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STAR WARS

# THE SHADOW LORD

**Lucasfilm** shares the dark arts that drive  
the striking visuals of the hit animation!

FUTURE  
ISSUE 267

THE IMPACT OF GREAT **BACKGROUND DESIGN** - AS EXPLAINED BY THE PROS

Enjoy creating more.



Simone  
Grünewald

**Painting in  
Clip Studio Paint is a joy,**

I especially love the feel of the gouache brush! It has a beautiful texture and is truly versatile.

Clipping masks are essential for me. I only have to draw the whole shape once, then I can paint messily over the edges without having to worry. What's even better is that Clip Studio Paint allows me to attach clipping masks to whole groups.

Another thing I love using is layer blending modes; in this case, I used Hard Light to give my characters a wonderful backlight, perfect for this sunset scene. For some extra glow, duplicate your layer and use Filter > Gaussian Blur for that extra bleed of light.



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



Out of all the iconic villains out there, only a few stand above the rest and Darth Maul is definitely one of them, with a distinctive look that is instantly recognisable. It's been a while since our screens were graced with his presence, so the release of Maul – Shadow Lord is one

we really wanted to look at, as the distinctive character is brought to life with a beautiful hand-painted new look. We talked to Lucasfilm to see how the show was put together, with a focus on the creative visual direction.

Elsewhere this issue, we take a good look at how you can use your art's backgrounds to create emotional reaction and atmosphere, teach you how to get the most out of your reference materials, turn the real world into enigmatic sci-fi paintings and a whole lot more.

If you're planning your next art tech purchase then head over to our reviews section, where we check out the latest display from Apple, the best office chair we have tested, alongside some great new training.

Enjoy the issue.

Rob

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

**EDITOR'S CHOICE** Three of my top picks this month...



**Make your characters act**

Discover how to add acting ability to your characters through gesture and pose.



**Strange sci-fi**

Artist Lê Long shows you how to create quirky sci-fi scenes based on real-world settings.



**Combining dimensions**

Learn how to add effects and mix 2D with 3D to create explosive battle scenes.

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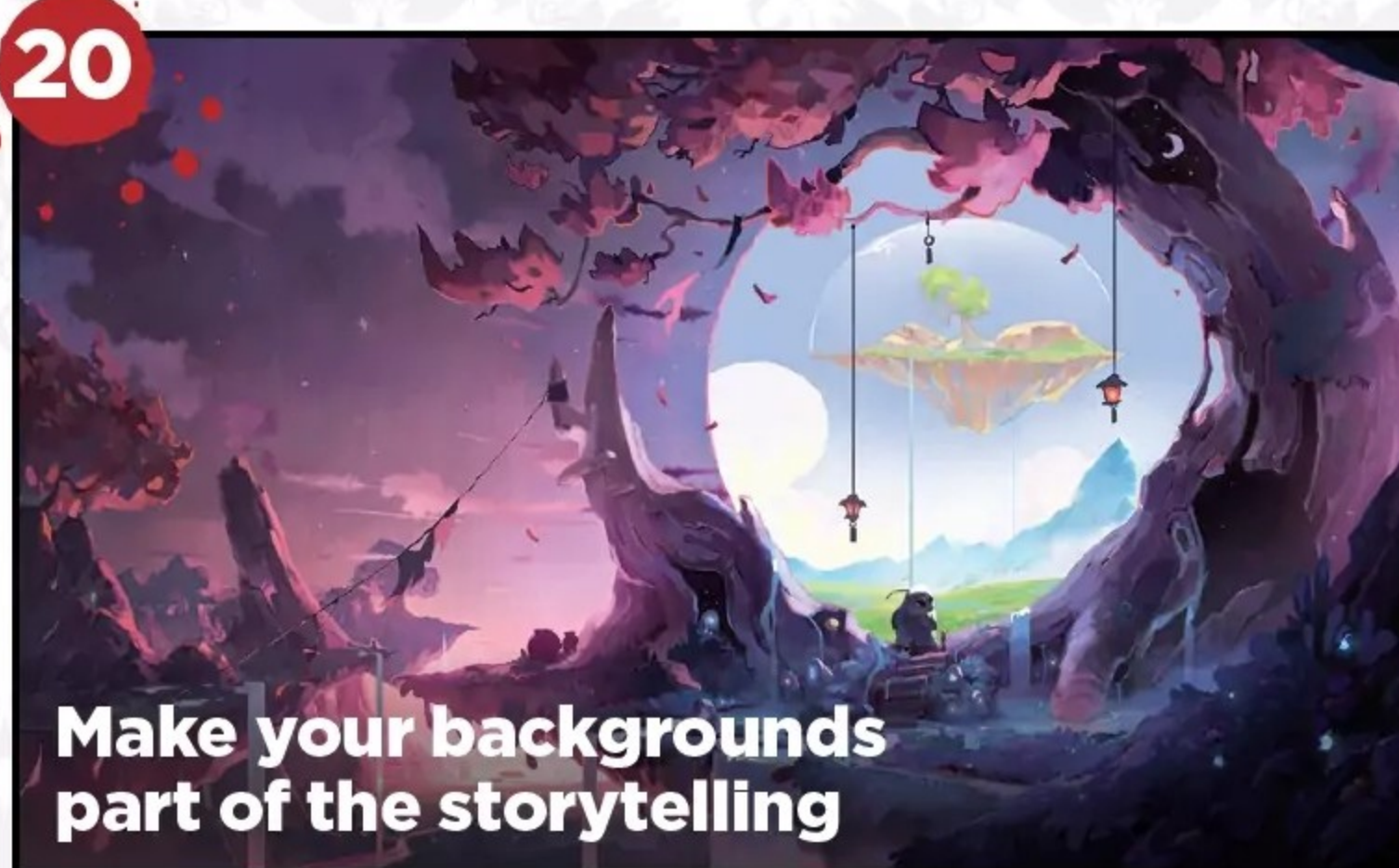
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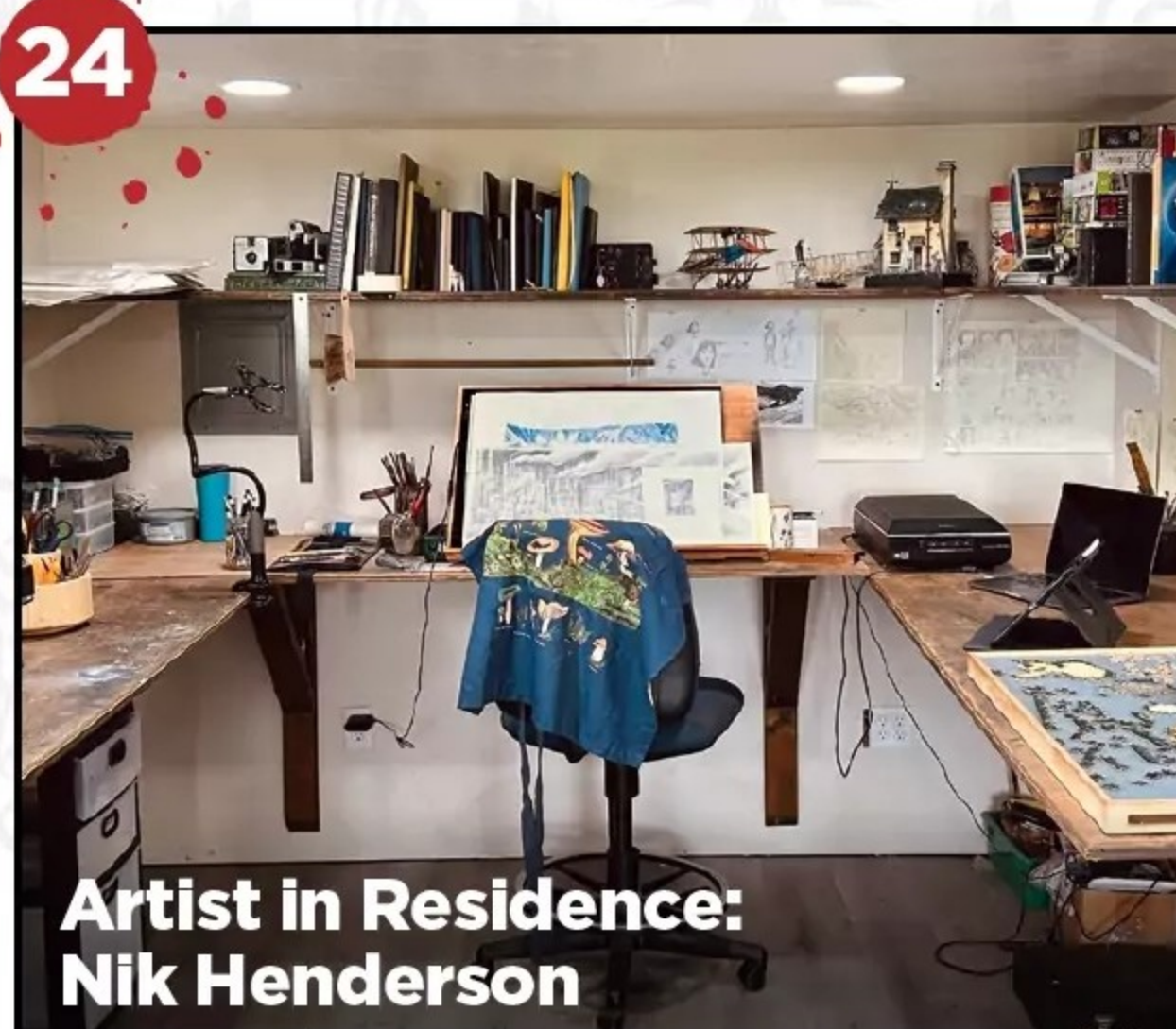
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## FXPosé

THE PLACE TO SHARE YOUR DIGITAL ART



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Development Sheet



FANTASY & SCI-FI DIGITAL ART  
**ImagineFX**  
**Workshops**

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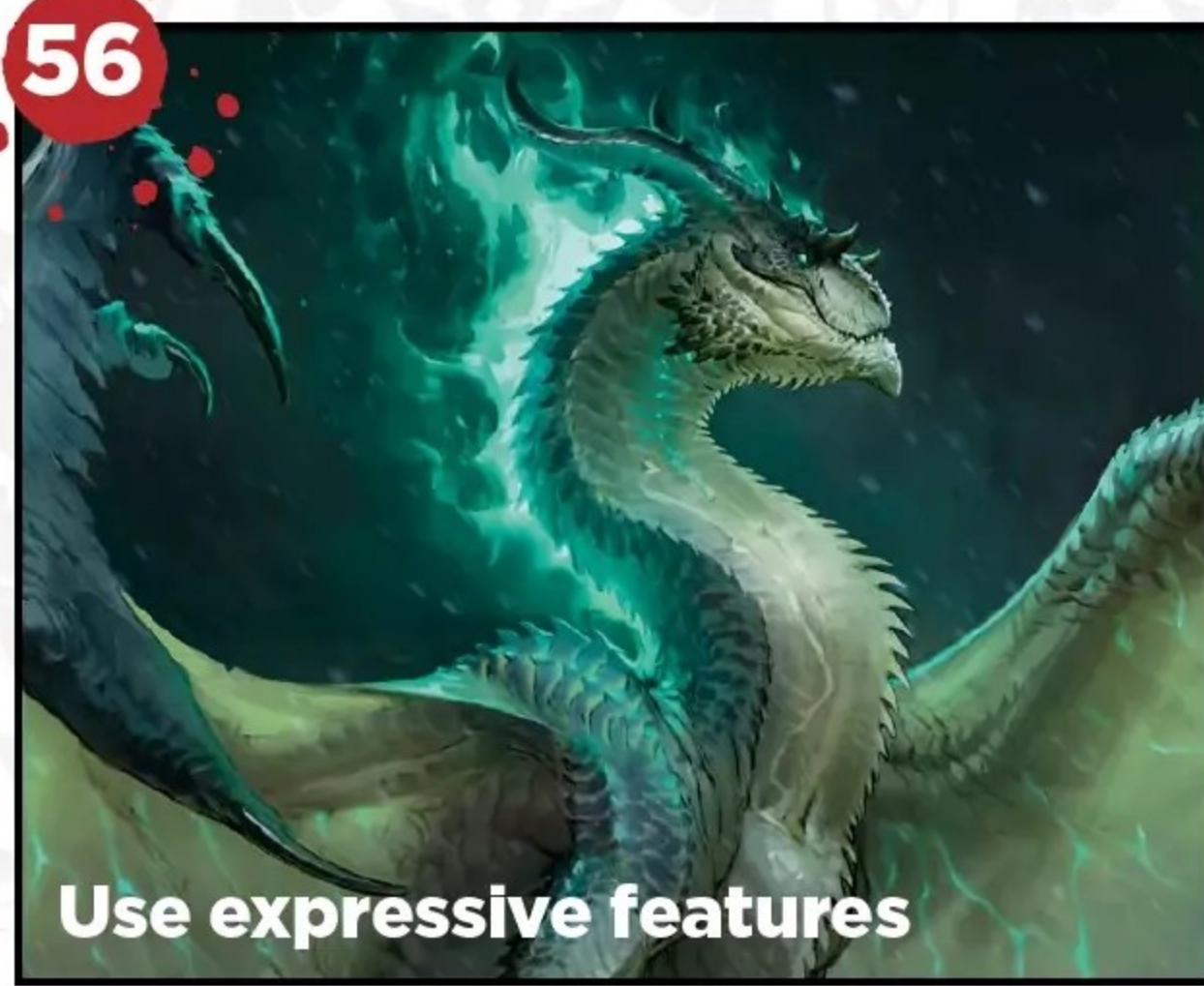
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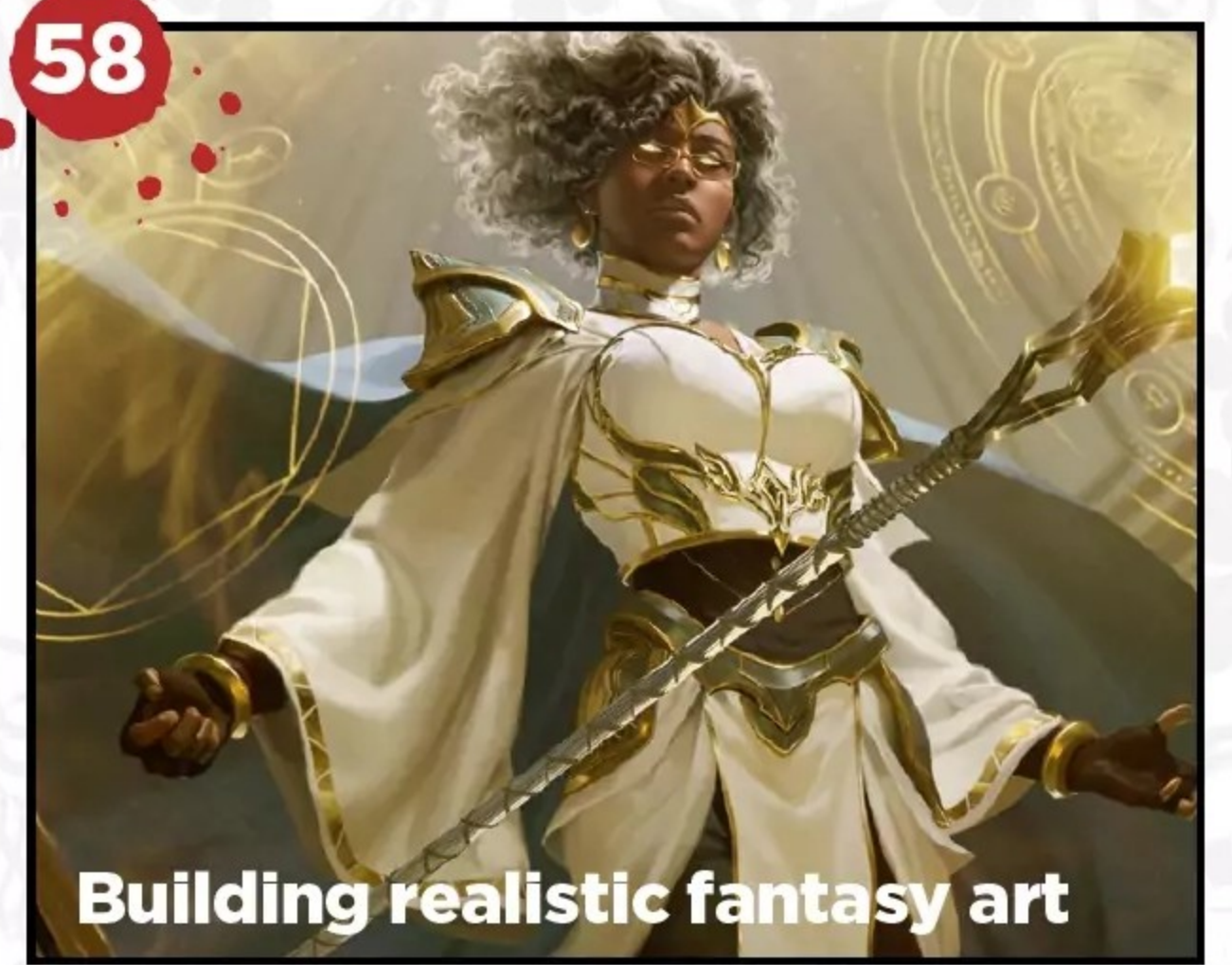
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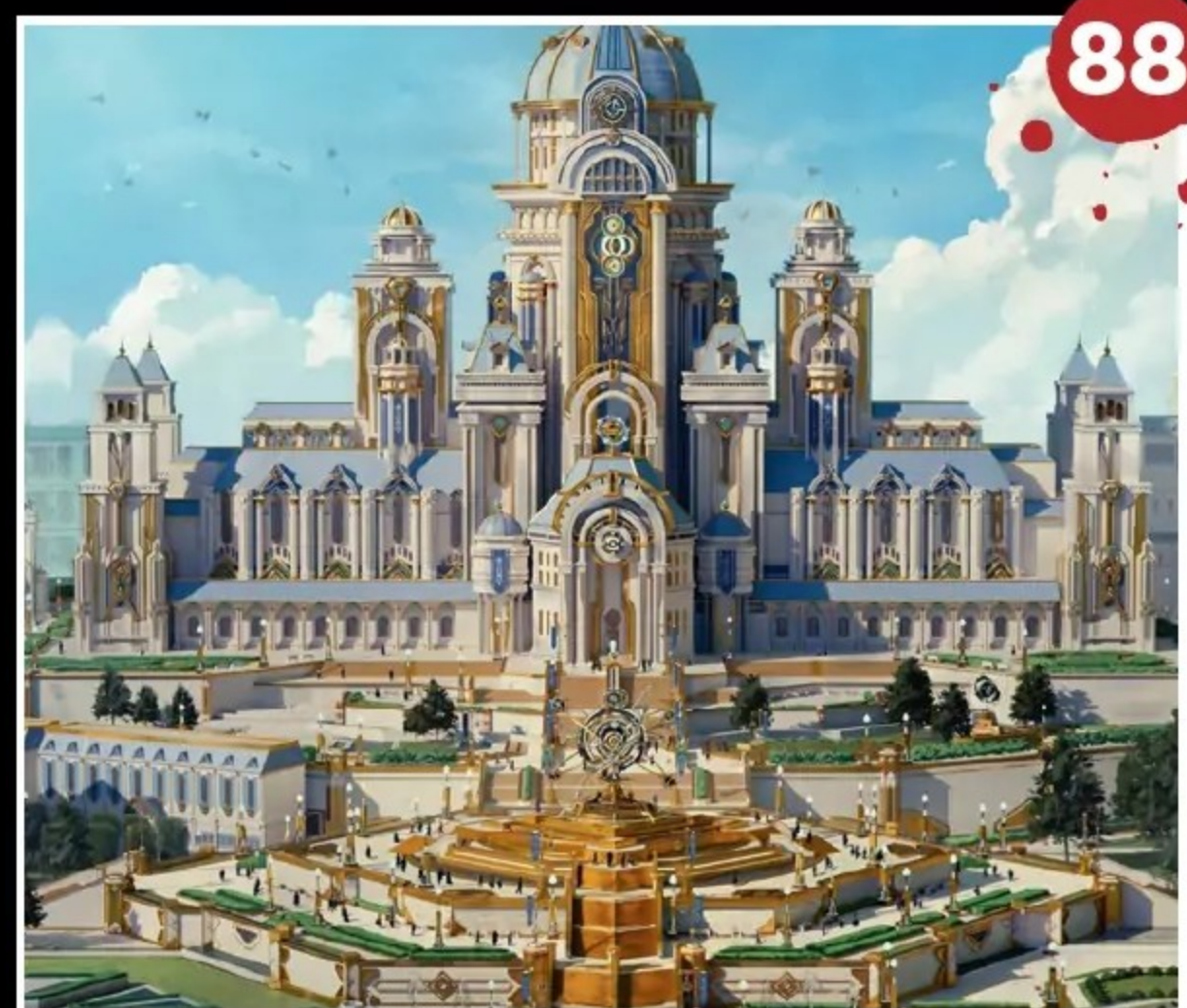
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Make your own characters act

