subcontractors or licensees shall be liable for loss or damage. We assume all unsolicited material is for publication unless otherwise stated, and reserve the right to edit, amend or adapt all submissions.

We are committed to only using magazine paper derived from responsibly managed, certified forestry and chlorine-free manufacture. The paper in this magazine was sourced and produced from sustainable managed forests, conforming to strict environmental and socioeconomic standards.

Full subscription rate: £97.50 for UK, €179 for Europe and \$203 for US.

GPSR EU RP (for authorities only)

eucomply OÜ Pärnu mnt 139b-14 11317

Tallinn, Estonia

hello@eucompliancepartner.com

+3725690241

General Product Safety 2023/988: The use of our product under normal or reasonably foreseeable conditions of use, including the actual duration of use, does not present any risk or only the minimum risks compatible with the product's use, which are considered acceptable and consistent with a high level of protection of the health and safety of consumers.

ImagineFX is a member of the IPSO (Independent Press Standards Organisation) which regulates the UK print and digital news industry. We abide by the Editors' Code of Practice and are committed to upholding the highest standards of journalism. If you think that we have not met those standards and want to make a complaint, please contact legal@futurenet.com. If we are unable to resolve your complaint, or if you would like more information about IPSO or the Editors' Code, contact IPSO on 0300 123 2220 or visit www.ipso.co.uk.

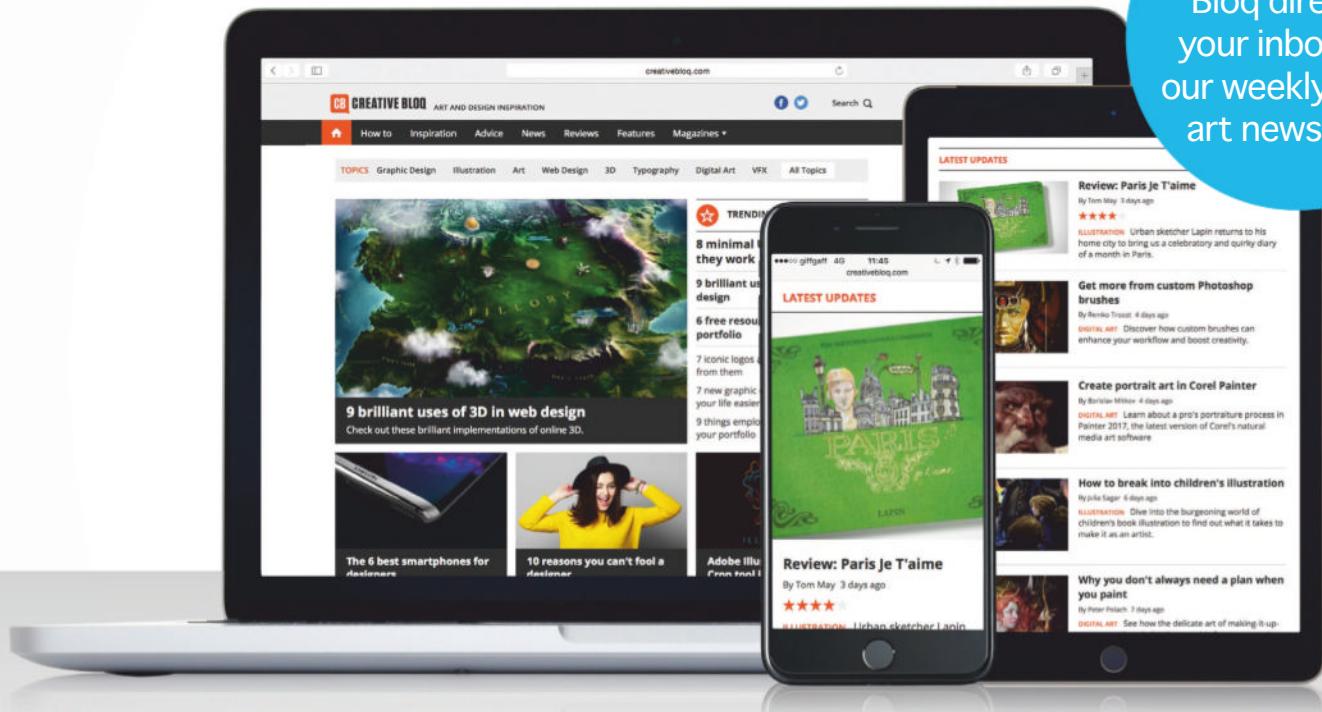


Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange (symbol FUTR)
www.futureplc.com

Chief Executive Officer **Kevin Li Ying**
Non-Executive Chairman **Richard Huntingford**
Chief Financial Officer **Sharjeel Suleman**
Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244

The number one destination for **digital art** news, views and how-tos

Get Creative
Bloq direct to
your inbox with
our weekly digital
art newsletter



Graphic design | Art | Web design | 3D | Digital art

www.creativebloq.com

Subscribe and save!

SIGN UP TODAY!

SUBSCRIBE AND SAVE MONEY!



SAVE
UP TO
45%*
PLUS FREE DIGITAL
ACCESS TO 140+
ISSUES**

START SAVING WITH AN **IMAGINEFX** SUBSCRIPTION!

Subscribing gets you big savings on the cover price, with issues delivered to your door in over 140 countries, while our digital editions are available for iOS and Android

CHOOSE YOUR PACKAGE!



PRINT PLUS FREE DIGITAL ACCESS

- Six months of the print edition
- No-hassle home delivery
- Pay less than you would in the shops
- Exclusive text-free covers
- **NEW!** Digital access to 150+ issues when you subscribe to print!**

DIGITAL ONLY SUBSCRIPTION

- Six months of the digital edition
- Instant access via your Android or iOS device
- Same content as the print edition
- Interactive text-free covers
- Never miss an issue

**THIS SPECIAL OFFER IS ONLY AVAILABLE BY VISITING
WWW.MAGAZINESDIRECT.COM/IFX/DH43Y
OR TELEPHONE +44 (0) 330 333 1113 AND QUOTE DH43Y**

Terms and Conditions: Offer closes 1st September 2025. Price is guaranteed for the first 6 months, please allow up to 6 weeks for the delivery of your first subscription issue (up to 8 weeks overseas) the subscription rate includes postage and packaging. *Savings are based on the cover price. Payment is non-refundable after the 14-day cancellation period. **Access to the digital library will end with your subscription. For full terms and conditions, visit www.magazinesdirect.com/terms. For enquiries and overseas rates please call: +44 (0) 330 333 1113. Lines are open Monday-Friday 8:30am-7pm, Saturday 10am-3pm UK Time (excluding Bank Holidays) or email: help@magazinesdirect.com. Calls to 0330 numbers will be charged at no more than a national landline call, and may be included in your phone provider's call bundle.

EXPosé

THE PLACE TO SHARE YOUR DIGITAL ART



Xinyue Li

LOCATION: France MEDIA: Photoshop, Procreate

WEB: www.artstation.com/toffue

Xinyue Li is a freelance concept artist who works closely with NetEase Games. She loves telling emotional stories through her characters, whether that's by drawing quiet moments or bold, fantastical worlds.

1



2



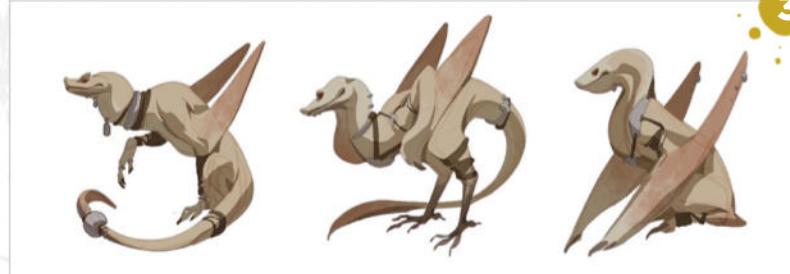
2 GOBLIN SLAYER

"A confident warrior with goblin heads in hand. I grew up loving fantasy, and this piece was inspired by Even Amundsen's bold characters."



1 PEELING TIME

"A dwarf peeling potatoes in jail, accompanied by a dog who's hoping someone will play with it. I liked the idea of flipping the usual tough-guy dwarf into something that was softer and funny."



3

3 CHARACTER SKETCHES

"Some designs for the Desert Courier and her creature companion, inspired by Sixmorevodka and Project Black."



10

ImagineFX

Want to submit your work? Visit <http://ifxm.ag/getinifx>

4 DESERT COURIER

"A desert rider rests quietly at a window, her eyes drawn to the vast night sky. For this piece I wanted to evoke the stillness of travel; the hush before motion."





Minjung Kang

LOCATION: South Korea MEDIA: Photoshop, traditional materials WEB: www.artstation.com/kanggoon

Minjung is an illustrator who explores bold shapes and expressive line work, influenced by black-and-white cartoons and graphic novels. Her personal work unfolds on Devil Planet, blending violence, dark humour and irony.

1



1 LUCIFER AND HER DOGS

“Lucifer, commander of the Sally clone army, is flanked by her vicious dogs. Each breed was carefully studied, and the composition was inspired by the tone of Norman Rockwell paintings.”

2

**2 CROW GANG**

“These crow-headed mobsters appear in my graphic novel, Devil Planet. Inspired by classic mafia silhouettes from films, the exaggerated forms reflect their underworld roles.”



3

**3 EAT THEM ALL, SALLY**

“A clone army of girls with no souls – hence no pupils. This large gouache piece draws inspiration from the aesthetics of old black-and-white cartoons and wartime posters.”

4 HEART OUT

“Cover art for my graphic novel Heart Out, created with writer Bartosz Sztybor. Set on my world Devil Planet, it follows Winter and Devil Dog hunting a heart for a crazed cyborg.”



Antoine Tabouret

LOCATION: France MEDIA: Photoshop WEB: www.instagram.com/gobertillu

Also known as Gobert, Antoine is a character designer and art director. A graduate of the Liège School of Fine Arts, he is inspired by old-school European illustration as well as modern manga and digital art.

1 THE LOST HERMIT

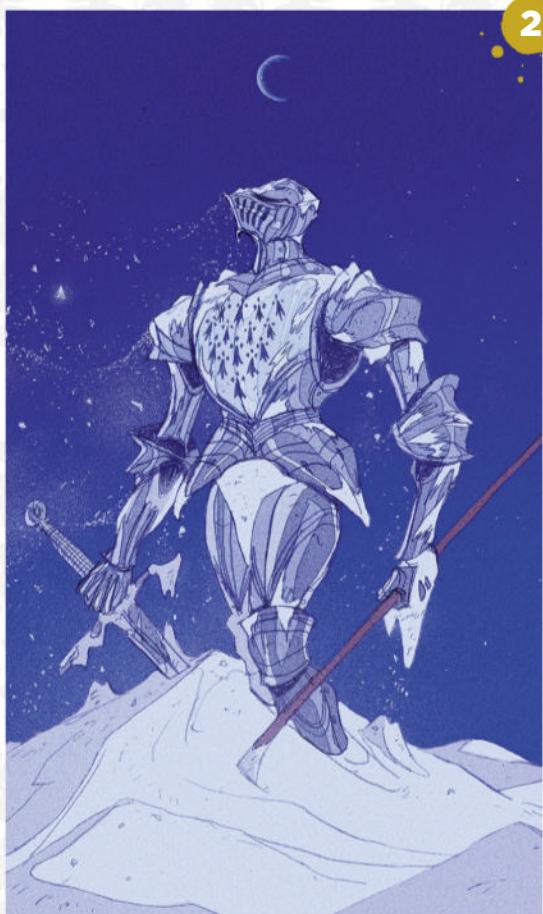
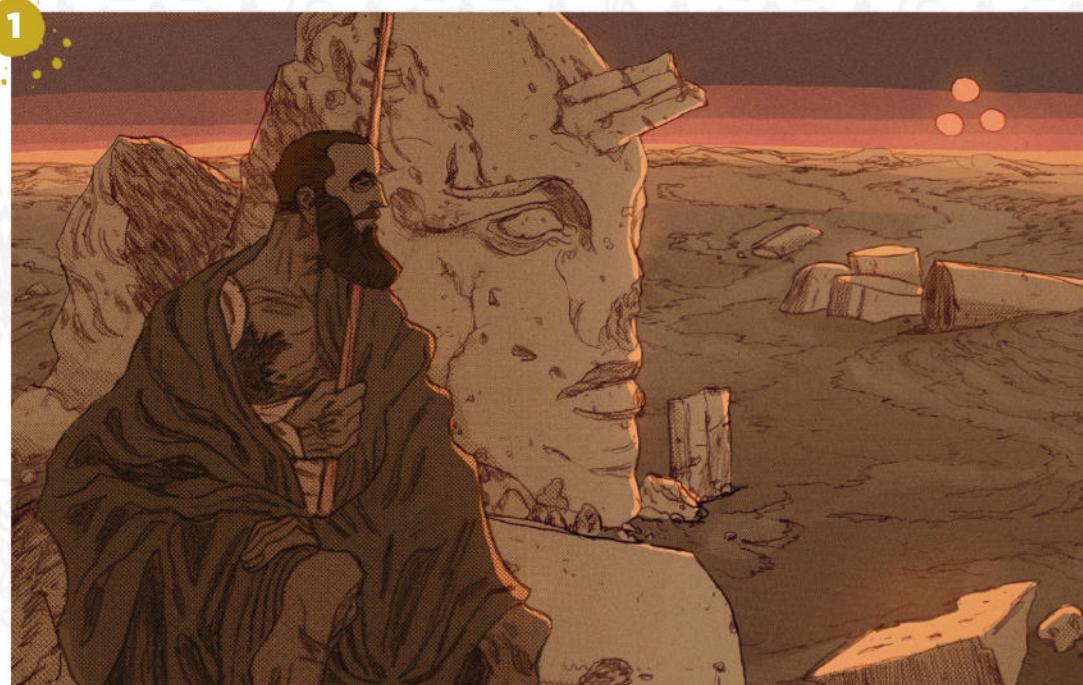
"Personal piece of a wise man lost in a foreign world, as suggested by the multiple suns. I tried to depict a mood that could elicit feelings of melancholy and peace."

2 KNIGHT OF GUÉRANDE

"A commissioned piece that depicts a knight rising from the salt marsh of the French city of Guérande."

3 ALIZA BLOODCREST

"One of the primary characters from Crown Gambit, a card game that I'm working on as a character designer. A noblewoman who became a knight, she's from a family who use blood-covered magical relics."



4 MORDRED

"A character design inspired by the infamous Mordred from Arthurian legends. It's filled with details from the stories, including his mother's crest and the symbol of the snake."





Kanda Em

LOCATION: Sweden MEDIA: Procreate WEB: www.kandaem.com

Kanda is a freelance illustrator and content creator who spends most of her days drawing live on Twitch. She focuses on original characters from her two universes, The Makings of a Wish and The Dark One's Tellings.

1 HANDS OF NIGHT

"Gin Han is my favourite character from my IP The Makings of a Wish. In general, I prefer to work with a unified colour scheme in my art, plus an accent colour or two."

1



2 GUARDIAN

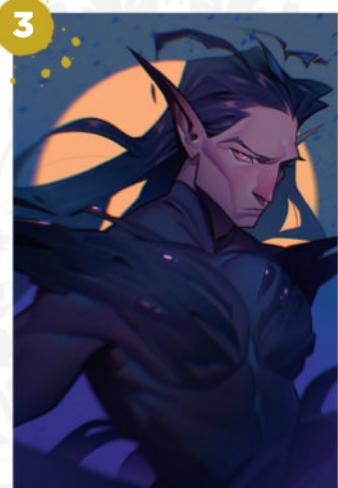
"A character illustration with a focus on the hair and fabric. These are two of my favourite characters from my other IP, The Dark One's Tellings: Nathaniel and Pontus."

2

2



3



3 ABNER POLARIS

"In The Dark One's Tellings, there's a race of elves who have an innate store of obsidian and iron in their blood, which they can use to shape armour."

4 POWER AND WISDOM

"Oftentimes when I'm drawing, I don't care too much about what's realistic or right. Most of the time I just want some fun shapes and colours – and that's what I do."





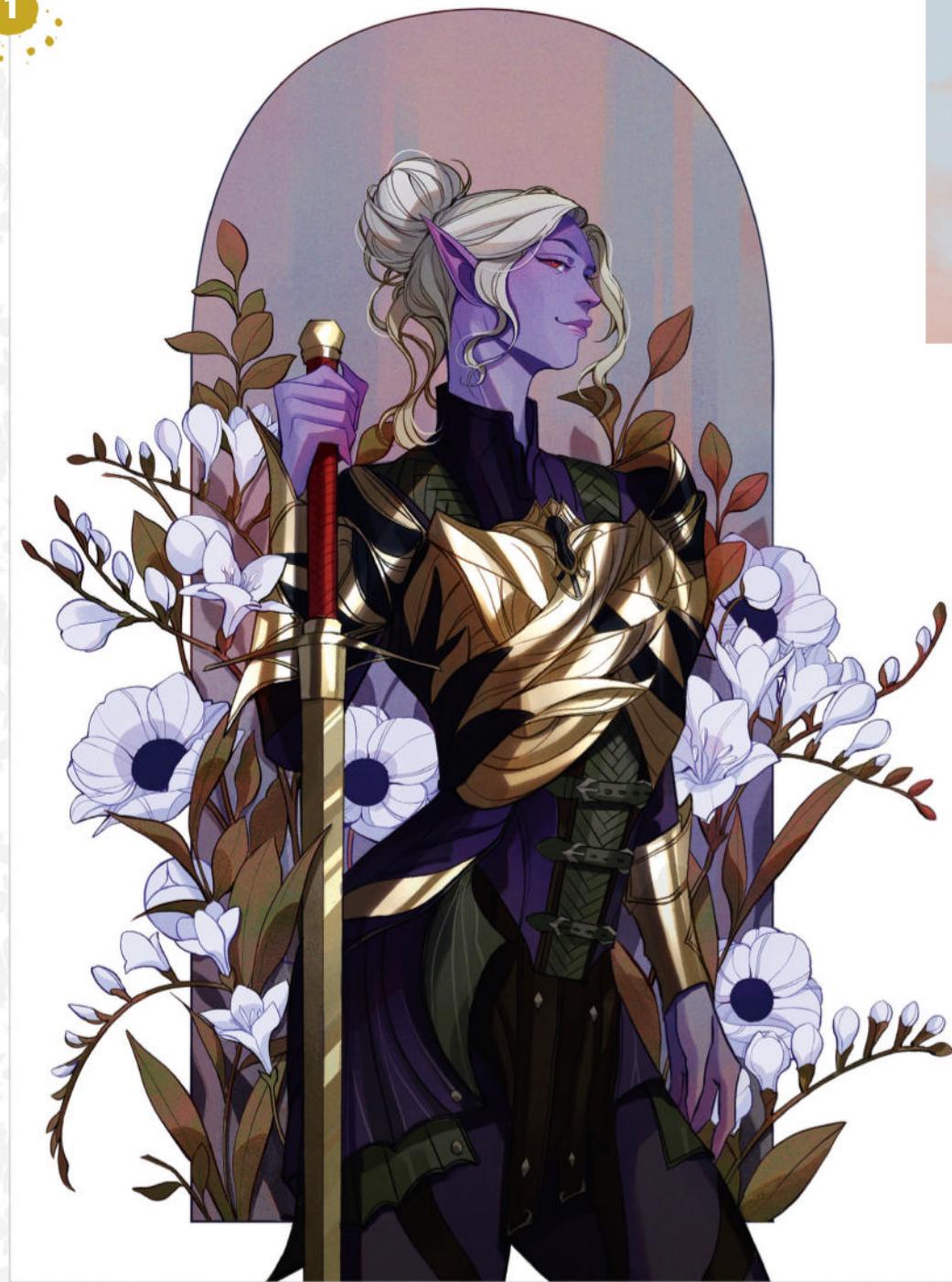
Kalina Aleksandrova

LOCATION: Bulgaria MEDIA: Clip Studio Paint WEB: <https://coffeekats.carrd.co>

Kalina has been influenced by the fantasy genre from a very early age. With a background in watercolour and mixed media, she strives to mimic fluid shapes and organic textures when creating digital artwork.

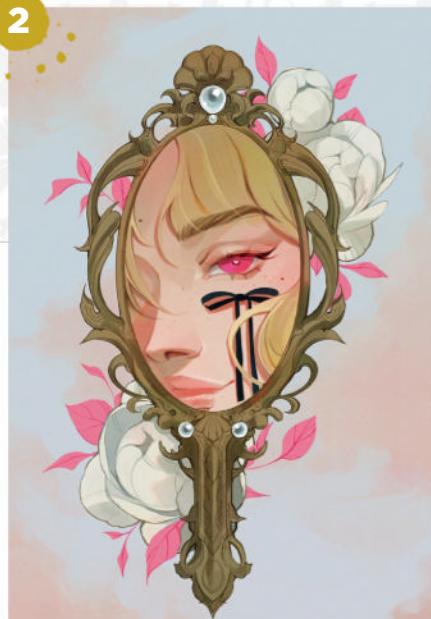
1 MINTHARA

"Fan art of Minthara from Baldur's Gate 3. As a huge fan of Alphonse Mucha's artwork, the art nouveau elements combined with decorative foliage felt very natural and fitting for this series of illustrations."

1

2 MIRROR

"This is a concept featuring my original character Aphrodite. The colour choices and background aesthetics here are inspired by the mysterious lover's eye pendants and renaissance-era paintings."

2**3**

3 SOLAIRE

"A portrait of my Dungeons & Dragons character! I wanted to illustrate how I envisioned her when we started playing, and hopefully I'll soon get to revisit her with all the changes that have taken place since."

4 APHRODITE

"Fan art of the goddess Aphrodite from the Hades video game series. I've wanted to push my skills and try painting more backgrounds, and this gave me the perfect opportunity!"





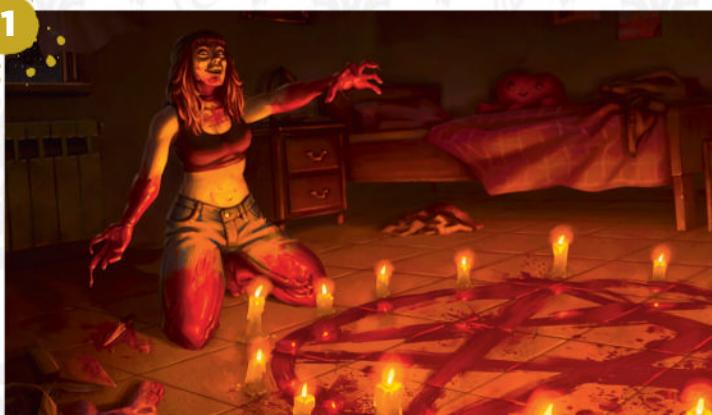
Matteo Meloni

LOCATION: Italy MEDIA: Procreate, Photoshop WEB: <https://matteomeloni.weebly.com/illustrations>

Matteo is a digital painter working on tabletop games and TCGs, whose art lends dramatic shadows and vibrancy. As well as animated movies like Princess Mononoke, he is inspired by Dishonored and Arcane.

1 THE RITUAL

"This illustration depicts a dark magic ritual from a short horror story. I love to illustrate books and create visuals for worlds that are not yet represented."



2 CORVO ATTANO - DISHONORED FAN ART

"A tribute to Dishonored 2, from the streets of Karnaca. I wanted to capture the game's stunning architecture and iconic lead."



3



3 LILIANA - MAGIC: THE GATHERING FAN ART

"With each piece I try to push myself to learn a new skill. For this artwork, I used the Colour and Overlay layers to create the zombie crowd. It's an amazing technique for managing complex scenes."



4

4 GERALT - THE WITCHER 3 FAN ART

"Geralt hunts with a wolf pack, symbolising that he's never truly alone, even when he tries to push others away. I liked this aspect of him in the book, and wanted to incorporate it in my artwork."



Oliver Ono

LOCATION: US MEDIA: Photoshop, traditional materials WEB: www.oliverono.com

Oliver grew up in the American Rust Belt, where the environment reflects a more industrious past. This has led to him injecting his characters and stories with a sense of history that's left for the viewer to decipher.

1 KIRYU

"My design of Kiryu Mechagodzilla. I was trying to draw robots that felt alive and it led to my current project, Starship Godzilla."



2 ARMA CURSOR

"The first image made for my personal work, Arma Cursor. I blended inspiration from Japanese woodblock prints and US Comics."

2



3



4



3 ONDEEN

"Sequential artwork from a horror retelling of the mermaid myth I'm working on with my brother. This shows the lead-up to the first meeting between the prince and the mermaid."

4 VIRA

"A panel taken from my current series! The best and most difficult thing about working on kaiju is getting to play with scale."

Do you want to see your art on these pages? Then email five pieces of your work and a short explanation about each artwork, along with a photo and a few details about yourself, to fxpose@imaginefx.com



THE
ROOKIES

Discover your potential with The Rookies; the launchpad for emerging digital artists. With The Rookies, your work won't only be seen, it gets noticed and featured, just like this! Join a community where your journey from hobbyist to professional artist is supported every step of the way.

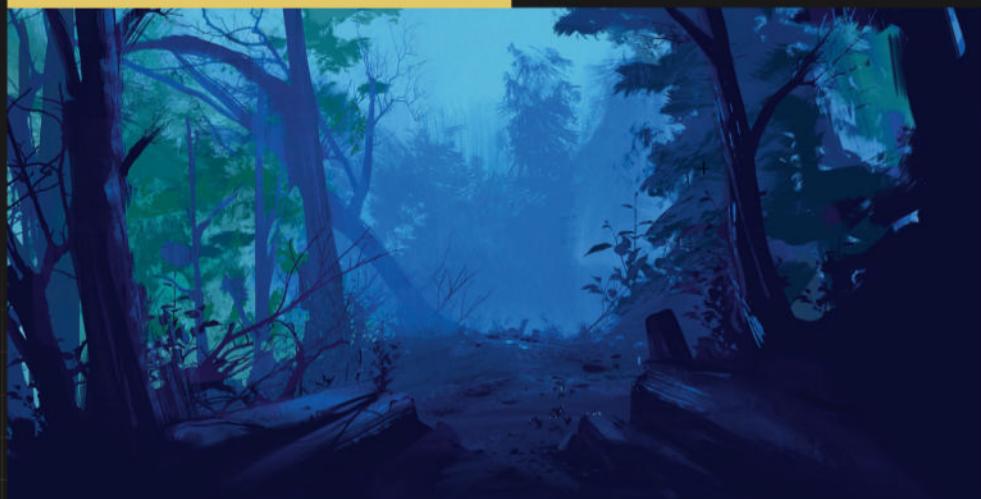
WWW.THEROOKIES.CO



The Horseman

YEAR CREATED: 2021 MEDIA: Photoshop

“The Horseman wasn’t born of logic, but of a silent storm. I was watching a film, yet my thoughts wandered elsewhere. I was alone – the kind of solitude that doesn’t frighten, but awakens. In that moment, filled with a stillness and shadow, something stirred within me: a silhouette; a horse; a wind; a gaze from another world. He didn’t arrive with thunder, but like a quiet revelation, yet unstoppable. Not born from the film, but from the wordless depth of the moment.”



The Rookies

Artist **PROFILE**

Peter Ilchev

LOCATION: Bulgaria



Peter currently works as a 2D artist and dreams of finding a role in movie production. He believes there is magic in art, and hopes to convey it through his creations.

www.therookies.co/u/PeterIlchev





Johanna says: "In my early career, work inquiries would spike my anxiety through the roof. Over time I got more confident!"



"I always knew what I wanted to say with my art. Staying true to my voice is what ultimately made all the difference," says Nataša.

A decade in art

Looking back **Tanya Combrinck** speaks to artists about how their careers have changed over the last 10 years and what they've learned

A lot can happen over the course of 10 years. Unexpected opportunities can take you in a new direction that you'd never thought of, or personal circumstances can put constraints on your life. Sometimes your dreams don't seem so appealing when you get close to them, and it turns out that something entirely different is the right fit for you.

This month we asked artists what their goals were 10 years ago, how

things turned out, and what they would say to their younger selves. What's clear is that everyone's journey is different – there's no typical path, and you never know when a new discovery will change everything.

A decade ago, German concept artist **Johanna Rupprecht** thought her path into the art world would start with full-time employment. She aimed to earn some

Elisabeth says: "When I was younger, people would tell me to make the art I wanted to do, and the work would find me. And in my case, that happened!"



money by freelancing while building up her art skills, and eventually get an in-house job in games or animation. "What I didn't expect at all was how fast my freelance career took off. I managed to make a full-time income from it," she says. Getting an in-house role wasn't necessary after all, and she has spent the last decade freelancing – even turning down job offers that have come her way.

CHANGING COURSE

"Realising that there are multiple viable paths to make a living was very valuable to me," she says. "There are many ways to earn money as an artist: from regular employment or freelance, to being a content creator, selling merchandise, or a hybrid of ➤



Erika says she would tell her younger self to start journaling: "Get all those swirling thoughts out of your head. They're not any good just spinning around in there."



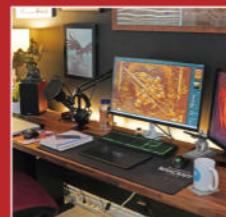
JOIN THE THU STORY EVENT

Trojan Horse was a Unicorn prepares to gather in Japan for an event based on the art of storytelling. Plus, big news revealed on the latest Wacom tablets. **Page 30**



TIM MILLER REVEALS ALL

The Deadpool director tells us about a passion for visual narratives, his artistic roots, and how it all led to becoming one of Hollywood's in-demand filmmakers. **Page 32**



HAVEN FROM ADULTHOOD

Blizzard artist Forrest Imel invites us into his studio to explore the nostalgic trinkets and fluffy friends that fend off the adult world - at least for a little while. **Page 34**

“Find other artists that have similar affinities and be your own gang of weirdos”

“You can only create great art if your foundation is solid,” says Andrew. “If your fundamentals are rock solid and you know how to really draw, you’ll be free to experiment and stretch your creative muscles.”

INDUSTRY INSIGHT MOVING PAST THE GRIND

Nataša Ilinčić on what she has learned in 10 years as an artist

How has your working life changed over the last decade?
My artistic vision has become clearer. My pace has slowed. My priorities have shifted.