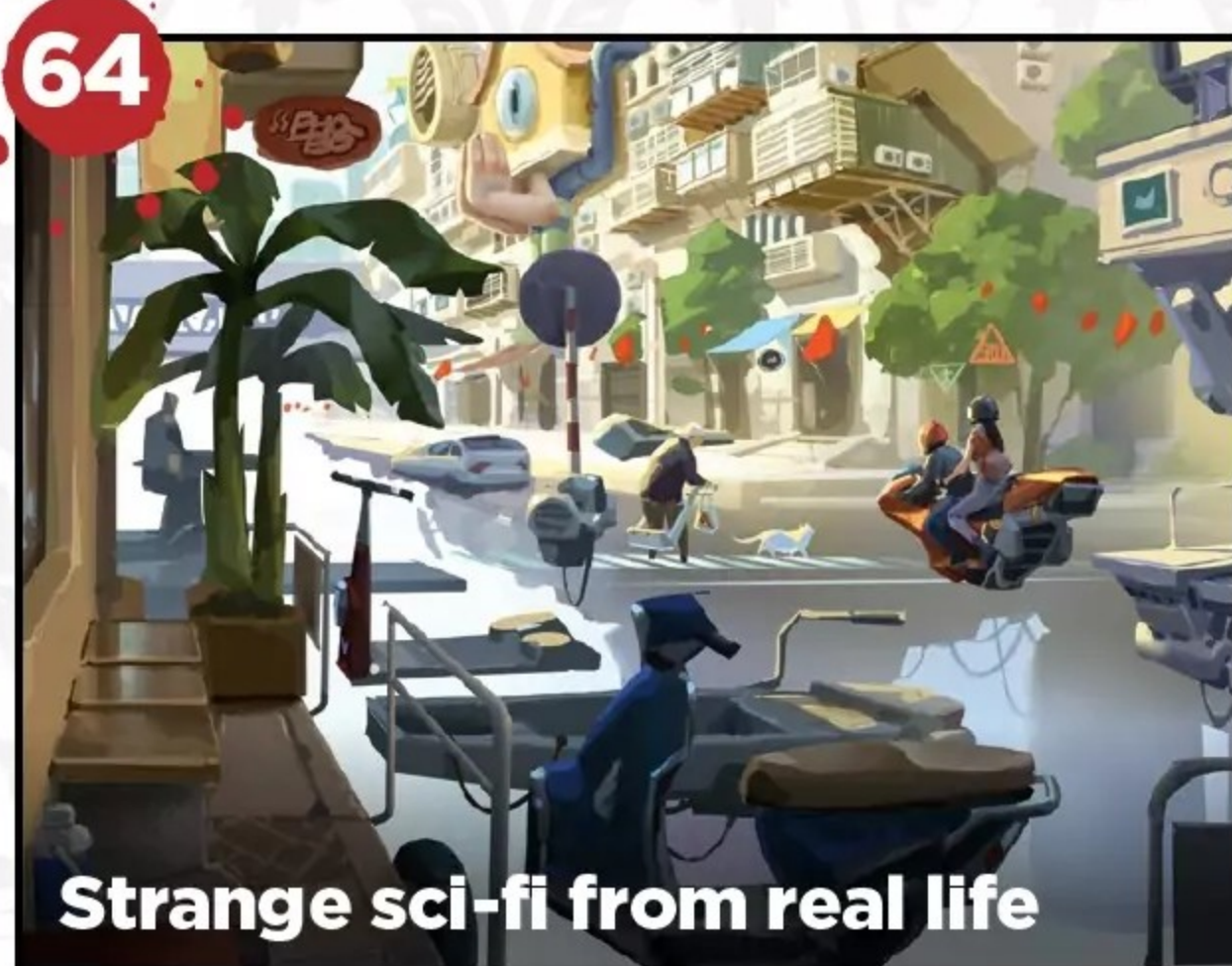
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**GET YOUR RESOURCES**

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://bit.ly/ShadowLord>
- 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

© SFB Games



Next month in...  
NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS  
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# BENEATH THE MASK

Go behind the scenes of **The Mermaid Mask** plus exclusive training by creators SFB Games

**Create dreamlike illustrations**

Amir Zand shares his process for using Photoshop layers for dreamy visuals

**Explore how to add light & depth**

Bring your establishing shots to life with advice from Louis Stillace

**Master modelling mech characters**

Lars Sowig shows you how to level up your hard surface models

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Content of next issue is subject to change

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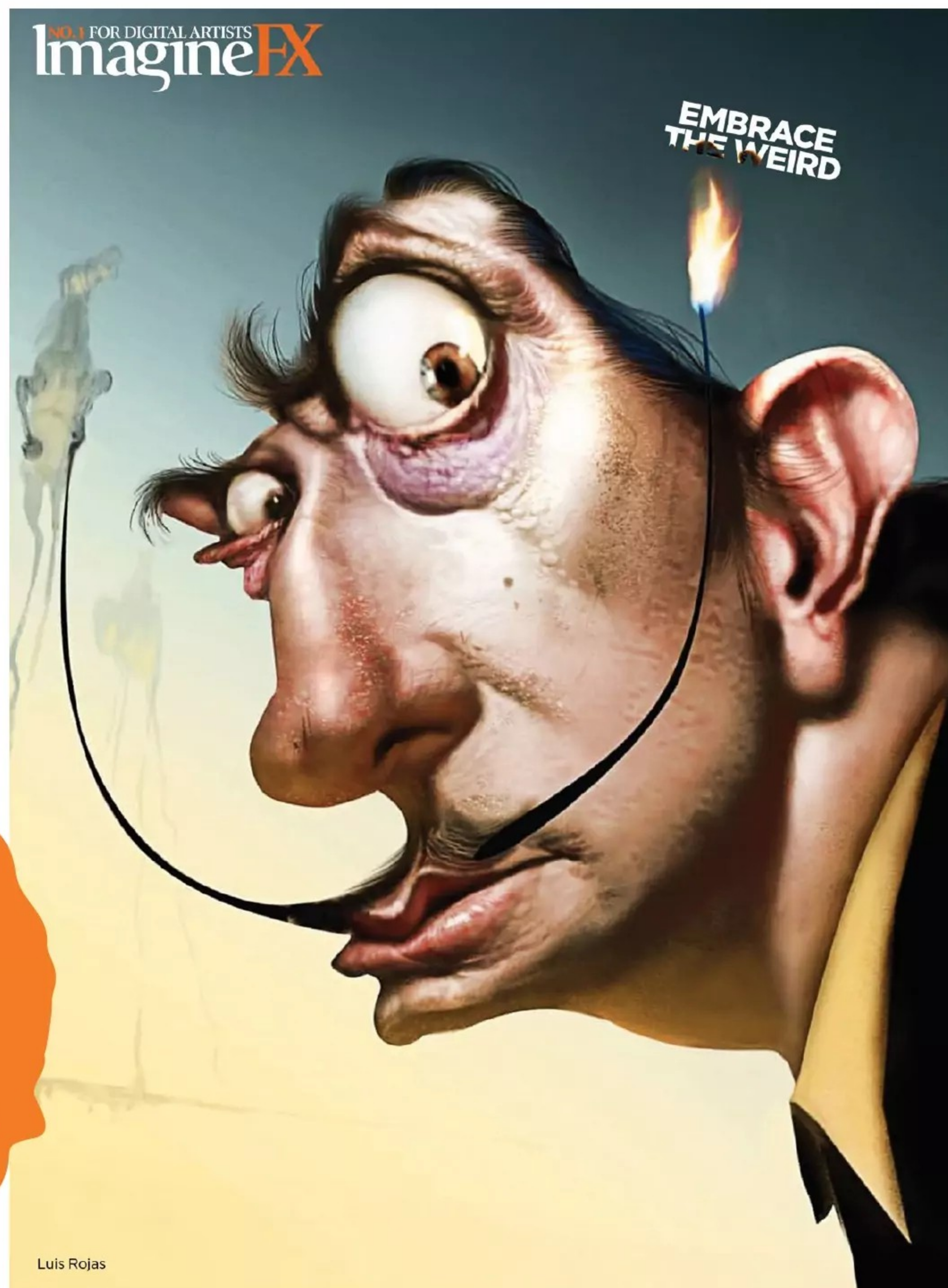
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# FXPosé

THE PLACE TO SHARE YOUR DIGITAL ART



## Leonardo Borazio

**LOCATION:** Italy **MEDIA:** Photoshop, ZBrush, Blender

**WEB:** [www.artstation.com/dleoblack](http://www.artstation.com/dleoblack)

A self-taught concept illustrator, Leonardo finds inspiration in traditional landscape painting. His work emphasises mood and suggestion, leading to collaborations with film studios and AAA game developers.

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ImagineFX  
ARTIST  
MONTH

### 1 SPACESHIP

"Against a desolate horizon of celestial debris, the skeletal remains of a fallen giant await. A lone hero navigates the meteor-strewn expanse, ready to unravel the history hidden within the ship's silent, metallic tomb."

### 2 AMBUSH

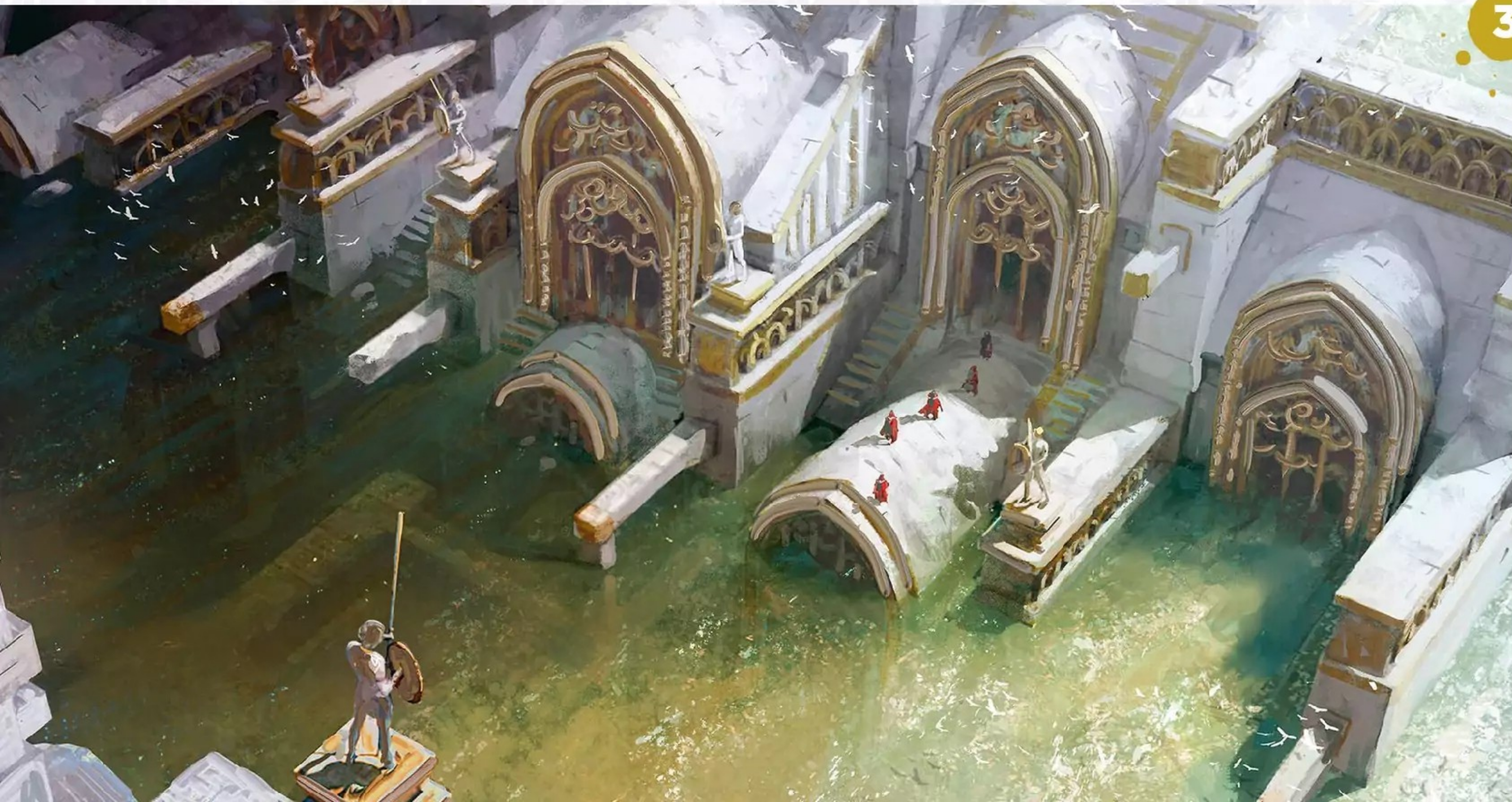
"A personal tribute to the haunting world of Lies of P. In this piece, I wanted to explore my fascination with the Black Rabbit Brotherhood, focusing on the tension and grim camaraderie that defines their presence in the game."

2



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



3

### 3 SUNKEN CITY

“The mythic ruins of a civilisation long past, this ghost-city pulses with an enigmatic energy, inviting the brave to peel back the layers of its dark, hidden history.”



## Blake Byun

LOCATION: South Korea MEDIA: Photoshop WEB: [www.artstation.com/blakebyun](http://www.artstation.com/blakebyun)

A freelance Illustrator from South Korea, Blake has a deep passion for bringing characters to life. Her focus is on creating narrative-driven illustrations with dramatic lighting and dynamic compositions.

### 1 MASQUE OF THE BLACK ROSE FAN SPLASH ART

"Inspired by Arcane, this piece shows Mel hunting for secrets. I used moody lighting and atmospheric framing to highlight her fierce resolve beneath a graceful exterior."



### 2





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## 2 NIGHTBRINGER HECARIM SPLASH ART

"I wanted to convey Hecarim's relentless momentum and dark, aggressive energy. Dynamic angles emphasise the sense of force. I focused on clearly delineated cast shadows to define the line between light and shadow."

## 3 TRANQUIL DISSONANCE

"In this illustration, I visualised duality. The cosy atmosphere hides the character's hidden grumpy nature. I balanced a peaceful view with the underlying uncomfortable truth."

## 4 PRESTIGE SPIRIT BLOSSOM APHELIOS SPLASH ART

"A rare, tranquil moment of Aphelios relaxing in a hot spring. I spent a lot of time rendering the gentle water ripples and adding layers of steam and water droplets to create a convincingly hot, humid, and grounded atmosphere."



## Aedel Fakhri

**LOCATION:** Indonesia **MEDIA:** Photoshop, Procreate, Blender **WEB:** [www.artstation.com/aedel](http://www.artstation.com/aedel)

Aedel is a freelance concept artist who focuses on mech design and visual storytelling. He enjoys turning complex mechanical ideas into readable forms inspired by military aesthetics, history and retro tech.

1



### 1 THE CARIBBEAN TERROR DUO

"These two characters are part of my own IP. I wanted to mix together creatures and old machinery from the 16th century."

### 2 EXOSKELETON - THE BULL

"This was a commissioned piece for the UNDERDOGS VR game. I worked with the game title for almost a year creating the mech. This one is my favourite piece so far."

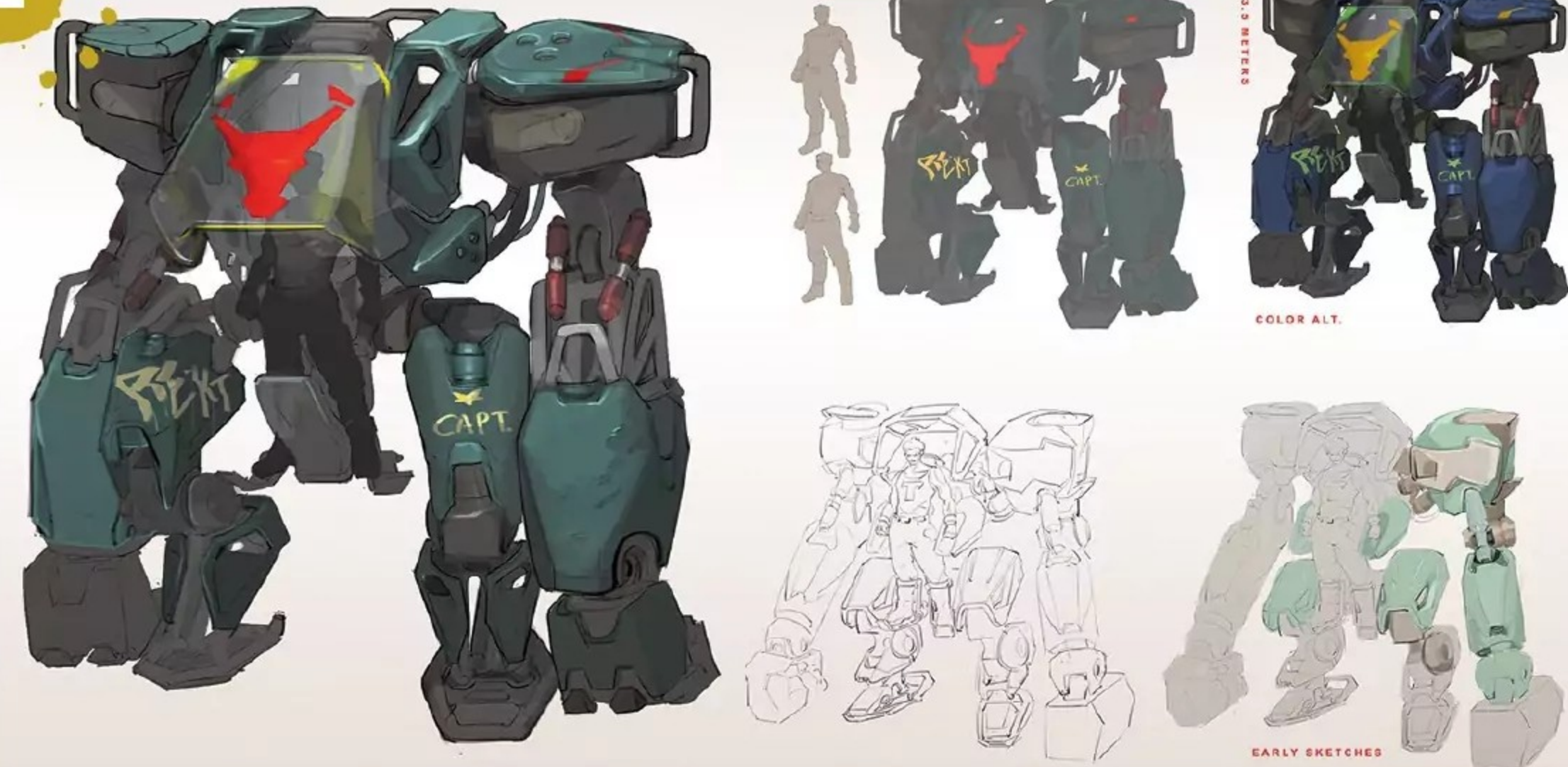
### 3 BOAT

"A visualisation of a colossal extraterrestrial machine emerging during a post-apocalyptic flood, inspired by a personal photo taken while boating with friends near Mount Krakatoa 15 years ago."

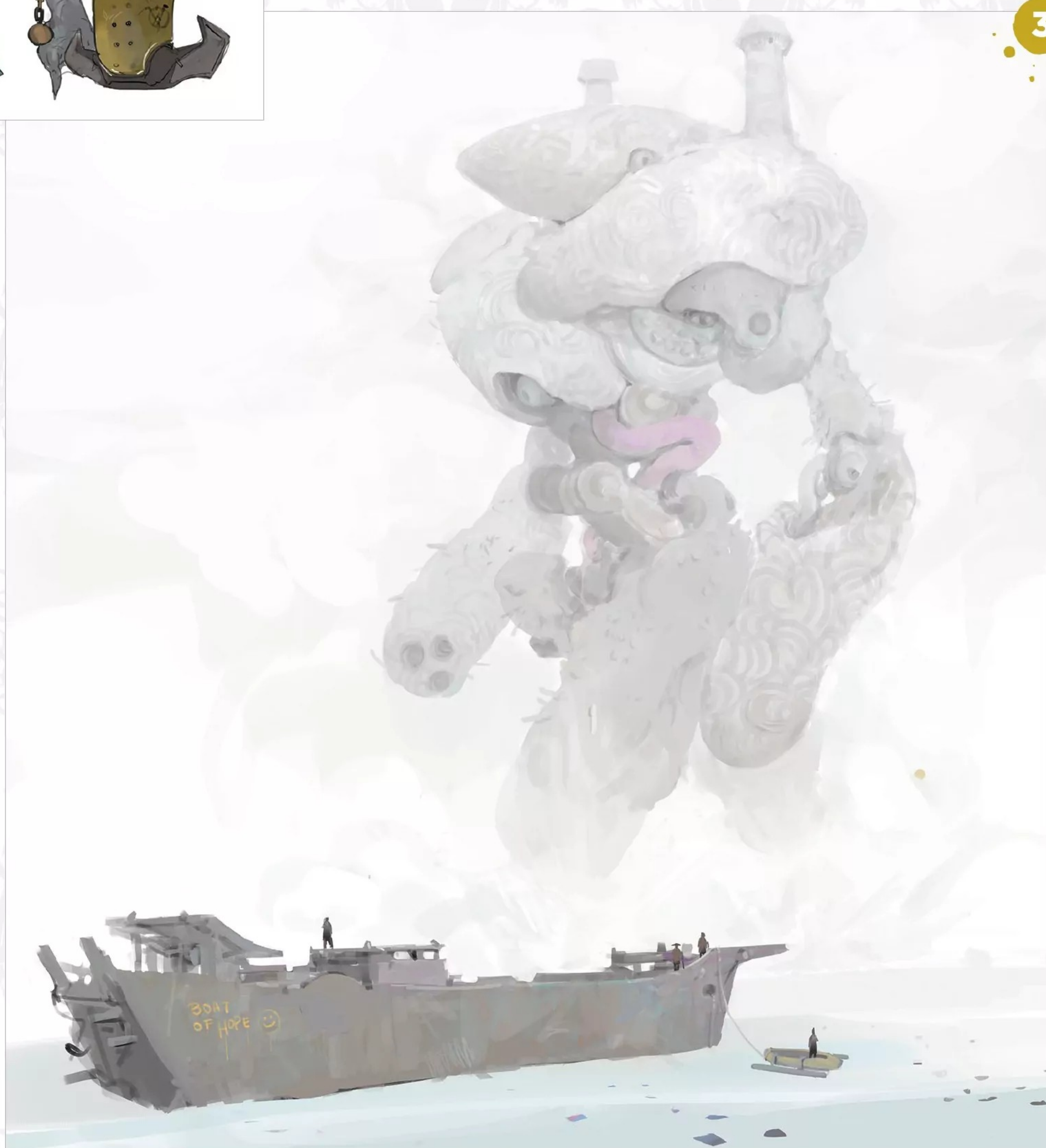
### 4 MEKAKUMA

"Mekakuma is a cyborg infused with an ancient assassin's memory, operating as a mercenary that sells its lethal skills to the highest bidder."

2



3







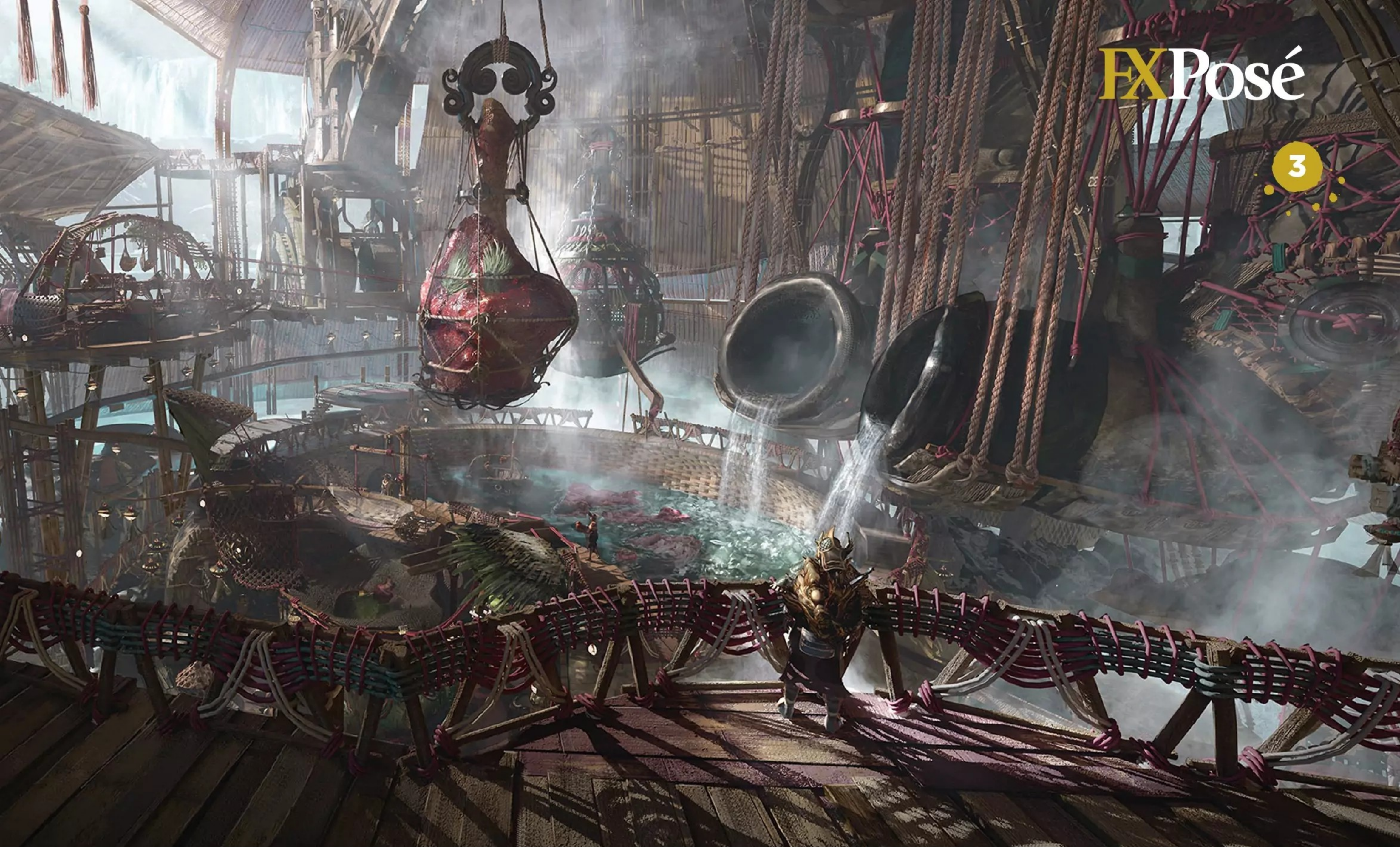
## Choomcherd Virapat

**LOCATION:** Thailand **MEDIA:** Photoshop, Blender, ZBrush, Plasticity

**WEB:** [www.artstation.com/choomvi](http://www.artstation.com/choomvi)

Choomcherd is an environment concept artist with an architecture background that shapes his work. Phaya Akat, his first large-scale project, reflects his Thai heritage and transition into concept art.





**1 THE SANCTUARY**

“Phaya Akat’s Sanctuary is a peaceful mountain village built around a hot spring, where people gather to cook, eat, and rest, offering a calm refuge for the heroes of this world.”

**2 PALACE OF MARA**

“An underground stronghold, now ruined and overgrown with vines, it was inspired by ancient Thai and Cambodian architecture, reimagined into something dark and haunting.”

**3 THE SANCTUARY KITCHEN**

“The kitchen is the heart of the village, built around a natural hot spring, where people gather and prepare food together across seven stages, blending ritual, community and daily life.”

**4 KHUN THONG WARSHIP**

“Khun Thong’s ship is a flying warship in Phaya Akat, serving as both battle vessel and refuge carrier, representing the heart of the world, inspired by traditional Thai culture.”

**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](mailto: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](http://WWW.THEROOKIES.CO)

# Blackfrost

YEAR CREATED: 2025 MEDIA: Photoshop, Maya

+ + + + + + + + + + +

“Through Blackfrost, I aimed to create a tangible, immersive universe, exploring how architecture, environment and atmosphere convey the control and confinement of a supermax prison. Drawing inspiration from Chamonix’s rugged peaks, Alejandro González Iñárritu’s cinematography, and iconic characters like Hannibal Lecter and the Joker, this project became a creative journey that refined my workflow and helped me grow as a concept artist.”



# The Rookies

## Artist PROFILE

**Lucas Renard**

**LOCATION:** France

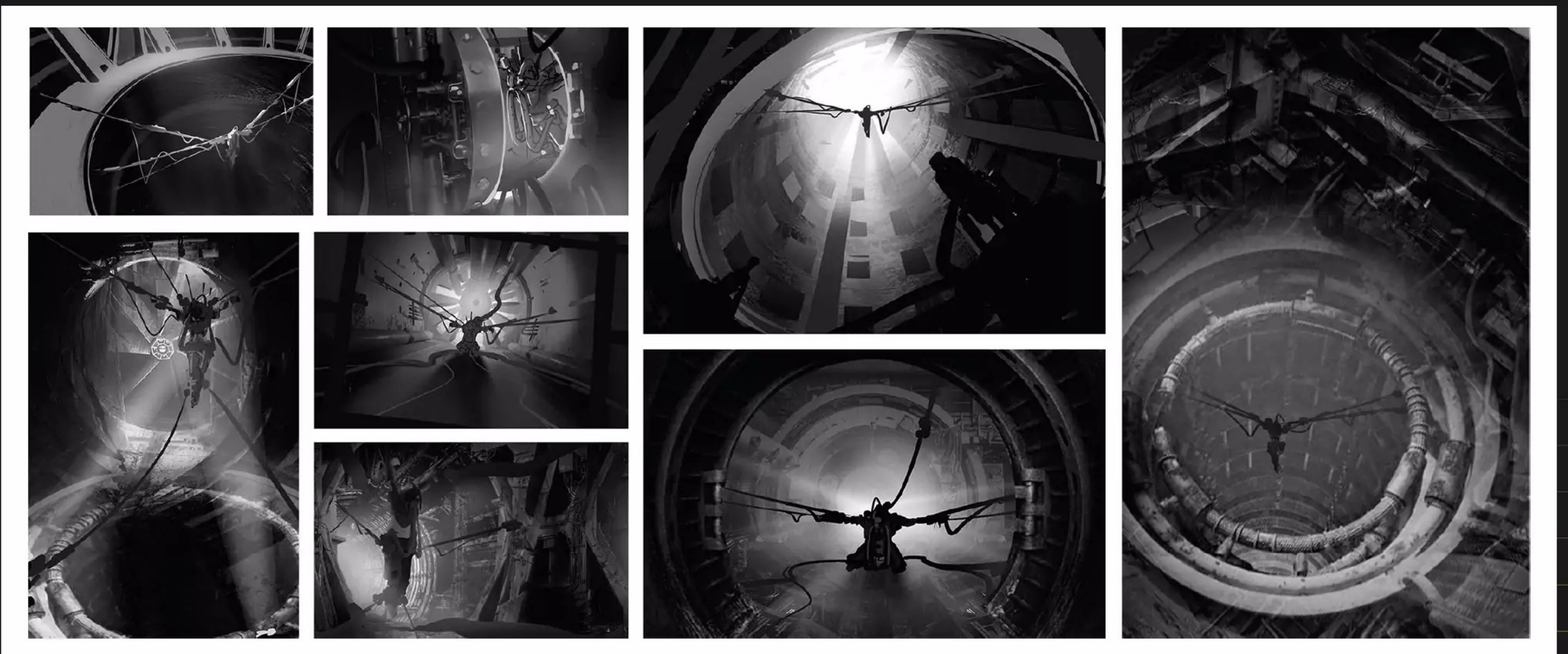


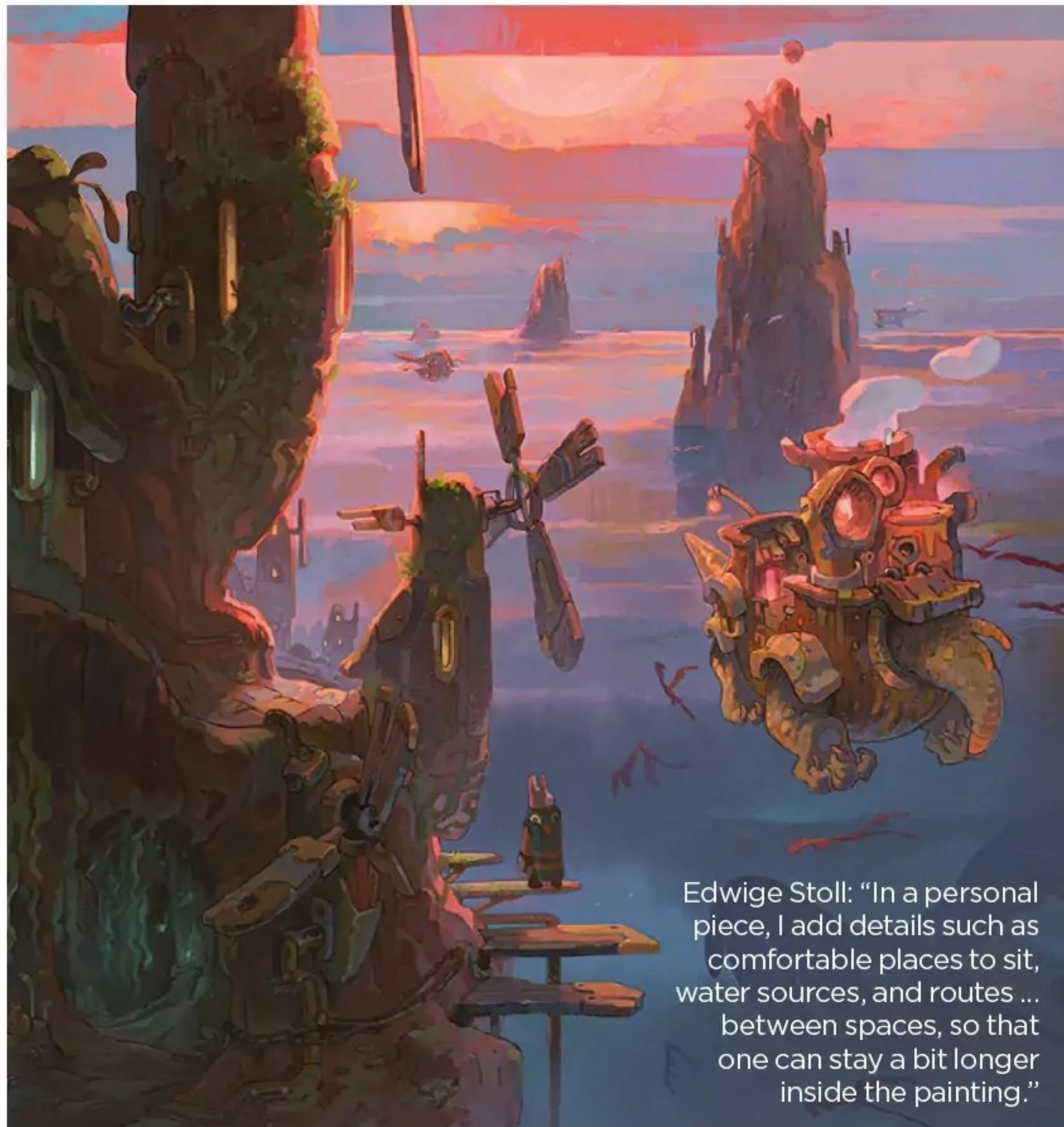
Lucas Renard is a concept artist dedicated to crafting immersive worlds, specialising in dark, realistic sci-fi and fantasy environments. Versatile and driven by passion and curiosity, his workflow blends 2D and 3D as he constantly explores new styles and techniques in order to grow and refine his artistic vision.

<https://www.therookies.co/u/MlsterFox>



RENDERING • Process





Edwige Stoll: "In a personal piece, I add details such as comfortable places to sit, water sources, and routes ... between spaces, so that one can stay a bit longer inside the painting."



Morgan Noll began her art training just six years ago, going from total novice with zero experience to professional industry artist in three years

# Make your backgrounds part of the storytelling

No humble background **Tanya Combrinck** talks about creating atmosphere and feeling with five background artists working in animation and games

**Building the environment in which a story takes place gives you a chance to set the tone and emotion of a production before any of the action unfolds.**

**Morgan Noll**, who works as a background and visual development artist in animation and games, tells us that she breaks her backgrounds down into three levels: "One, what do I want an audience to feel while engaging with this piece? Two, what narrative elements do I want to inform the design of the scene. And three, what visual language works best for supporting those choices?"