I've come to understand that the grind culture simply isn't compatible with a sustainable self-expression through art. That led me to being more careful with the work I take, and prioritising my own projects.

What advice would you give your younger self?

If there's one thing I regret, it's not standing up for myself as much as I should have. It's not an easy thing to do when you're green, and full of imposter syndrome in a world that likes to take advantage of that.

My advice is to treat your time as the precious resource it is. If you find yourself wasting energy chasing numbers and big names, refocus on your art. Really delve deep into your story, your voice, what makes your art unique. Don't let your art sit in drawers or on Instagram – turn it into books, games, collections, things that people will treasure. Find other artists that have similar affinities and be your own little gang of weirdos. Our job can be lonely; it's nice to have someone to chat to over a virtual cup of tea when things are tough.

And finally, rest, stretch and exercise your muscles. Having chronic pain due to overworking yourself in your 20s and 30s isn't worth that deadline you're trying to meet, trust me.



Nataša's artwork is focused on mythology, nature and history. She has published her own artbook and oracle deck. <https://natasailincic.com>





"While I learned a lot at art school, I felt ill-prepared to make a career as an artist at first," Caitlin reflects.

► multiple income streams. It's good to be open-minded about changing tracks and expectations when new opportunities arise."

Johanna's experience has taught her the importance of cultivating a savvy business mindset. "There's more to an art career than just art, particularly as a freelance artist," she adds. "Educate yourself in business matters: learn how to negotiate, do paperwork, read and write contracts, and calculate sustainable rates or salaries. Learn to communicate well and to advocate for fair payment and working conditions. Your future self will thank you for it!"

LOVE YOUR STYLE



Illustrator **Elisabeth Alba** is another artist who took an unexpected turn, in her case because her art style didn't fit where she thought it would. "Ten years ago I was still imagining myself illustrating picture books or middle-grade novels and book covers," she recalls. "My



"Art challenges, such as making a drawing every day, should be used with caution," says Nodens.



Elisabeth's art appears in magazines, books, games and more.

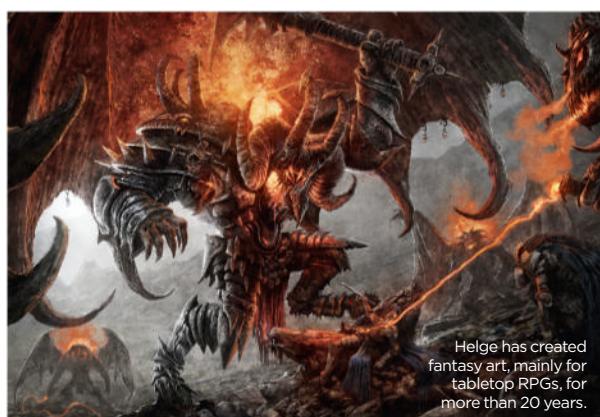
work was deemed too traditional, too 'classic' for the current kids' market, but I didn't want to change my style or what I illustrated; I loved what I did.

"Fortunately, back in 2014, I was found by Llewellyn Worldwide to work on a tarot deck, and I've now found a market I enjoy making art for. I've been working on a tarot or oracle deck every year since."

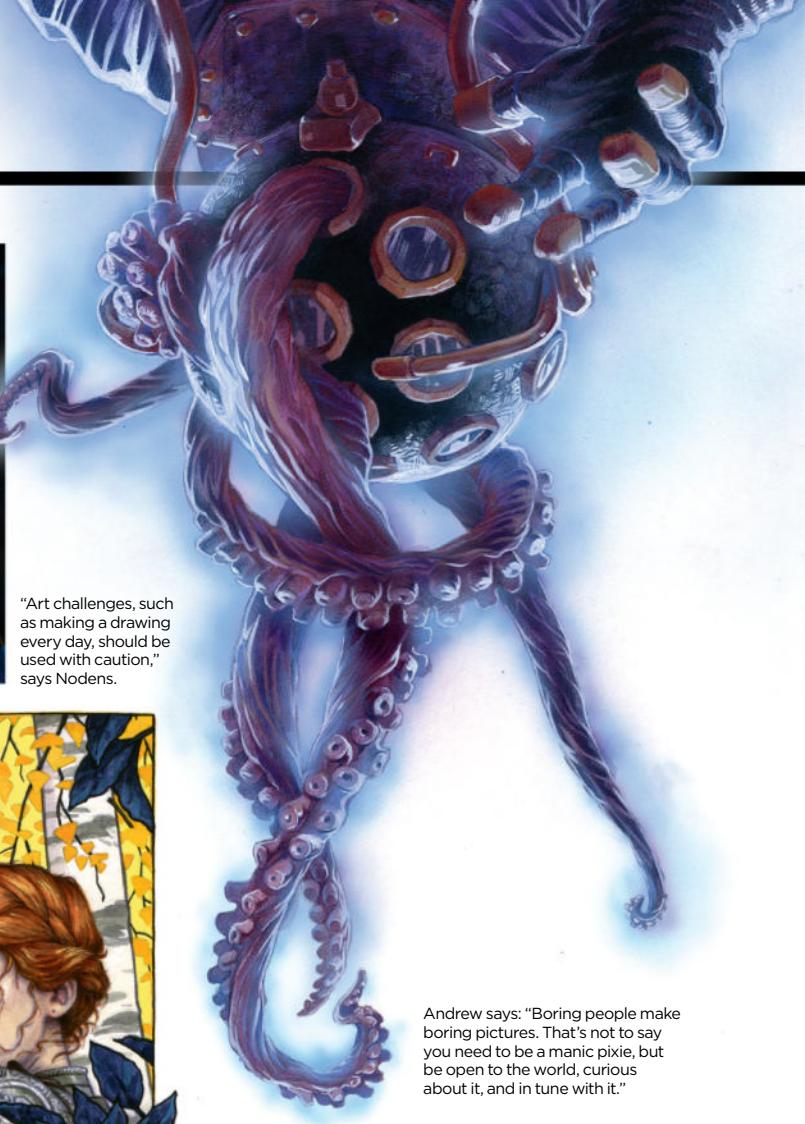
For Elisabeth, the "do what you love" advice worked: "I kept at it even when it wasn't what I thought the publishing world wanted," she says.

Much like Johanna, illustrator **Andrew Sides** started out wanting a job working in animation or video games specialities, but struggled to break into those areas.

"Eventually, after hearing from friends within those industries, I drifted away from that goal, and for a long time I was rudderless," he says.



Helge has created fantasy art, mainly for tabletop RPGs, for more than 20 years.



Andrew says: "Boring people make boring pictures. That's not to say you need to be a manic pixie, but be open to the world, curious about it, and in tune with it."

“Now I recognise my strengths as someone who enjoys dabbling in different fields”

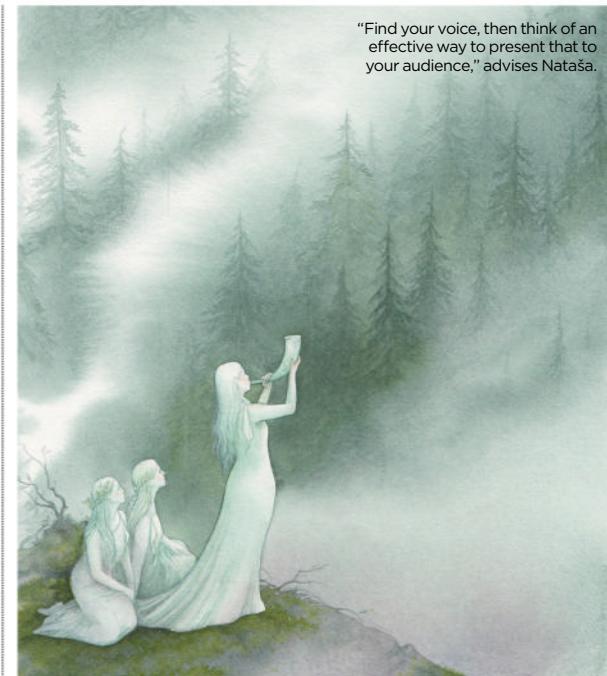
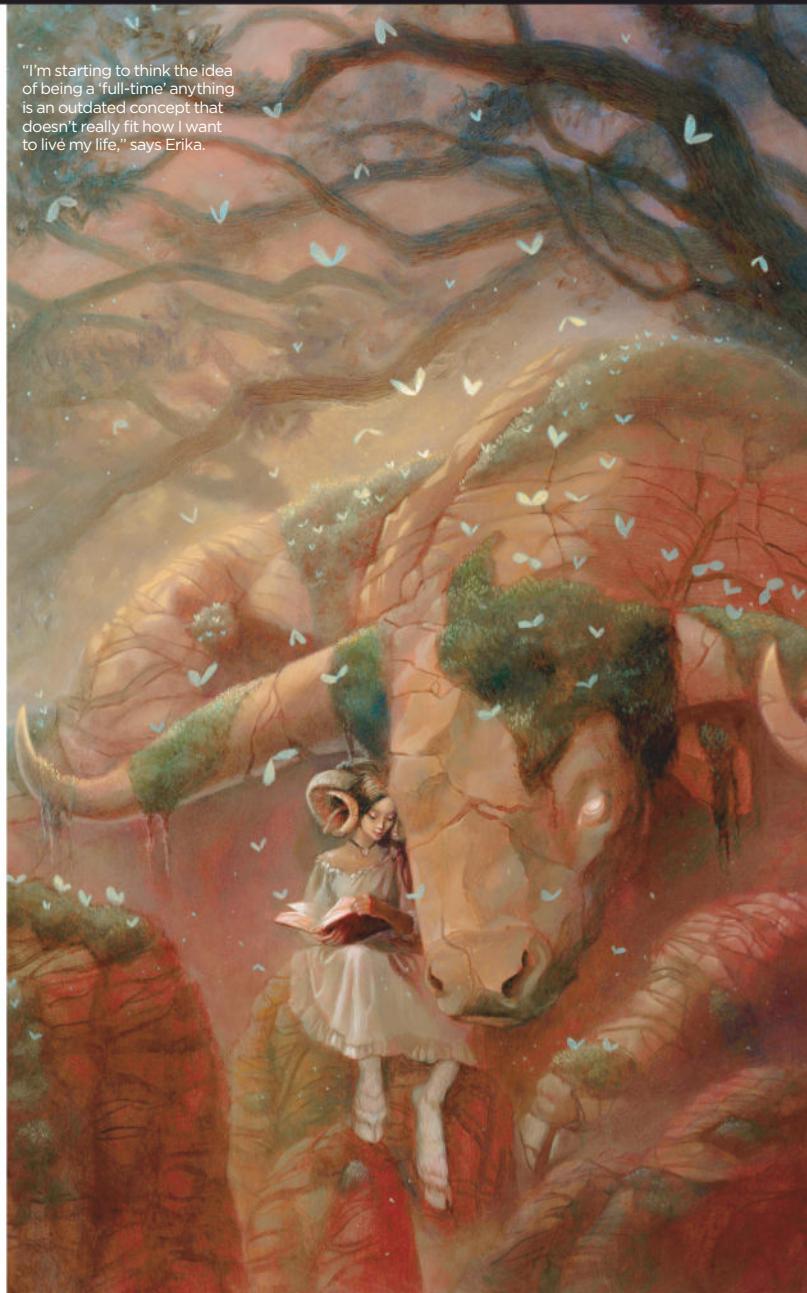
But over time he found his footing. "I've come to recognise my strengths as someone who enjoys dabbling in many different fields, and being fast and skilled on multiple fronts so I can fulfil whatever a client is looking for."

It turned out that being a jack-of-all-trades was Andrew's calling, and his goals have shifted to account for this. "I wanted to chase the big-ticket things like all the other artists, but nowadays I realise that I wanted them simply because other people did," he reflects. "It's important to recognise what you enjoy creating, and be okay with not going after the shiny object everyone else is seeking. If it comes your way, that's fine, but don't feel guilty about not actively pursuing it."

IT TAKES TIME

Several artists told us that through trying out a variety of mediums, techniques and subjects, and keeping

Artist news, software & events

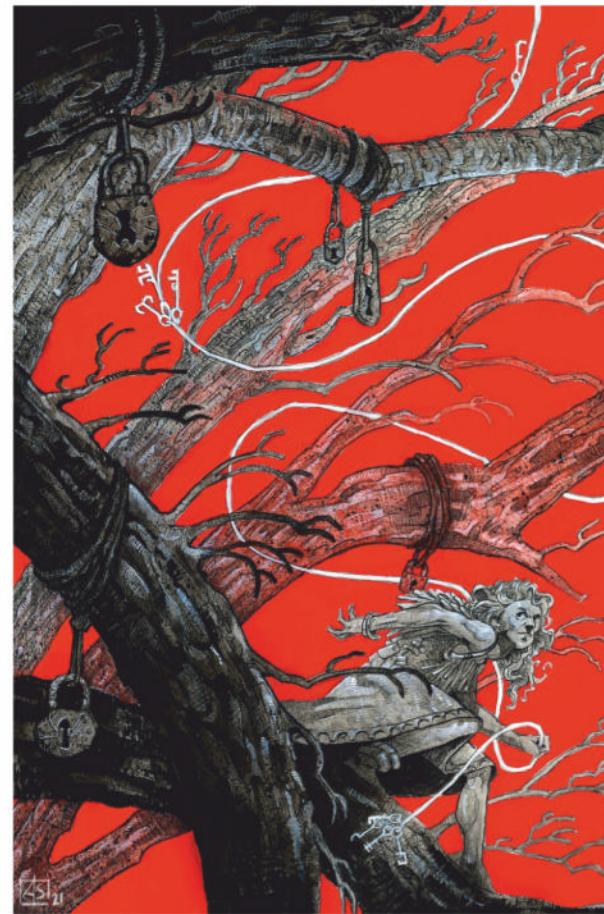


an open mind, their aptitudes and preferences became clearer. Fantasy artist **Caitlin Fowler** found herself "a bit lost" when she completed her degree in studio art 10 years ago, and sought ways to expand her horizons. "After graduating, I continued my education through mentorship programs at SmArt School, and that allowed me to experiment while building up my professional portfolio," she says. Through that, Caitlin discovered a new passion for making fantasy art that was infused with symbolism and mythology.

Over the next few years she began experimenting with other mediums, learned about cold calling, looked for gallery opportunities, and spent a lot of time submitting her work to different projects that she found on social media. And it has paid off. ➤



Helge says: "You learn to be kinder to yourself, to allow imperfection, and even to be absorbed by it. This speeds up your development as an artist enormously."



By casting a wider net, Caitlin has found a broad range of applications for her art. Today she's exhibiting her work in galleries, taking on personal commissions, and creating concept art, album art and book covers.

Caitlin tells us: "As time has gone on, I've found opportunities that I hadn't initially considered, including artwork for wine bottle labels, tarot card art, and cover art for magazines. Lately, I've started pursuing more freelance work in game art, which is something I had never thought about in the past. Over the past 10 years, I've learned that there's no one-size-

fits-all definition for what it means to be an artist, and to keep myself open to different opportunities."

FAMILY MATTERS

For many artists, the biggest change they've had to face over the past



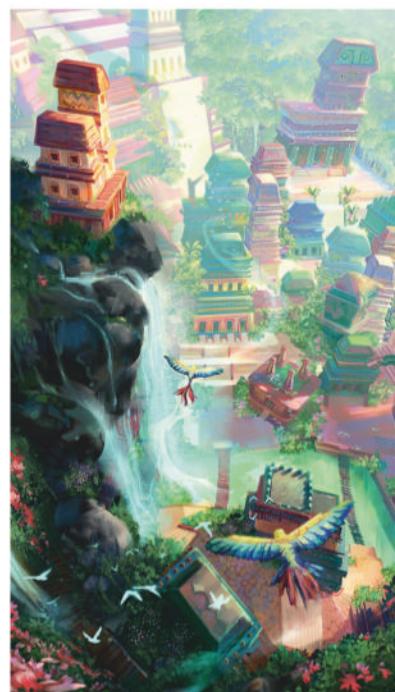
decade has been the career disruption that comes with parenthood.

Helge C. Balzer says his working life was changed dramatically by the birth of his first son just under 10 years ago, which required him to reduce his hours by half. Put to the test, he found ways to adapt and combine fatherhood with his art career.

"I'd already been quite successful as an illustrator and concept artist back then, but now it was all going to happen within 50 per cent of my original working hours," he recalls. "I worked very hard on my craft to become faster and more effective, and in the process I was also able to become extremely organised."

"Keep up with the news, read literature, watch movies, exercise, go on walks; the more varied your life, the more input to feed into your art," Andrew recommends.

Helge says: "Hardly anyone is exposed to as much frustration, disappointment, fear, self-doubt, hurt and criticism as an artist. But overcoming these builds a special person."



Johanna says: "During Covid, companies were happy to work remotely. That seems to be reversing, sadly."



In a similar way to Andrew, Helge came to realise that finding what works for you is better than pursuing fame and glory. "An important change in my perspective was the realisation that commercial success is completely different from popularity," he says. "I've never liked being the centre of attention. And with this realisation, I was able to make more confident decisions to turn down any requests and offers that would have made me uncomfortable."

Looking back 10 years, fantasy artist **Erika Taguchi** wanted to be a full-time illustrator, but had to let go of that goal when she became a mother. "My 'day job' as a web developer proved to be far more lucrative and manageable while caring for a child," she says. "I used to think art and development

“Over the years, I've learned there's no one-size-fits-all definition for what being an artist is”



"As my son has gotten older, the balance between parenting and making art hasn't become easier exactly, but I'm more practised at managing both," says Erika.



"Avoid anything that makes you suffer when you draw; it should be difficult to tear yourself away," says Nodens.

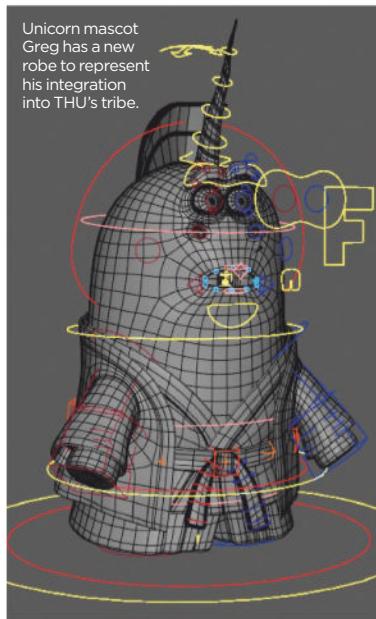
work were completely separate, and that I had to choose one or the other, but I've come to accept that I can do both. One can actually support the other in ways I didn't expect."

On reflection, she would tell her younger self "to stop working so hard to keep different parts of myself in separate boxes". She explains: "Yes, I do web development and I make images, but those are just things I do – they're not who I am. What actually matters are the qualities that drive everything: creativity, curiosity and tenacity. I don't have to be defined by what I accomplish or produce. My identity is much larger than any project or career path."

THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-CARE

After 10 years on the job, our artists have learned more than a thing or two about the creative life, and there's one piece of advice that keeps being repeated: look after your body and your mind. "Seriously, it's vitally important to give your working hand a rest," says illustrator and concept artist **Nodens**. "And you need to protect your eyes and your back, and make sure that you get enough sleep too. We don't notice these things until they become critical."

Johanna adds: "There can be a lot of pressure to push yourself past your limits, both physically and mentally. Spending time with family, friends and enjoying your hobbies, eating healthily and resting your drawing arm are all just as important as working hard on your art, and will make you a better artist in turn."



Unicorn mascot Greg has a new robe to represent his integration into THU's tribe.



The event's poster art marks a new chapter in Greg's story.



Creative director Fabio Scied and art director Nicolas De Aquino led the poster art team.

Learn about the art of storytelling

Horsing around Meet masterful artists and make new connections with Trojan Horse was a Unicorn in Japan

Trojan Horse was a Unicorn (THU) is more than just an art convention. Over the last decade it has hosted a global tribe of creatives, helping them transform through knowledge and growth, while picking up new friends and building networks. THU is a cornerstone of development.

This year's THU Storytelling event takes place in Kaga City, Japan, from 17-20 September. The gathering will allow artists and creatives from a variety of backgrounds to develop

their skills from an impressive line-up of "senseis". Among them is Hideo Kojima, the legendary creator of the Metal Gear series, Death Stranding and more. The Mad Max filmmaker George Miller and Deadpool director Tim Miller will also be in attendance, among other well-known artists.

The Kaga City convention will be a secluded retreat immersing attendees in traditional Japanese experiences, with onsen hot spring breaks and sake tastings mixed in alongside the



3D techniques were used to create the towering snake.

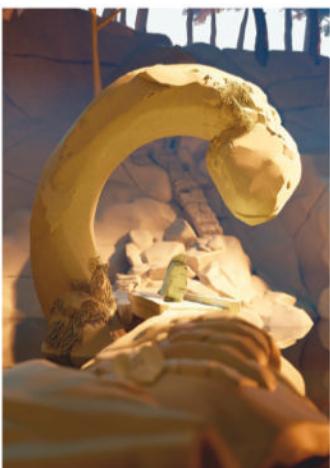
masterclasses and talks delivered by the senseis. If you're a fan of creativity, beautiful scenery and a little sake, THU is the event for you.

Following the tradition of previous posters, this year's art explores the transformative nature of the event and its community, with Greg, THU's unicorn mascot, on the next step of his journey. The team behind it dug into the narrative, building on past poster art with Greg now wearing a THU-themed yukata robe to symbolise his integration into the tribe. He is also surrounded by scenery from the Kaga City region and joined by a scaly companion for the year of the snake.

To discover more and buy tickets, visit www.trojan-unicorn.com, and for more on the poster's creation head to our sister site www.creativebloq.com.



The THU Storytelling poster is gradually built towards its stunning final form.



Wacom unveils new Cintiq tablets

Touch of genius A higher-resolution and slimmer design could make Wacom's latest tablets the must-have gear for aspiring digital artists

Wacom has long been one of the go-to brands for high-quality tablets for both professional and amateur artists. And now the Japanese company has announced another generation of its popular Cintiq pen displays, featuring slimmer builds and higher resolutions.

The upcoming Wacom Cintiq 16, Cintiq 24 and Cintiq 24 Touch models all feature a sleek, fanless design that

A compact design with an easily adjustable stand makes the Cintiq comfortable for extended painting and drawing sessions.



© Wacom

reduces noise and offers improved portability. The 24-inch models are particularly slim, measuring in at just 21mm thick, which is nearly half the depth of the previous 22-inch version.

The Cintiq 16 also receives a resolution upgrade, jumping from 1,920 x 1,080 to 2,560 x 1,600 pixels. Both of the upcoming 24-inch models (one pen-only, the other touchscreen) offer QHD resolution of 2,560 x 1,440 and include an adjustable stand.

All three displays support USB-C connectivity and will continue to use the existing Pro Pen 3. The addition of direct bonding minimises the gap between the pen tip and on-screen cursor for improved precision.

Each of the new tablets will inherit the anti-glare etched glass from Wacom's premium Cintiq Pro line, replacing the older film layer to better reduce reflections and eye strain. And



© Wacom



The Cintiq 24's sleek pen stand attaches to either side, while ports are neatly integrated on the back.

Wacom has also introduced a new Pro Pen 3 Wood Grip as an optional accessory, designed to offer a more natural, comfortable feel in the hand.

The tablets are scheduled for release in the northern hemisphere this summer. More information can be found at www.wacom.com.

Sonic buffs spark debate

Cover lovers Fans discuss their top Sonic the Hedgehog comic fronts, from a quintessential pose to eye-catchingly bizarre art

Ever since his debut in the early 90s, Sonic the Hedgehog has been one of the most iconic video game characters of all time. Like all gaming greats, he's received a number of offshoots, including action figures, merchandise, (controversial) movies, and numerous comic book spin-offs - many of which don't get the recognition they deserve.

With such an iconic character design, Sonic makes for the perfect

Below, from left: Silver the Hedgehog goes full conspiracy mode; Love Stinks! gathered Sonic's matters of the heart; our hero feeling a little blue.

comic book protagonist, so naturally he's featured in some truly brilliant and bizarre cover art over the years. From moody Metal Sonic art to intricate anniversary illustrations, fans have been reminiscing about the best Sonic comic book covers online.

The debate began on X, when one fan asked: "What's the most iconic cover from the Sonic comics?" Fans soon flocked to share their top picks, with a diverse range of comic covers cropping up. The resounding response was issue #252 of the Archie Comics Sonic series, released back in 2013, which shows our fast friend poised for action. Illustrated by legendary comic artist Ben Bates, for many the design is quintessential Sonic the Hedgehog at his best.

Some of the quirkiest covers include issue #64 of IDW's series featuring a frazzled-looking conspiracy theorist



© IDW/Archie/Sega

Archie Comics' Sonic the Hedgehog #252 was a popular choice for the character's top comic cover.

Silver the Hedgehog, and Sonic the Hedgehog: Love Stinks!, which sees him dealing with the hardships of relationship drama. Ironically, he looks pretty hard done by in Issue #155 of the Archie series, which shows a solemn Sonic crying alone.



© IDW/Archie/Sega



The mind of... Tim Miller

Library of imagination The *Deadpool* director explains how his passion for innovative storytelling was born

Where did you grow up, and how has this impacted your art?

I grew up in the suburbs outside Washington DC, in Fort Washington, Maryland. I had a great childhood with all the usual stuff growing up in the US brings, if you're lucky enough to have good parents, enough money, and no real trauma. Most fortunate of all, I'm the child of a huge reader; my dad's library was like a treasure vault. I was that kid who'd get lost in the worlds of Edgar Rice Burroughs and Robert E. Howard - real pulp adventure stuff. I'd read anything, but those stories were like gateway drugs to my imagination.

And I loved to draw. Comics were my jam because they mashed up the best of both worlds: heroic stories and fantastic art. All that geeking out over art and story set the stage for what I wanted to do.

What, outside of art, has most influenced your work?

Beyond traditional art, my two major influences are genre literature and computer technology. Immersing myself in science fiction and fantasy novels sparked my imagination and ignited a real passion for storytelling beyond the visual within me. Then the emergence of computer technology as an art tool came along, and that completely absorbed me. It offered tools and possibilities that I hadn't believed were possible.

Equally significant has been the opportunity to work collaboratively with other artists. Co-founding Blur Studio in 1995 as a place for animators and artists to come together was incredibly satisfying. I've learned so much through collaborations with visionaries such as David Fincher on *Love, Death & Robots*, and James Cameron on *The Terminator*. Those ideas have altered my perspectives, demonstrating the power of collective creativity when trying to push the boundaries of storytelling.

“I didn't expect to be given as many fantastic opportunities as I have... I'm the luckiest nerd on the planet”



The first episode of *Love, Death & Robots*, *Sonnie's Edge*, was released in 2019.

Were there any important paintings from your formative years?

Like many genre artists from my generation, Frank Frazetta was a massive influence and inspiration. There are so many great paintings, but I'll pick *The Destroyer*, a painting done for the cover of a Conan novel.

Can you tell us about your first paid commission?

I can't remember, actually. I'd draw things, and sometimes my friends would want them. If I had to guess,



it was probably a Frazetta or comic cover rip-off, or a Playboy centrefold, which, now I think of it, was likely my fourth great inspiration... like many 13-year-old boys!

What's the last project you finished?

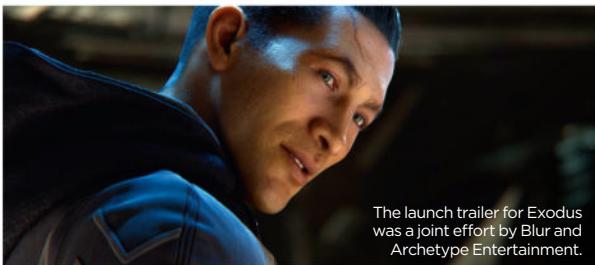
In my role as a director that would be a Love, Death & Robots short titled The Screaming of the Tyrannosaur. Now I think about it, it has many of the same elements found in Frazetta, comics and Playboy! It's unsurprising since I still feel like a kid inside.

Is making a living as a creative all you thought it would be?

It's been much, much more. I didn't expect to be given as many fantastic opportunities as I have. I'm the luckiest nerd on the planet, and it's been a wild ride, full of unexpected twists.

Growing up, I just loved to draw. I thought I'd end up as an editorial illustrator or helping to create comic books, but breaking in was more challenging than I'd imagined. That's when I stumbled upon computer graphics, and it was transformative. This was in the late 80s, and it was all brand new. Eventually, that led to co-founding Blur Studio, where I could blend my love for art and technology.

Projects like Deadpool and Love, Death & Robots have been a dream



Keanu Reeves took the lead role in the Secret Level episode based on Armored Core.

come true to work on. So, while the path wasn't what I initially envisioned - is it ever? - it's been better.

What advice would you give to your younger self to aid you on the way?

I'm not sure I'd do anything different - and I can only offer advice based on what I did that seemed to work, at least for me. And let me say again how much luck played in my opportunities.

Anyway, the advice would be to be persistent and grab every opportunity, even if it doesn't align perfectly with

your dreams. Early on I faced challenges breaking into the comic industry, which led me to explore computer graphics, a field I hadn't initially considered. This pivot opened doors I never anticipated, eventually leading to projects like Deadpool and Love, Death & Robots. Unexpected paths can lead to great destinations. Always keep pushing forward, remain adaptable, and don't hesitate to take that first step, even if it's not where you envisioned starting.

How has the art industry changed for the better since you started?

It's so utterly different in terms of capability and technology. Digital tools and computer graphics have revolutionised artistic creation. When Blur Studio started, we were at the forefront of integrating the tech that's now industry standard. Artists have unprecedented access to software, lessons and online communities today. This democratisation has lowered the entry barriers, and a diverse range of voices and talents have emerged.

The interconnectedness of the internet has made global collaboration the norm. Artists can work together across continents, and the demand for visual content has grown with the vast numbers of streaming platforms, video games and digital media. This means more opportunity to showcase work and reach wider audiences.

What's your next step in art or life?

I've always sought ways to tell stories with as much creative freedom as possible. Projects like Love, Death & Robots and Secret Level have allowed me to explore narratives without the typical constraints, collaborating with talented artists to bring stories I find interesting to life.

However, navigating the industry's gatekeepers remains a soul-draining exercise. I'm continually looking for opportunities to get more autonomy in the work Blur does, seeking partnerships and platforms that allow more art and less bureaucracy. The goal is to keep pushing boundaries and finding new ways to share stories.