Asking these questions helps her to form the basis of her design, which she builds on by considering how it will be inhabited, and what detritus that habitation will leave behind. "I try

to keep my artistic choices informed by characters," she says. "I like to add extra scuffs and cracks to items that would naturally pick up a lot of human use, and to leave traces of activity like dust, notes, graffiti, scribbling, stains etc. to evoke a sense of history within a space - that it exists independently outside the moment it was captured."

Focusing on the overall forms of the space she's creating helps Morgan to get an idea of how it will be received

Morgan Noll's credits include Digman S2, Star Trek: Lower Decks S5, and various other projects for Titmouse and Nickelodeon.



by an audience. "I like to break things down into simple shapes and graphic impressions and then build them back up into semi-realism through these repeated graphic patterns and shapes," she explains. "I find this process helps me distil what the overall impact of an environment is and helps me better facilitate a sense of tangibility, which is really important for work that serves a larger purpose in bolstering a story, such as background art for animation."

## BROAD BRUSHSTROKES

**Edwige Stoll**, an artist who's worked on The Character of Rain, Arcane S2 and The Summit of the Gods, echoes



this idea about the importance of the larger forms. "Try to use a brush that's as big as it can be, to the point that it's



### COMPACT AND BIJOU

Accomplished illustrator Nik Henderson shows us around his small but characterful studio, adapted from a wooden shed. **Page 24**



### BUILDING A NEW FUTURE

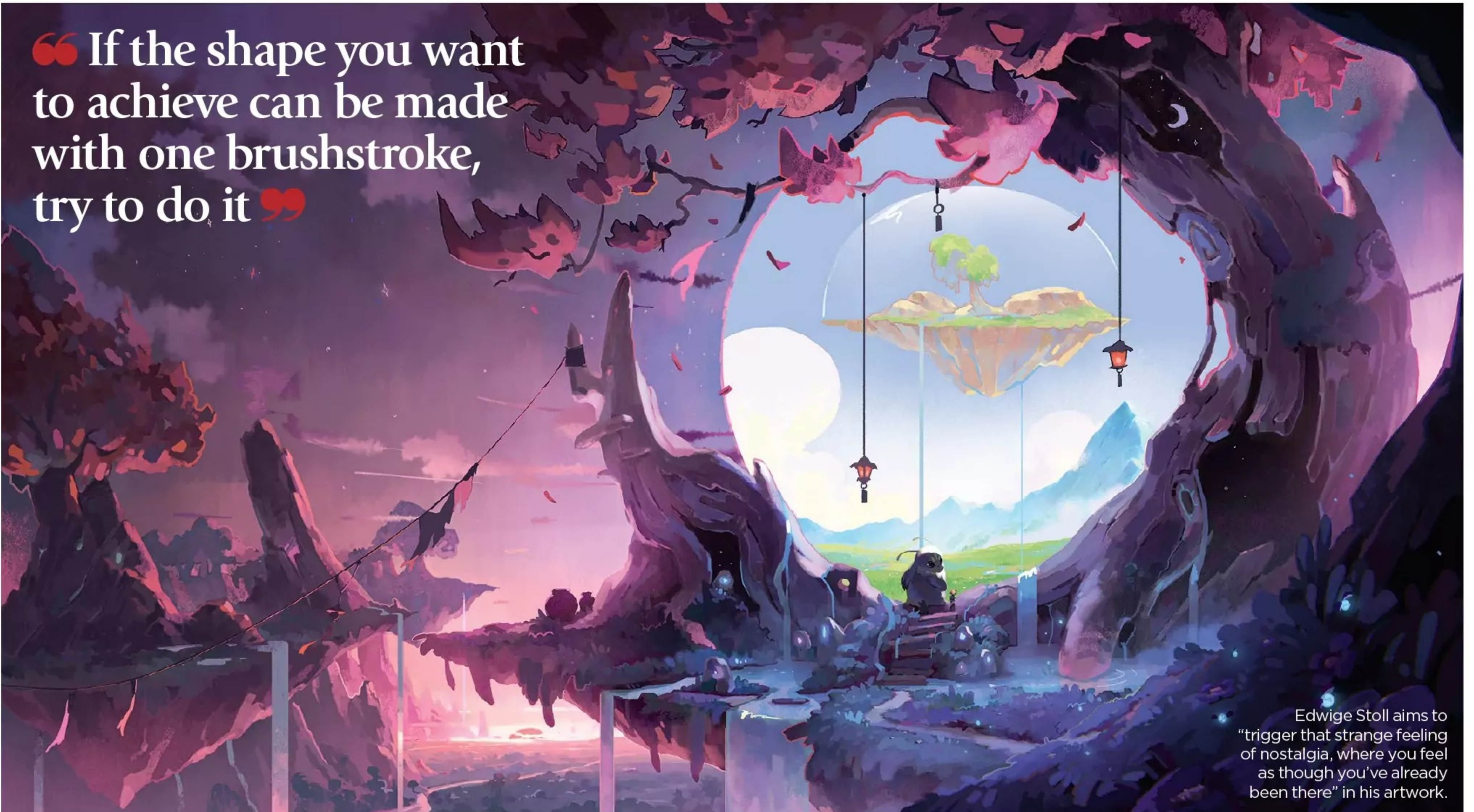
Niko Gesell, a freelance artist from Germany, walks us through his career, from recreating historic buildings to making short films. **Page 28**



### YOUR VIEWS, YOUR ART

Two readers extol the caricature creations of Luis Rojas, while others admire the stylish sketchbook of Bella Liu and robots of JC Jongwon Park. **Page 31**

“If the shape you want to achieve can be made with one brushstroke, try to do it”



Edwige Stoll aims to “trigger that strange feeling of nostalgia, where you feel as though you’ve already been there” in his artwork.



Concept art by Eduardo Vargas. “I like to imagine a kid making funny sound effects when I look at this painting,” he says.



Eduardo Vargas tells us that value structure is similar to intervals in music: often the values you don’t use matter more than the ones you do.

uncomfortable to paint with, to make more expressive strokes,” he says. “If the shape you want to achieve can be made with one brushstroke, try to do it, and put intention in every stroke.”

Your guiding light, says visual development artist **Eduardo Vargas**,



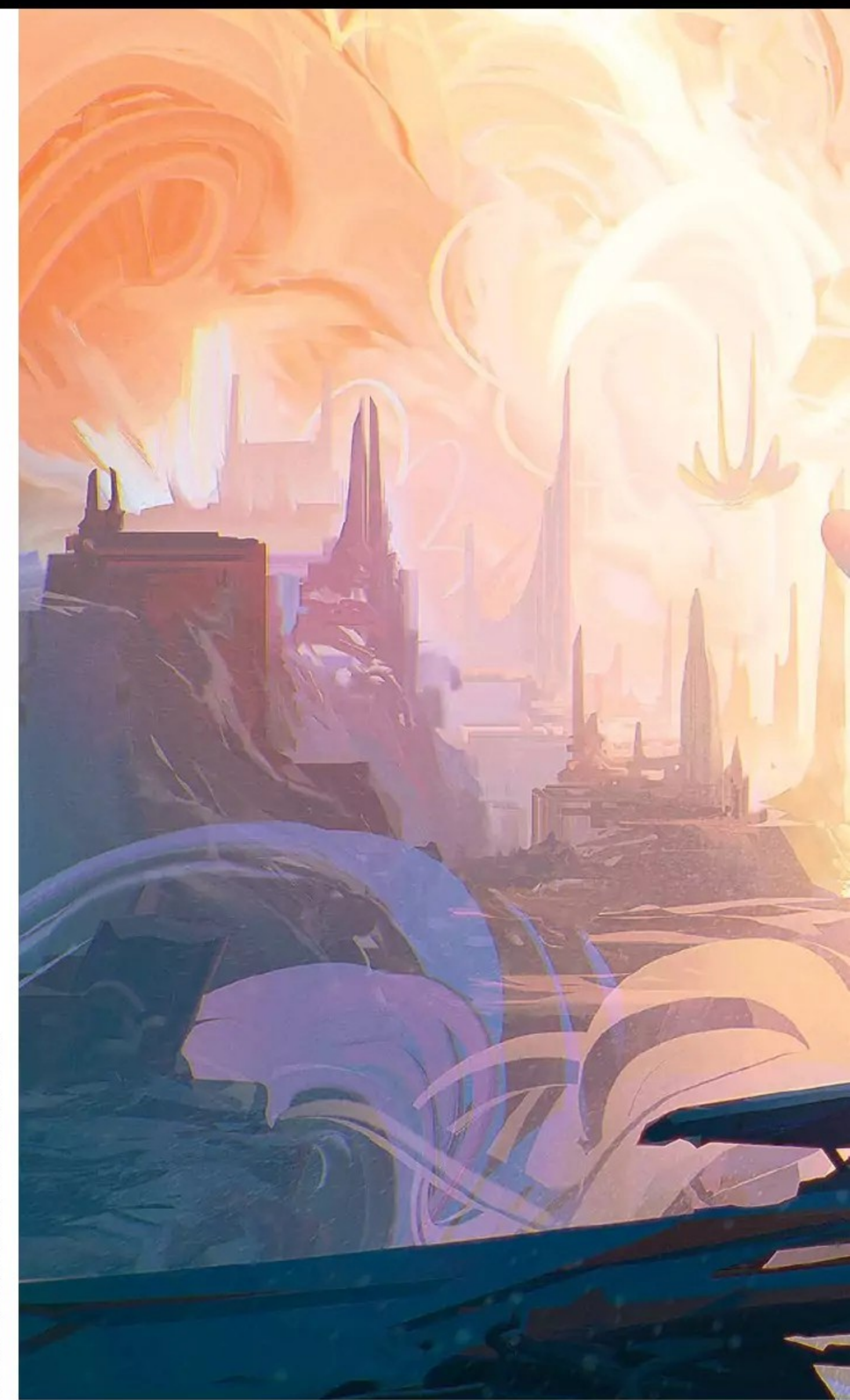
should always be the narrative. “Every decision that we take when painting backgrounds has to serve the larger

purpose of what the story is trying to say. We should always start with understanding the story as deeply as possible, and only then move onto executing the background itself. Once we understand the story, the lighting,

mood and tone decisions will be easy to make.”

As a background artist, you’re part of a team, and much of the job is about collaborating effectively with other artists working elsewhere in the production pipeline. Having worked on big productions such as *The Legend of Vox Machina*, Eduardo is well versed in the complexities that arise as work is passed around.

“Backgrounds have an interesting place in the pipeline because in many ways we inherit most of the boons and flaws everyone else made before us,” he says. “What’s most important is to understand that every mistake we commit and every mistake we



➔ don't deal with will be equally inherited by the next team, which in most cases will be compositing."

Being a good team player is about developing a strong sense of how the whole production fits together and your role within that. "As with most collaborative work, the key here is communication and understanding the process of animation well enough so that you can foresee problems before they happen," says Eduardo. "If everyone in the pipeline is aware of how what they do affects everyone else, then productions flow much more smoothly."

## ORGANISATION OF LAYERS

One of the most important things to do when handing off work is to make sure the files you're passing on are well-organised, says Morgan. "When you're a background artist, often you'll be managing hundreds of layers. It's good practice to make sure that all of your layers are named, grouped in accordance with respect to your foreground, midground, background, and clearly separated for

compositing teams down the pipeline. It helps with creating overlays and underlays for character animation, it ensures that pieces of your background can be edited easily for any adjustments."

Most people find this work a chore, so Morgan uses an attitudinal tweak to get herself to do it: "It helps me to treat it like an exercise in care for my fellow artists," she says.

## “ Get comfortable with being able to break down a style ”

Getting a job as a background artist on a team working with an established IP is often a matter of demonstrating that you can deeply immerse yourself in that universe and pick up the style and art direction.

"Get comfortable with being able to break down a style," says Morgan. "When I was working on Tales of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles adaptation, for example, I made a

"Embrace the process of experimenting, making mistakes, improving, and even deciding that you want to switch styles completely and start from scratch," says Cassie Jacobsen.

giant PureRef file of all of the feature films' visual development I could find. I tried to really break down how the scribble-style worked, and when and how scribbles were applied."

Morgan tells us she would do studies of small objects such as a clock or pizza slice, trying to replicate the style and "get it into my hands". These types of studies are great to put into your portfolio to demonstrate your ability to pick up an established style.

"It's also good to keep in mind with your portfolio that you should really be assessing what the artistic direction is of the IP you're interested in," Morgan adds. "How does the IP choose to depict organic elements like water or foliage? Graphically? More softly rendered? Do they use pure

A work created for the PleinAirpril annual challenge by Cassie Jacobsen. "You can never keep a file too organised," she advises.

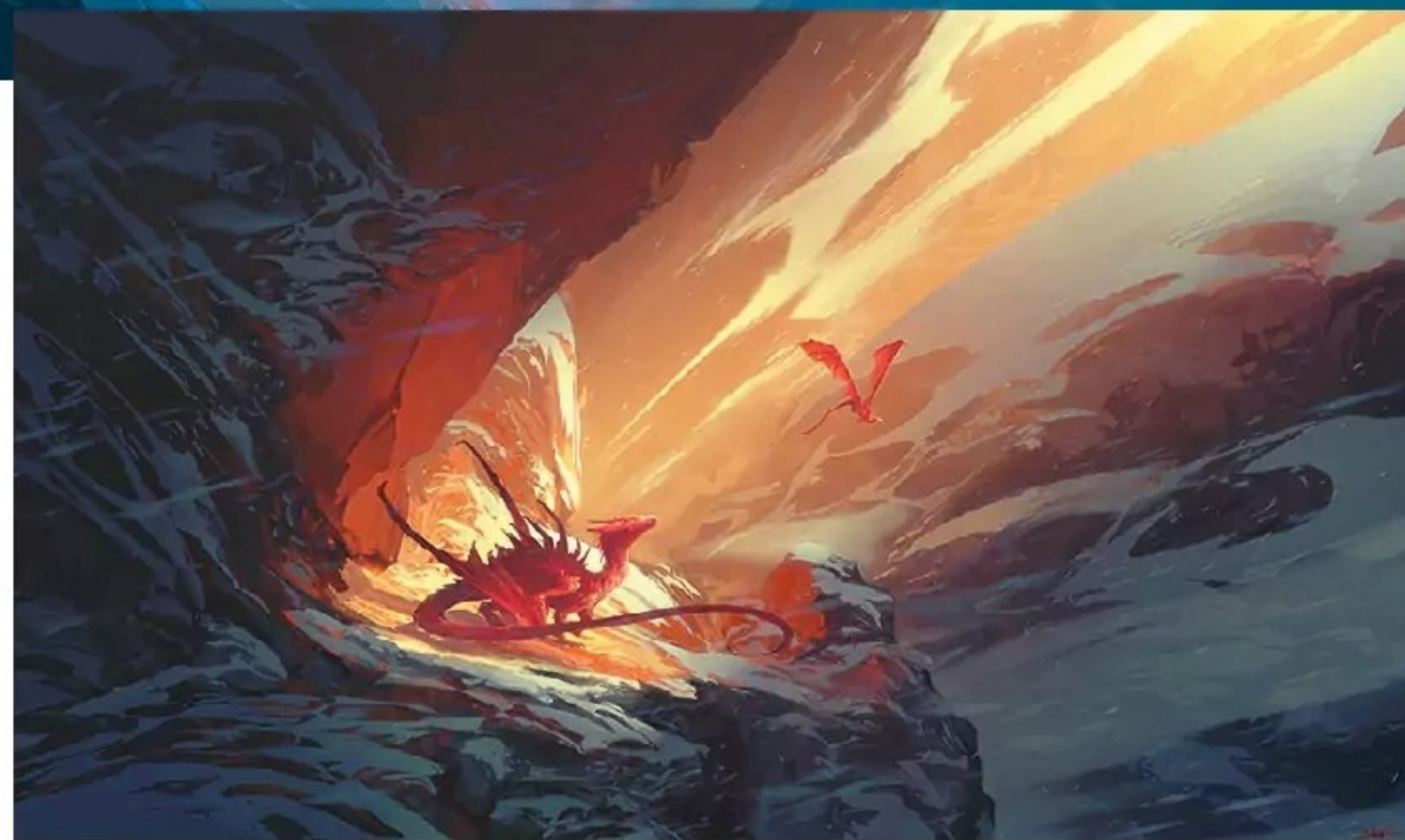


Eduardo Vargas has painted backgrounds for The Legend of Vox Machina, and worked on various other TV and film projects.





"When I added Gravity Sketch on Oculus to my toolkit, I was able to rediscover the joy of sculpting my stories," says Bastien Grivet.



black for their shadows? Do they use line-art or are they lineless? Do they incorporate elements like scribbles or halftone? If you can metabolise these nuances and showcase them in your own style or artwork, I think that goes a long way for demonstrating your capabilities rather than pure observational drawing."

## DOING YOUR HOMEWORK

Illustrator **Bastien Grivet**, who recently won an Emmy Award for his background design work on Star Trek:



Prodigy, agrees that this level of study is the key to success. "When it comes to pitching yourself, the more you show that you know the universe of the studio you want to join, the more they'll see that you're capable of solving their problems," he says. "When Dungeons & Dragons asked me to join their projects, I had to spend the first two weeks learning 50 years of art history dedicated to D&D. You have to do your homework to truly capture the essence of the stories your environments must convey."

One way to think about background design, says Morgan, is that in a sense, background design *is* character design. "We're all products of our environments and our environments

"I build my sets by hand in Gravity Sketch and import the geometry into Cinema 4D where I finish the texturing, lighting and rendering, then finalise in Photoshop or Clip Studio Paint," reveals Bastien Grivet.

also reflect a lot of our interiority back at us. This should be especially true for the worlds we craft because all of design is an informed choice.

"I try to always think about the person or people inhabiting the space. Thinking from a character lens ensures these choices are rooted in what I want the audience to learn about the people or their world. Are they messy? Are they self-conscious? Do they project wealth and power but you can see rental suit receipts peaking out under the rug? Look around at your own room. Take note about what your things say, or perhaps even hide about you.

"The most amazing thing about background art is that we get to think on this level, that every little scuff in a surface, or misplaced shoe, or crumb left behind in a scene is a purposeful clue to a fuller picture of a character." ■

## INDUSTRY INSIGHT

### CASSIE JACOBSEN

*The background specialist on the value of experimentation*

#### Tell us about your approach to setting the tone of an environment and creating atmosphere and emotion.

Sometimes, I already have a clear idea for a composition, but not its lighting or colours, or vice versa, so creating thumbnail sketches and paintings is a great way for me to fill in those gaps and choose the strongest scene. It forces me to simplify and not get lost in details that might detract from the tonal goal.

#### Are there any tips or tricks that pushed things to the next level for you?

Learning to paint scenes with neutral lighting first and then adding light and shadow via layer blending modes (like overlay and multiply) was a game-changer. Background painting can be such an overwhelming process, but I found that rendering each object without a specific light or colour scenario made the task much more manageable.

#### What mistakes do people make when getting to grips with background art?

Focusing on the outcome of finding a style over experimenting with tools and processes. Trying to hone in on your style too early can be limiting and even become frustrating when you hit creative roadblocks. When you allow yourself to experiment, try new methods, and get inspired by the things or artists you like and apply them to your work, you acquire skillsets that make you a more experienced artist. Your style will naturally develop and come through in your paintings.



*Cassie Jacobsen is a digital artist specialising in background painting and illustration*

<https://cljjsen.com>



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A control panel from an F4U Corsair (my favourite plane) holding up way too many sketchbooks.

Easel and lightboard.

Antique coca-cola bottle holder for storing supplies. Many things in my studio came from flea markets.

## Nik Henderson

**Wooden wonder** This illustrator transformed a shed into a tiny but mighty illustration studio



I work in a shed in southern Missouri, my nearest neighbours are cows and a freakishly large and oddly friendly armadillo. Originally this shed was meant for something

like gardening equipment and storage tubs, but with some insulation, drywall, and electricity it has become my creative sanctuary. I have been working here since early 2021 after I left art school, and it is still holding up strong.

The best thing about building a studio from scratch is that I can design my space however I want. I added a wrap-around desk so that I can easily switch between projects. I also added plenty of shelving over the top of it for storing books and sketch-pads.

My work day usually starts around 11am. I'm a bit of a night owl so after dinner I will usually be up until 1am. Night is my favourite time to work as there are far less distractions - unless coyotes are nearby with their yipping.

I always have something playing while I work. For music, I enjoy film ➡

# Artist news, software & events



Epson V600 scanner, an absolute trooper.

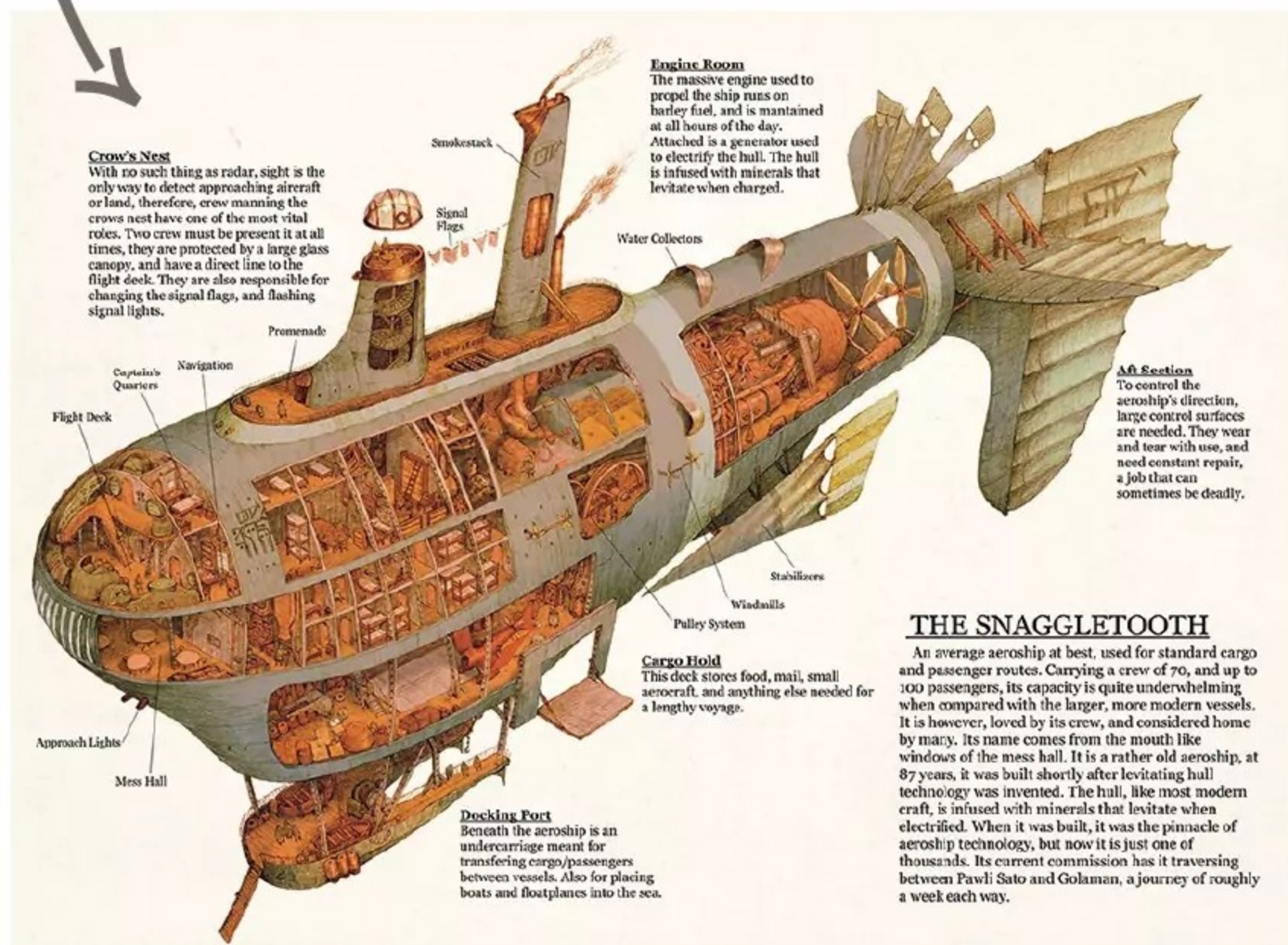
Last year I spent three months in Japan, and I met a very kind elderly man who gave me his handmade origami. It will forever be on my wall.

I love jigsaw puzzles. It's my way of relaxing at the end of the day.

My digital station, I use a mix of Procreate and GIMP for touching up my illustrations. I stopped using Photoshop a few years ago.

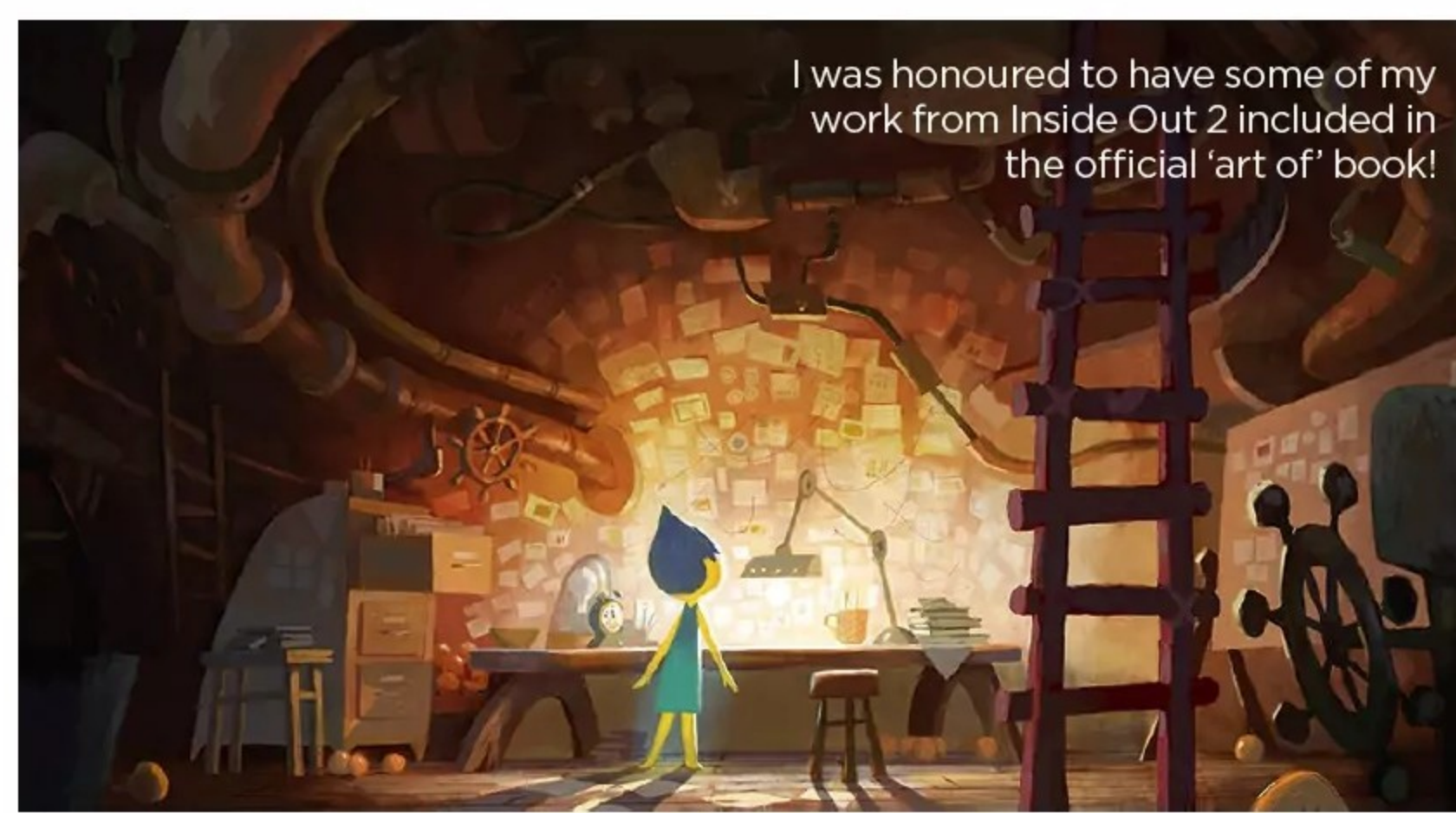
I decided to geek out and do a cutaway of an airship from a story I've been working on.

Some loose sketches from current projects. I like using cheap paper for brainstorming ideas.





A spread from *The Dream*, a wordless graphic novel with a story by Gideon Sterer.



I was honoured to have some of my work from *Inside Out 2* included in the official 'art of' book!



I am a big aviation history enthusiast, particularly when it comes to airships. I love to collect ephemera from the early days of flight. I grew up around airplanes so I have always had a fascination with anything that can fly.

A hobby of mine is building miniatures from scratch. I love the challenge of building something new and trying out new techniques. I think it's important to have a creative outlet besides my professional work.

## “ I am always experimenting and trying new techniques, since I'm never satisfied doing one thing for too long ”

➔ scores, particularly those by Joe Hisaishi, John Williams, and Howard Shore. I also like to listen to audiobooks and paranormal podcasts.

### THREE IN ONE

My studio space is split into three sections. The middle is where I have my easel and is where I do my traditional illustration work, primarily for children's books. I like to dabble in everything. So I have paints, graphite, colour pencils, charcoal, etc. I am always experimenting and trying new techniques, since I'm never satisfied doing one thing for too long.

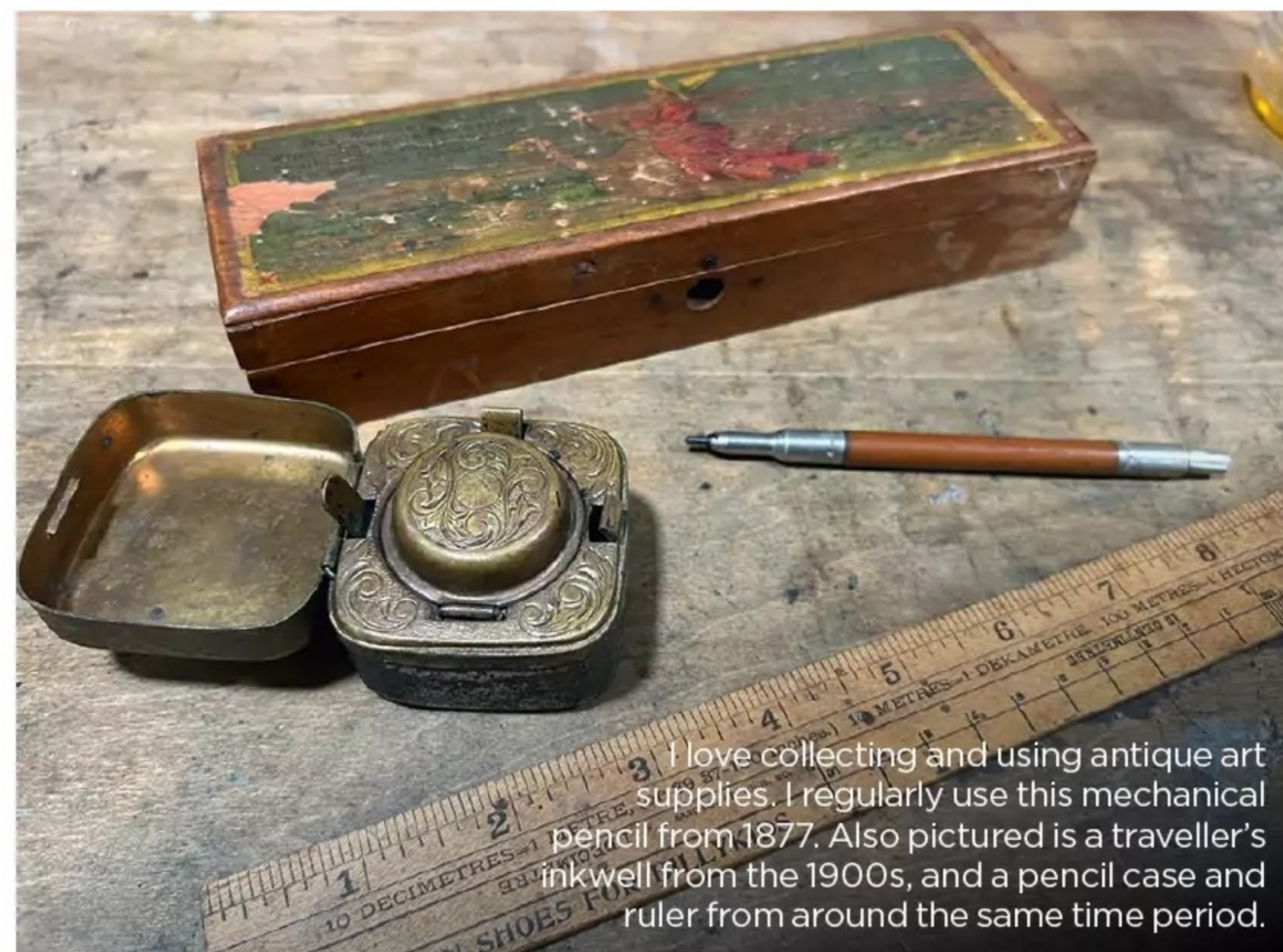
To the left is where I have my model-making setup. Building models and dioramas from scratch is a big hobby of mine, and serves as a creative outlet that isn't tied to the stress of deadlines and income. Sometimes I make small models as reference for my illustration work if I

need something specific. It is a great deal of fun and I enjoy the challenge.

To the right of my easel is my digital setup. I do most of my digital work on an iPad Pro using Procreate, usually for touching up my illustrations or adding colour. I also have my scanner and a MacBook. I prefer working traditionally over digitally, so don't use these very often. Further down the table, you can find my jigsaw puzzle space.

My studio has been my favourite spot for the last five years. I am planning to relocate in the near future, so it will be sad to leave it behind, but I will always remember it as the place where my career began.

*Nik Henderson is an illustrator and visual development artist whose clients include Pixar, HarperCollins, and Penguin Random House. He studied illustration at SCAD and currently lives in Strafford, Missouri.*  
<https://bit.ly/4dezJZw>



I love collecting and using antique art supplies. I regularly use this mechanical pencil from 1877. Also pictured is a traveller's inkwell from the 1900s, and a pencil case and ruler from around the same time period.



This is my little studio from the outside. It has a perfect porch for reading and watching the sunset. I also get great views of incoming thunderstorms.



Second Place, created in Rebelle 8 Pro. "Super happy how this one turned out!"

## The path of... Niko Gesell

**Moving pictures** The freelance artist and animator tells us about his varied career



### What's the last piece that you finished, and how does it differ?

I just finished my first aerial-shot painting called Second Place. It's about two airplanes racing through the clouds and is much more about selling an idea and getting a mood across. So something that would probably be used in pre-production or to pitch something - very different from doing tile sets that later get assembled in the game itself.

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



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

I honestly think ignorance was a blessing. If I had known the amount of hours it would take, I might have been discouraged early on. The biggest advice I would give myself is to do more of the kind of art that I like, and not just what the industry demands.

**“The biggest advice I would give myself is to do more of the kind of art that I like”**

The Driftwood Shipyard. "Part of a larger project based on the idea that 'Driftwood Vikings' rely on items washed ashore due to limited resources on their own land."

Do not always mould yourself into a cookie-cutter form. But there are obviously huge upsides to making sure your art can be used in productions. That being said, I love the journey I've had so far.

### Has digital art changed for good since you've been working in it?

Not really, no. I think people are struggling more than they were a few years ago. The prevalence of AI has scared a lot of people away from investing in games and has just created general insecurity among artists. It's much more about being unique and having your own voice.

### What character or scene that you've painted do you most identify with?

[That would definitely be] The Estate (the orange house). It's actually based on a house in the surrounding area of Nürnberg and feels most like home. There is something about old but colourful buildings that speaks to me. My dad used to do a lot of renovation work on old buildings, so I think I was taught to appreciate those.

Reading Corner. "Made as a practice piece, the goal was to further improve environment and background art skills."



Herbologists Room. "I wanted to play around with Blender's Eevee renderer for a while and this is the end result!"



"Studying at the Temple can be relaxing!"

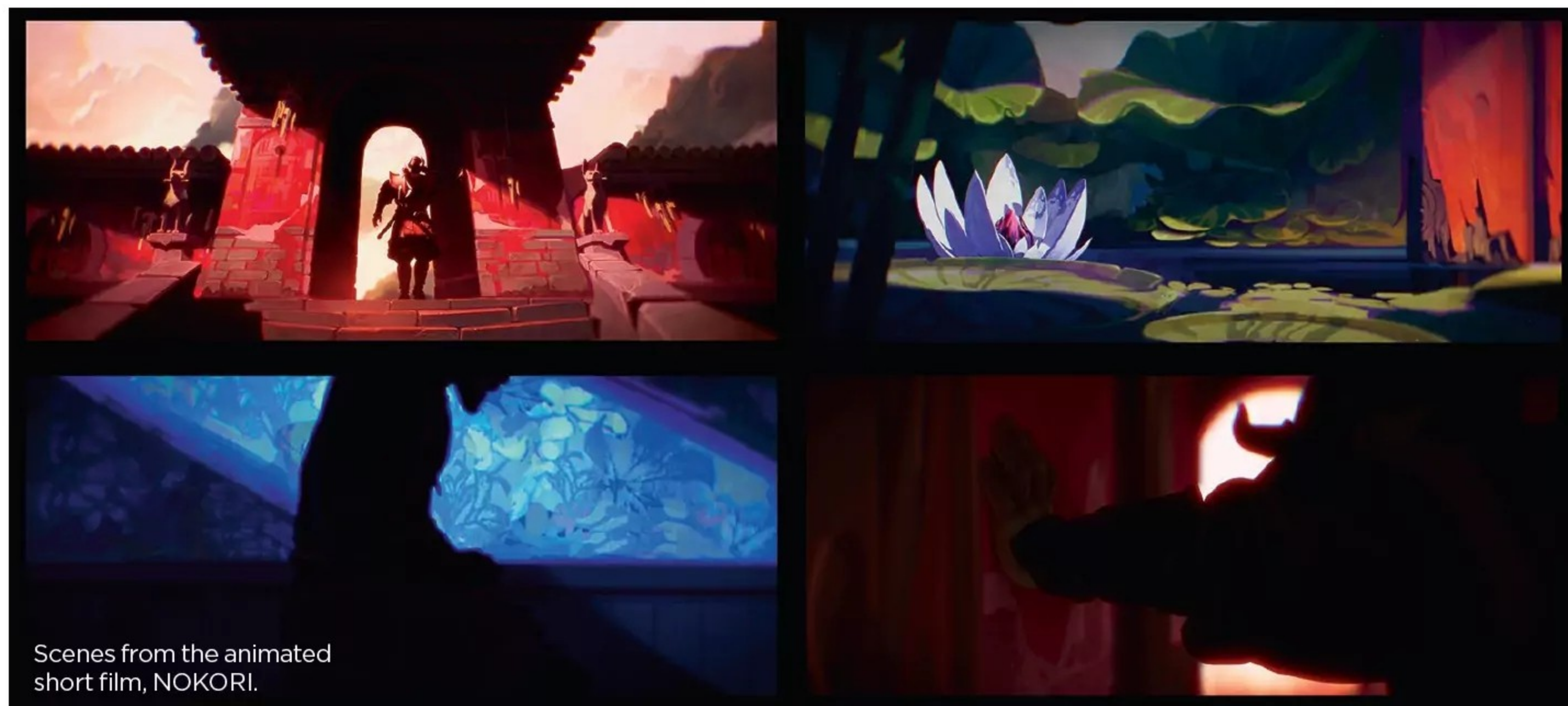
## What is your next step in art or life?