Tim Miller is an acclaimed film director, best known for his blockbuster directorial debut *Deadpool*, and for co-creating *Love, Death & Robots*. He began his career as a VFX artist and animator, founding the acclaimed Blur Studio. www.blur.com



Forrest Imel

Knick-knack nostalgia

Enter the artist's domain, full of trinkets to distract him from the adult world



My wife and I bought this house back in 2020, but it wasn't until the start of 2025 that I finally decided to make some moves towards fitting out my dream office. Prior to this, my workspace had been practically the same setup for eight years.

I tend to get tunnel vision and not bother with updating my studio. I believe I had an office with no prints, posters, or any decoration for the first three years of owning our home. At the start of 2025 I bought a new desk and shelves for all of my knick-knacks. I even invested in a standing desk base that, surprisingly, I've used almost every day since getting. ➡



This is an illustration of Uther Lightbringer that I created for Hearthstone. I was really excited to get to work on this since I'm a big fan of the game!



These are prints I got from Glenn Rane at the Rose City Comic Con. This was before I started working at Blizzard. Getting to meet him meant a great deal to me, as his art was a big inspiration when growing up. He also gave me a portfolio review!

This is a statue that was part of the World of Warcraft: The War Within collector's edition box. This was the first expansion that I got to work on for the game, so it meant a lot to me to receive it.

I keep various types of snacks around my desk, typically because I forget to eat real things. Currently, I'm rocking some Starbursts and honey-roasted peanuts.

I keep a planner by me all day and will write out my tasks every morning. I think this is honestly the secret sauce to being productive.

Artist news, software & events



This image I'm working on is the latest T-shirt design for my own business, Void Monster. It's based on the spell card Swords to Plowshares from Magic: The Gathering.

This is a large print of the illustration from my very first playmat that I made and sold on my website. This image started me on an adventure and is one of the first images that I actually feel proud of.



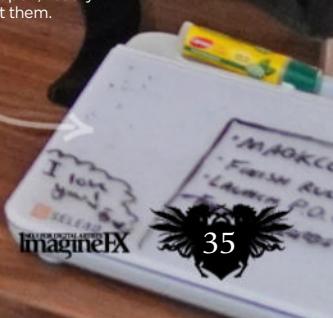
My cable management is abysmal. The first day I set the desk up all of the cables were hooked up correctly, then they fell and I haven't fixed it since.

This is the mug I use when recording for the Distraction Makers YouTube channel that I co-host with Gavin Valentine. The channel is all about discussing game design through the lens of Magic: The Gathering.

WORLD
WARCRAFT
TEAM



I use this small whiteboard to keep track of my monthly goals. I've found that if I try to track long-term goals without being able to see them in the open, I easily forget about them.



Over the last few years I've rediscovered my love of anime and manga. I started by collecting and reading through Shaman King, and they now sit on this shelf being guarded by my main man Dark Magician from Yu-gi-oh and Gatomon from Digimon.



As far as equipment goes I'm pretty boring. I use a medium-sized Wacom Intuos Pro tablet for all of my work. Before that, I owned an Intuos4 for about 10 years, it was my first tablet and lasted a long time for all of the use that I got out of it.

I'll occasionally do some traditional work at my desk, mostly little sketches in pen or pencil, but I feel much more at ease working in Photoshop. I use a Razer mouse and keyboard, both of which have gross stuff on them from over the years. My two monitors have

a lot of smudges from eating ramen noodles at my desk and having broth droplets splash up on them.

HOME COMFORTS

I have a Sennheiser e 835 microphone on an ergonomic arm that's attached to my desk. It's the mic that I use for just about everything, and I get a lot of compliments on the sound quality. I like to think it makes up for my smudgy monitors. To the left of my main workstation is the work laptop I use to access super top-secret files.

“When I’m home, I also get to be near my wife, and our two cats and two dogs”

Now that I work full-time at Blizzard Entertainment, I stick to a typical 9-5 working schedule, though luckily I still get to work remotely. I was a freelance artist for over 10 years, so I'm used to working at home and don't really have an issue with staying productive.

I keep a planner on my desk where I write down all my tasks at the start of each day, which helps to keep my brain focused on what I have to do. I also like to keep a handy whiteboard planner on my desk for all my monthly goals. But when I'm home, I also get to be near my wife, and our two cats and two dogs, who can usually be found behind my desk sitting on a small sofa bed.

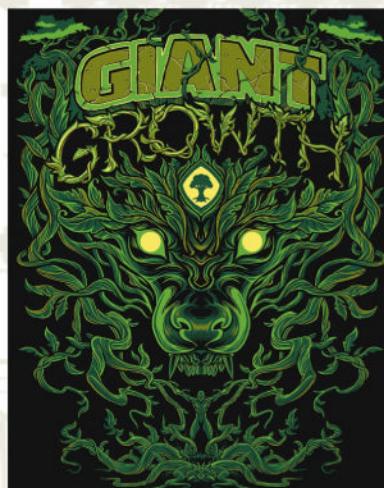
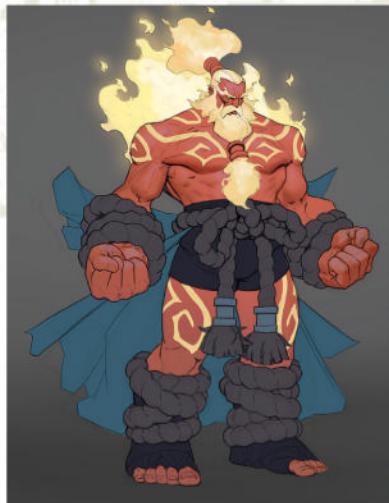
Forrest Imel is an illustrator and concept artist in the games industry who has worked for companies including Blizzard Entertainment, Riot Games, Wizards of the Coast, and many more. www.artstation.com/forrestimel



This was one of my few splash images for League of Legends. That was a wild time in my career as I felt like I was still growing in a lot of ways, and had to learn a lot in a short amount of time to reach that level.

Artist news, software & events

A character concept for a personal project that may or may not ever see the light of day. Most of the characters I design tend to be big muscle men, or just look like a knock-off of Dark Magician.



This is the first shirt design that I made for Void Monster, and is based on the Magic: The Gathering card Giant Growth. The style for these designs is very different to my usual work, which has made it a really fun challenge to explore.

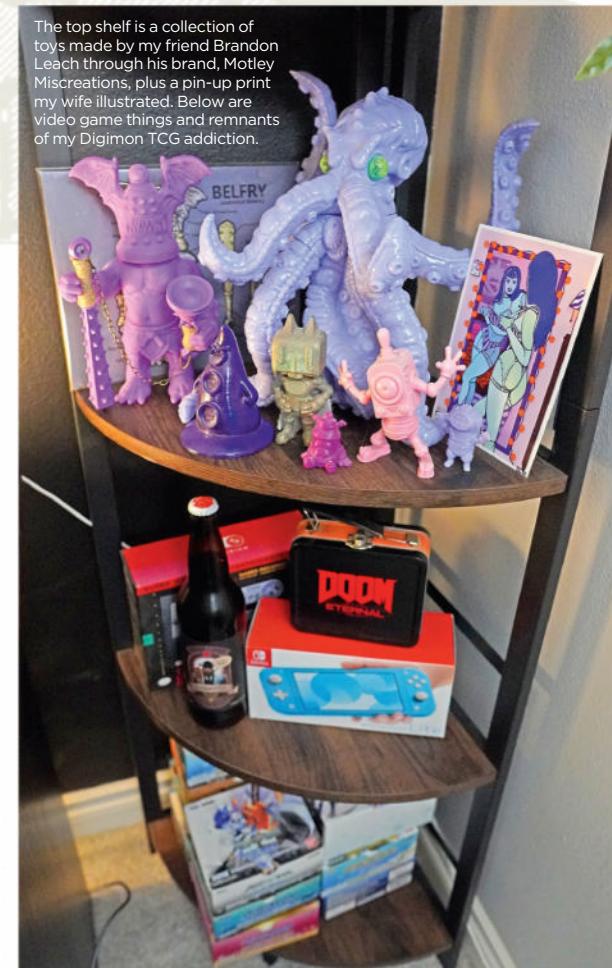


This year I started a new business: Void Monster. I make illustrated apparel and accessories based on trading card games. This is where I print labels and stack outgoing shipments.



Three of my four pets: our cat, Binx, and our two dogs, Pepper and Spooky. You won't find our other cat, Plasma, anywhere near these three. She may be an actual demon!

The top shelf is a collection of toys made by my friend Brandon Leach through his brand, Motley Miscreations, plus a pin-up print my wife illustrated. Below are video game things and remnants of my Digimon TCG addiction.



I have a large collection of artbooks, books for reference, and now game design books. The top shelf has items I've collected working at Blizzard, plus a Magic: The Gathering card I illustrated called Dockside Extortionist.

GET IMAGINEFX DELIVERED DIGITALLY!



iPad is a trademark of Apple Inc., registered in the U.S. and other countries. App Store is a service mark of Apple Inc.

Available via our online shop

www.magazinesdirect.com/imaginefx-magazine

Available on iOS or Android

Letters

YOUR FEEDBACK & OPINIONS



Contact the editor, Rob Redman, on mail@imaginefx.com or write to ImagineFX, Future Publishing, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA, England



Follow us on X: x.com/imaginefx



Find us on Facebook: facebook.com/imaginefx



Share your artwork via #imaginefx: instagram.com/imaginefxmagazine



Concept misconceptions

Hi ImagineFX. Having just read your last issue, I've realised I need to do more research. I had been planning a career as a games concept artist, thinking I fully understood what I was heading into. But your feature on this showed me there's so much more to it than I'd thought. It still interests me hugely and is still the career I want, but it was really useful hearing from some artists that are already doing it, so thank you!

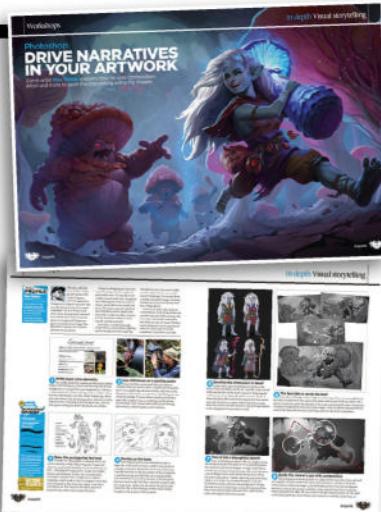
Sabine, via email

Rob replies Thanks for getting in touch Sabine. I was also fascinated reading the feature and you're so right! Getting insight from those who are already working in a specific field can be really helpful. It's good to gain some understanding, but can also excite and reinvigorate your own appetite for doing the same with ideas about what your future could hold. Whether that's learning to find your place in a team situation, or dealing with elements that aren't often shared online, it's all great information to ingest.

We talked to a handful of established concept artists to get the lowdown on what the job is really like.



DID YOU MISS THE PREVIOUS PACKED ISSUE?
Don't worry – you can get hold of issue 254 at ifxm.ag/single-ifx.



Max Weber created a fantastic workshop on imbuing a narrative into your illustrations in our last issue.

Visual narrative

As an illustrator I often find the biggest challenge isn't the actual presentation of my ideas – things like the values and rendering – but the struggle to tell a story. It's like trying to compress a whole movie, or at least a scene, into a single frame and I'd been struggling to fathom how to go about it. I have to say that Max Weber's tutorial last month was fantastic and really made things clear when tackling this kind of a problem.

Hamza, via email

Rob replies Hi Hamza, thanks so much for reaching out, and I'm so happy to hear you enjoyed Max's workshop last month. I'm not an illustrator by any means, although I do enjoy drawing, but I can really appreciate what he was teaching in those pages. There can be a whole lot to keep in mind when working on a large image like that, so reading about someone else's method can be really useful. I'm also a big fan of his work generally and that particular piece of art is one of my favourites. I love the mix of pure fantasy with his touches of humour.

Comic hero

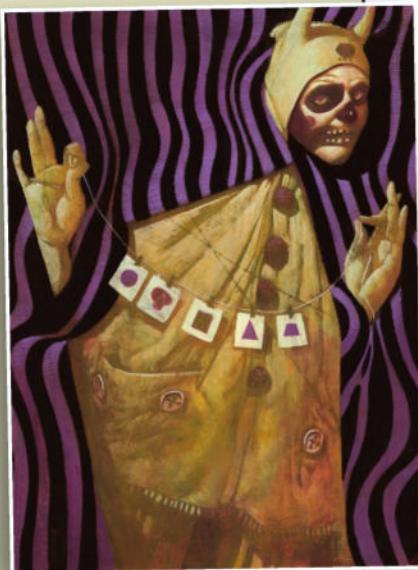
I'm writing quickly to say a huge thanks for featuring Greg Staples' studio last month. I've been reading and collecting comics for years and Greg is among my favourite artists out there. It was ace to see inside his space and now I'm feeling the urge to start building my own purpose-made studio too.

Gary, via email

Rob replies Lovely to hear from you Gary. I'm also a fan of Greg's work and I've wanted to get him in the magazine for a while. It may have been a bit of a wait as he needed to get his new studio finished, but I'd say it was well worth it!



New works that have grabbed our attention



B.C. Maxwell
@illumax.art



Abhishek samal
@abhispaint

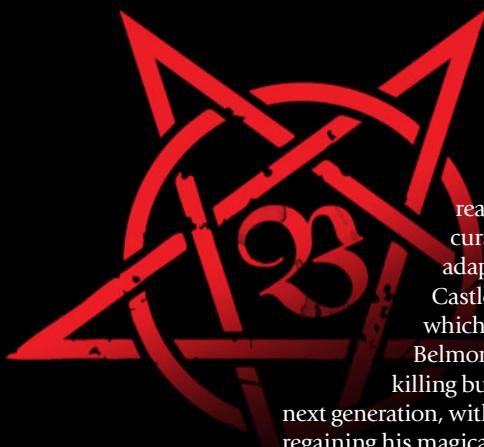


Saurav
@drawnk

If you've created art that you want us to shout about simply tag us on X or Instagram, and use the hashtag #imaginefx

The art of Castlevania: Nocturne

Trevor Hogg sinks his fangs into Season 2 of the dark anime to discover how its creators conjured characters and creatures



Breaking the enduring curse of video game adaptations is the Castlevania franchise, which has passed the Belmont family demon-killing business on to the next generation, with Richter Belmont regaining his magical abilities to accompany his trusted sacred whip by the end of Season 1 of Castlevania: Nocturne. And now the second season of the Netflix dark fantasy series – set during the time of the French Revolution where vampires attempt to lead a revolt of their own – is again animated by Powerhouse Animation.

CHANGING FACES

A specialist animator did transformations from beginning to end for characters such as Erzsebet Báthory.



All images courtesy of Netflix and Powerhouse Animation Studios.

Also making a return are directorial siblings Adam and Sam Deats, as well as character design supervisor Katie Silva, who pushed the show's designs to reflect the emotional journey of Richter and the other cast members throughout the eight episodes.

"When we started working on Nocturne, we wanted to bring it a touch of elegance to tie it into some of the French backdrop, but at the same time refine certain things," states Sam. "Occasionally in the original series, there were some struggles with how certain shape languages were working and certain shading styles that gave us some trouble. It takes hundreds of

STYLISH ACCESSORY

A signature clothing accessory for lead character Richter Belmont is his white headband.

different animators working on the show to make it happen. Different people would translate that style in different ways and we found that we needed to make a few adjustments to try to refine our approach, as we went into the new series on top of trying to improve upon the aesthetic."

A particular show has remained an influential touchstone in moving from the original Castlevania anime and into Nocturne. "Obviously, we love Berserk and there are some dark moments in this show," notes ➤

“When we started, we wanted to bring a touch of elegance to tie into some of the French backdrop”

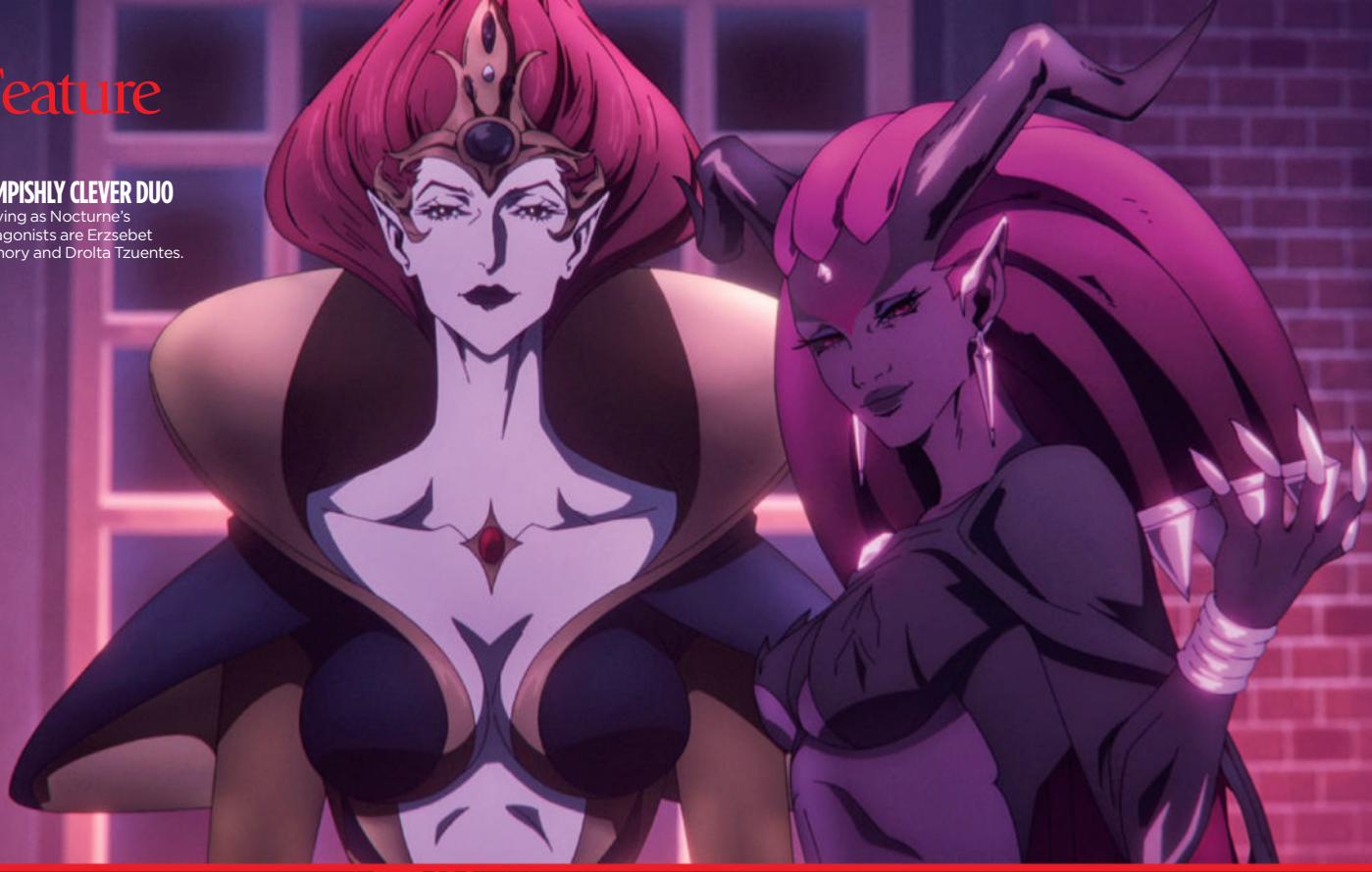


18TH-CENTURY REFINEMENT

The goal was to bring elegance to the visuals to reflect the French Revolution setting.

VAMPISHLY CLEVER DUO

Serving as Nocturne's antagonists are Erzsebet Báthory and Drolta Tzuentes.



→ Katie. "But it's less starting with a grizzled protagonist [Trevor Belmont] and more beginning with a younger protagonist [Richter]. Nocturne is more colourful and has curvy lines."

An effort was made to simplify the animation process used during the series' creation. "It's funny, we went into Nocturne wanting to make it more animation friendly," remarks Sam. "We tried to adjust the shading



WHITE ON WHITE

Alucard was always a difficult character to get right.

style in the show to have fewer levels of shading, to have more nuanced shape language in the shading and more delicate line work and things like highlights in the hair. The result was that the nuances, shape language and more elegant line treatment basically made it a straight-up even split with the complexity of the original series. We ended up at the exact same place but with a slightly different look."

His brother is in agreement. "Not even just that," notes Adam. "Like most of 2D animation, we're still outsourcing to animators here in the US and studios in Korea. We tried to simplify the shadows. They are less dense and yet we'd still get shots back with a third and fourth tone."

That simplification could only go so far, as Katie explains: "All of those buttons on this outfit are going to be difficult to track, but sometimes a character needs a lot of those details and animators have to put up with that. It's a give and take."

WICKED WARDROBE

The character design that went through the most iterations was that of ancient vampire antagonist Drolta Tzuentes, who gets transformed into a Night Creature. "When she was first designed in Season 1, I showed a bunch of designs to the producers and writers, and the writers went, 'This is so wonderful. Let's do all of them,'" Katie recalls. "That ended up happening but it was a running thing that I was trying to make happen where she had a different outfit every time she showed up. All of the team got to design her."

"This season she's a Night Creature, so it's hard for us to do that. But we had flashback sequences where she also got to have a bunch of ➤

“We adjusted the shading style... but finished at the same place with a slightly different look”



HIGH ON THE RICHTER SCALE

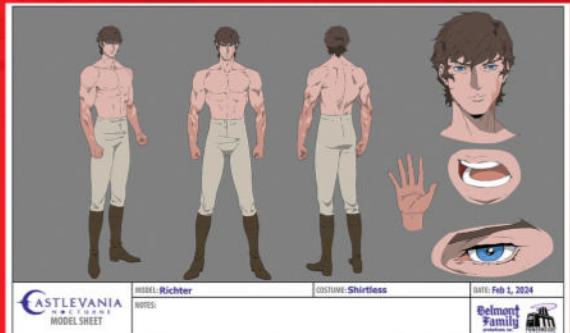
Richter Belmont is in full control of his magical powers, which influenced his character design...

"Sam went in with the goal of making sure Richter gets elements of his old outfit from the original Castlevania: Rondo of Blood game," states Adam. "He managed to use that as the means of showing that growth, which is the fun part."

The video game homage was a nice visual and narrative touch. Sam adds: "Slowly throughout the series and between the two seasons, part of the goal was to reflect Richter's character growth and confidence by building him from one of his

character designs from the games into the classic one that everyone remembers from the original Rondo of Blood game.

"This was actually intended to be reflected in Season 1, starting with Episode 106 through to the end, and Richter's design was actually updated, particularly his expression sheet and hairstyle. Those were updated to reflect the change in his attitude and character growth. Everything did change little by little throughout the series, all the way



BUFFING UP

Richter Belmont's muscular but athletic build earned him the moniker 'Chad Richter' among the crew.

down to how we were styling his hair. It's all subtle but is there."

Katie follows up with a laugh: "It's definitely Sam's baby! Through the season we had to redo his main sheets, which is difficult because the main characters need to have a lot of expressions and several angles. We definitely did redo Richter and gave him funkier hair and various expressions. We called it 'Chad Richter' versus 'Baby Richter'. He evolved into Chad Richter. Sam has a shot where he's taking an energy blast and protecting Annette, and his sleeves burst off. It's like, 'There's Chad Richter.' We definitely had to do a number of sheets for that."

SUITABLY DRESSED

In recognition of Richter Belmont's growth as a character, he finally gets to wear his Castlevania: Rondo of Blood outfit.

EFFECTIVE STORYTELLING

Much of the visual effects work is entirely digital and was made to look cohesive in the compositing process.

➡ different outfits! My thought is that Drolta has a different outfit for everything she's doing. When Drolta is talking to Olrox in Season 1, she's wearing what we called her negotiator outfit. It's part of her character and also makes her fun."

Character transformations are treated as special moments. "Instead of doing a bunch of model sheets for each stage of the transformation, we have a specialist animator on our staff and they're figuring it out from the beginning to end stage," explains Sam.

"There are some cases in Season 2 where a character will hit a midpoint in their transformation. We have a lot of scenes as they're developing that transformation. In those cases, we had to do multiple model sheets for several different stages of that.

"It depends on the circumstances. If it's going to be one sequence of shots where we see someone turning into something, I prefer to give it to a specialist animator. But if it's going

“Instead of doing model sheets for each stage of a transformation, we have a specialist animator on our staff”

to be a long stretch event that changes throughout a larger number of shots and a lot of different animators have to be involved with that, it's better to design those things in sheets."

CHALLENGING CHARACTER

Interestingly, the pure white face of the dhampir Alucard posed more technical than emotive problems. "Adam had to deal with how much Alucard can get blown out if he's not being carefully colour adjusted," says Sam. "But when it comes to the facial expressions, Alucard has always been a difficult character to draw right; that has been a constant even with the original series when he had a little more colour in the face. It's part of the same struggle that we have with the nuances of the show; the line style and subtleties of certain expressions that we try to push for. It's a challenge we've grown used to over the years that we've been drawing him."

But lessons have been learned by the team, as Adam observes: "One thing that you should never do is have hair colour almost identical to the skin colour. It's really bad! That colour gets wrong all of the time. There were paint issues." ➡



FAMILIAR ALLIES

Alucard joins forces with another member of the Belmont kin, this time in 18th-century France.

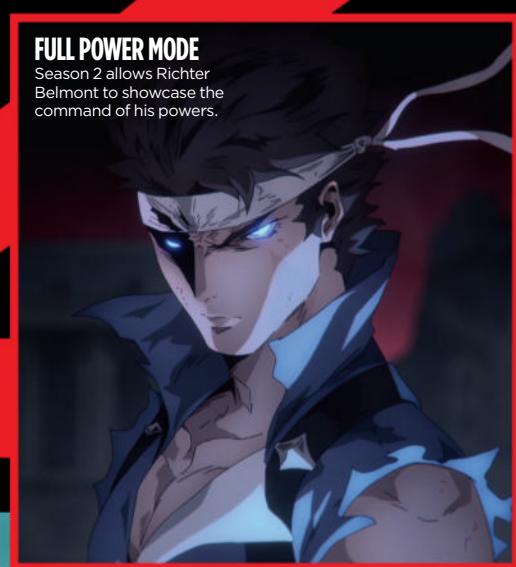
HEADS UP

Conceptualising new expressions for the show's lead character, Richter Belmont.



FULL POWER MODE

Season 2 allows Richter Belmont to showcase the command of his powers.



HIDDEN HORRORS

The Abbey is strangely tranquil considering it's where Night Creatures are manufactured.

HUMANISTIC TRAITS

The Night Creatures have more human elements this time around to mirror their evolution in the story.



MANUFACTURING NIGHT CREATURES

The deceased get resurrected as demonic beasts with human qualities...

"As a team, we'd talked about the Night Creatures having more human elements because the story is directly related to their evolution after a certain point," Adam recalls. "This time around we had to think about what's going to bring out those human elements in a subtle way, and they were there in the first four seasons too [including three seasons of the previous Castlevania anime series]."

The manufacturing process for Night Creatures is different than in the original series. Katie explains: "In the [Nocturne] story it's a machine. It's implied that the machine is bringing each individual's soul back into the same body."

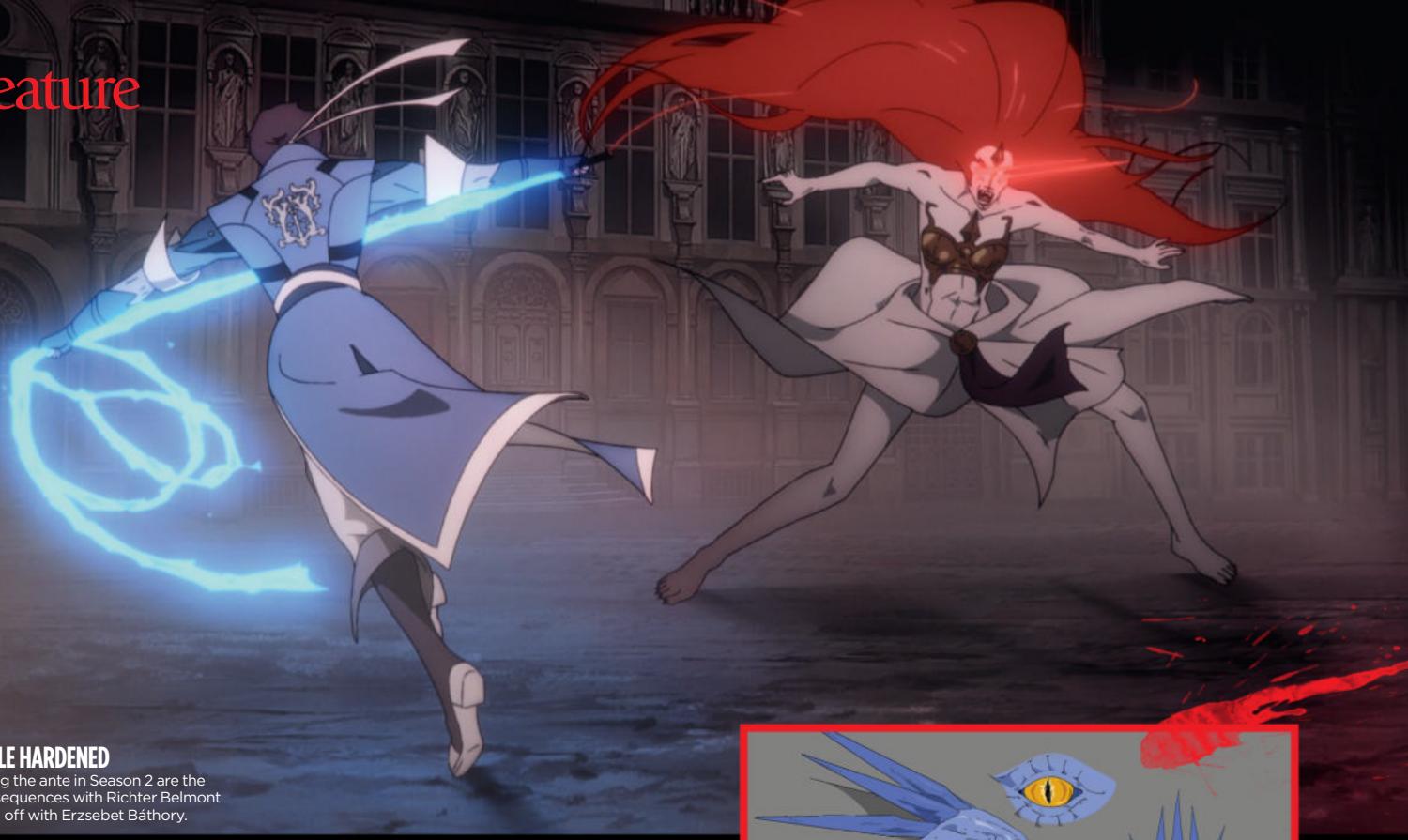
Sam adds: "From a storytelling perspective we have the Abbot using a machine to produce Night Creatures now, so the goal was to reflect that sometimes.

On occasion, it was that we wanted to make sure there was a little bit of that humanity showing. But on other occasions we had to also have hordes that are going to be fighting in this army. We built certain creatures to not have their original soul attached and that reflects their design as well, to be more creature-like. It depended on the circumstances on how they came to be and how they served the story."



DEVILISH DETAILS

Ancient vampire antagonist Drolta Tzuentes, who gets transformed into a Night Creature, went through the most iterations.



BATTLE HARDENED

Upping the ante in Season 2 are the fight sequences with Richter Belmont facing off with Erzsebet Báthory.

“I wanted it to feel violent-looking despite the fact it was a singular orb that crackles and flashes a lot”

Effects designs, meanwhile, are tricky because of outsourcing. “If you have a unique effect design, then it sometimes gets burnt out by the outsourced animation crew, so tends to look similar to other stuff,” observes Adam. “What worked nicely is that we’d have some of our in-house animators like Josh Aguilar, who’s a great effects animator and did, for example, Erzsebet Báthory’s dark orb. I gave him a short description, and he did a still frame of it and said, ‘I’m going to animate this because we can

send it to the outsource studio and they’ll know how it moves.’

“I wanted it to feel violent-looking despite the fact it was a singular orb that crackles and flashes a lot. What Josh did with it was great. It had a black lightning bolt and white core that looked like the eclipse and the animation moves a lot. That single bit of animation appears in almost every shot when she’s holding the orb. It was useful and efficient to do it that way.

“That goes for everything. We have fire effects model sheets that we’ve



DRACONIC DESIGN

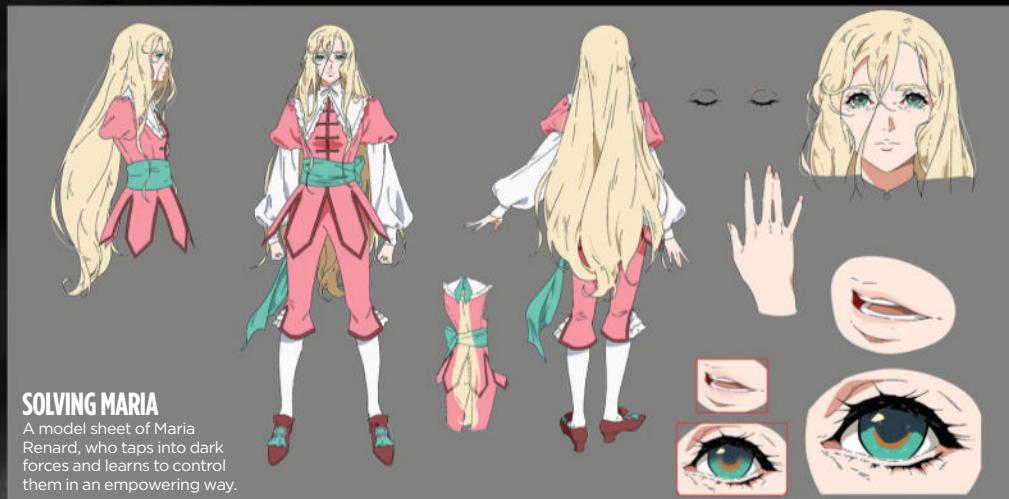
A model sheet for the magic dragon that’s summoned by Maria Renard.

actually used for a long time. They don’t get duplicated as closely as I would like, but we’ve still been using them for a long time now.”

DETAILS AT A DISTANCE

Some modifications were made to the character design methodology for Season 2, taking a lead from other anime series. “We had distance models so that the closer you zoom in on a camera, the more detailed the character will get,” explains Katie. “We actually have ways that explain how to increase or decrease detail for these characters; that was a new thing we started doing. A lot of anime does it, but we leaned into it this time.”

Generally, Nocturne’s character designs tend to be line dense. “It’s our cross to bear when you work on a show that you want to be as elegant and detailed as this,” admits Adam. “That becomes a problem of being hell to animate, so we find ways to cut corners like the characters not needing a lot of detail for a crowd.”



SOLVING MARIA

A model sheet of Maria Renard, who taps into dark forces and learns to control them in an empowering way.



EMOTIONAL RANGE
Richter Belmont has a funkier hairstyle and new facial expressions.



TAILOR-MADE
The interior of a tailor's shop situated in Paris during the French Revolution.

COMPLETE EFFECT

Animation tests assist in creating unique visual effects styles that can be replicated...

"We tend to find that if we do an animation test for unique effects styles, that has a positive influence any time a similar effect comes around again," Sam says. "But if it isn't a unique effect, for example fire or dust, typically what happens is that the animator will lean into their own individual habits, so those effects tend to end up being more varied and up to how the animator decides their approach to those kinds of things. We make all of those effects feel cohesive by adjusting how we composite them in the final show."

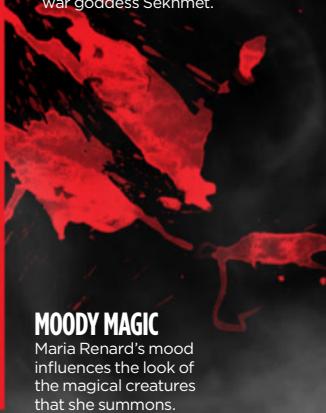
Digital augmentation is an important tool. Adam says: "We do quite a bit of visual effects entirely digitally, so we have to make calls about what's going to be a totally digital effect in our pipeline. A long time ago, because the show is based on a game, we decided that we were going to have a distinct visual effects pipeline here and there because it meshes with the overall look of the game. If we run out of time to do a 2D cell effect, then we figure out something in post that's purely digital. Usually that ends up falling on me!"



However, the approach wasn't entirely straightforward with so many animators working on the show. Sam admits: "One of the trickier things when it comes to distance models is that there's a way that looks better. You can only draw so small but we'd find sometimes that when a character got smaller or their face was turning, the face would turn into mud depending on how it was being cleaned up. We had to do our best to communicate, 'Here is the shape language that's easy to animate and looks good from this distance.' We tried our best to get that across with all the different animators. It's a constant struggle."



ANCIENT CURSE
Exploring how Annette looks when possessed by the ancient Egyptian war goddess Sekhmet.



MOODY MAGIC
Maria Renard's mood influences the look of the magical creatures that she summons.

Sketchbook

Amanda Esplugues

Delicate dragons and other magical creatures flock together on the pages of the Spanish artist's adorable sketchbook



EXPERIMENTAL SKETCHES

"It's fun to sketch using only blotches of colour that spark new ideas and concepts in my mind. The most important thing is to let creativity flow."



Artist PROFILE

Amanda Esplugues

LOCATION: Spain



Amanda is a creator of magical creatures that guard nature and guide humans towards balance and connection with life. Beyond art, she has studied positive psychology, life coaching, and natural nutrition, among other fields. She lives in a mountain village, surrounded by everything she loves most: her family, pets and a bunch of sketchbooks! <https://ulksy.com>

SPEEDY SKETCHES

"One of my ways to generate new ideas is doing quick pen sketches. It helps me avoid overthinking details and achieve more expressive and dynamic drawings."

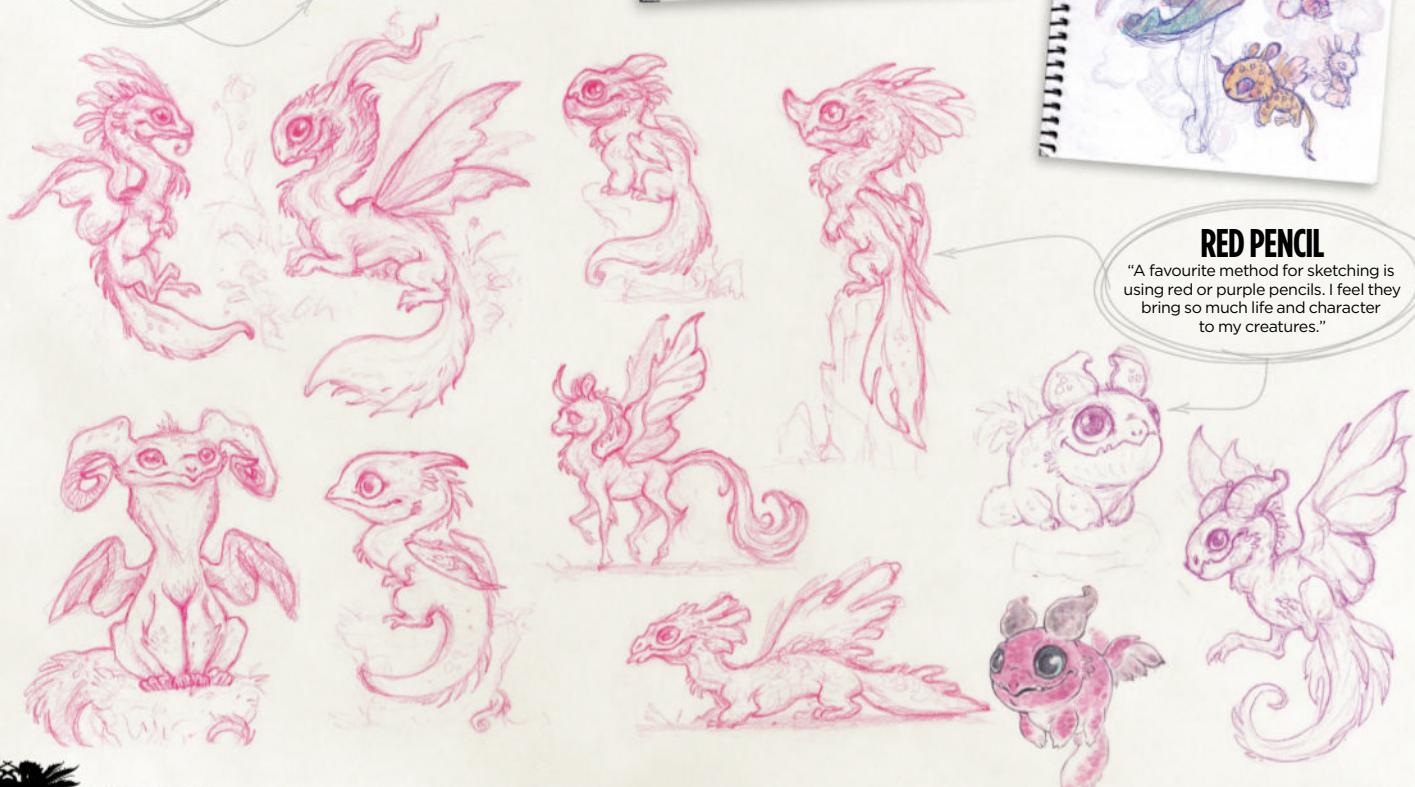
TOUCHES OF COLOUR

"I also love adding colour to some of my sketches. I like how they can bring joy and tenderness to creatures, and particularly enjoy bright colours inspired by exotic animals."



RED PENCIL

"A favourite method for sketching is using red or purple pencils. I feel they bring so much life and character to my creatures."



FLOWER DRAGON

"From a quick pen sketch came the idea for this dragon that looks like a flower. I love imagining my creatures as tiny beings that go unnoticed in nature."

GRAPHITE DRAWINGS

"These sketches have a unique, special charm to them. Depending on how I feel, I'm drawn to different materials. I love staying open to all kinds of possibilities and new forms of expression through sketches."

“Red and purple pencils bring so much life and character to my creatures”



DRAGONS AND DOGS

"I love basing my creatures on real animals. In this case, I played with the idea of dog-dragons inspired by breeds like the Ibizan Hound, and Spanish and Italian greyhounds."

TREE DRAGONS

"These creatures can truly hide in plain sight... they might even resemble trees! Next time you walk through the forest, look closely, as there might be a dragon or another creature where you least expect it."



FAERIES!

"Faeries are another of my favourites. Their subtlety and beauty captivate me, and they teach humanity to care for nature and respect all living things."



LITTLE BLACK SHADOW

"This little guy was one of my first dragons, created in 2015, and it's still among my favourites. I love small dragons with round heads and big eyes that feel almost real."



Sketchbook Amanda Esplugues

DIGITAL COLOUR SKETCH

"Starting from a pen sketch, I made a quick digital colour version inspired by exotic birds. Digital sketching is a fast way to explore ideas before committing to a final piece."

BUTTERFLY DRAGONS

"Another concept I love is dragons as tiny nature spirits that take delicate forms, such as butterflies. I just adore creating these types of dragons!"



“Another concept I love is dragons as tiny nature spirits that take on delicate forms like butterflies”

PENCIL ON PAPER

"Sometimes I start with red lines and finish the sketch with pencil. I love the magic sensation that graphite conveys."

BIRD DRAGONS

"Dragons that could be mistaken for birds are another favourite of mine. I try to capture the beauty of these animals in my designs."



Do you want to share your sketches with your fellow ImagineFX readers? Send us an email with a selection of your art, captions for each piece and a photo and bio of yourself to sketchbook@imaginefx.com

MASTER THE TECHNIQUES YOU NEED TO CREATE YOUR BEST FANTASY ART

Let the industry experts at ImagineFX be your guide as you dive into a wealth of tips, tricks and techniques for incredible fantasy art, from how-to guides to programs from Photoshop to Krita, to in-depth technique masterclasses



FUTURE
MEDIA

Ordering is easy. Go online at:
magazinesdirect.com
Or get it from selected supermarkets & newsagents

NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS

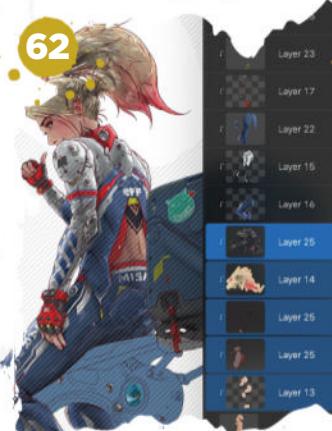
ImagineEX Workshops

**Workshop assets
are available...**

Download your resources by turning to page 5. And if you see the video workshop badge, you can watch the artist in action, too.



Advice from the world's best artists



54

60

62

74

This issue:

54 Add colour with traditional feel

Discover how Eliza Ivanova retains sketchbook style when digitally colouring in Procreate.

60 Let your inner child run wild

An action-packed book cover gets a little help from Ivan Shavrin's younger self.

62 50 tips and tricks for Procreate

We asked five artists to share their top advice – from efficient workflows to using handy tools.

72 Easy exercises for fresh ideas

Ognjen Sporin explains why word association is great for expanding on your creations.

74 Build character designs that sing

Learn to get a tune from your art as Lera Kiryakova explains her process for expressive characters.

80 Simplify the complex forms

Ruxing Gao seeks to balance simplicity and complexity in his striking landscape scene.

Workshops

Love Eliza
Ivanova's artwork?
Explore her collection
of artbooks available
at her online shop
<https://ifxm.ag/3G21GHd>



Procreate

ADD COLOUR WITH TRADITIONAL FEEL

Follow along as **Eliza Ivanova** explains her process for colouring artwork digitally without losing that innate sketchbook charm

Artist PROFILE

Eliza Ivanova
LOCATION: US

Eliza is a Bulgarian fine artist, illustrator and animator based in San Francisco. She worked as a 3D animator at Pixar for a decade and helped create the likes of Cars 2, Inside Out, Monsters University and more. www.elizalivanova.com



It's not uncommon to see a beautiful pencil or ink drawing that's been butchered under multiple layers of poorly constructed digital colouring. Textured brushes are designed to replicate real-life brush, pencil or ink marks, so why not utilise the power of those real marks that have already been laid down on the paper?

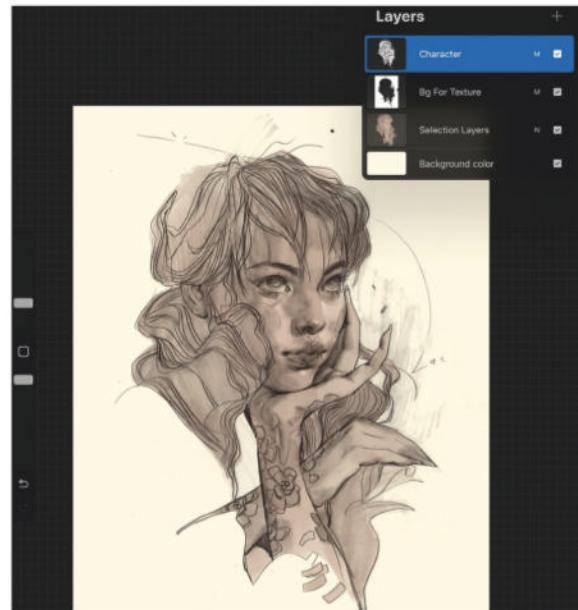
In this tutorial, you'll be able to follow along with my colouring

process, see which brushes I use to mimic my drawing and shading, and learn how to maintain valuable information – such as line quality, shading, textures, and imperfections – while elevating your piece digitally.

It's important to keep in mind that your basic setup is key to line up for success from the beginning; the things I look out for are scanning resolution (I use 600DPI or more), and selecting brush packs that contain brushes close to the ones

used in the original piece. However, there are plenty of default brushes already available in Procreate that work wonderfully, especially the pencil and ink ones.

I also include brushes to simulate colour splotches and bleeds, and always test out my blending brush for texture as close to a real blending stump as possible. If your digital blending appears too smooth, it can overpower any nearby textures and sticks out as a mistake.



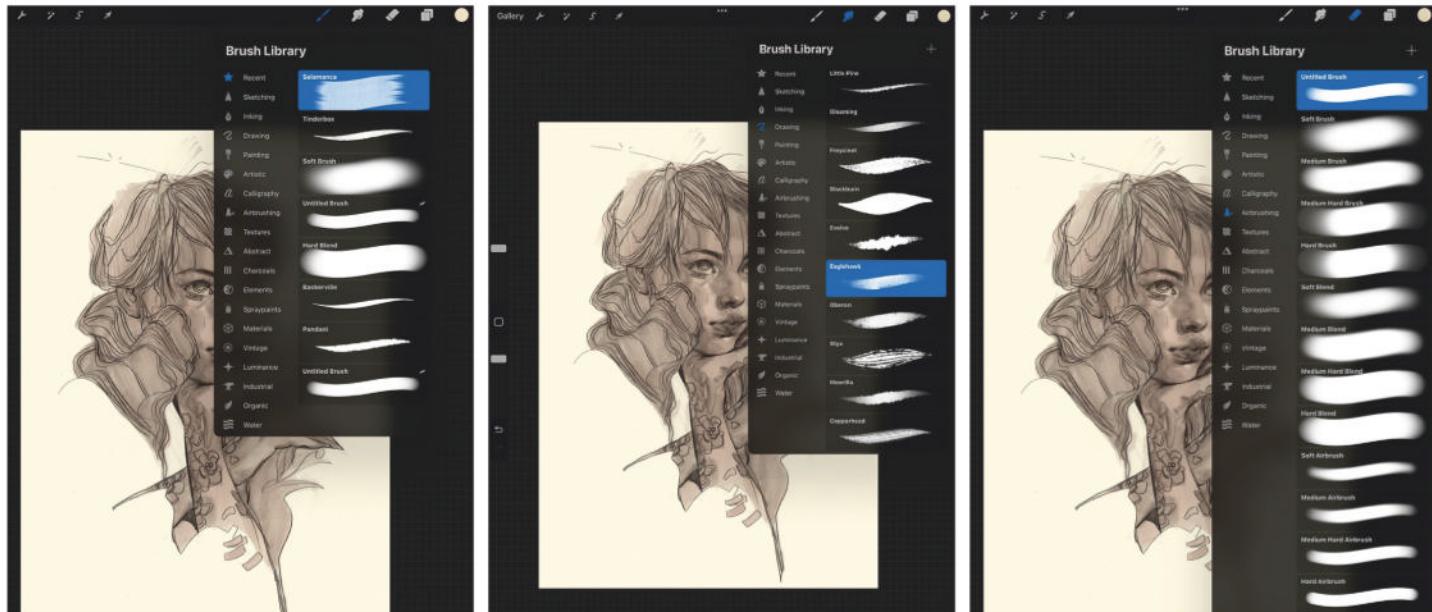
1 Separate the original scan into multiple layers

The first thing we'll need to do is set up our scanned drawing ready to be worked with digitally. Split it into at least two layers, most importantly the subject layer and a background layer. If the subject is pretty well contoured but there are additional elements of shading outside the subject lines, include those in the subject layer. To avoid harsh edges while separating the image into layers, use the Feather option at 2-3% to soften the selection's edges, then Cut and Paste. I also use the Multiply Blend Mode for the subject layer.

2 Use layers as quick selection tools

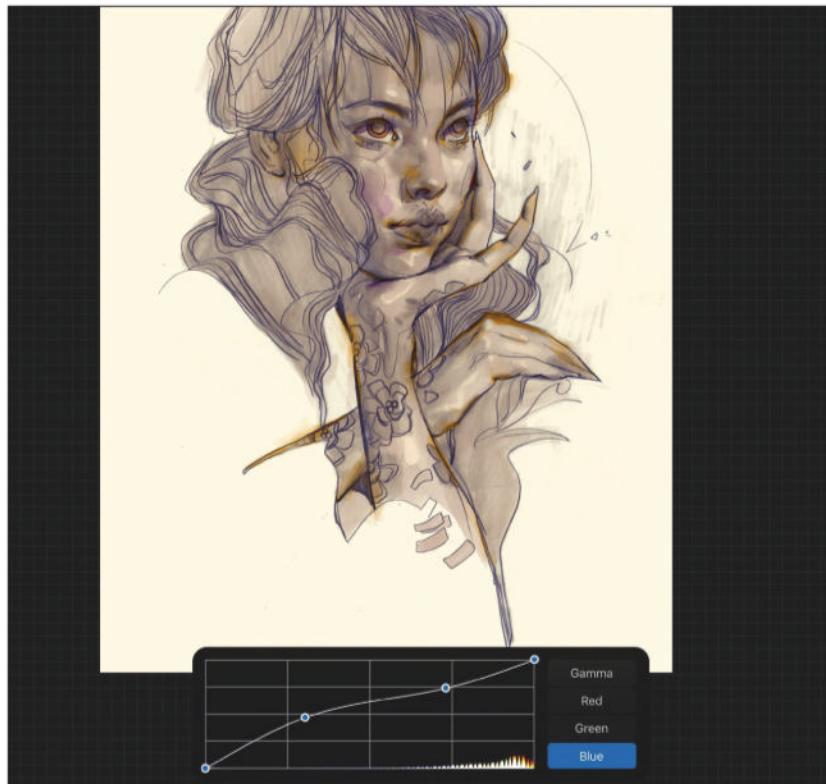
The main reason for Step 1 is to have a quick way to select the subject and start colouring. Do this by going to the subject layer and clicking on it again to prompt more options to pop up. Click the Select button to choose the whole contents of that layer, then create a new layer while the selection is still active. Finally, use Procreate's ColorDrop option (dragging and dropping the colour from the Color Wheel) or a brush to block in a new layer in the shape of the subject. From now, we'll use this layer for colouring and shading. ➤

Workshops



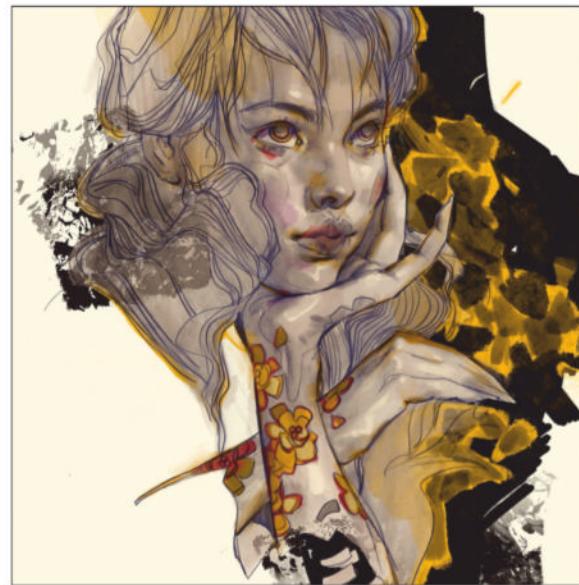
3 Decide on your line-up of basic brushes

Let's prepare the basic brushes that we'll use throughout this piece. For the general colouring I chose Salamanca, for blending I selected Eaglehawk, and for erasing I picked a basic hard airbrush with a little extra Fall Off at the ends. I prefer my erasers to have a clean, hard edge that I can always texture later on with the blending tool. Finally, my blending brush leaves a textured look without smoothing out the original brush too much, so I get a nice pairing and variation without needing to redo the brushes.



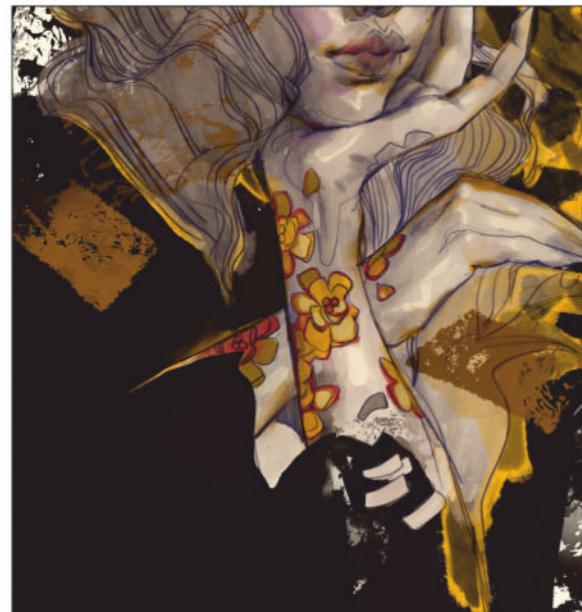
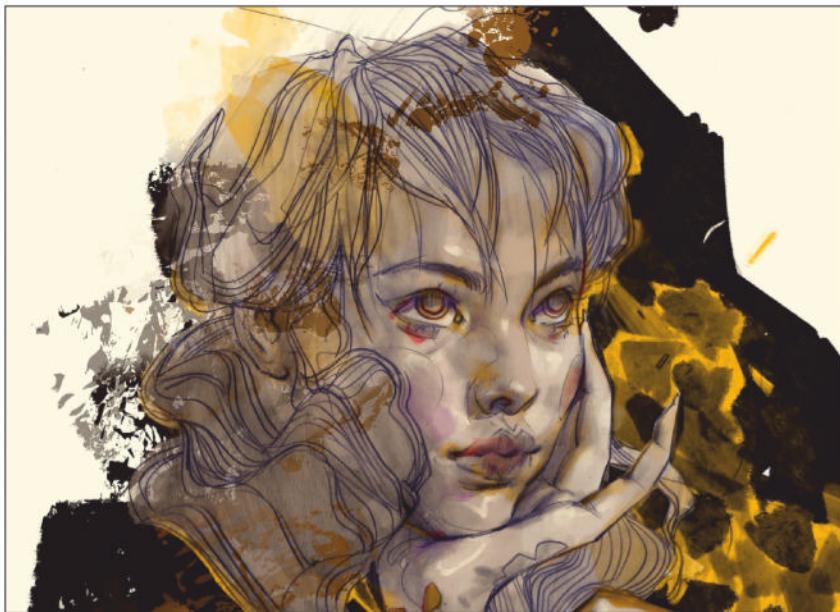
4 Add colour textures and variation from the beginning

I like to get some fun textures into the base colour as early as possible to move on from the basic block colour as quickly as possible. Using the painterly brushes, punch up the light and shadow values from the pencil layer to highlight what's already there. Next add some colour bleeds to again punch up the darker spots in the drawing, as well as around the silhouette. With the quick addition of one extra colour, you create the impression of sophisticated colouring just by the gradation and combination of the two colours used.



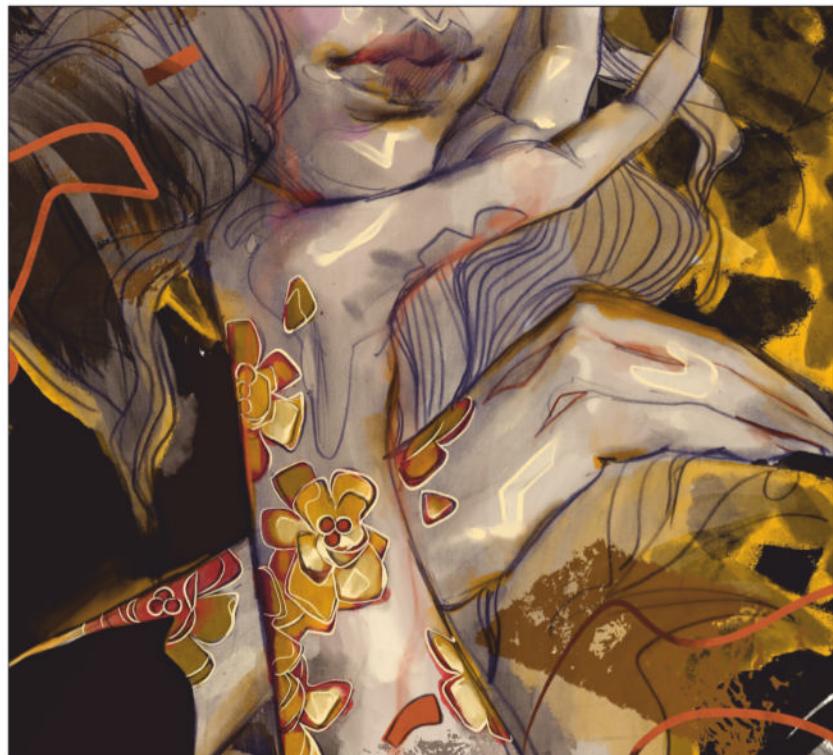
5 Make the background dynamic

I often leave the backgrounds around my figures as blank negative space. This effect works well with pencil sketches where a lot of the missing elements are implied environments. However, in this case I wanted to build on what was already there and needed a drastic change to add a new point of interest that still highlights the main figure. So, with a chunky brush I blocked in a dark background shape, with the negative space now broken up into a midground and background to add a subtle dimension. I also introduced a third colour to the figure, ochre, and tied it with the background in the form of rough flowers and leaves. The black shape cloaking the character was also expanded, and the colour temperature of the pencil adjusted to be a touch more blue.