I've been a huge film fan my whole life and have recently moved into that industry with my work. A lot of the knowledge from games does translate very well, but there are so many new things to learn and understand. In addition, I've had the chance to direct my first animated short film, NOKORI, recently, which plays at a few festivals. I think I want to do more of that!



*Based in Nuremberg, Germany, Niko focuses on creating work that feels authentic, immersive, and visually striking.*

[www.artstation.com/nikogesell](http://www.artstation.com/nikogesell)



Scenes from the animated short film, NOKORI.

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# Letters

YOUR FEEDBACK & OPINIONS

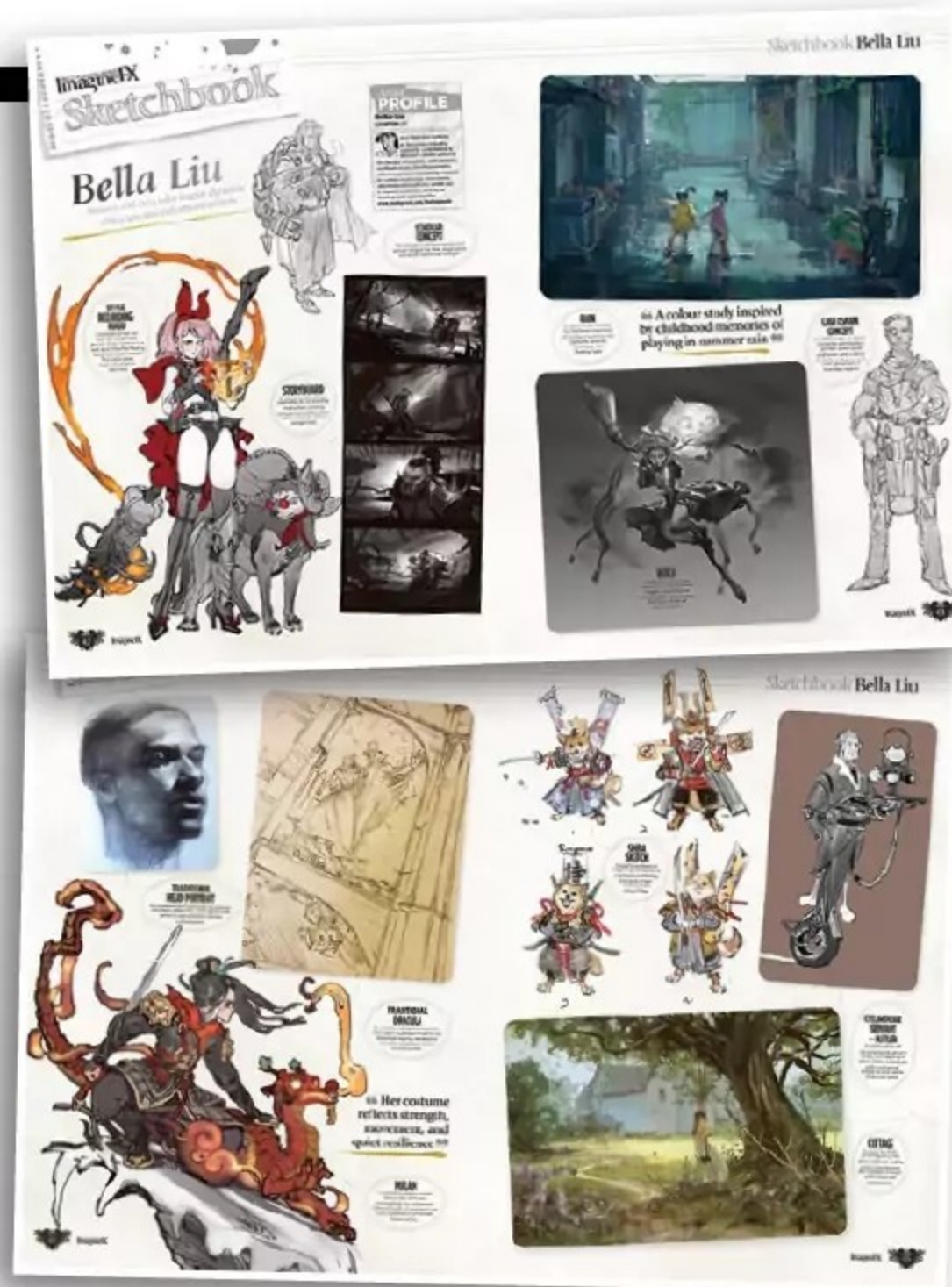


Contact the editor, **Rob Redman**, on [mail@imaginefx.com](mailto:mail@imaginefx.com) or write to ImagineFX, Future Publishing, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA, England

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Bella Liu opened the pages of her sketchbook, filled with her stylish take on a wide range of subjects.

style is something else. I don't know quite how he manages to paint such recognisable images that are so far from the originals, but it works so well.

**Dean, via email**

**Rob replies** Hey Dean. You are so right! Luis really has a knack for capturing the essence of not just people but creatures too and there's no mistaking who he has painted. It isn't something we see so often these days, but we're so glad we got the chance to talk to him about his work and to showcase some of it in the magazine.

### Magical sketches

Your sketchbook section is my favourite part of the magazine each month and last issue was beautiful. Bella seems like such a talent: versatile and her rendering style really speaks to me. Thank you for getting her to share her work.

**Chloe, via email**

**Rob replies** Hi Chloe. Good to hear from you and yes! Bella is a fantastic artist and we were honoured to have her in our last issue. She covers a lot of ground with her distinctive style and she manages to mix things up at the same time, which is no mean feat!

### Mechanical anatomy

Hi Rob. A simple quick thank-you from me. I really liked the tutorial last issue on robot concept art. Great seeing JC's process but also the finished art, which was really inspiring. Thank you JC!

**Eddie, via email**

**Rob replies** Hi Eddie. I'll be sure to pass that along to JC. His workshop was ace, wasn't it? I really like how he imbues so much personality into those robots, giving them bucketloads of personality and his rendered style is gorgeous too.

## FRESH PAINT

New works that have grabbed our attention



**Kat Taylor**  
[@kat\\_taylors\\_art](https://instagram.com/kat_taylors_art)



**Neri**  
[@nerimitsu](https://instagram.com/nerimitsu)



**Krishen Cotta**  
[@krishen.c](https://instagram.com/krishen.c)

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



### Strange anatomy

Thank you so much for your last issue. I know you've covered anatomy before, but I was pleased to see a different take. Luis Rojas' caricatures were cool, but I really liked seeing how anatomy can be used for non-human art. All the imaginary creatures in the article were fantastic. More please!

**Evie, via email**

**Rob replies** Hi Evie, thanks for getting in touch. It's always a pleasure to hear from readers, especially when there's such praise. I couldn't agree more. Anatomy is obviously core to many characters, but is so useful for creatures of all sorts. Having an understanding of these things doesn't mean you can't break the rules. Just do it in an informed and believable way.

### Embracing the weird

Your last issue was so good! I'm not much of a character artist, but I still enjoyed the magazine and found some useful nuggets in there. I did really like the Luis Rojas article though and his

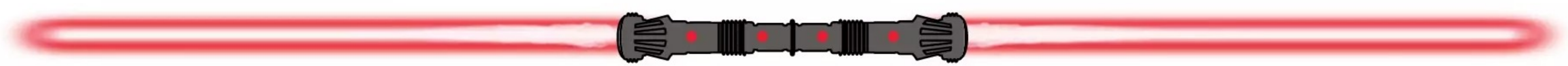
Explore some warped anatomy, created by caricaturist, Luis Rojas.



**DID YOU MISS THE PREVIOUS PACKED ISSUE?** Don't worry – you can get hold of issue 266 at [ifxm.ag/single-ifx](https://ifxm.ag/single-ifx).

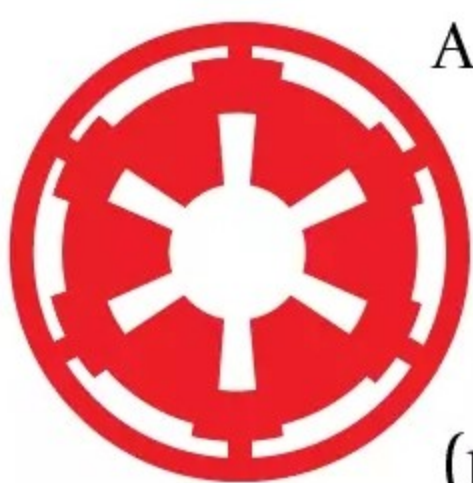
# PAINTING THE MENACE

Andre Kirk, art director at Lucasfilm Animation, discusses the visual development work produced for the animated series **Star Wars: Maul – Shadow Lord** with James Clark



## ROOFTOP VIEW

Clint Felker's development art visualises the menace of the planet Janix and Maul's docked ship in a world of light and shadow.



A striking and unsettling presence who has been part of a galaxy far, far away for nearly 30 years, Maul (previously Darth Maul, a creation of George Lucas) has embodied a fierce, tragic and intelligent fusion of mind and body since being introduced in the movie *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*. Well established as a favourite character, Maul's trajectory has been given fascinating development in the new animated serial produced by

Lucasfilm Animation, *Star Wars: Maul – Shadow Lord*.

ImagineFX speaks with Lucasfilm animation art director Andre Kirk about the visual language of *Maul – Shadow Lord* and its conceptual visual iterations.

**Andre, how has the design language for this new series built on what audiences will know or be familiar with, whilst also pursuing something new?**

With *Maul – Shadow Lord*, [Lucasfilm president] Dave Filoni was very

involved in the look and what he wanted it to be. A lot of that was going back to the work that we had done on the early series of *The Clone Wars* and that painterly style that we wanted back then, but a lot of the technology was fighting us in terms of getting it to move and feel like a painting. Now we're at a point where we can actually fully realise that. Subsequently, it was about training the team in oil painting, explaining to them this look that we wanted and how you would traditionally paint it. For example, we don't want to see the

## PRINCIPAL PLAYERS

The three protagonists of Star Wars: Maul – Shadow Lord: Brander Lawson, Devon Izara and Maul; his silhouette so familiar and resonant.



## JANIX CENTRAL SPACEPORT

Ben Bryant's concept art for Janix Central Spaceport applies familiar Star Wars architectural language to a new environment.



➔ paper underneath the paint. Think of this as oil painting. If you want light, it's the colour; it's not the paper revealing itself. Showing them the distinctions between watercolour, gouache, oil painting and acrylic, to try and push the oil-painted style of things was really important. For some of the younger designers who haven't had as much exposure to traditional media, it was about training them up so that we could have that be present in the designs and follow all the way through the assets, through lighting, through texture, through everything and appear like that on screen. We get the feeling of the thickness of the paint on surfaces, which previously in early episodes of *The Clone Wars* might have just been texture. Now we've got so much more that we can

■ **We can get some of those edges to reflect the painterly nature that we're after** ■



### JANIX HOVERWAY PLATFORM

Designing the forms of Janix required artists to consider seen and unseen spaces as they iterated a plausible Star Wars cityscape.

use. And with our incredible work and effect, we can get some of those edges to reflect the painterly nature that we're after.

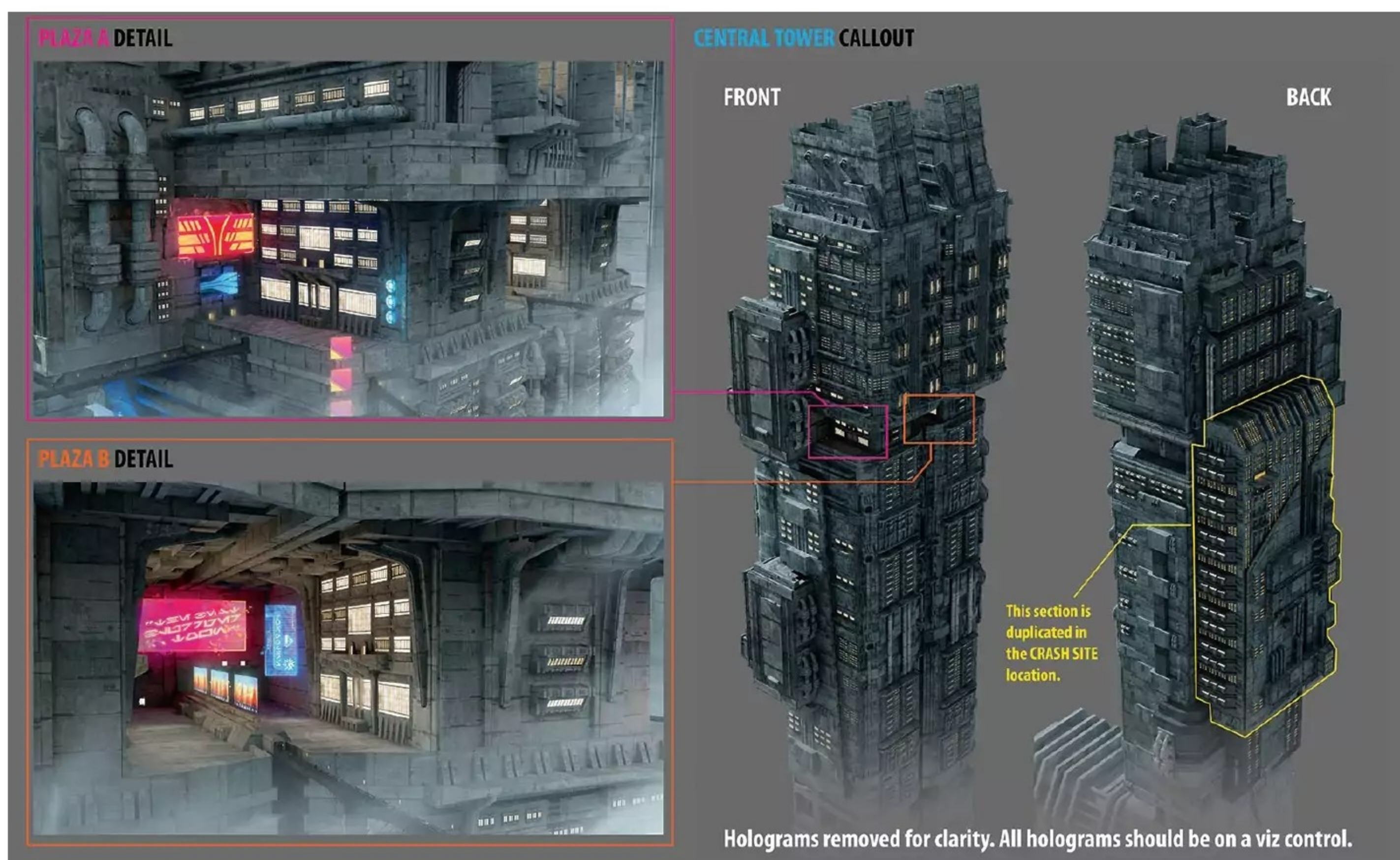
**In relation to Janix, is there a particular architectural feature or space that you might be able to unpack a little bit more, in terms of that design process?**

Dave Filoni was very set on what he wanted Janix to look like. He had done several sketches that outlined the city, which is set in a crater that was formed on this jungle planet a

long time ago and the city has developed in there with outlying sister cities around it. He was very specific about us looking at different architectural styles for the different locations in the city. We looked at a lot of retro-futurism, the future we were all promised and never received. Filoni also wanted Janix to have a lot of terrestrial transportation as opposed to air transportation, which is more reminiscent of Coruscant, and so we were figuring that out as well. We had to ask questions like 'Do you have a tube transportation system? How do people get around? Do we need to make room for pedestrians? Is this a walkable city?' All of these thoughts make their way into the designer's individual tasks, providing a broader understanding, even if they're not working on a train system, but they're working on a street. They'll know 'Oh, okay, I should put a subway entrance in here. I should put in crosswalks. Is there a central island in the road?' Things that we deal with in our day-to-day life, but don't necessarily pay attention to in the Star Wars universe. The people on Janix would have the same problems.