6 Create a new layer for the details

The next step is to begin adding and refining the overall detail. I typically add five or six detail layers for different purposes: one to refine roughed-in shapes, another to try out design elements, another to test ideas for lighting or textures, and so on. These layers are rarely flattened, as it's imperative to be able to control and revise as we go. In this step, you could also add a clean-up layer like I used to work on the flower tattoos on the subject's arms, as well as some highlights in the face and eyes to make them appear supple and dewy.



7 Dig out some depth

At this point I was happy with the direction of the piece and decided to try out some floating elements to add yet another foreground detail and slightly expand the depth. The floating ribbon is coloured in such a way that it overlaps on itself, and the same goes for the floating ovals. Any small variation adds to the overall effect of depth and sophistication, even if it's a subtle touch. Such details are playful and important in having the figure feel suspended in its environment; a dance between fantastical design and what's real.

8 Pay attention to details

Zoom in and address small notes as if with a magnifying glass, as digital screens can be deceptive when zoomed out. Pay extra attention to details on the face, because any subtle additions will drive the viewer's eye right to that focal point. We can turn highlights into designed shapes to tie everything together. At this point, make sure the lighting is punchy but without fighting the original lighting of the pencil sketch. The tattooed flower outlines in my piece weren't working, so I used an eggshell white ink brush to invert the lines and turn them into gilded jewellery. This isolated element draws subtle attention to itself. ➤

Workshops



9 Use invisible details for visual effects

What I call 'invisible details' unify all the different layers, especially the digital and pencil elements. Throughout the colouring process, periodically throw in a bit of chromatic aberration (no more than 2-3%) as well as blurs on certain background elements and colour blooms. These effects break up areas that appear too perfect – which is a trait of digital art – into areas of colour offsets and lines that go in and out of focus. The goal isn't to draw attention to these effects but to blend everything together. Only do these on colour and detail layers and don't touch the pencil sketch. Above you can see how the colour aberration looks in the colouring of the eyes, which have a blue/yellow tint.

10 Refine the background elements

Next I refined the background leaves. I went with ginkgo leaves, because their shape is so recognisable, even as silhouettes. The goal is to make sure that, as the leaves are being refined, they don't overpower the details of the figure. To avoid that, I made sure the line work of the leaves is closer in value to their base yellow. The outline is closer to the inverted outline of the flower tattoos, but doesn't have the same inverted effect, as the leaves' outline is blended into the colour layer.



11 Touch up the tones

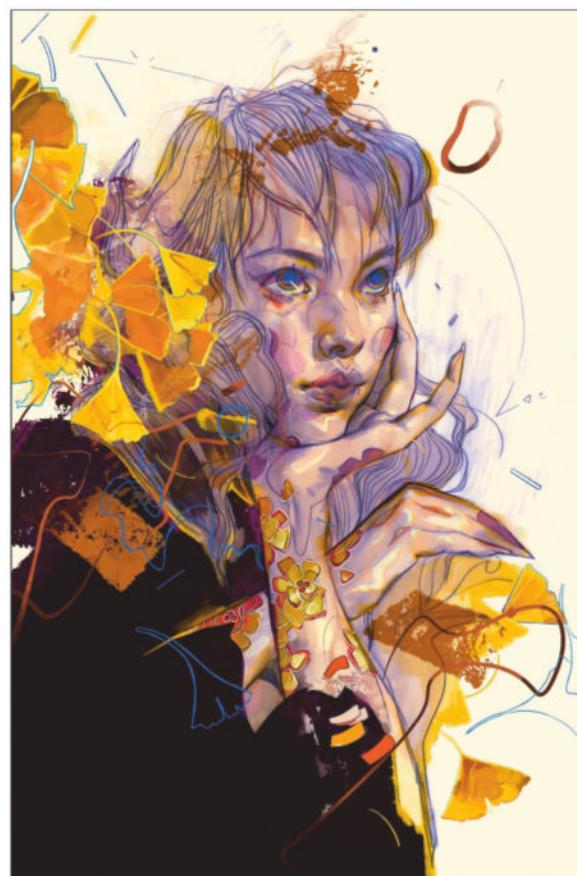
Sometimes changing pure white or pure black elements to different shades with cool or warm undertones can add sophistication to the overall look – a big difference with a seemingly minor adjustment. In my image, I changed the tone to a dark magenta that paired well with the blue tone of the pencil sketch. I also added a magenta colour that bleeds onto the arms and fingers, as well as some of the ginkgo leaves to further unify the various layers.



12 Address any feedback

As this artwork was created for the **ImagineFX** cover, I got some notes about tweaks to the background and for text placement. That's why I ended up keeping the dark cloak shape in this iteration of the piece but removed the dark background around the face. I also added the ginkgo leaves to the other side of the face as a foreground element by the hair. This was done to clear the space around the face for text, but not lose the overall feel of the piece.

In the final images, I had to push the colours and further boosted the blues and yellows. I added some more chromatic aberration to the highlights this time, as I felt they were looking slightly underbaked compared to the rest of the image. This had the bonus of adding a magical, technicolour effect that felt nostalgic. Lastly, I created some blue ginkgo leaf outlines as design elements to fill some of the cleared space. The blue tones were requested, which is why I added them throughout.



13 Moving forward

Each piece has its own demands for colouring, and some require a heavier digital pass than others. With that said, my general setup is pretty much identical to this one, and it's a matter of how much or how little I lean into colouring and boosting the original. The only time my process can slightly differ is when I create a digital sketch from scratch, though even then the layer setup largely ends up being close to this one.



Technique focus

LET YOUR INNER CHILD RUN WILD

Ivan Shavrin unleashes youthful spontaneity for a feeling of excitement in his lively cover illustration



"For this book cover, I was given a rough description of what the client wanted to see and then also tried to have some fun with it.

I kept everything simple. I'm at the stage of my creative journey where I want my artwork to combine my

professional, acquired skills with a childlike sense of spontaneity. That means more brushstrokes, more randomness, more chaos. I'm glad the content of this piece aligned well with my desire to create a wild and dynamic drawing. I'd recommend giving your inner child a voice if you want to get similar results."



Artist **PROFILE**

Ivan Shavrin
LOCATION: Spain

Ivan is a cover artist who has worked for a number of high-profile clients, including Marvel, Disney, Dark Horse Comics and Boom! Studios. He has also previously worked as a concept artist at Axis Studios.
<https://bit.ly/4311PY6>

Shavrin '24

Artist insight

50 TIPS AND TRICKS FOR PROCREATE

Uncover a selection of secrets for creating mind-blowing work on the acclaimed iPad app with our master artists

If you're one of the increasing number of artists working on an iPad, you'll most likely have tried Procreate. So many people have fallen in love with what it offers, making it one of their primary creative tools. But

whether you're a seasoned pro or a fresh newbie, there's always something to learn.

Whether you're looking for workflow improvements or want to learn how to make the most of the app's broad feature

set, our team of Procreate artists is here to share their top tips covering what it brings to the table. Learn everything from working smart with layers and Blend Modes, to navigating the app efficiently and more.

1-10: NELSON TAI



1 HOOK UP AN EXTERNAL KEYPAD

Using these improved my workflow and efficiency greatly. With it, I can switch tools, undo and redo all more quickly with key presses. Keypads can easily be found on Amazon with countless iterations offering a wide range of features and price points.



Artist
PROFILE

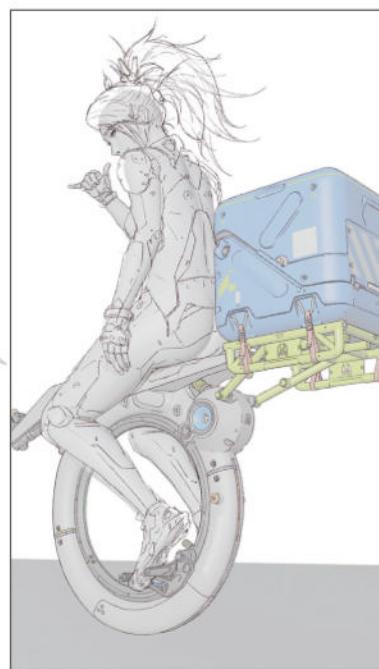
Nelson Tai
LOCATION: Hong Kong

Nelson is a concept designer working in the film and video games industries, specialising in hard-surface science fiction designs.

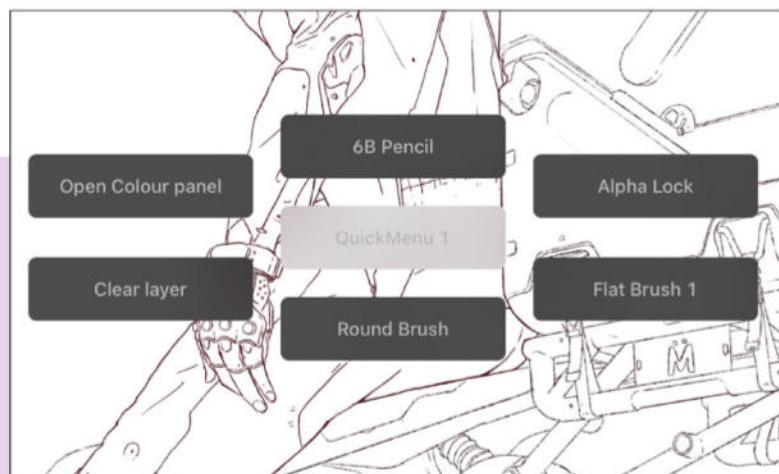
<https://bit.ly/3FHzkCe>

2 PREP 3D REFERENCES

I often use these for my blocking or reference. It's important to set up the render size from your 3D software the same as your canvas in Procreate. Locking the 3D camera is also important so that any future changes to your 3D scene can be easily re-rendered and replaced in Procreate, and continue to have everything matching up.

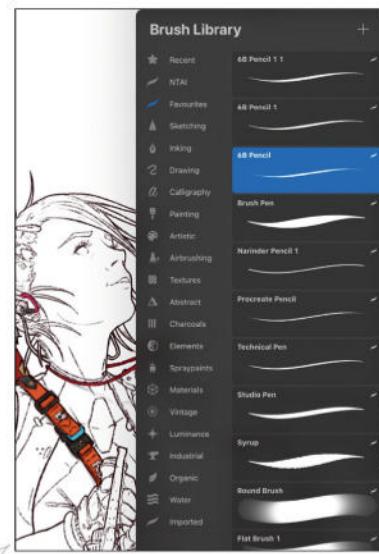


“My top brushes and functions are on a QuickMenu so I don't have to lift my drawing hand off the canvas”



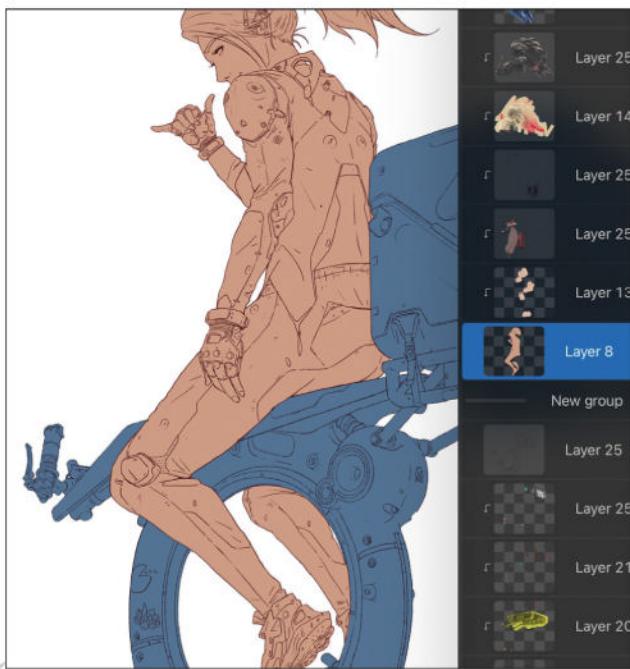
3 MAKE A CUSTOM QUICKMENU

Set up a QuickMenu that best serves your workflow to further improve your efficiency. I have my most-used brushes and functions here, so I don't need to lift my drawing hand off the canvas to tap into the menus and functions. Having a QuickMenu button ready and waiting on an external keypad is also awesome!



4 SAVE YOUR FAVOURITE BRUSHES AND SIZES

Create a new folder in the Brush Library to store the brushes you use most often for quick and easy access. Duplicate and drag brushes into your folder to add them. Tap the Brush Size slider, then the '+' button to save the brush sizes. As well as saving on time, I find this useful to keep my line work consistent. While we're at it, why not add brushes into your QuickMenu for extra speed?



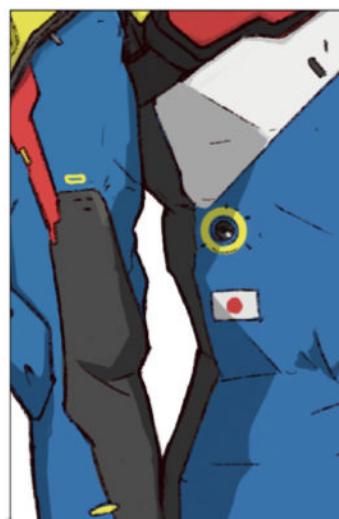
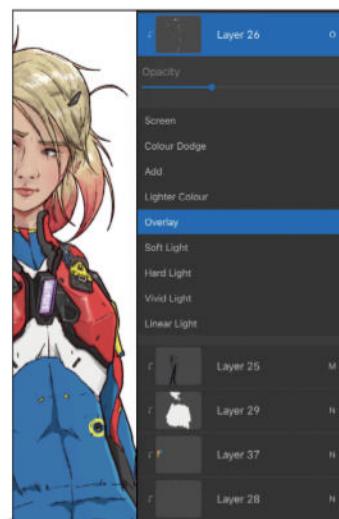
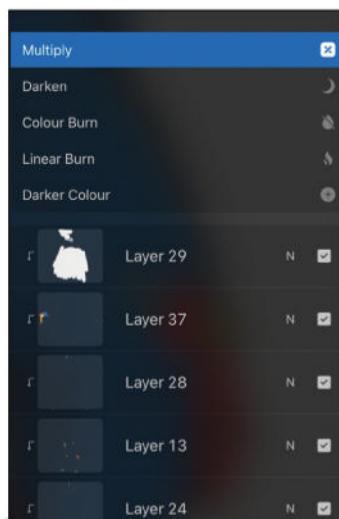
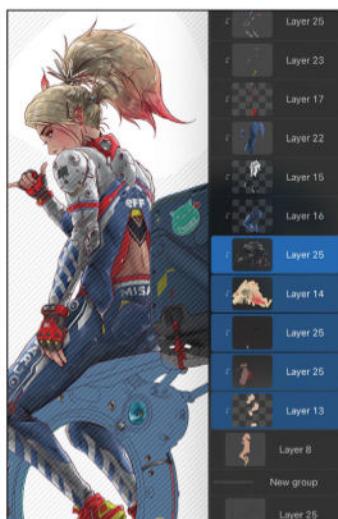
5 COLOUR WITH CLIPPING MASKS

For characters, I usually like to paint out the base silhouette with a skin colour, then add Clipping Mask layers on top to develop. Often adding this silhouette layer helps check for issues in the proportions or shapes that you don't easily catch with just line work. The Clipping Mask layers would start with the skin, then another for hair, one or two for clothing, and additional ones for accessories and so on. Everything gets kept nice and clean within the base layer as Clipping Masks.



6 ALPHA LOCK

Using Alpha Lock in conjunction with Clipping Masks during the colouring stage is extremely useful to keep things clean and contained. Get this set up in the QuickMenu, or open and select the layer you want to be Alpha Locked and swipe right with two fingers. A layer that's actively Alpha Locked will show a chequered background in its layer list thumbnail.



7 USE MULTI-LAYER TRANSFORMATION

It's immensely powerful to be able to transform specific areas across multiple layers at once when you need to move and shift things around. Simply swipe right on the layers you want to edit then use the Lasso tool (or any other selection tool) to select the area you want to transform.

8 CREATE SHADOWS USING COLOURS...

I like to add shadows at the end of my process by creating a layer set to the Multiply Blend Mode and reducing the opacity down. I typically use dark blues to paint shadows, but for skin, I may instead use oranges and reds depending on the situation and how it looks visually.

9 ...AND HIGHLIGHTS WITH A LITTLE BLOOM

For highlights, meanwhile, I'll add a layer set to the Overlay Blend Mode with the Opacity reduced to whatever looks best. I predominantly use light yellows to paint highlights plus a light colour, which depends on the light source's colour, with a soft brush for any light bloom.

10 PERFECT CIRCLES

To easily draw clean circles, keep your pen held when you get back to the start of your shape. At that point, the circle should readjust automatically into a cleaner curve as you hold the pen down. But that's not all! If you also tap a finger down in addition to the pen, the circle readjusts again to form a perfect circle. ►►

Workshops

11-20: DANIEL WŁODARSKI



Artist PROFILE

Daniel Włodarski
LOCATION: Poland

Daniel is an illustrator. For the past 11 years, he has created artwork for children's books, games, puzzles and cartoons. During his career, he has worked on more than 80 children's books from all over the world. Daniel most enjoys crafting unique characters using both traditional and digital techniques.

<https://bit.ly/3ZTNjLW>



11 JUST DRAW!

It's easy to be overwhelmed by a flood of thoughts, new information, tutorials and so on. Which iPad is the best? Which brushes should I buy? Which guides should I follow? Stop worrying, and just start drawing! Start at the beginning with the basics; use pens, pencils, crayons, watercolour, plasticine, or whatever you want – have fun and don't be afraid to experiment. Let the child in you run free. Your initial motivation should be having fun creating art that's humorous and beautiful, or whatever else you want it to be.



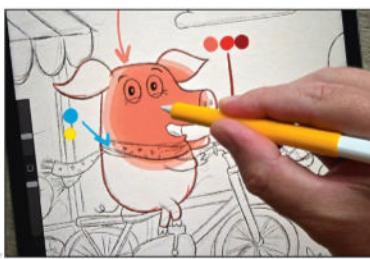
13 GO FROM SIMPLE TO COMPLEX

Do you have a great idea but feel like something is holding you back? Building scenes from simple, linear bases into complex isometric projections with different perspectives and several vanishing points can be tricky. Don't overcomplicate it; choose the easiest method and try to create a message that grabs people not by how it's built, but because of what it represents. Procreate is great when working with perspectives and other compositional factors, as you can use its grid or the Symmetry tool to guide you in the right direction.

12 EXPLORE THE BRUSH LIBRARY

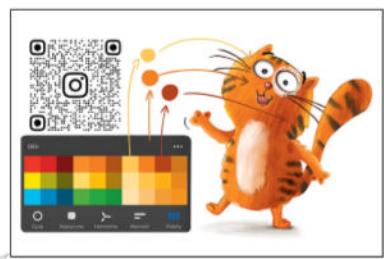
We all have our own unique style – that's what sets us apart! And when you're trying to create a new design, the huge variety of brushes built into Procreate are fantastic for helping your ideas stand out from the crowd. And if

that's not enough, you can also easily import external brushes into Procreate to build up an even bigger library of tools. For added ease, brushes can be grouped, exported, duplicated and edited to create new sets, while you also can use your own textures to create a unique brush.



14 WORK YOUR WAY UP

Experience and technique will come with time. At the beginning, sketch a lot and add colour when you're ready. Draw the outline of the shape with a hard brush and fill it first. Level up by using Procreate's Clipping Mask to add texture and colour to shapes. Next try filling an irregular shape or a jagged outline, but be careful not to bleed colour all over the page. Lower the fill and colour any imperfections manually.



15 COLLECT COLOURS

Colour can be difficult to master, especially for things such as skin tone and backgrounds. Collecting custom Palettes can help with this, as they'll allow you to pick from tried and tested colours, tones and other elements. You can prepare sets for night-time or underwater scenes, as an example. And if you're working on a project across multiple files, this is also great for consistency. Scan the QR code above for more.



16 TAKE CRITICISM ON BOARD

What if people don't like your art? At the beginning of my adventure with drawing, I read comments under my posts saying, "It looks creepy", "the head is too big", "I don't like it", and so on. It was frustrating and made me angry. But when I replied, I received clear answers and advice, which felt great. Not every comment is malicious – criticism is the best thing that can happen to you. Positive comments are a pat on the back but do little to develop us, and lack of development is regression. There's a grain of truth in every criticism, so take it on board and use it to continue growing as an artist.

“Finishing one drawing every week means you'll end up with 52 new pieces over a year! ”



17 SPARK YOUR IMAGINATION

It can feel like such a trivial question, but what should you draw next? If you're struggling for ideas, use the hashtag #dtiys (draw this in your style) to find other people's work to recreate, or take part in regular events such as Inktober where you receive prompts. This will help stimulate your imagination to create ideas from a prompt before adding your own twist; you could add humour and emotion, or use a new art style. If you're new to Procreate, these are also great ways to get to know the software without having to worry about what to draw.



18 LEARNING TAKES TIME

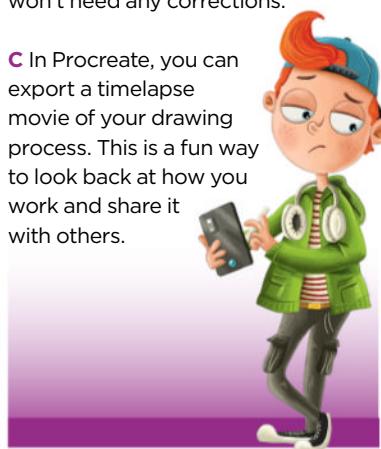
If you're hoping to make a career out of your art, it can be frustrating not to receive any commissions early on. But try not to worry about it. Commissions aren't the goal – you're here to have fun and improve your skills. Draw several times a week and celebrate your successes. Even one finished drawing a week means 52 pieces in a year! And the more you draw, the more you improve over time. Art apps like Procreate have countless tools and functions, so take time to try them out and see what fits your workflow.

19 QUICK TRICKS

A Use the Warp function to bend elements. Remember, this slightly reduces the quality, so it's good to initially draw objects slightly larger than needed so they can then be reduced to the appropriate size after being warped.

B When you run out of layers, duplicate the project and merge the layers when you're sure they won't need any corrections.

C In Procreate, you can export a timelapse movie of your drawing process. This is a fun way to look back at how you work and share it with others.

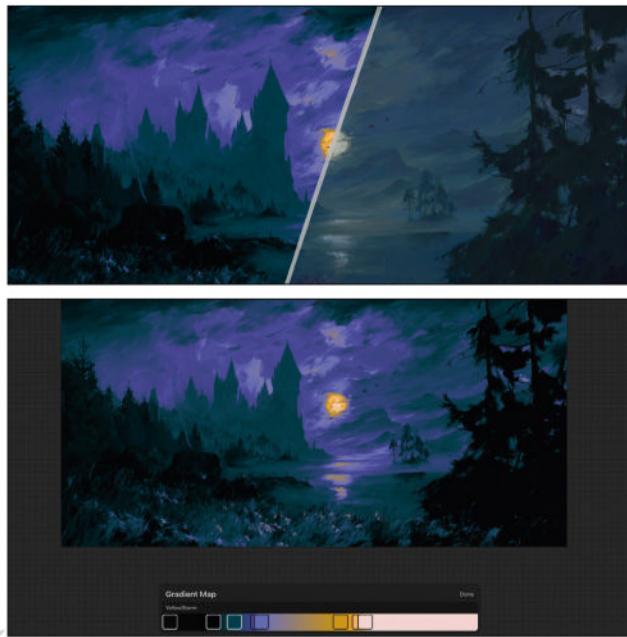


20 SHARE YOUR ART

A portfolio isn't a PDF with a few of your best pieces, it's all of your art across a variety of sources such as Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, X, and sites such as ArtStation. Don't just share finished work with the world, post work-in-progress images and videos, and use other functions such as Reels to build your personal brand. In the past, painters used paints and canvas, but today we use iPad and Procreate. Times have changed and we have galleries in our pocket, so it's worth taking care of how you present your work. ➤

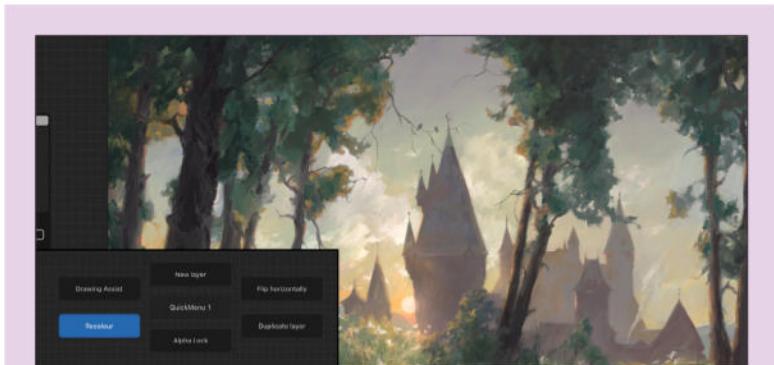
Workshops

21-30: FLORIAN HEROLD



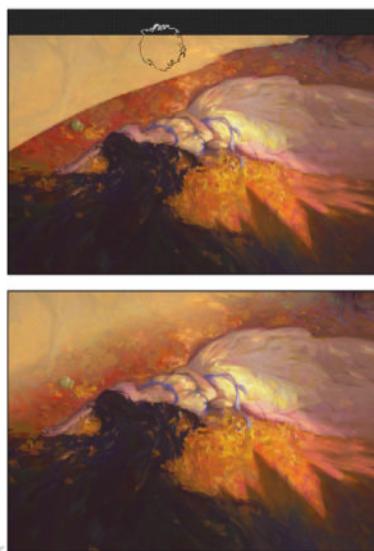
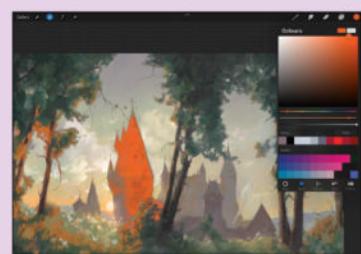
21 EXPERIMENT WITH COLOUR

Gradient Maps are an amazing and easy way to test different colour schemes for your painting, or even colour a greyscale piece in a timely and confident manner. You can iterate on work-in-progress pieces or try new variations for finished art. Unless you're just experimenting, always try to apply Gradient Maps on top of a painting that already has a good value structure, as these will give you the best results.



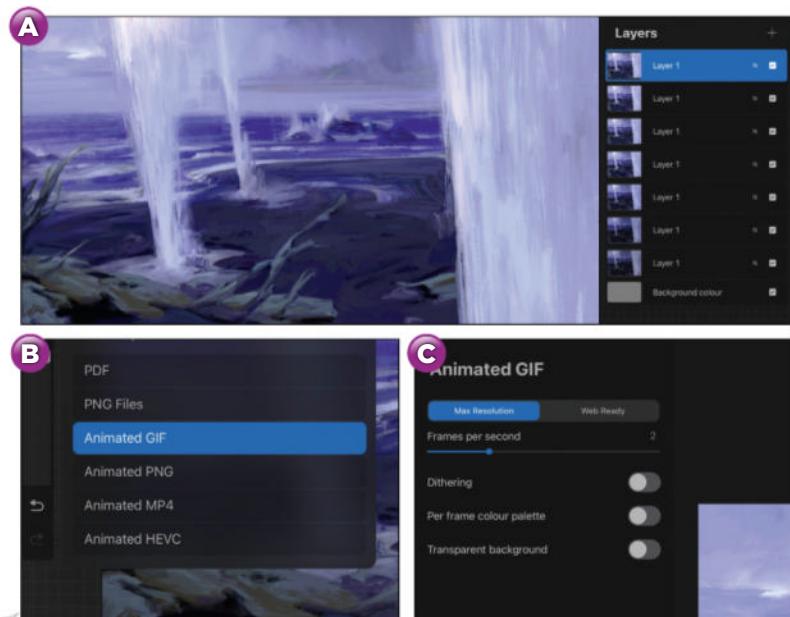
22 SWAP COLOURS QUICKLY

Recolor might be my favourite tool in the entire app. As you'd expect, it recolours parts (or all) of your painting based on the currently selected colour, the values in your painting, and the location of a small crosshair that appears while using the tool. You can move this marker freely and set the strength of the recolour effect with the slider at the bottom of the screen. It becomes clear once you use it a bit. You can find Recolor in the QuickMenu by holding down one of the options and scrolling to the 'R' section.



23 SOFT GRADIENTS

I found that a tiny but effective trick to create a nice soft gradient in Procreate is to simply paint with a big brush on a new layer and add Motion Blur to it. You'll find that in the Adjustments menu and, once selected, drag across the screen to determine direction and strength.



24 SHOW YOUR PROCESS

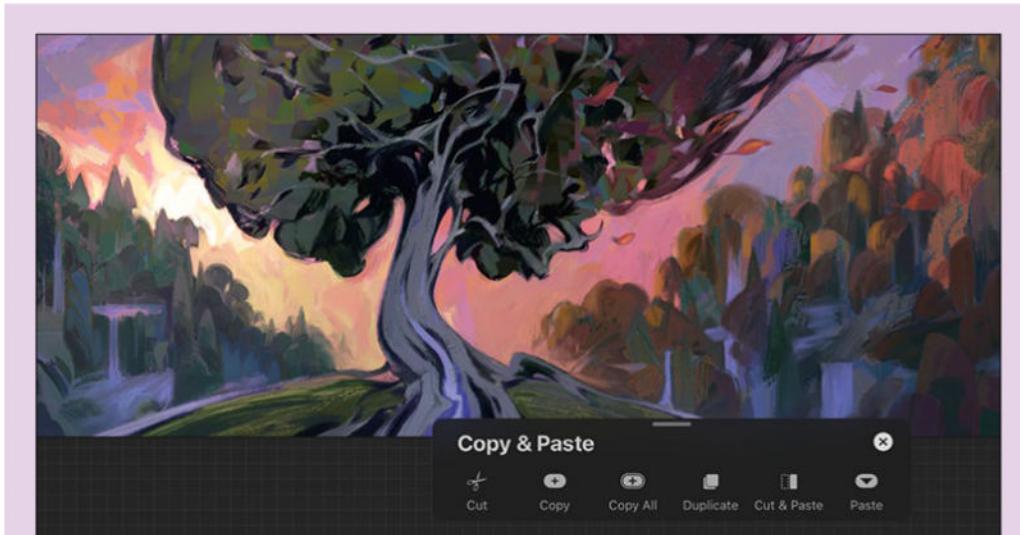
Create and save GIFs the quick and easy way! If you'd like to save a GIF of your painting's process steps for example, simply add each step as a layer from bottom to top (A), go to Animated GIF (B) and set the frame rate (C). If you'd like a certain frame such as your final painting to be shown for longer, all you need to do is duplicate that layer one or more times before saving, so no need for the Animation Assist timeline!

25 STEP BACKWARDS

You work on a piece for some time only to realise it was better before. In case you didn't keep any layers or backups, Procreate's Time-lapse replay feature is an awesome tool to backtrack and compare your current state to any previous version, make screenshots and then adjust your paintings accordingly. I recommend downloading the VizRef app for handling references on iPad.

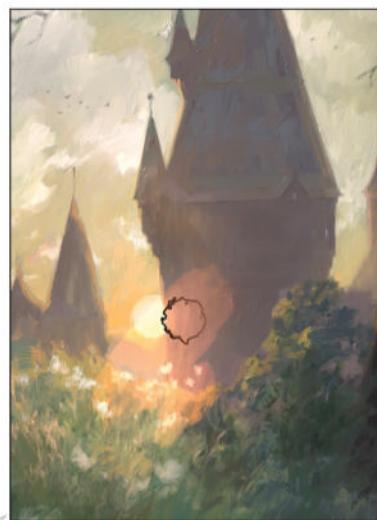
26 SIMPLE SELECTION

Lowering the Selection Mask Visibility can actually make working with selections much less visually confusing, giving you a clearer view of any changes before committing. It can be set to a low value before becoming too unnoticeable. In the same way you can change the time it takes to start colour-picking, you can set a "Draw and Hold" delay: the time for a drawn line to become a certain shape while keeping the pen still on the screen.



27 SWIPE FOR COPY & PASTE

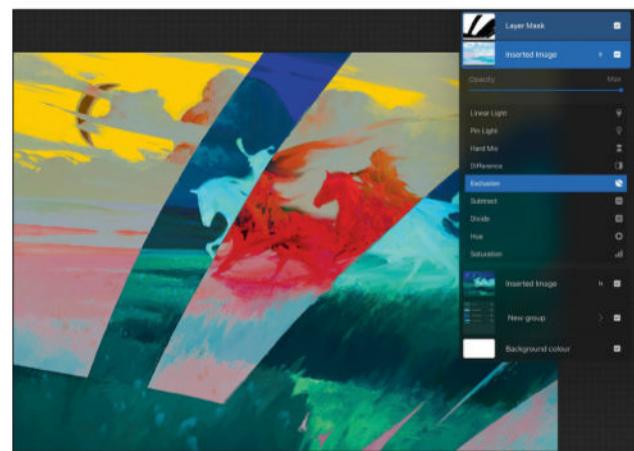
The Three-finger Swipe gesture is so useful for accessing the Copy, Cut, Paste and Copy All options. That's especially true for the latter, which copies everything currently visible and lets you paste it onto a new layer, or even another file. This comes in handy when you're trying out different colour options in the middle of your process, adjusting curves before sending the work to a client and so on. You can activate the Three-finger Swipe under Gesture Controls>Copy & Paste.



28 GO CAREFUL WITH COLOR DODGE LAYERS

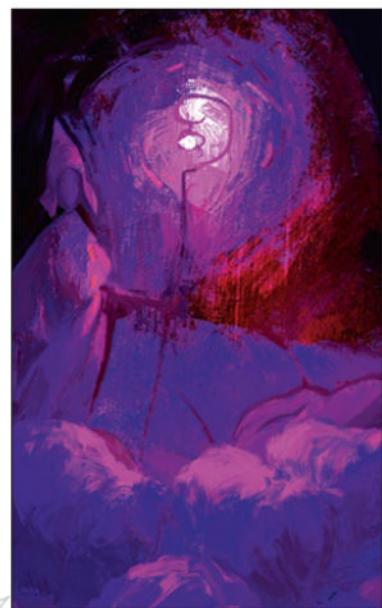
Using the Color Dodge Blend Mode can lead to great results in terms of effects, glow and lighting. However, it's easy to overdo it and end up with too much contrast and overall brightness in your image. The best method that I've found to utilise Color Dodge is using dark, saturated colours on the layer, and brushes with a little texture. You can build up a glow with nice colours more subtly this way and always add stronger highlights in later.

“Loosen up and combine whatever tools and styles you like to find something new”



29 BE A LITTLE RECKLESS

Duplicating, transforming and colour-adjusting layers is an excellent way to achieve some great-looking results that you wouldn't have thought of otherwise. Lay bold brushstrokes and duplicated layers on top of your work with new Blend Modes (I love Lighter Color and Darken, while Difference, Subtract and Exclusion are cool too), and erase or mask parts without being too precious with what's already there. Of course, in the end you want to control the chaos and make sure important parts are readable, but this reckless approach can make your paintings much more interesting.

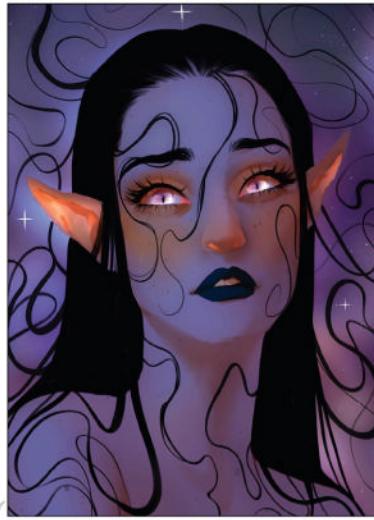


30 TAKE A STEP OUTSIDE THE BOX

Don't get stuck in the safe zone when creating; lines can be made on paintings, and bold paintstrokes added to line-art. Loosen up and mix whatever tools and styles you like to discover something new! At the same time, don't force things just for the sake of being different. I'd say anything goes as long as you enjoy your creative process! ➤

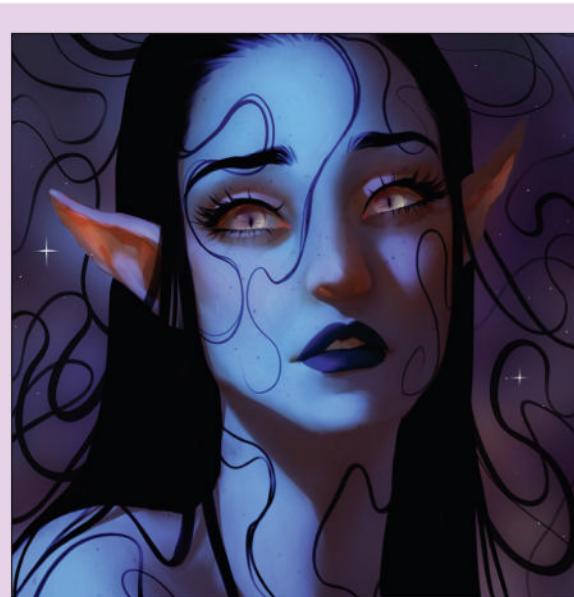
Workshops

31-40: PAULINE VOSS



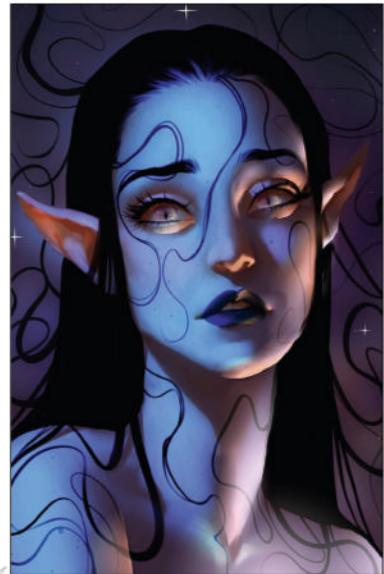
31 WORK DARK TO LIGHT

One of my favourite lighting techniques starts with placing a coloured Multiply layer on top of the whole painting. This pulls all the local colours together and gives the image an instant atmospheric base. I'll use soft violets, dusty pinks or teals, depending on the desired mood. From there, I'll slowly start to build up the light using Add or Linear Dodge layers. This helps me to sculpt the light while remaining in control of the value and contrast. It's like moving through fog: you start out in the dark, and let the light guide your way.



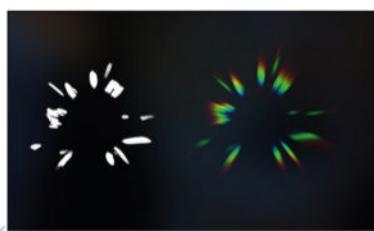
32 PAINTING 3D INFORMATION

Instead of painting a visible light source, focus on how light interacts with the object itself. I block in the lit areas with a hard round or square brush, paying attention to the object's 3D structure. Then I smudge or soften the edges to control transitions and shape. I typically imagine a basic 3D form like a cylinder or sphere underneath and place the light accordingly. Realistic lighting depends on understanding surface planes, so searching for suitable reference helps.



33 ADDITIONAL LIGHT SOURCES FOR REALISM

I like to introduce a second or several light sources and bounce lights in an image. This can come from the ground, nearby objects or ambient surroundings. I keep it less intense than the main light and often use a contrasting hue to add depth and visual interest. Using multiple light directions makes the object feel more embedded in the scene. Normally I have one Add Blend Mode layer, duplicate it and apply Gaussian Blur to enhance the glow.



34 RAINBOW SPARKLES FOR A HINT OF COLOUR

To create holographic sparkle effects, paint sharp white shapes like starbursts or shards on a new layer. Set the layer to Add and use the Chromatic Aberration tool, pushing the slider to the max, which splits the light into subtle RGB fringes. Finally, apply Perspective Blur to stretch the shape so the separate colours blur into each other. The result feels like magical, prismatic light, perfect for adding highlights in eyes, around glowing elements, or in spell effects.



Artist PROFILE

Pauline Voss

LOCATION: Germany

Pauline has been a freelance illustrator and concept artist since 2017. Her clients include Valve, Wizards of the Coast, Netflix, Disney and HarperCollins. www.skadivore.com



35 CUSTOM SMUDGE BRUSHES

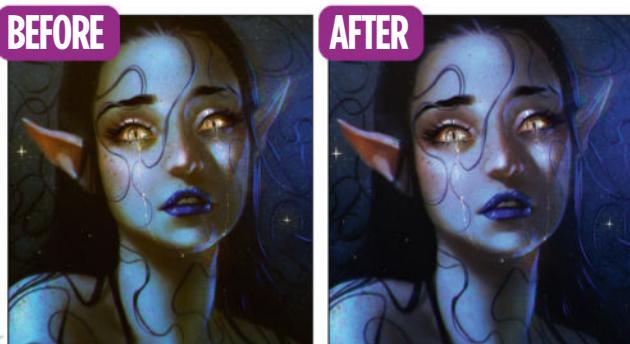
In Procreate, you can turn any brush into a Smudge tool. Just tap the Smudge icon, then select your desired brush. In the Brush settings, increase the Smudge slider under Apple Pencil to 100% for full control. You can also import custom textures in the Grain settings to shape the way your brush smears. This lets you blend areas with rich texture instead of using a soft round brush. I use this technique to soften glow edges or blend values while maintaining a painterly, handcrafted feel.



36 PAINT SATURATED SHADOWS

Subsurface scattering happens when light penetrates translucent materials like skin, petals or wax and diffuses. In Procreate, I exaggerate this effect by painting saturated reds, oranges or pinks into areas where light would pass through, like ears, fingertips or flower edges. Soft blending into nearby shadows creates the illusion of glow from within. This effect works especially well when aiming for an ethereal look. It's perfect for anything delicate or organic.

“Blurs are especially useful for creating flowing elements such as hair, fabric or mist **”**



38 SHIFT MOOD WITH COLOR BALANCE

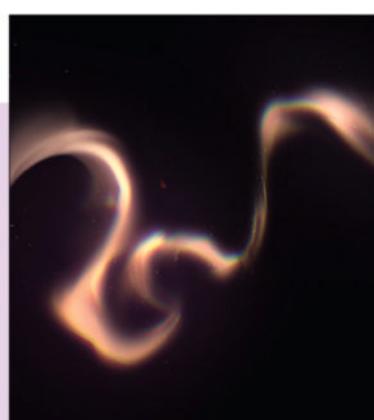
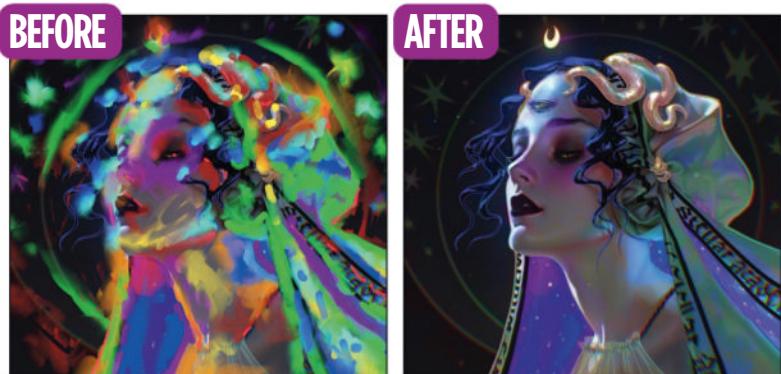
The Color Balance adjustment is one of Procreate's most powerful tools for atmospheric lighting. Instead of repainting, we can tweak the sliders for shadows, midtones and highlights separately, shifting each subtly towards a specific hue. For example, pushing highlights into blue and shadows into red instantly develops tension, while midtones towards magenta add warmth and a fantasy feel. This adjustment acts like colour grading in film and can dramatically change the light language of your image with just a few moves.

39 LIQUIFY FOR ORGANIC MAGIC

The Liquify tool is ideal for creating dreamy smoke trails, magical wisps or flowing light. Start with a rough shape using soft brushes on Add or Color Dodge layers, then go to Adjustments>Liquify. Using the Push, Expand and Twirl modes, shape the glow into fluid, ribbon-like forms. Soft or textured smudging breaks up the shapes even more.

37 USE PERSPECTIVE OR MOTION BLUR TO CREATE MOVEMENT

Perspective Blur and Motion Blur are powerful tools to suggest movement or depth instantly. I'll duplicate a layer, apply one of these blur modes, then softly erase parts to control where the motion hits. This is especially useful for creating flowing elements like hair, fabric, mist or ambient particles. You don't need to repaint everything, as a subtle directional blur makes your scene feel more cinematic and dynamic in seconds.



40 ADD IRIDESCENT WITH SATURATION

To break up large, homogeneous areas and give your art a pearlescent shimmer, paint wild, colourful strokes on a separate layer, using all colours of the rainbow. Set the layer to Saturation mode and reduce its opacity to around 10-20%. This keeps the underlying value and hue intact, while adding delicate colour variation that mimics iridescence. This technique works especially well on fabric, skin, abstract backgrounds and glowing materials. ➤

41-50: ANTONY WARD



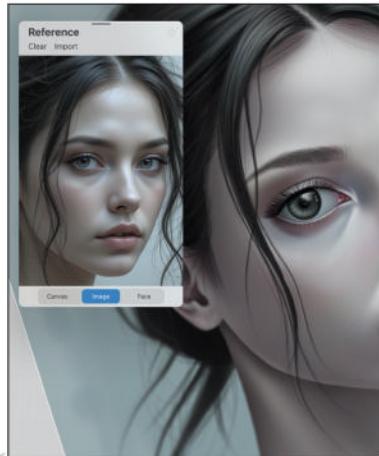
Artist PROFILE
Antony Ward
LOCATION: England

Antony Ward has been creating digital content for over three decades. Whether it's video game development, painting portraits or recording in-depth courses for his YouTube channel, he has experience across the artistic spectrum.
<https://bit.ly/45gGbwl>



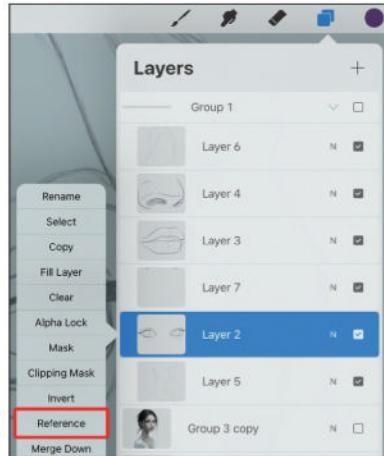
41 PROCREATE WIDGET

An often-overlooked option is the ability to add a Procreate widget to your iPad home screen rather than the standard icon. The main benefit is that it allows you to instantly jump into your current project so you can continue working. Another advantage is that it also lets you quickly show off some of your art. As with any iPad widget, there are options to adjust its size, shape and position for your preferred layout.



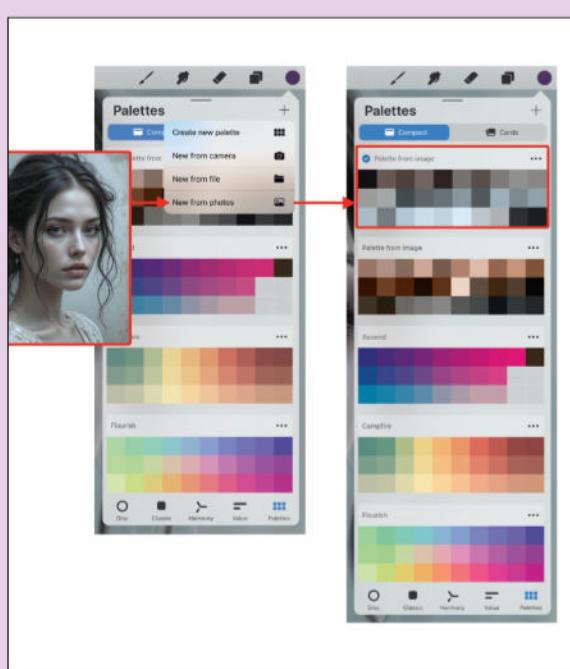
42 USE REFERENCE IMAGES AND LAYERS

If you've ever needed the option of a second reference window rather than using the iPad's split screen, which isn't ideal, Procreate has got your back. Go to Actions>Canvas and you'll see a Reference option. When enabled, this gives you a new floating window that you can move around and scale. You have a few options with regards to what the window displays: you can use it to show the current canvas; add a



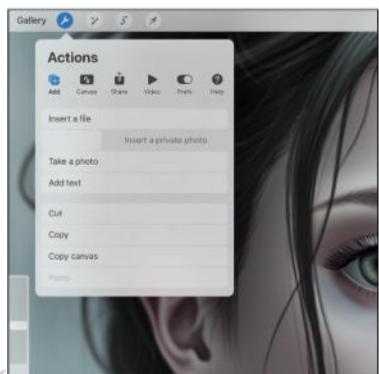
reference image; or use your own face as a reference.

Here's another reference trick! We all know you can quickly fill an area of your work by dragging the colour dropper into it, but the problem when working with line-art is that you end up with the filled colour on the same layer, making it difficult to edit it later. Another option is to set the line art layer to Reference. This will let you quickly fill areas on a separate layer beneath so they're kept apart and easily edited later.



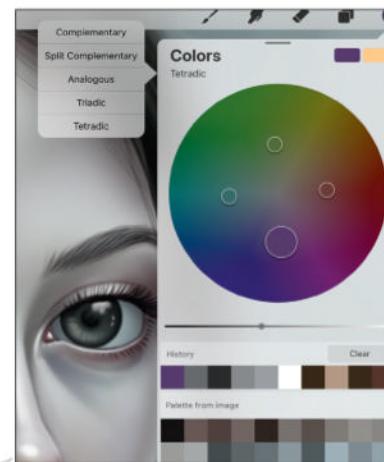
43 INSTANT COLOUR PALETTE

Rather than trying to pick colours from a photo to use in your work, let Procreate find the dominant shades and generate a palette for you. To do this, open up the Color Panel and head to the Palettes tab. Now press the '+' icon in the top corner and you'll be given an option to generate a new palette using the camera, a file, or a photo from your library.



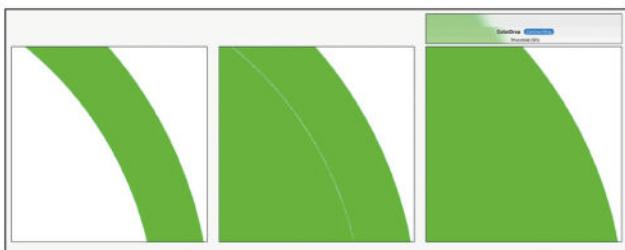
44 PRIVATE PHOTOS

When generating a timelapse video of your work, typically everything that happens on your Procreate canvas is recorded. Sometimes you may need certain layers to be hidden though, like a reference image or a temporary sketch. In Procreate you have the option to import images as Private Photos, which creates a new layer that's invisible to any timelapse recordings. To add one, go to Add and then Insert Photo, but swipe it left to reveal the 'Insert a private photo' option.



45 COLOUR HARMONY

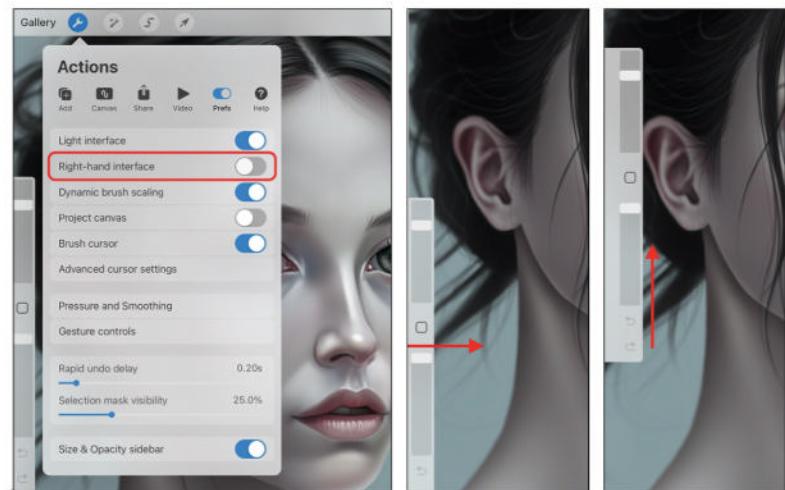
Colour theory plays a huge role in art, and this is something Procreate's developers are well aware of, so they built tools to help. If you open the Color Panel you'll see a Harmony option along the bottom. Choosing this will open the dial and show you the complementary colour related to what you've selected. And if you click the Colors title, you'll see a whole range of options available.



46 REMOVE FILL LINES IN LINE-ART

Dragging a Color Swatch onto the canvas is a quick and easy way to fill an area, but sometimes the fill doesn't quite go all the way, leaving a faint white line just outside the radius. To combat this, all you need to do is keep the pencil, or your finger, held down and you'll see a Threshold bar appear across the top of the UI. You can now drag to the right to increase this Threshold and eliminate your line.

“Rather than trying to pick out colours from a photo, let Procreate do all the work”

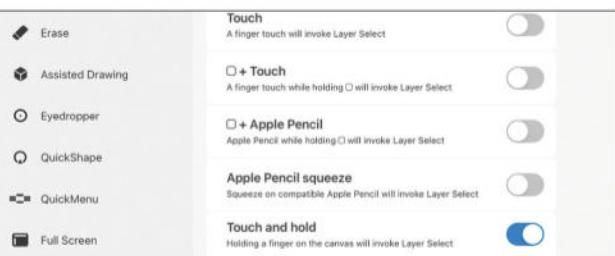
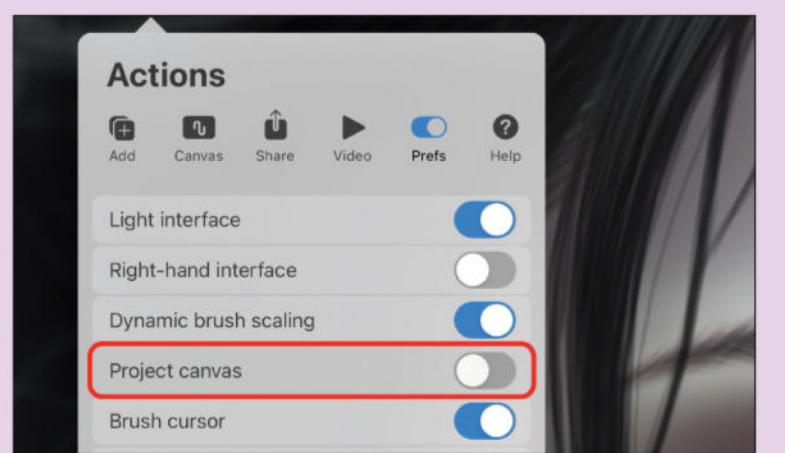


47 MOVE THE BRUSH BAR

Did you know that the Brush Size and Opacity bar can be moved? Firstly there's the 'Right-hand interface' option in the Prefs tab, which will mirror the bar to the opposite side of the canvas. That's great, but you can also change its vertical position. Swipe in from outside the screen and the bar will move out. Keep holding it and you can move up and down to adjust the position.

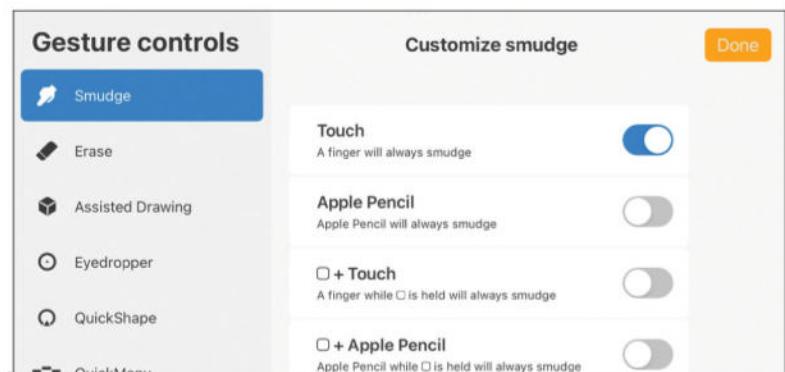
48 PROJECT CANVAS

Using the reference window is a great way to quickly see your canvas while you focus on a specific area, but the iPad screen isn't huge so the canvas can sometimes feel cramped as you do this. Another option, if you have a spare monitor, is to project your canvas onto it as you work. Connect the iPad to the monitor to do this, which will simply mirror the iPad screen initially. Now go to Prefs and enable Project Canvas. The canvas will be displayed but remain fixed, so won't show you moving and zooming into it as you work. This is also great if you're giving demonstrations.



49 FIND LAYERS QUICKLY

While working on a piece of art, your layer management will inevitably go out of the window unless you like to organise and name your layers as you go. Even still, when you have a lot it can be difficult to quickly find the one you need. Procreate has a neat option that lets you hold a finger on the screen, and it will automatically select the layer you want by detecting the pixels beneath. To enable this, go to Actions>Prefs>Gesture Controls. Choose Layer Select and enable 'Tap and Hold'. You can also adjust the delay needed before it's triggered.



50 SMUDGE WITH YOUR FINGER

If you're more of a traditional artist who's used to chalk, charcoal, or maybe even pencil, you'll frequently use your fingers to quickly smudge your work for blending. There's an option in Procreate to get a similar effect! Go back to Gesture Controls, but this time choose the Smudge option. Simply enable Touch at the top and you can now smudge the screen with your finger.

Workshops



Technique focus

EASY EXERCISES FOR FRESH IDEAS

Ognjen Sporin reveals why word association is a great trick for dreaming up new designs



"This image was made as a part of a much bigger Dungeons & Dragons project, and was based on a very simple sand-themed Druid subclass idea. When you're working off basic prompts, it's vitally important to try and think outside the box in order to come up with a compelling design. One of the best methods that I've found for ideation is using word associations. In this case, I was thinking of desert-dwelling animals (the snake), mixing that motif with the narrative concept of a flying carpet (or a cloak), and then unifying them both underneath the broader sand theme to create a feeling of cohesion." ☀





Artist **PROFILE**

Ognjen Sporin

LOCATION: Serbia

Ognjen is a freelance artist who has worked for clients such as Netflix and Blizzard, but is currently focused on indie projects, creating personal art, and teaching.
<https://bit.ly/4mHg4Fx>

Photoshop

BUILD CHARACTER DESIGNS THAT SING

Get ready to rock with **Lera Kiryakova** as she shows you how to create pitch-perfect characters bursting with personality

Artist PROFILE

Lera Kiryakova

LOCATION: Montenegro

Lera is a professional illustrator and character designer. She loves to draw fun and charming characters, focusing on emotions, personality and playful details. www.lerakiryakova.com



In this workshop, I'll guide you through my character creation process, from drawing up the initial sketch to finalising the rendered artwork.

We'll start by exploring different poses to find the most dynamic and engaging silhouette, and then refine our sketch, with the focus on clear, expressive line work that helps to

convey personality and movement. Once the sketch is ready, I'll walk you through the colouring process, starting with base colours, adding depth with shadows, and gradually building up highlights to create a polished 3D look.

One of the key aspects of this workshop is understanding how to treat different types of material like glossy leather, soft fabric and shiny

metals to make the character feel more realistic and visually appealing. We'll also integrate the character and background using atmospheric effects and lighting tricks to enhance our final composition.

And on top of that, I'll show you how to add a vibrant smoke trail effect that gives your scene even more energy and helps to make the character truly stand out.



1 Find a dynamic pose

Before considering details, start with a few quick pose sketches. At this stage, don't focus on the anatomy or construction but rather on the silhouette, energy and movement. Experiment with different options to find the most expressive and interesting angle. It's important that the pose feels natural yet fun and memorable, with a silhouette that remains clear and easy to read.