**What has the design process emphasised in the work for the character of Maul?**

There was a lot of work on coming up with the look for the show, like the brief of getting that living painting feeling, and Maul was one of the test characters that we would iterate, in terms of asking 'What is this look that we want to achieve? And how can ➔





## THE MAKING OF MAUL

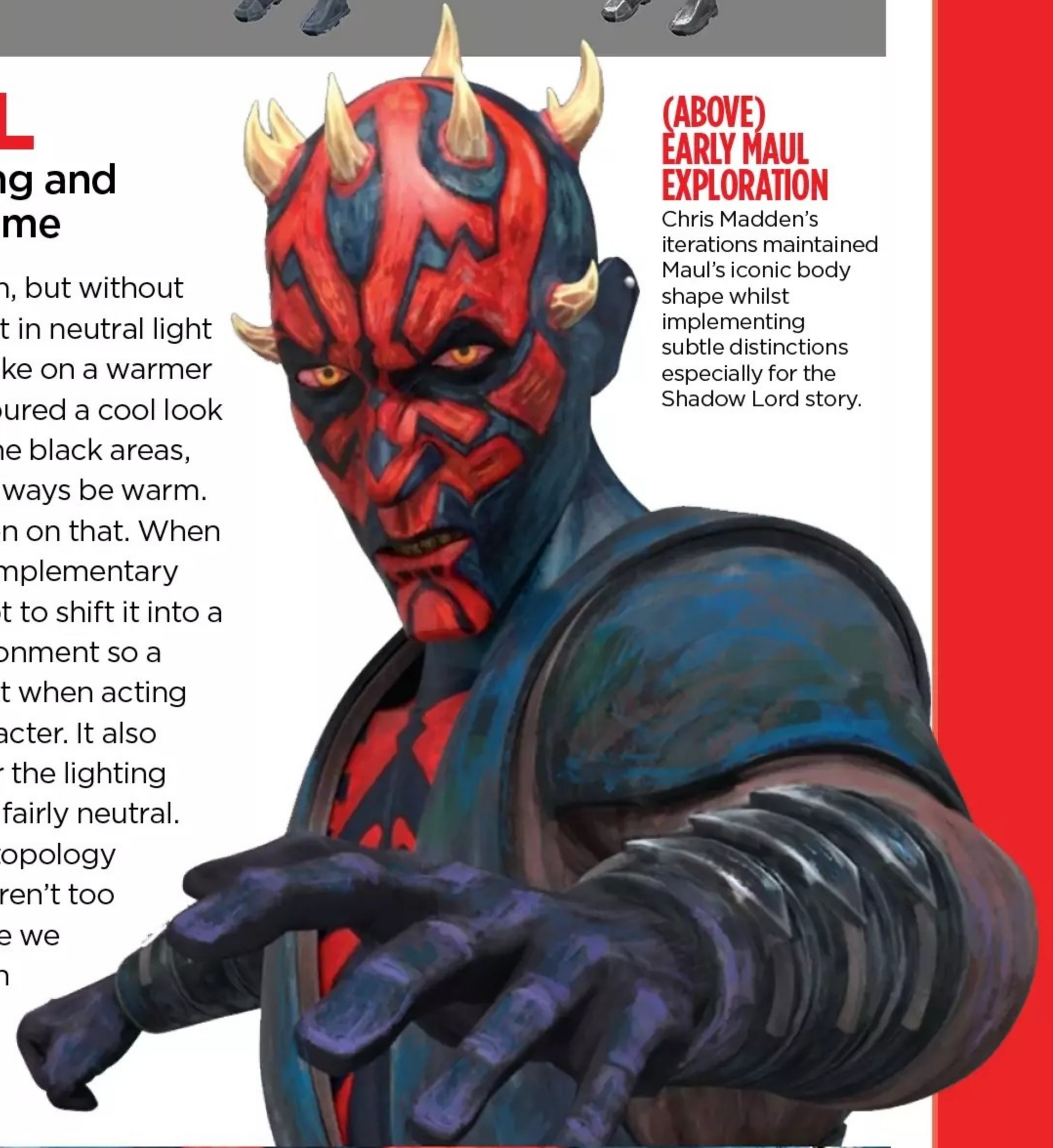
Andre talks us through the process of designing and considering Maul's look for his body and costume

"A lot of it is about breaking up solid colours into complementary colours and having additional hues to make your eye realise that this is a painted surface. It's not a solid colour. So, with Maul, and for the environments, we don't want that flat solid colour. We want to see that someone has painted that out of very similar hues and very similar values, but they've broken up that surface with paint. So, with Maul, if we get in close, we don't want to see the pores of the skin. We want to get closer to the painting ... to see those brushstrokes. That is the surface of our world. It's not reality. It's something you have to sort of be aware of and go 'Oh, that's going too realistic.' We want the paint to be the surface of objects and clothing and skin. There was a lot of work with that; particularly on Maul's

black outfit and his skin, but without totally shifting it so that in neutral light he doesn't suddenly take on a warmer look. For Maul, we favoured a cool look to offset the red and the black areas, rather than have him always be warm. There is a concentration on that. When we introduce these complementary colours or hues, it is not to shift it into a different lighting environment so a character will stand out when acting opposite another character. It also makes it a lot easier for the lighting team if the colours are fairly neutral. But in terms of Maul's topology and his body, there weren't too many changes because we were pretty happy with where he was in The Clone Wars season seven."

### (ABOVE) EARLY MAUL EXPLORATION

Chris Madden's iterations maintained Maul's iconic body shape whilst implementing subtle distinctions especially for the Shadow Lord story.



# Feature

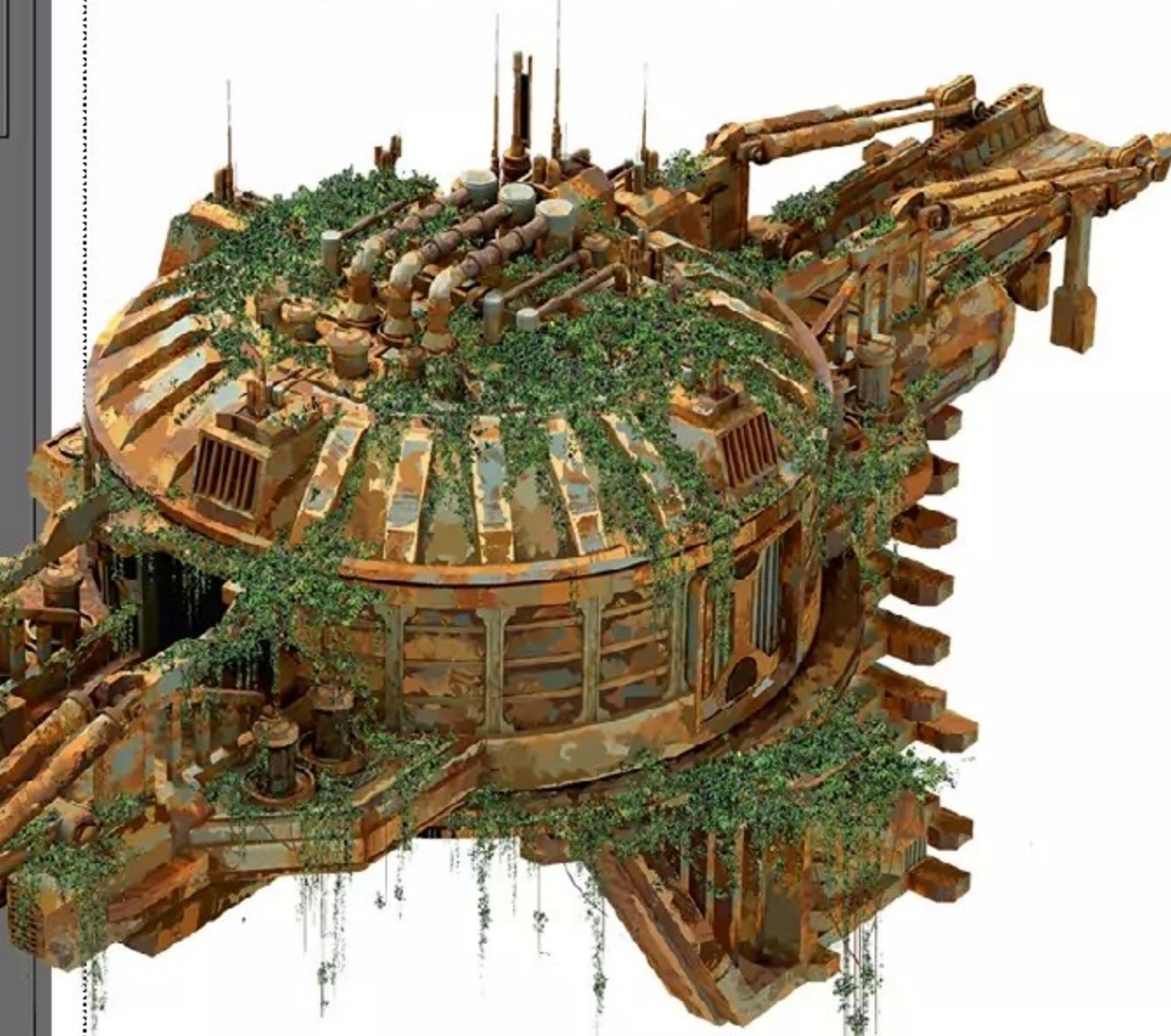
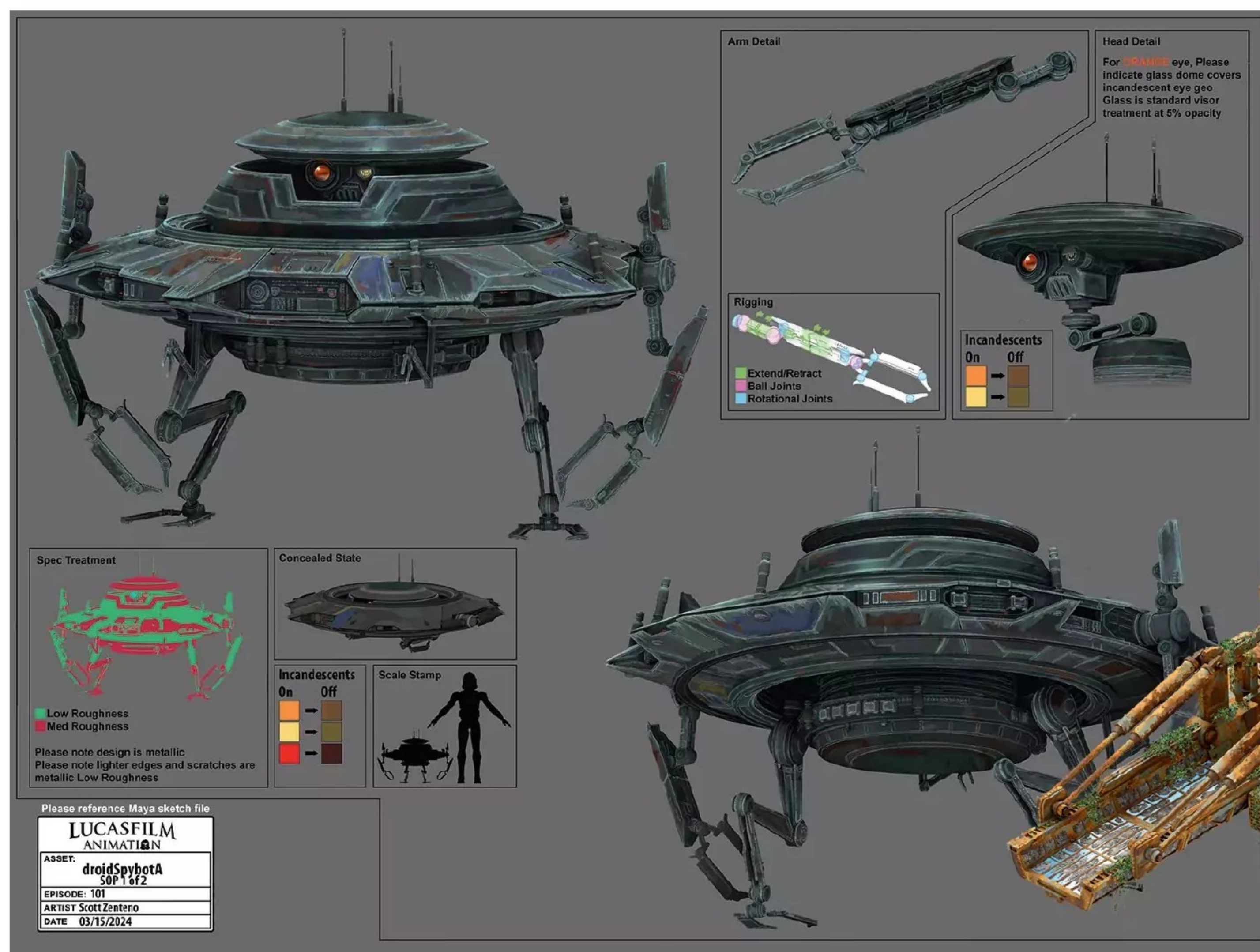
➔ we anticipate it moving?' It set the challenge for all of the departments, and we asked 'How would you build a texture, model it, animate it and light it? We did a lot of iteration on Maul's face but without losing who Maul is. He is immediately recognisable, but we also want to be able to say 'That's our Maul.' We want to be able to pick him out of a crowd, or if you walk into a store and you see a bunch of action figures, you can easily say 'Oh, that's our Maul'.

**Andre, what are the essential character iteration approaches that you and your team work through?**

With our character designs, we have about seven days to work on a character, and what the designer has to factor in is that at the end of those seven days you're sending off a design that needs to be turned into a 3D asset with no questions asked. So, we don't want to risk the delay that a question can pose. We're trying to answer everything we possibly can on that sheet. So, at the end of that seven-day build period, we'll turn in a design sheet with orthographic turns, which is the more technical part of the delivery, but we're also going to make a 'Spirit-Of' image. The Spirit-Ofs will show off the mannerisms of the

**■ Silhouette roughs are great; the rougher the better so we can get those iconic images ■**

character and more vibrant and stylised colours. The main designs are often fairly technical with characters in an A-pose to make them easier to build, and the Spirit-Ofs will be more expressive. When you add them together, it gives the crew a full picture of what and who a character is. The main pages of the technical designs will show details on the line work, colour, and orthographic views – for those we'll send in a front, back, and side-view angles. The front and back image will be lit, but the left and right side-views are flat-coloured so that we can provide the most accurate information on how to interpret a design's textures. We don't want to have someone accidentally eye-drop a colour somewhere where we've created a highlight. Our artists also indicate a



**MAUL SAFE HOUSE BRIDGE**  
Clint Felker's art suggests the dynamic between tech and wild overgrowth, evoking a sense of ruin.

## JEDI MASTER STYLE

Andre talks us through the process and questions involved in designing and clothing Jedi Master, Eeko-Dio Daki

"There was a lot of development on his back story, outfit and how he should be dressed. His costume is very similar to a flight suit, but where did he get it? Is it his originally? He's on the run, but is he a pilot? In disguise? Ultimately all of our characters have this level of scrutiny because it's our job to think about all these questions in Design, and Master Daki was no different. And then there are things you might not consider, like his cape. How do you break that up into multicolours? How do you get those additional hues in there, but get it to

store light fairly evenly? Do you paint in shadows so we can rely on [those] you get from the folds of the fabric? How will we do tattered edges on the fabric, the hood, the cape? Ultimately the question becomes how do we retain the painterly and stylised nature of the world without things getting too realistic? Sometimes where you do see real-world textures, like a cotton weave or something in a fabric, it's oversized. It's not attempting to be realistic. It's a bit like what you would have with plaster gypsum. A lot of our surface texture is that and it's telling



### EEXO-DIO DAKI

The character's visual development process explored expressivity, head shape, and light and shadow interplay.

the designers, 'Hey, you might not have played with gypsum, but this is what it looks like, and this is what we're after; where your surface texture goes in and out between paint, then weave, then paint, and then weave.' It's all of these observational things that you pass onto your design team that are able to integrate into their work and have it help develop their designs."

# Star Wars: Maul – Shadow Lord



## RECOGNISABLE CHARACTERS

Chris Madden's image of Maul and Devan coalesces around the importance of character silhouettes that are quickly readable by the viewer.

hex number for a character's base skin tone, so that we know it will accurately appear in a number of different lighting environments. The eye and pupil size on the designs will also indicate if it's a human or alien creature. Any information that we want to draw attention to, we would call out on these sheets. Whether it's calling attention to an animation-supervisor, an asset-supervisor or an effects-supervisor, saying, for example, that 'This character has a glowing right hand.' We would indicate that, and we'd indicate what colour the glow is as well. Our designers have to keep their build timelines in mind as they work over their seven-day periods. Usually we like to aim for getting rough sketches out on the first day so that I can get and give approval on everything. Silhouette roughs are great; the rougher the better so we can get those iconic images. For example, you don't want it to be mistaken for someone else if it's backlit. You want it to be recognisable as its own character. If it's in a scene with a bunch of other characters, it'll be very good to show those characters their silhouettes as well, next to your line-up of characters that you're wanting to get a buy-off on. It's good to do about five or six roughs of the character you're designing and then, as we work forward on our character, we get to the point where we can finally deliver that package at the end of the seven-day period. ➡➡

## STAR WARS CITY

Andre Kirk discusses artists' perspectives on the planet of Janix and how the details are crucial

"There's very little interpretation between the designs and the final product. So for instance, for the bridge (seen in episode 1 of the series), the design team would be responsible for showing you every angle of it: how it would work, how it connects to the buildings, how the buildings are made, what they look like from every angle. What the signs are on those buildings and just sort of laying out the

space that you're in. We give opportunity for the storyboard artists to move things around, but once we've checked with the supervising director on very specific things he wants, we'll lock that down. We don't want someone to look at a scene and go 'Wait. Where am I?' It has to make sense not just for the story but also in a real-world city layout way, even though it's something a viewer might never see."

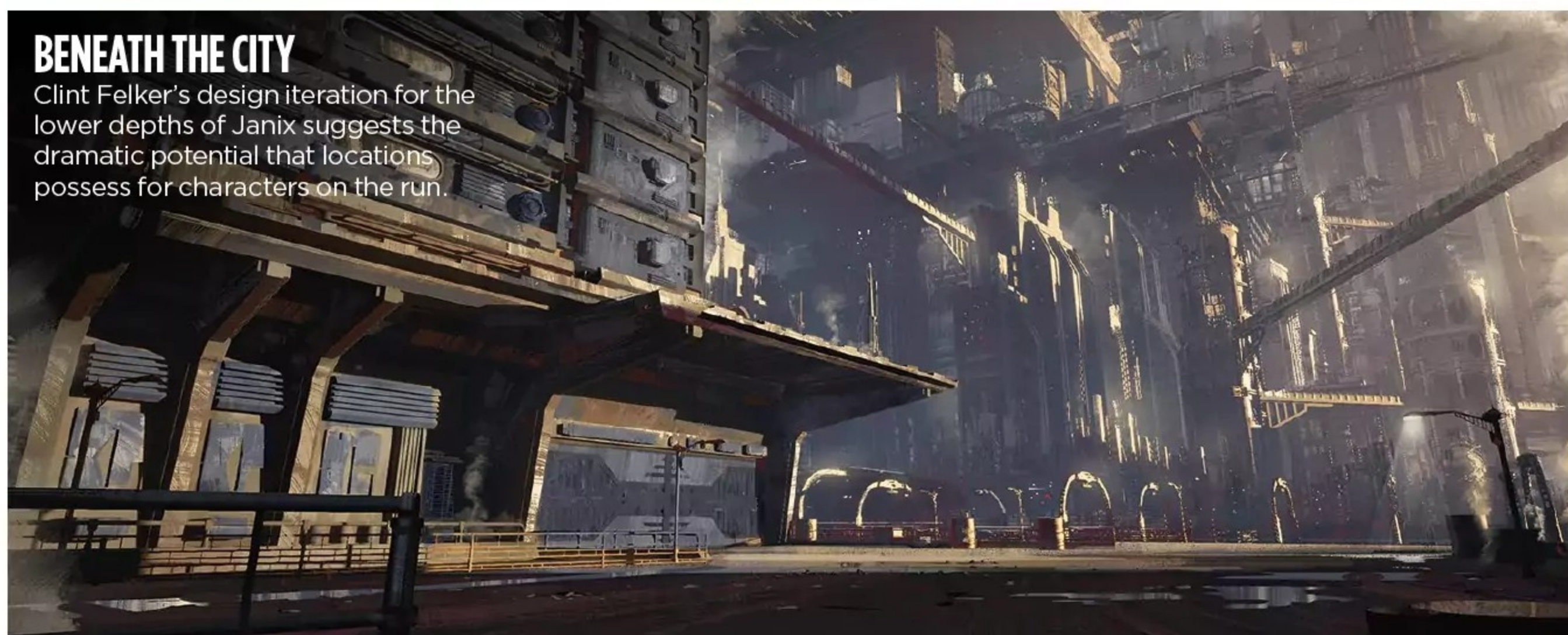


## JANIX OVERVIEW

Chris Felker's Janix image fuses the technological and natural in a familiar Star Wars aesthetic; evoking, too, the design of Utapau in Star Wars: Revenge of the Sith.