2 Choose the final sketch

From several pose sketches, choose the strongest one, which in my case was number three as I think it best conveys the movement and energetic mood I was looking for. Roughly define the key body elements but don't focus on small details yet. Add a natural bend to the spine to enhance the character's movement. The microphone stand in my piece is also tilted and slightly curved to make the pose more dynamic and natural. ➤

WORKSHOP BRUSHES

PHOTOSHOP

DEFAULT BRUSHES: SOFT ROUND BRUSH

Used for smooth shading and soft gradients, and great for creating subtle lighting transitions and softening edges.

HARD ROUND BRUSH

Defines sharp edges, and handy for sketching and adding precise details. Ideal for colour blocking and refining shapes.

In depth Expressive characters



Workshops



3 Refine the sketch

To clean up the rough sketch, lower its opacity and draw more precise lines on a new layer. We can also define the character's facial expression here. The goal is to show their charisma not only through the pose, but also through a charming facial expression. I sketch a wide smile, adjust the eyes and eyebrows, and add extra details to the outfit, shoes and other elements.



4 Build more details

Now we'll refine the sketch further by bringing in small details to enhance the character's expressiveness. To emphasise my singer's playful personality, I decide to curl his hair into dynamic waves and add a star pattern to his socks, making him a little more stylish and fun. The sketch is almost complete at this point.



5 Complete the line-art

For the final sketch, we want to refine the contours of the outfit, hairstyle and accessories, and define the folds of the clothing. Keep the lines clean and precise to make the colouring stage easier. At the same time, avoid adding too many details so that each individual element remains clear and readable. Once the final lines are in place, we can move on to colouring our character.



6 Lay down base colours

Begin colouring by setting your sketch layer to Multiply so the lines remain visible. Create a new layer underneath for the base colour fills. I usually work in a single layer to keep everything cohesive, but keep small details such as the star pattern on the socks on a separate layer. I also added a neutral grey background behind to make the character stand out a bit better.



7 Block in the shadows and merge layers

Reduce the opacity of the sketch and start defining the shadows across the character using a soft round brush, on a new layer and with a clipping mask. Once the shadows are in place, we want to merge the layers and use the Smudge tool to soften the edges and transitions. Finally, I also slightly blurred the character's outer edges to prevent any harsh cut-out effects. ➔

Workshops



8 Enhance the volume

Now remove any remaining sketch lines to clean the drawing and refine the shapes. Continue adding depth by working on light and shadow, but don't focus on material differences yet. I added warm pinkish tones to my character's cheeks, nose and ears to make him feel more lively, and also began defining the hair by sketching out the main strands and following the flow of the movement.



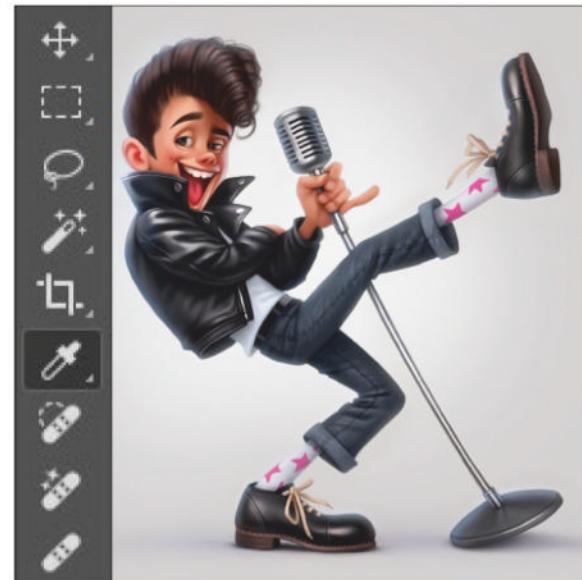
9 Bring in extra details

Now we can switch attention to the material and surface properties. The leather jacket and boots needed to appear glossy, so I enhanced their highlights. The jeans, on the other hand, remained matt, so had softer shading and less contrast. I also refine the face and hair with extra highlights to create depth, but avoid strong highlights on the skin to prevent it from looking plasticky.



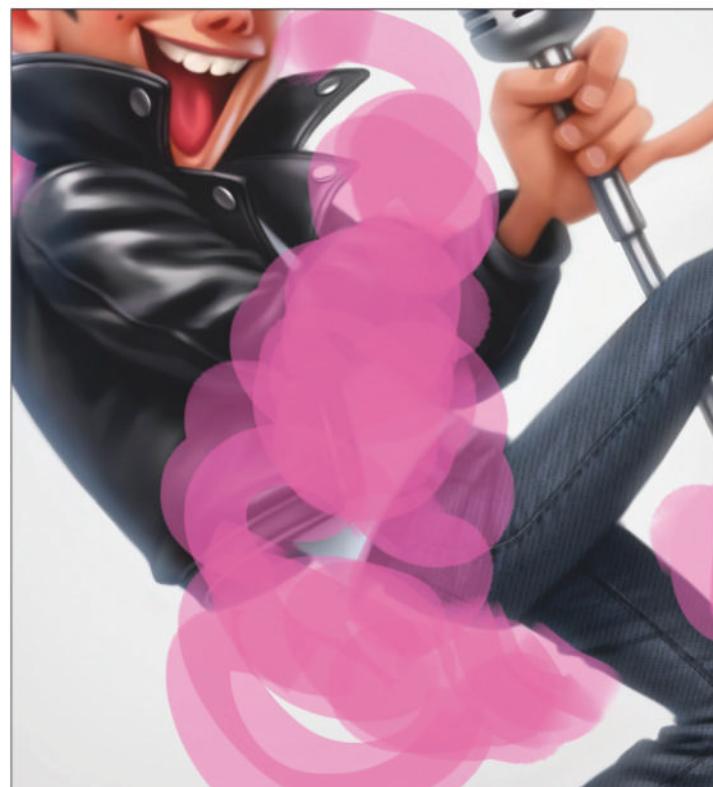
10 Form the materials and textures

At this stage, let's increase the contrast in the materials. The highlights on the leather jacket and boots in my image become even brighter, while the metal microphone gets sharper reflections to enhance its metallic look. Add in a soft shadow under the character using a gradient effect where the darkest part is near the contact points with the floor and then fades out gradually. To add texture, I apply a denim photo to the jeans in Multiply mode and adjust the opacity.



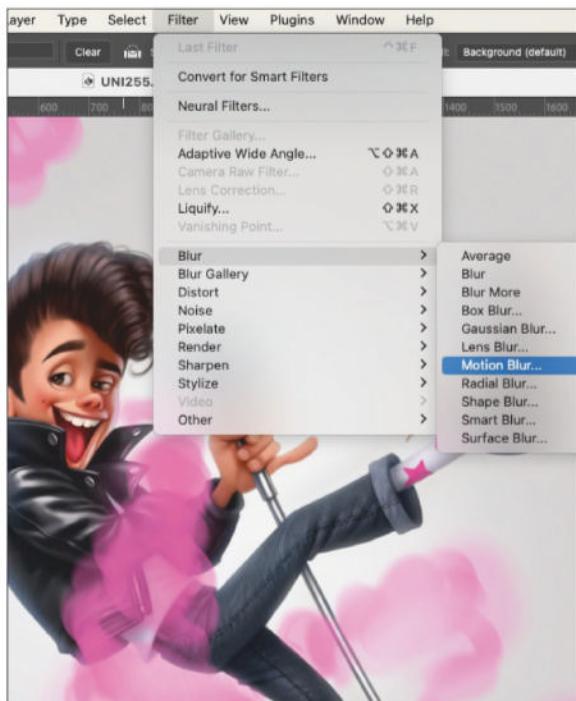
11 Finalise the character

To wrap up work on the character, create a soft atmospheric glow around them to blend better with the background. Pick the background colour with the Eyedropper tool and lightly paint around the figure with a soft, low-opacity brush; this makes the character feel more integrated into the scene. Next place reflected light on the skin and outfit to enhance the depth. Finally, add any small details such as shoelaces, buttons, seams on the jeans, fingernails, and so on. The character is now complete, but we can still boost the energy of the scene.



12 Create a colourful smoke effect

To develop a stronger stage presence, I wrapped vibrant pink smoke around my character, which creates a more dynamic sensation in the illustration. Roughly sketch the smoke flow using a hard brush in a way that complements the pose rather than overwhelming the composition.



13 Blur and adjust the smoke

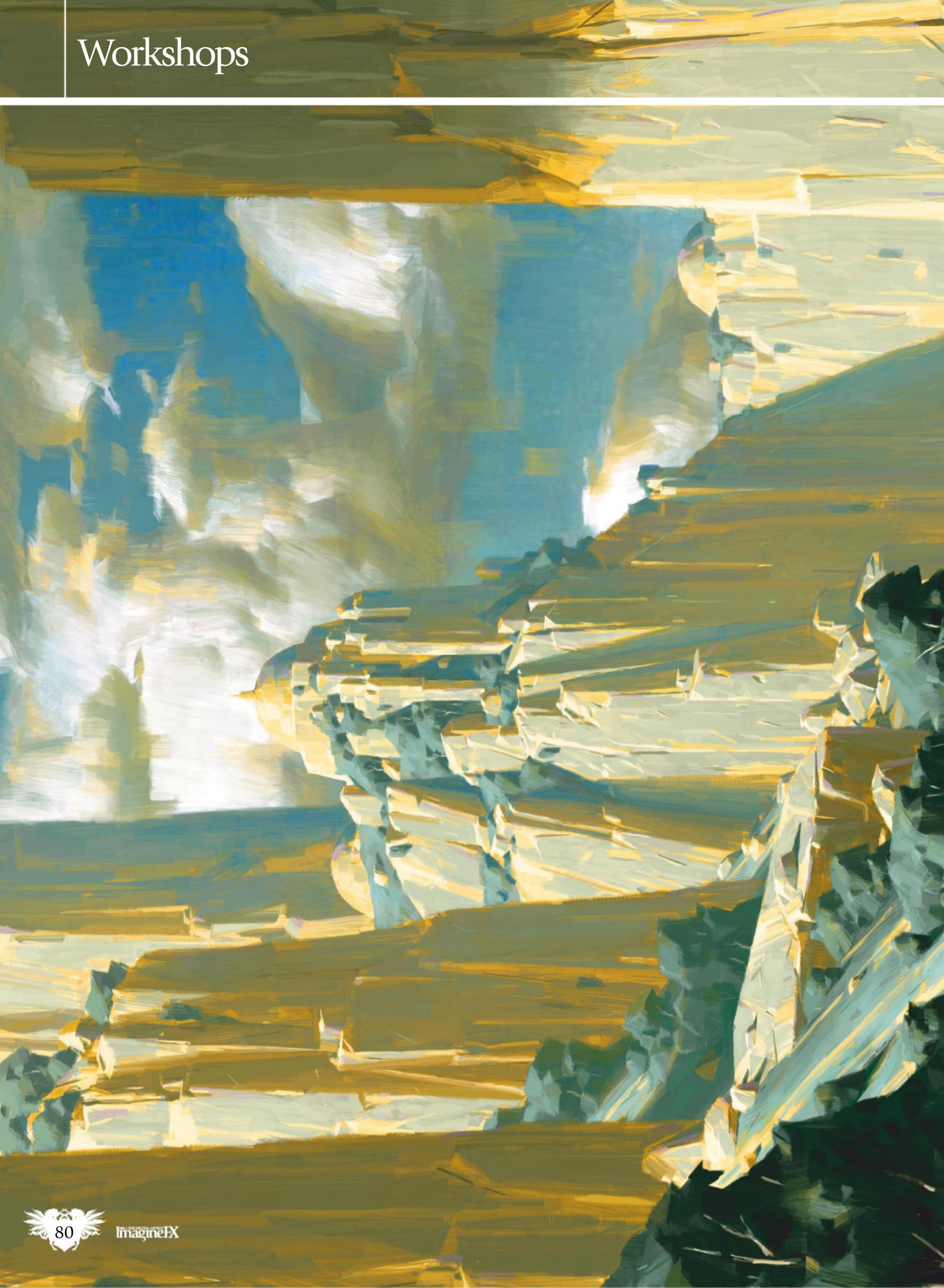
Now transform the rough brushstrokes into soft, realistic smoke. Using the Motion Blur filter we can create a natural dispersing effect, then fine-tune the density by making some areas more transparent and others more solid. Combine a soft brush with the eraser for smooth gradients to give the smoke a natural, flowing look.



14 Final touches

Utilise both hard and soft brushes in the Smudge tool to create swirling smoke patterns. Make random strokes in different directions to add texture and then some finer, soft details with a brush before blending them again with the Smudge tool. This final pass gives the smoke more depth and volume. With the smoke effect now surrounding the character, the scene feels complete, and my rock star is ready to take the stage and set the crowd on fire!

Workshops





Tech Focus Simplified shapes

SIMPLIFY THE COMPLEX FORMS

Ruxing Gao tests himself by focusing on using geometric shapes for a dramatic landscape

Technique focus



"For this piece, I challenged myself to create an image entirely in Photoshop using only two hard round brushes that closely mimic real oil paint – all without relying on any 3D software or photo references. Rather than simply imitating the look of traditional oil painting,

I focused on simplifying complex forms into various geometric shapes. My aim was to express realism through abstraction. I constantly searched for the perfect balance between complexity and simplicity, which not only extended the production time, but also brought me immense joy throughout the creative process."



Ruxing Gao

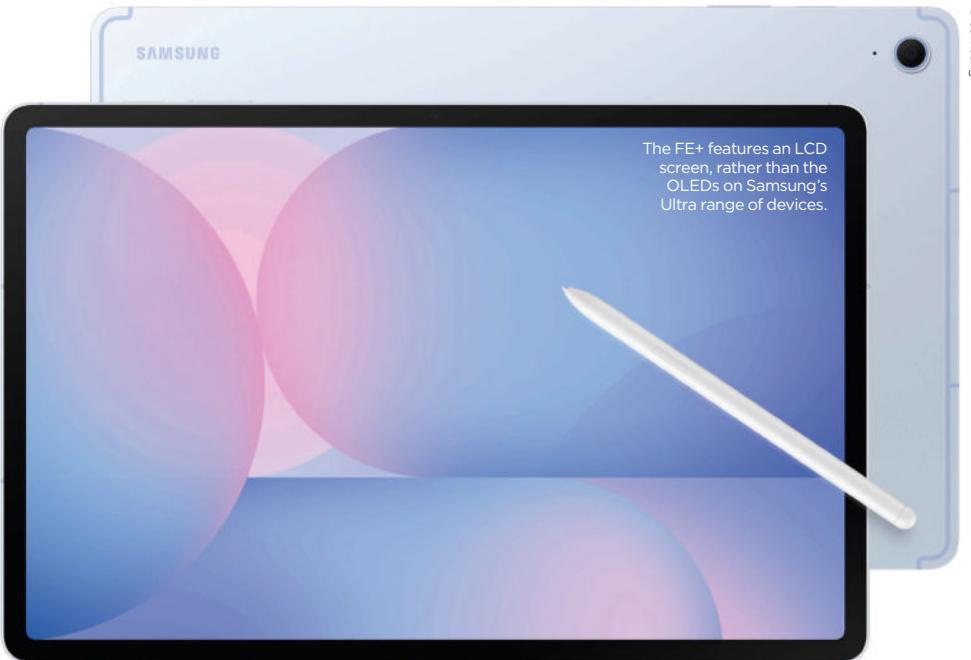
LOCATION: China

Ruxing Gao is a freelance digital artist based in Shanghai. He explores painting techniques and modern CG illustration.
<https://bit.ly/441HWeZ>

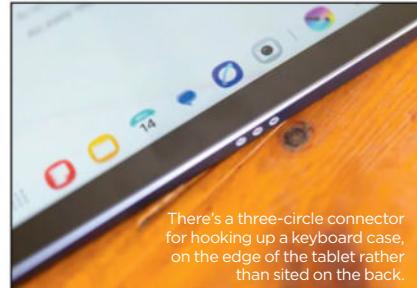
Reviews



The latest digital art resources are put to the test by the ImagineFX team...



The FE+ features an LCD screen, rather than the OLEDs on Samsung's Ultra range of devices.



There's a three-circle connector for hooking up a keyboard case, on the edge of the tablet rather than sited on the back.



The magnetic S-Pen snaps to the back of the tablet.



You'll find a 12MP wide-angle camera on the rear.

Samsung Galaxy Tab S10 FE+

APPLE RIVAL It may not be an Ultra, but chances are you won't care as this Samsung tablet attempts to challenge the iPad Air

Price From £600/\$650 Company Samsung Web www.samsung.com

The best tablets offer a responsive screen with enough space to work in, plenty of power to keep up with what you're doing, and an app ecosystem that enables you to reach goals. The Samsung Galaxy Tab S10 FE+ manages all three, and isn't wildly expensive either.

If you're used to an iPad, Samsung's tablets feel very wide. The usable area of the screen has a 16:10 aspect ratio, and the bezels at each end stretch this out further. It makes them excellent for watching videos and browsing the web, but can feel a tiny bit restrictive if you're sketching with Samsung's excellent S-Pen stylus.

The tablet series is available in two forms, one with a 10.9-inch screen (FE), and the FE+ model that has a 13.1-inch display we're reviewing here. Thanks to its thinner shape, the larger screen is the better of the two, as an 11-inch widescreen tablet can feel like a big phone rather than something you'd like to read or draw on.

As a cheaper Android tablet there isn't a vast range of extra features, but having the S-Pen in the box is certainly a selling point. It attaches via a magnet to the long edge of the tablet or on the back. It's a stripped-back device, with one side button and an eraser if turned upside down, plus a retractable nib for pressure sensitivity.

VERDICT

This sensibly priced big-screen tablet is a compelling choice for sketching and note-taking. It feels like a flagship but lacks some features, though these aren't likely to be ones you'll miss.

Pros

- 13in screen available
- Solid performance
- Stylus included

Cons

- Other tablets offer more power
- Android lacks some big-name apps

Rating



It's notable that Samsung has gone with a standard LCD screen, rather than the OLEDs it uses on its Ultra tablets and high-end phones. This isn't a huge mark against the FE+, as at 800 nits of max brightness you're still going to be able to use the tablet in sunlight, though you won't want the sun shining over your shoulder as the display is quite reflective. The colours are still well saturated, but superior displays are available.

PERFORMANCE TESTING

The S10 FE+ runs on a home-grown Samsung chipset rather than the high-end Snapdragon chips used in the Ultra models. This means it can't hit



It all feels a little iPad-like in design, with an aluminium and plastic build of flattened sides and rounded corners.

“Having Samsung’s S-Pen stylus packed in the box is certainly a selling point”

the same high scores in benchmarks due to its fewer processing cores and those it does have being weaker. In Geekbench 6, it pops a multi-core performance score of 3,888 against the Galaxy S10 Ultra’s 7,047 and the iPad 2025 (A16)’s 6,338. Even the older Galaxy Tab S9 Ultra hit 5,796, and yet we have no complaints about the performance of the Tab S10 FE+.

It feels fast enough, with no fear you’ve paid premium for performance that you’ll never use. Everything ran well apart from demanding 3D games, and there’s enough processor grunt to handle 4K video, which the built-in camera can supply at 30fps. Get the more expensive model with 256GB of storage, and you get 12GB of RAM instead of 8GB in the 128GB model we reviewed. Storage is never really an issue thanks to the MicroSD card slot.

As for battery life, Samsung has done something very right with the FE+’s 10,090mAh cell. In the PCMark Work test, which loops common office and video-watching tasks non-stop, it kept going for over 19 hours – that’s exceptional power reserve.

Ian Evenden



BenQ PD3226G

REFRESHING PURCHASE This lightning-quick 4K monitor offers a satisfying experience – for a price

Price £1,100/\$1,400 **Company** BenQ **Web** www.benq.eu

Want support for refresh rates of 120Hz-plus from a display aimed at creative pros? Good luck with that.

Even Apple’s Studio Display and Pro Display XDR are limited to 60Hz.

But hold on! BenQ’s latest 32-inch 4K creator monitor fixes that with slick 144Hz capability, plus a fantastic array of connectivity including Thunderbolt 4 and a KVM switch. But boy will that fab feature set cost you!

The monitor ticks a lot of the usual creator-friendly boxes when it comes to features and performance. It’s calibrated to well below a Delta E of 1 from the factory, offers decent but not spectacular colour coverage of 95% DCI-P3, and is both Pantone validated and Calman verified.

Of course, it’s also a 32-inch 4K model, which means lots of screen real estate and good pixel density of around 140PPI, which makes for crispness. The basic image quality from the IPS panel is also seriously sweet, with all the key colour modes, including DCI-P3 and sRGB, looking bang-on right out of the box.

The 144Hz refresh rate is supported over both HDMI and DisplayPort, the latter also incorporating DisplayPort Alt mode on Thunderbolt 4 interface. Obviously 144Hz isn’t a must-have for most workflows. But for some digital



artwork tasks, for instance when using a drawing tablet and similar input devices, high refresh seriously boosts response and accuracy. What’s more, 144Hz makes this monitor a pleasure to use day-to-day. Compared to 60Hz, everything feels so much snappier and more responsive.

There’s a generous port selection on the rear of the chassis. The power, HDMI, DisplayPort and trio of USB-C inputs sit flush on the rear rather than underneath the lower bezel, which makes for super-simple connectivity. There’s also another collection of connections on the lower surface of the bottom bezel, including a USB-C data port, a triple-port USB-A hub and 3.5mm audio.

The most obvious drawback is limited HDR support. There’s no local dimming and the brightness tops out at 400 nits, blown away by OLEDs.

Jeremy Laird



VERDICT

This monitor for creative pros is more than just a routine upgrade thanks to the addition of a 144Hz refresh rate for a super slick, responsive feel. It also offers fantastic connectivity. However, it’s painfully pricey and only offers limited HDR performance.

Pros

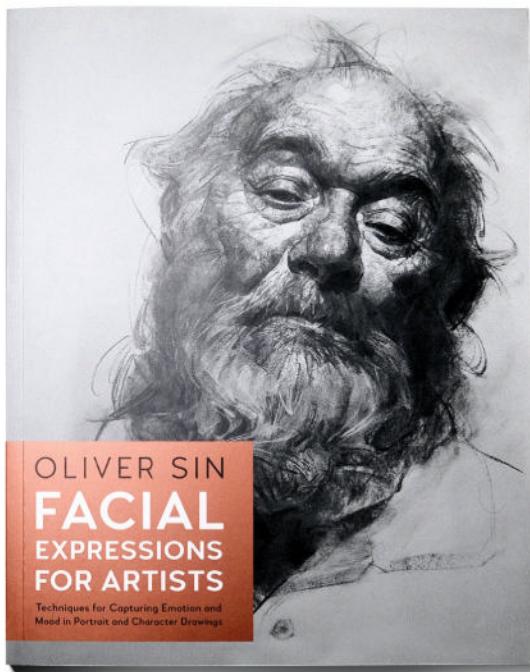
- 4K IPS panel
- 144Hz refresh
- Great connectivity

Cons

- HDR support limited
- Expensive
- Feeble speakers

Rating





OLIVER SIN FACIAL EXPRESSIONS FOR ARTISTS

Techniques for Capturing Emotion and Mood in Portrait and Character Drawings



Key rules for facial anatomy are covered in detail through both written information and visual diagrams.



The book is filled with an array of examples that should cover a wide variety of an artist's anatomical needs.

Facial Expressions for Artists

FACE FACTS This guide book offers incredible depth for those wishing to gain new mastery over facial structure and emotion

Price £20/\$27 **Author** Oliver Sin **Company** Rockport Publishers **Web** <https://bit.ly/3FMILA2>

Human anatomy is complex to master, but for most of us the main aim will be to imbue characters with emotion to drive a narrative of some kind. This comes with a unique set of hurdles to clear.

Oliver Sin's book *Facial Expressions for Artists* aims to ease that process and does so well. The book itself is 159 pages split into logical sections, from understanding the skull and primary muscles, right through to properly portraying people of different ages. Each section is colour coded too, so finding where you left off or looking for a specific topic is a breeze.

What you won't find is much step-by-step instruction. The book focuses

almost solely on developing an understanding of anatomy, with multiple examples provided for each. For example, the eyes: you might expect to see a guide on how to draw line-by-line, but you actually get an understanding of the topography, as well as changes to the structure under different expressions.

This kind of information is far more valuable than a walkthrough for the theme at hand, as it provides artists with a fundamental understanding of what they're drawing, whereas a step-by-step tutorial likely results in cloning the art in the book.

As for that art, there's a lot of it, and all of a very high standard. There are plentiful diagrams showing structures and anatomy, but far more examples of rendered art based on the chapter's topic. Say you're studying noses, then you'll find multiple types here, which you can draw inspiration from or use to practise your observation skills.

There are many full heads too and, as the title suggests, these cover a wide array of expressions. The book ends with an index, making it easy to zero in on what you need.

Rob Redman



Author Oliver Sin analyses topics across a range of ages, providing artists with a wealth of knowledge.

As long as its kept clear of any glare, the basic iPad offers a tidy screen for its price.



iPad 2025 (A16)

SKETCHPAD Apple's entry-level tablet is a handy piece of kit

Price From £330/\$350

Company Apple

Web www.apple.com

RATING

Without a desktop-class M chip inside it, merely a version of the iPhone 15's A16, the bottom-rank iPad may look like it has much less to recommend it to creatives than the Air and Pro models. And while you'll certainly be locked out of some apps, the 2025 edition of the iPad is still superb value for sketching, note-taking, browsing and streaming.

As is typical, the screen is extremely nice. Though while it has an oil-protection layer to try and keep your sweaty fingermarks off it, there's no anti-glare coating on this model. You still get up to 500 nits of brightness from the LED backlights, and Apple's True Tone colour management keeps things well saturated.

While this might look like a tablet for consumption, the fact it's compatible with Apple Pencils means there's the opportunity to use it for sketching and painting. With an 11-inch screen it's certainly portable. There's tilt recognition, Apple's low-latency connection, and pressure sensitivity if you choose the older, 1st-gen Pencil.

Unsurprisingly, the A16 iPad scored lower than its siblings in our benchmark tests due to it only housing five cores. The iPad M3 Air is a big step up in terms of power, but if you won't be using that processing oomph, the basic iPad represents good value.

ian evenden

VERDICT

If you're looking for insight into facial structure, how time and emotion changes it, and how you can translate that for your character work, this is a fantastic book. It doesn't give specific instruction but does offer a foundation. It's well laid out, colour-coded for ease of navigation, and is beautifully printed.

Pros

- In-depth information
- Logically presented
- High-quality paper and printing

Cons

- No step-by-step tutorials included

Rating



Introduction to Children's Illustration

GOING OLD SCHOOL Learn how to create distinctive traditional illustration for youngsters with Adolfo Serra's Domestika course

Publisher Domestika **Price** £50/\$50 **Format** Online **Length** 2hr 39min **Web** www.domestika.org

This Spanish language course, which has been dubbed in English, is a great way to explore traditional mediums for illustration, with a focus on children's stories. Using collage and ink among his techniques, instructor Adolfo Serra guides the viewer through distinct examples of illustration. Adolfo has a varied professional background as an illustrator and takes his time at the start of the course to define what children's illustration actually is.

The course is entirely traditional, requiring paper, scissors, brushes and inks – either purchased new or pulled from your shelf before beginning. This hands-on approach makes the course engaging as you dive into sketching and building a story around Alice's Adventures in Wonderland to start. From there, we explore monotype



and collage techniques, helping artists discover which medium best reflects the story they're telling.

In the final part of the creative journey, we learn to combine different mediums to create a unique vision that can be adapted to tell the wider story. While the videos are lengthy and provide you substantial guidance through the creative process, students should be prepared to take ownership of their own artistic development. For those of us accustomed to learning software, this course could prove to be a therapeutic breakthrough or a frustrating challenge.

While the course may seem expensive, regular discounts are available for Domestika members, making it a worthwhile addition to your educational collection.

Mike Griggs



You'll need a variety of traditional tools at hand to follow along with all of Adolfo's lessons.

Brushing up...

We put three packs through their paces to find out whether they're worth downloading



Jingsketch Basic 10 Procreate Brushes

Artist Jingsketch

Software Procreate

Brushes 10 **Price** Free

Rating

This great set of 10 brushes comes from Jingsketch's wider pack of 50. It serves as a solid introduction to how the creator's brushes feel before committing to the larger pack.

<https://bit.ly/45qMKwK>



100 Ink Photoshop Brushes

Artist Resource Boy

Software Photoshop

Brushes 100+ **Price** Free

Rating

Another guilt-free win from Resource Boy. Let your inner Jackson Pollock loose with this set of 100 ink splats to artfully 'mess up' your digital pieces, with enough variety to be unique.

<https://bit.ly/4jSpBHe>



Grave Etcher: Engraving Brushes

Artist RetroSupply Co.

Software Affinity Designer

Brushes 118 **Price** £22/\$29

Rating

Though this set is expensive, the 118 brushes offer a range of etching styles in Affinity Designer, from linotype to Old West wanted posters. For the right project, this could be a real time-saver.

<https://bit.ly/45ISQI>

NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS
ImagineFX

GET YOUR BINDER TODAY!



FEATURING
ARTWORK BY
LOISH

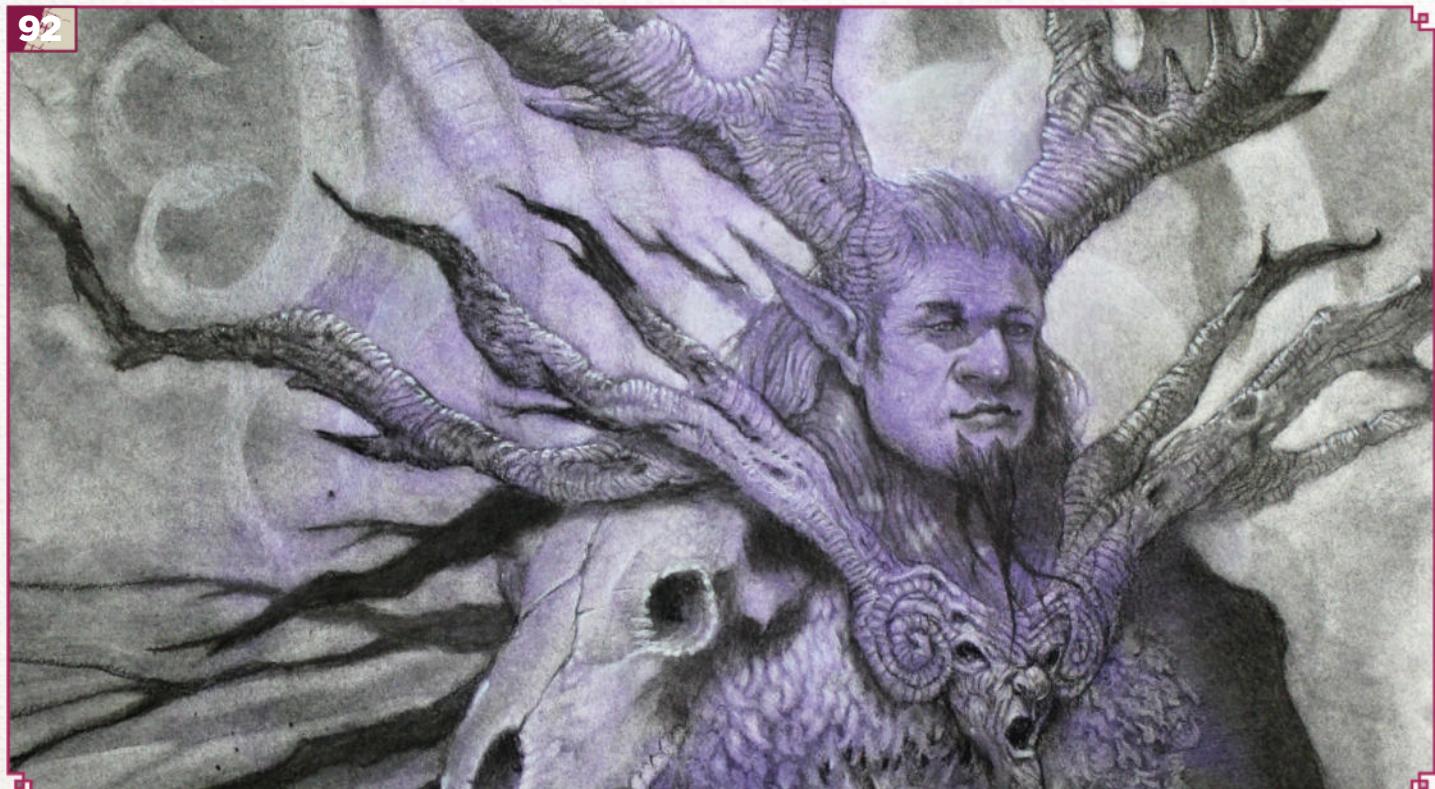
This sturdy binder, featuring cover art from our 150th issue, will store and protect 13 issues of ImagineFX. Prices start at £13.99, which includes delivery!

ORDER ONLINE: IFXM.AG/BINDER

Traditional Artist

Inspiration and advice from the best pro artists

92



88



98



This issue:

88 Traditional FXPosé
Discover this month's selection of the finest traditional art, which has been sent in by you!

92 Create characters from an abstract
Eric Messinger takes you on an adventure in spontaneity as he crafts an intricate charcoal beast.

98 First Impressions: Laura Aldofredi
The artist discusses how her life experiences shape her work, and talks about a fairy tale project.

FXPosé

SHOWCASING THE FINEST TRADITIONAL ARTISTS

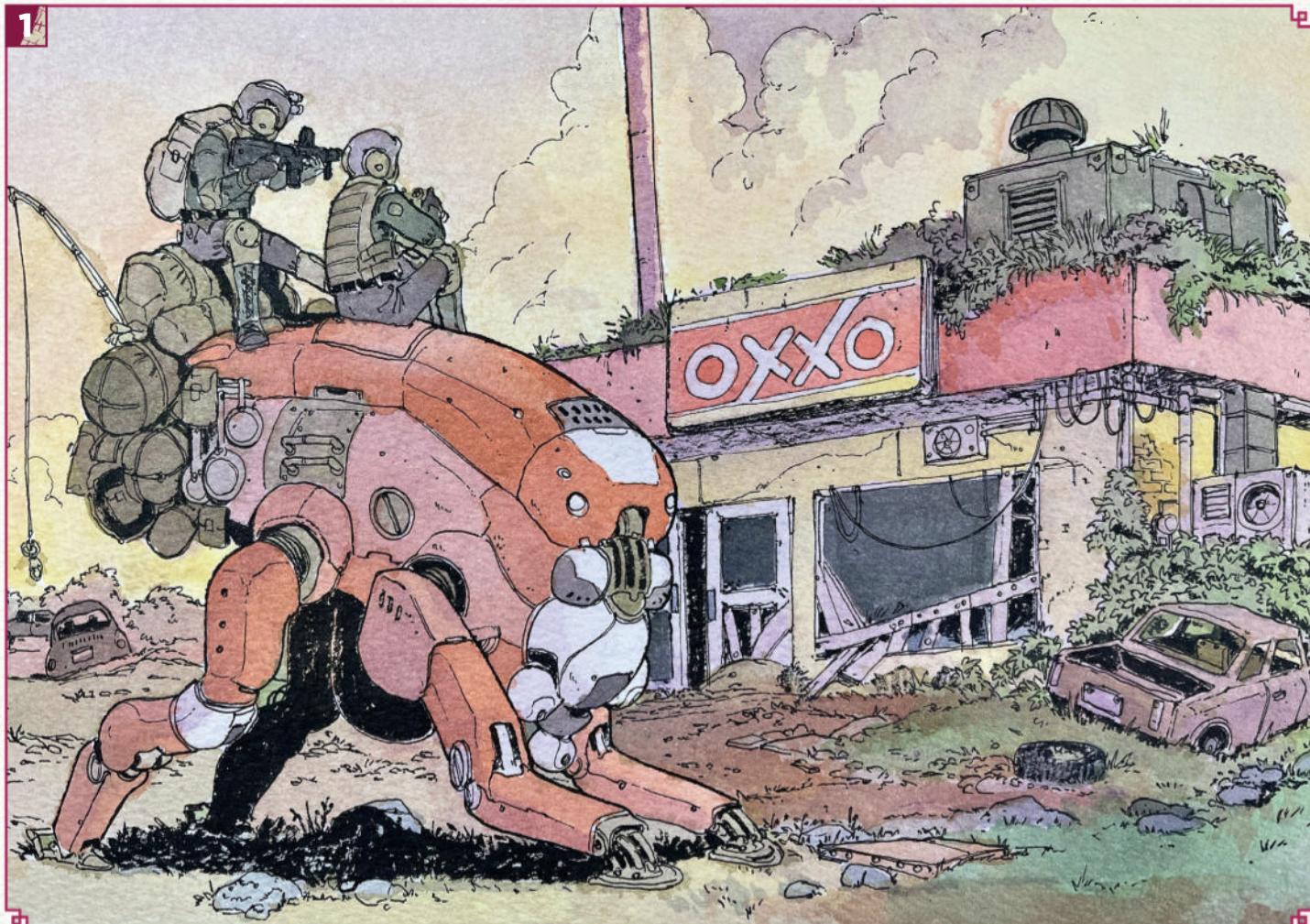
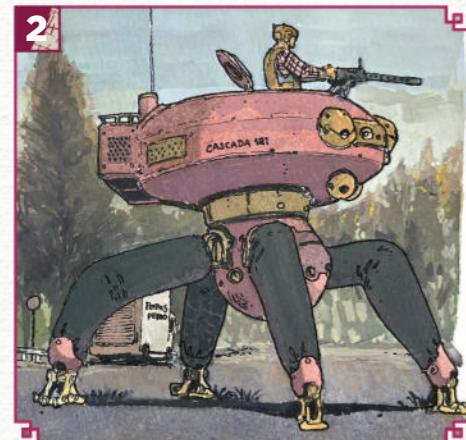


Rodrigo Gil Chávez

LOCATION: Mexico MEDIA: Pencil, pen, gouache, watercolour, Copic markers

WEB: www.artstation.com/gilrodrigo

Rodrigo is an illustrator and concept artist with over 15 years' experience in the design, entertainment and creative industries. For the last six years he has specialised in tabletop games as a lead concept artist and illustrator.



1 OUTSKIRTS PATROL

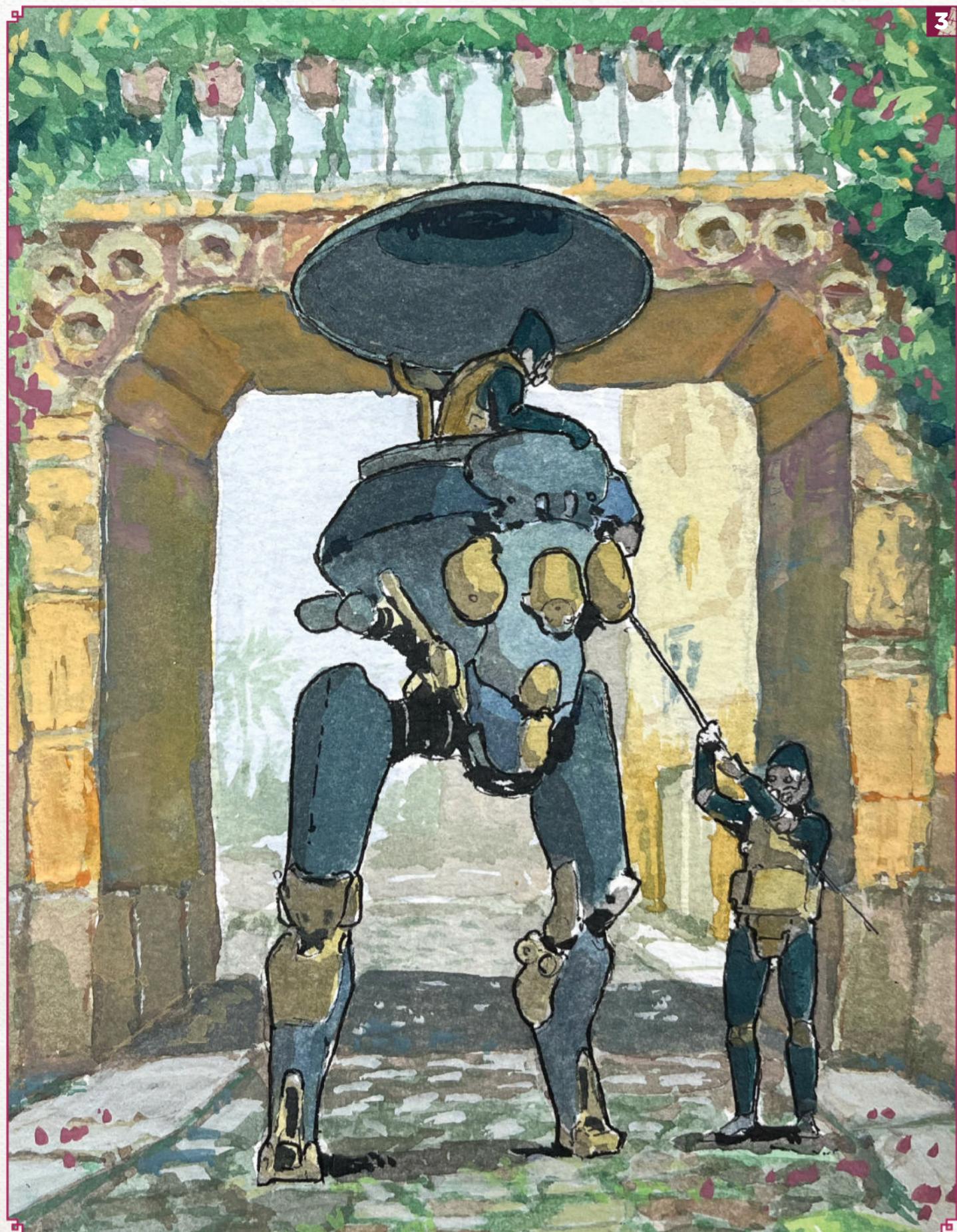
"An abandoned convenience store. I used a single colour wash followed by local colour in different areas to take advantage of the watercolour's transparency."

2 HIGHWAY SECURITY

"A heavily armed mech with a sicario on a highway. In Mexico you'll often see security and other 'private interests' patrolling the highways with small armoured vehicles."

3 UNDERPASS

"This picture is a small personal project made with watercolour, gouache and inks. I wanted to bring Mexican architecture and surroundings into a science fiction setting."



3

Jongun Yun

LOCATION: South Korea MEDIA: Pen, ink, pencil WEB: www.instagram.com/drawing__eda

Jongun is a brush artist who specialises in expressive black-and-white portraits. They are inspired by manga, fantasy and classical ink work, with a focus on expressing emotion through bold strokes and raw contrast.

1 FIRE WITHIN

"A dynamic, intense rendering inspired by samurai and fantasy. Created entirely in brush and ink for raw energy and aggression."



2 OLD WARRIOR

"Using bold ink and scratchy textures, this character study channels their age, wisdom, and unspoken history."

2



3



3 SILHOUETTE OF STILLNESS

"A woman's profile captured with bold, expressive brushstrokes. The contrast of white space and deep black evokes a poetic stillness, suggesting introspection and calm along with a minimalist elegance."

4 GAZE OF THE DRAGON

"A woman with a provocative gaze wears a kimono adorned with a powerful dragon illustration. The contrast between her delicately rendered hair and the bold design expresses strength and beauty."



Traditional Artist Workshop





Charcoal

CREATE CHARACTERS FROM AN ABSTRACT

Join **ERIC MESSINGER** as he helps bring out the intuitive side of your creativity with a walkthrough of his spectacular and spontaneous charcoal art

Dust off your charcoal and grab your sense of fun, because we're about to go on an adventure to reclaim your artistic spontaneity and intuitive creativity!

I've been a passionate creator of monsters and otherworldly beings since I was old enough to pick up a crayon. While I'm a mild-mannered graphic designer by day, I explore the worlds of darker creatures by night.

For many years, I thought my art had to look like everyone else's to be successful. I started by colouring at Image Comics in the 1990s and went almost exclusively into comic-based digital work for many years after.

When I hit a low point in my artistic career, I returned to the traditional mediums I knew best:



pencil and charcoal. In charcoal powder, I discovered the power of starting with an abstract, and it lit my imagination on fire. This built up my ability and confidence to solve problems on the fly. With my artistic intuition now rebooted, the creatures from the other side began to line up and knock on my brain. Each of them starts with a charcoal abstract to form a bridge between their dark universe and our own.

This workshop can be used to find or clarify your artistic voice, help remove creative blocks, discover and develop new characters, and create finished pieces. Based on questions I've received from my YouTube videos, this process will require less effort with a solid foundation in anatomy and knowledge of how

to use value to create shape and composition. I'll take you through the process step by step, from how to mount your paper onto a board to creating your abstract, what to look for within it, how to use brushes and erasers to pull out what you see, and using value and composition to create a focal point.

Please note that charcoal powder can be messy, so make sure that you have a clear space to work in! This will allow your brush to dance across the paper, and you won't have to worry about where the powder goes.



By day, Eric Messinger owns Think Horse Studios, a design and marketing firm. By night, he creates creatures

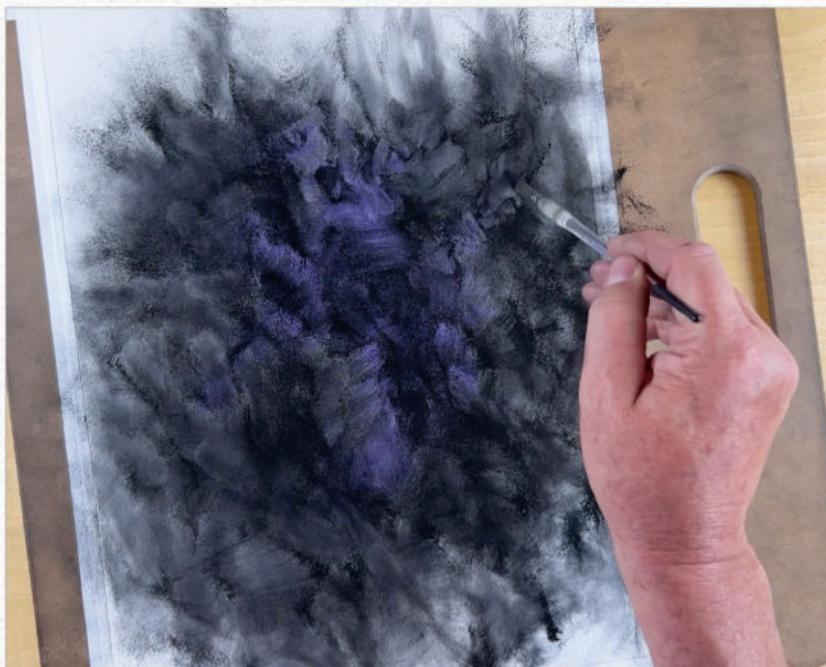
from beyond the veil using charcoal abstracts. <https://bit.ly/3SK8uwb>

Traditional Artist Workshop



1 Get set up

I mostly use hot-press watercolour paper because I like the subtle texture and grit. My first step is to lightly sand my Masonite backing board using a piece of 280-grit sandpaper. Sanding helps ensure that there won't be any imperfections in the board that could become visible during the process. After dusting off the surface, I stick the paper down using drafting tape.



3 Apply the charcoal

Using a light touch, I start with a 2.5-inch soft brush to move the charcoal powder around the page and layer it over the colour. Work from a large to a small brush to create an interesting shape that appeals to you. Be creative in the tools you use; bird feathers can create a wonderful texture.

2 Begin with the colour

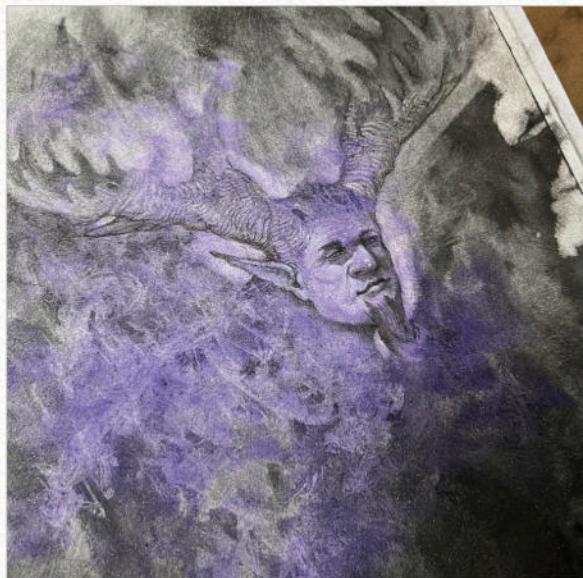
If you're using colour, layer it in first. While I prefer PanPastel, you can use any soft pastel stick. Apply medium pressure when creating the abstract. If you use a sponge to help move the colour around the page, it will create an interesting texture that you can use to develop and define your abstract shape.



4 Do multiple abstracts

I like to create three to five abstracts at a time that I then place around the house, where I get to view them regularly. Waiting for one of them to speak to you may take a day, a week, or more. Be patient! I rarely move forward on the first thing I see in the abstract.

In depth Intuitive charcoal



MATERIALS

PAPER

- Arches hot press watercolour paper

BRUSHES

- Filbert 5000, sizes 2 and 6
- Scrubber, size 6
- Filbert, size 4
- 397 Round, size 1
- Filbert 383FL, size 2
- 504 Round, size 3
- Wash, size 1.5

CHARCOAL PENCILS

- Hard
- Medium
- Soft
- White Charcoal

OTHER

- Kneaded eraser
- Powder charcoal
- String charcoal
- 0.5-inch art tape
- PanPastel, any colour

5 Carve out shapes from the abstract

Once you see a face, arm, or other defining characteristic, start with a 0.25-inch soft brush to carve out what you see. The first brushstroke removes the most powder, and each subsequent stroke will remove less. I always keep a soft, dry cloth beside me so I can wipe the powder off the brush when I need a lighter value.



6 Pause and look

After I define what I first see with my brush, I'll again put the piece up where I can view it. I imagine what the piece will look like as a whole composition while still maintaining the spontaneity and flow that got me to this point. I lightly use my brush to experiment with shapes.

7 Erase with a brush

Most people think that erasing needs to be done with a specific type of eraser. In this technique, during Steps 5 and 6, the erasing is done with a brush. If you want to remove something or change the composition, use a larger brush with charcoal powder to gently brush over what you want to change. ➤

Traditional Artist Workshop

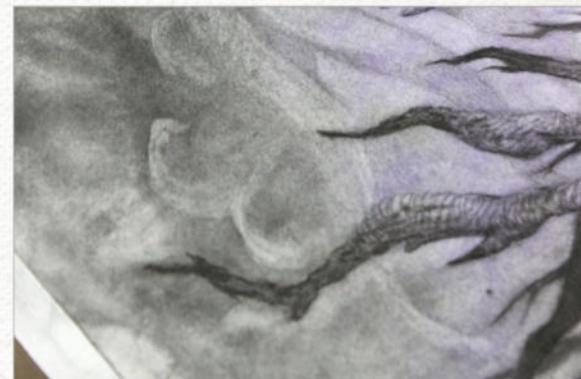


8 *Flesh out the creature*

When you have a better idea of what you want in the composition, work from the focal point to the other parts of the painting that will frame it and support the composition. Stay within a range of lights and mid-values. Working within these allows for the most flexibility in case of any changes.

9 *Keep an eye out for more possibilities*

At this point, take a pause again. Turn the piece upside down or sideways to ensure you don't miss out on any other creatures or supporting elements of the painting. The agony and ecstasy of this type of technique is that a new visitor can appear at any time, as it did in this piece. Allow your intuition to guide you.



10 *Handy reference sources*

To ensure that my character's face is structurally correct, I open my two favourite apps. Head Model Studio offers a wide variety of facial structures and lighting options, while the Handy app is my go-to for hands. When needed, I'll use myself as a model and shoot images of what I need for correct lighting and poses.

11 *Develop extra characters*

Work any new visitors that appeared in Step 9 into your composition. Pay close attention to your values, as it can be easy to disrupt the value range you've been building up to this point. Be patient when fleshing them out and integrating them into the composition. I gently use a hard charcoal pencil and a soft brush for this stage.



12 Bring out details and textures

Using detail is one of my favourite ways to build the story of the piece and bring each character to life. Focus on the textures within the character's clothing and armour, as well as their design. You can create a fine point on your kneaded eraser to lighten and add shape, and use a charcoal pencil to enhance depth.



13 Place the darks

Now it's time to add the dark values! I use vine charcoal and soft charcoal pencil. If you're using General's pencils, use numbers 2, 4, and 6 to layer in darker layers. Scrub these with a firm-bristled brush, but don't scrub in your darks until you know where you want them as these layers won't erase easily.



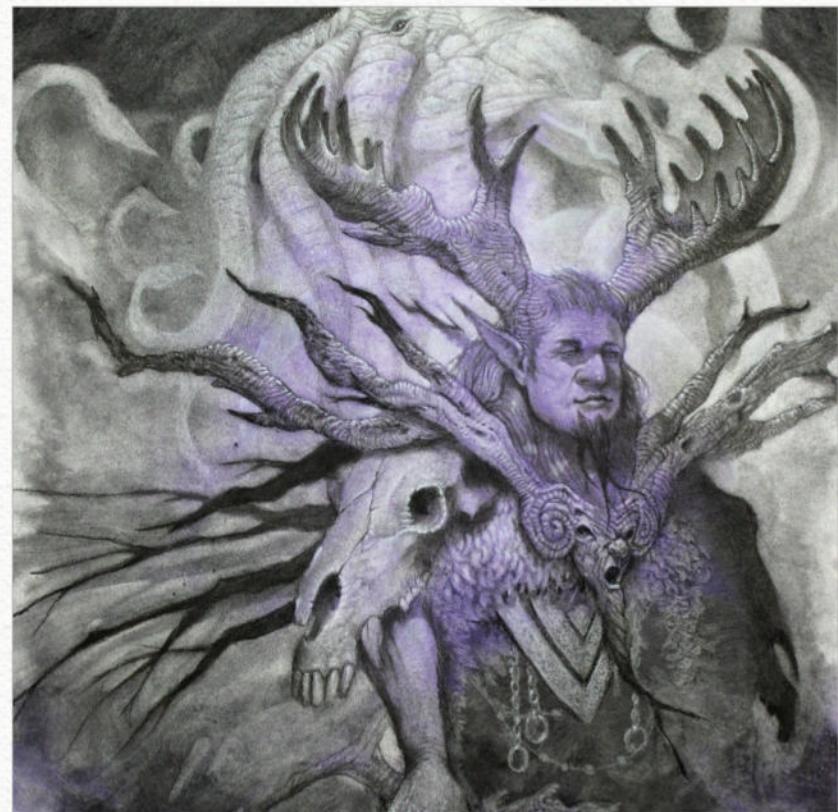
14 Push and pull values

While I use my kneaded eraser throughout the painting process, it's my go-to during this phase. Push and pull your values to help maximise the depth of the composition. Keep in mind that if you've added too many darks too quickly, a very light touch with an electric eraser can pull you out of your black hole.



15 Final details and highlights

Now is the time to add an extra touch of atmosphere. Look for areas to accentuate with a soft glow, specular highlights, dust, and sometimes little critters to give the painting extra dimensionality and punch. When the first pass is complete, refine and adjust your values to ensure you can create the maximum energy needed for the piece.



16 Last reflections

Remember that this is a fluid technique. When I discovered the second creature during Step 9, I wasn't satisfied with the result in terms of values and building depth. To rebalance the composition, I had to readjust my values, revisit earlier steps, and make significant changes so the new composition would work. That's one of the keys: remember to use this process intuitively. 

First Impressions

★ Laura Aldofredi ★

Why life experience is the artist's truest driving force



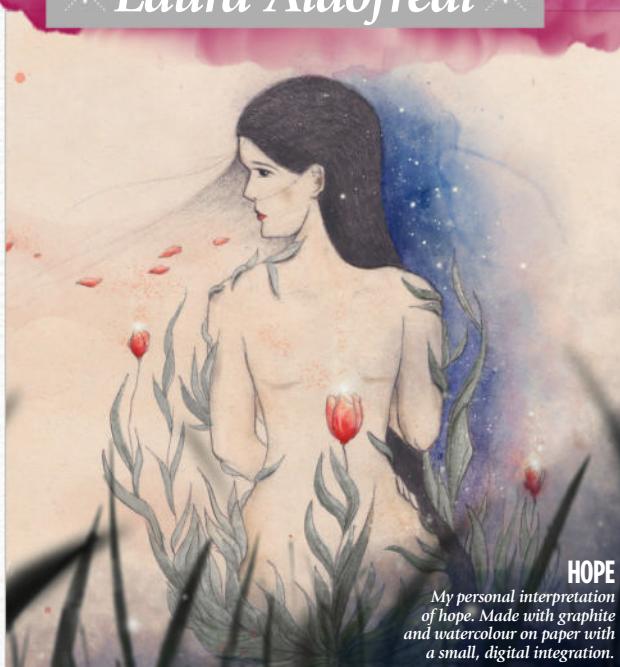
What's your main source of inspiration?

For a long time, I thought I needed specific sources of inspiration to do this job. But now, while I still have strong interests, I don't believe I need to refer to any of them as inspiration. I'm realising that who I am and the way I live my life are enough to keep me going in the artistic universe, and that alone makes my work authentic.

When working on a project, I'm now thinking, "What's the added value I can give this subject?" It turns out the life I've lived, am now living, and want to live already offer me all the ingredients I could need to answer those questions.

Is making a living as an artist all you thought it would be?

During my studies, a publisher visited our class and said, "Oh my, you guys have chosen one of the most difficult jobs ever." At that time I didn't understand what she meant. I wasn't aware yet of the amount of vulnerability connected to this job. I didn't understand that with my art I would be constantly exposed, judged, and so on. It's true,



My personal interpretation of hope. Made with graphite and watercolour on paper with a small, digital integration.

“It takes time to shape your artistic path, so allow yourself kindness and patience”

it's not a job for the weak. Now I understand and have learned to deal with that.

If you were starting out now, what advice would you most appreciate? The more we live, the more we understand about life and art. We don't need to have all the answers immediately. It takes time to shape your own artistic path, so allow yourself kindness and patience, even and above all in failure.

Are there challenges to working traditionally over digitally?

Working traditionally, I'm aware that I don't have the luxury of big mistakes. Erasing is difficult, often simply impossible, so I have to work around it with more preparatory sketches and at least one developed test using the final technique.

However, that lack of full control is also fascinating. Sometimes those

mistakes have a reason to be there and become part of the final work.

Another challenge is the colour quality. You need to know materials and their properties very well to achieve the colour vision you want.

Do you tend to stick to a single medium, or do you mix and match? If so, what and why? For years I worked traditionally only, then for a while digitally only. Now I'm in an experimental phase. I mix different analogue techniques (charcoal, graphite, watercolours and gouache), and combine them with digital. I'm seeking a creative process that feels my own and can merge my strengths in each.

Are you working on any passion projects at the moment?

Yes! Into the Woods, an intimate, coming-of-age fairy tale about confronting your inner darkness. I'm developing this project both as a silent picture book and as an animated short film. It's interesting to see the different creative choices I make for each format, while still defending the core of the story.

What's your next step in art or life?

I'm focusing on strengthening my author's voice and signature, so I'm making more space for personal projects. At the same time, I'm also letting my own personal style be more visible in my work. For a long period I've chased the ideal of being unique, different and special – all words that I now find misleading.

Finally, I'm understanding that my style is already more authentic than I think. I don't need to chase anything, just be myself. That's also interestingly connected to the rise of AI. If there's one thing AI can't do, it's being me and drawing as I do, with my mistakes and insecurities!

Laura Aldofredi is an animator, picture book illustrator and teacher from the Netherlands. She is busy writing and developing two short animated films. See more at <https://lauraaldfredi.com>.





Recycle your magazine and
seven days later it could come
back as your newspaper.

 **recycle**
The possibilities are endless.

www.recyclenow.com



Jasper,
age 11

I'm young, disabled, but not so different

The right wheelchair is the real difference

Did you know there are over **75,000** young people in the UK who need wheelchairs to get around?

They have the same **dreams** as other young people. But they don't always have the same **opportunities** because they can't access the equipment, skills and support they need.

Find out how you can be there for young wheelchair users at whizz-kidz.org.uk