## BENEATH THE CITY

Clint Felker's design iteration for the lower depths of Janix suggests the dramatic potential that locations possess for characters on the run.



## STRIKE A POSE

Chris Madden's Maul 'A-pose' defines proportion, textural specifics and colour range.



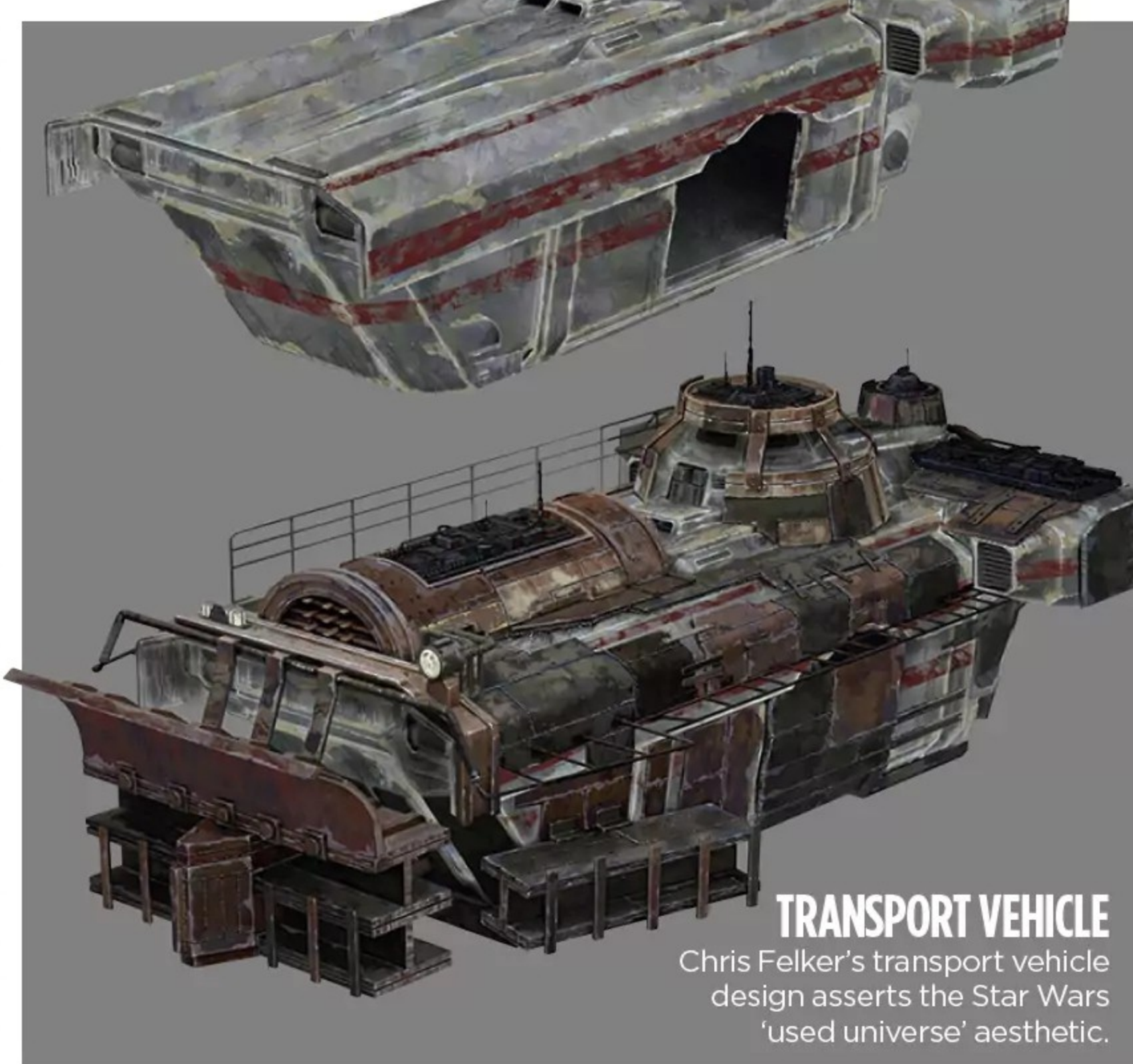


## JANIX SPACEPORT SHIPYARD

Clint Felker's design for a spaceport shipyard applies a monochrome look that's consistent with the wider 'film noir' visual style for Janix.

### ➤➤ Could you talk us through the visual development / concept / iterations art for alien characters?

It's always challenging, but really rewarding once we figure out how to solve the complications of a design. Looking at Jedi Master Eeko-Dio Daki as an example: we wanted to create a new species of alien for this character, and there was a lot of iteration because we didn't want to make just a standard dinosaur, we wanted something more unique and 'Star Wars'. We wanted an alien character that could emote, which is always tricky the further you go away from the human. In its neutral conversational turn, it should be able to hold a conversation with you. You want it to be a speaking character and you want to be able to relate to them. These are all things that are very difficult to do. It's easy enough to do cute with not much speaking. But to design someone that you could hold a conversation with and not either laugh



## TRANSPORT VEHICLE

Chris Felker's transport vehicle design asserts the Star Wars 'used universe' aesthetic.

“ We wanted an alien character that could emote, which is always tricky ”

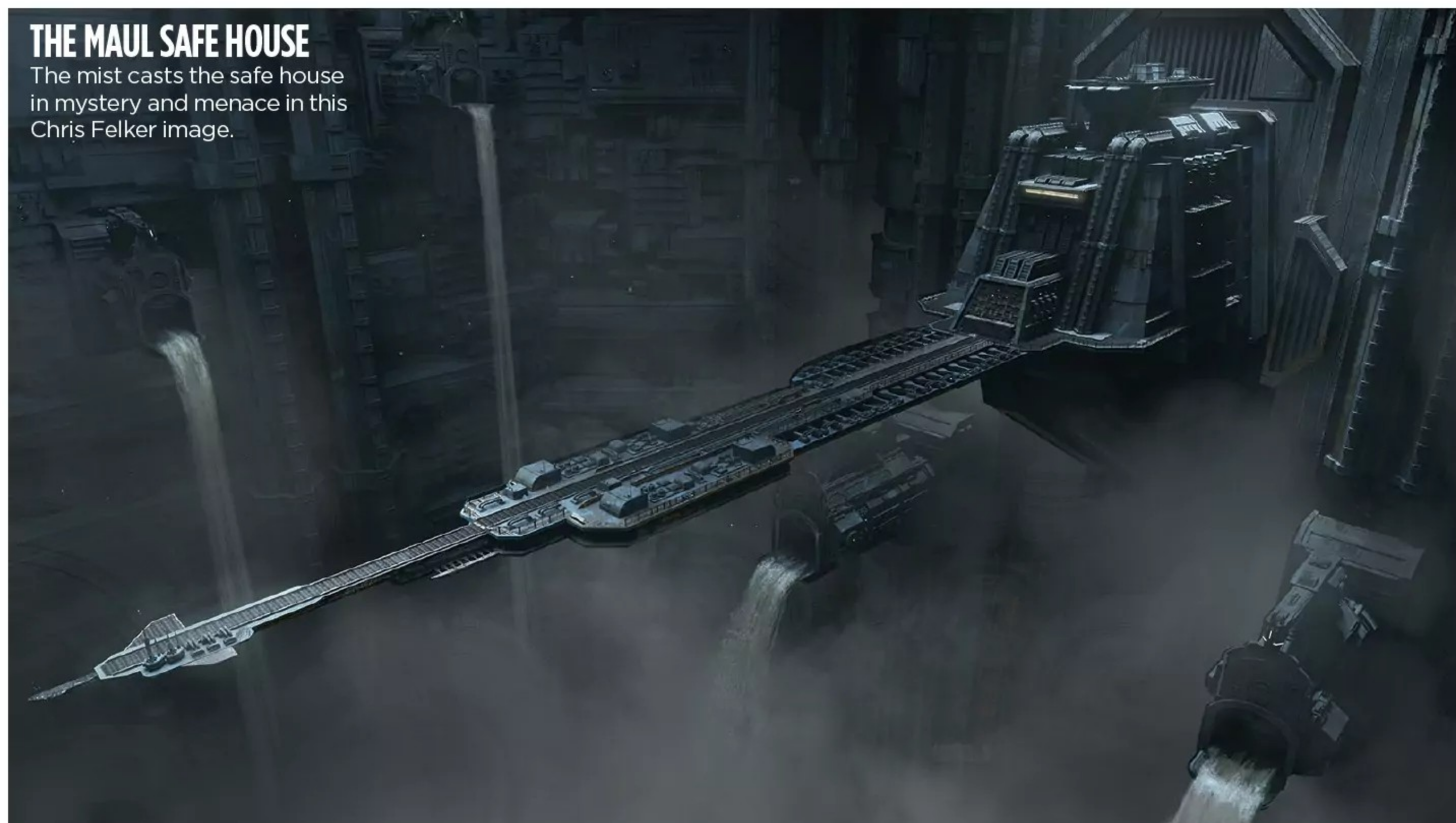
or not be afraid of is a challenge. Eeko-Dio Daki has the potential to be scary, but he has the potential for all these other emotions too; it was about striking a balance. And then it gets even more tricky when you're told to have a character that can blend into a crowd. So, you always have to balance the character by themselves as unique and interesting, but not so bespoke and unique that they can't still disappear in a crowd. A lot of that is solved by making sure that the rest of the world also has aliens in it so that you're asking 'Oh, what's their back story?' You don't want them to steal the scene, but you want to set the stage that this isn't the only alien in this world. It's just another alien that you're talking to. But, through their performance and the emotion in their face, they can illustrate that they're capable of all these varied emotions, actions and motivations.

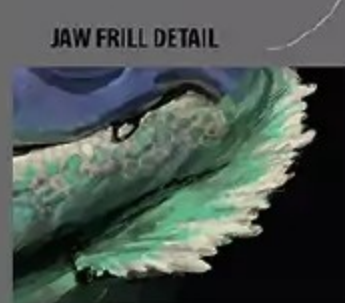
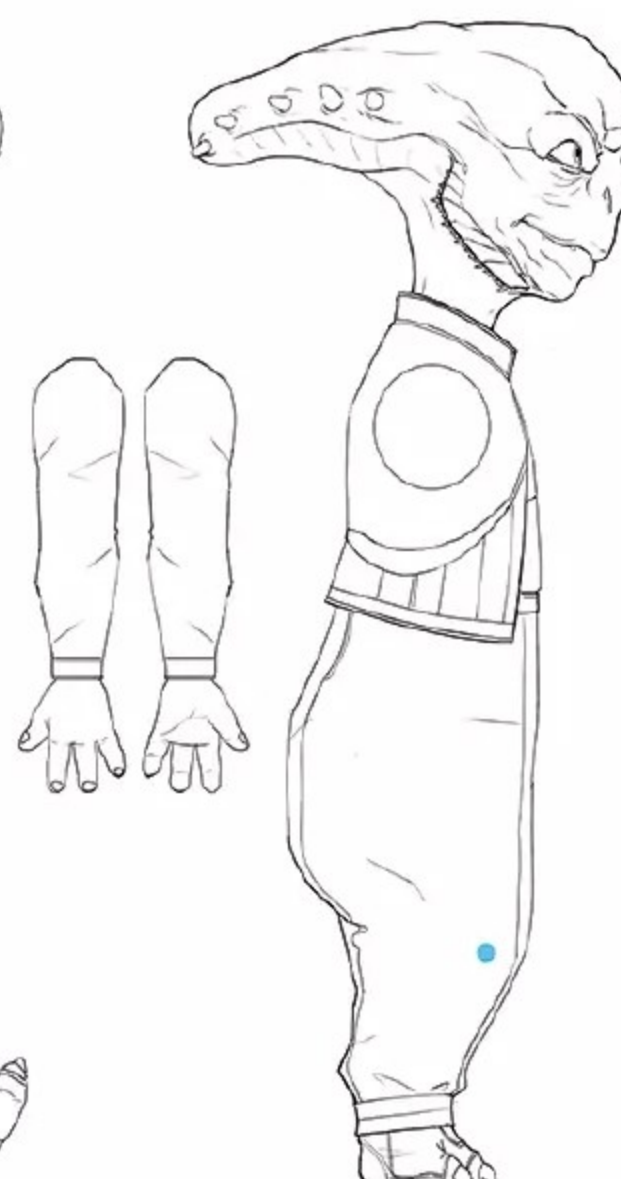
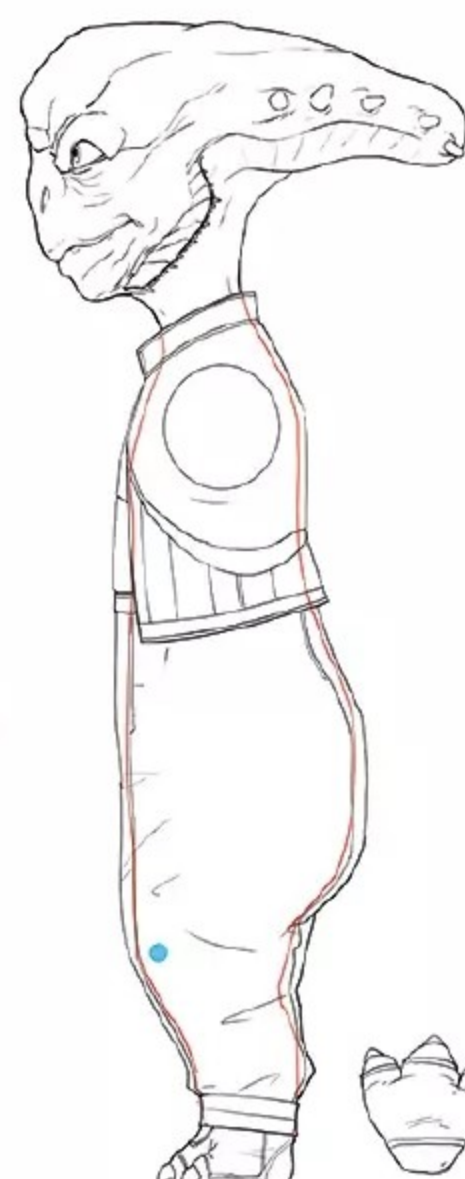
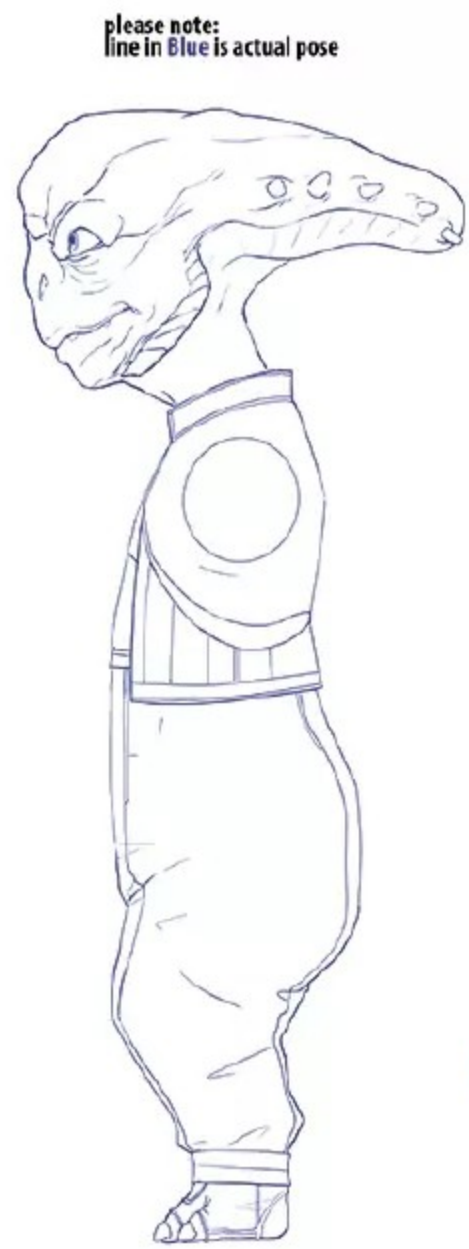
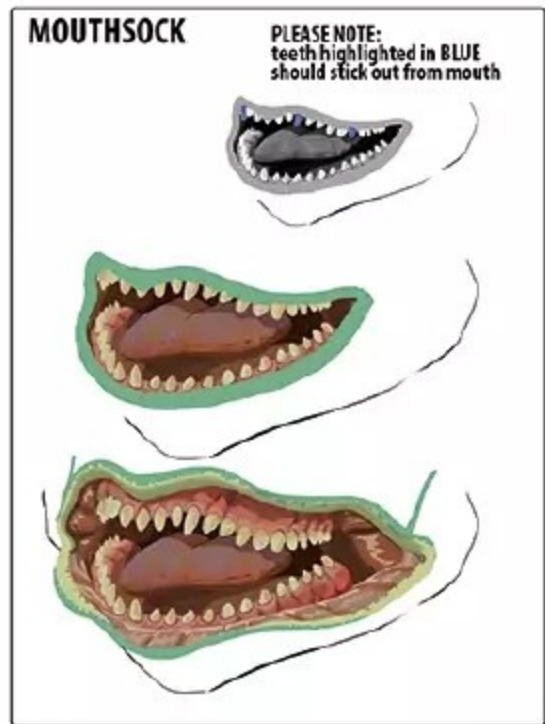
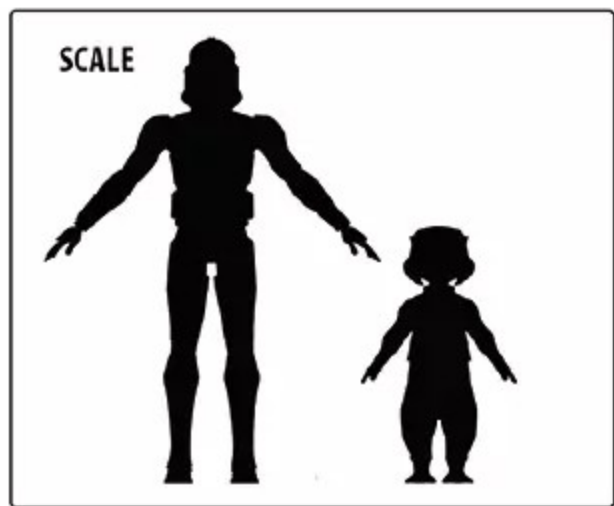
### Andre, how would you describe the overall process of the work accomplished by you and your team for Maul: Shadow Lord?

There's no filter between us and the final product being made. The design team starts as the first group of artists to work on the show after the script is written – we get to interpret all the engineering, the blocking, how the world is built and comes together to visualise what's written in the scripts. It's something we do on all our shows, but for Maul – Shadow Lord specifically we wanted to make sure we were keeping ownership of the character and how he fit in with the world we were creating. It's not just this unique and well-known character, but it's our version. It's distinctly Maul – Shadow Lord. ●

## THE MAUL SAFE HOUSE

The mist casts the safe house in mystery and menace in this Chris Felker image.





|                            |                          |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>LUCASFILM ANIMATION</b> |                          |
| ASSET:                     | lootiVarioA<br>pg 1 of 2 |
| EPISODE:                   | 101                      |
| ARTIST:                    | DAWN CARLOS / ANDRE KIRK |
| DATE:                      | 02/23/2023               |



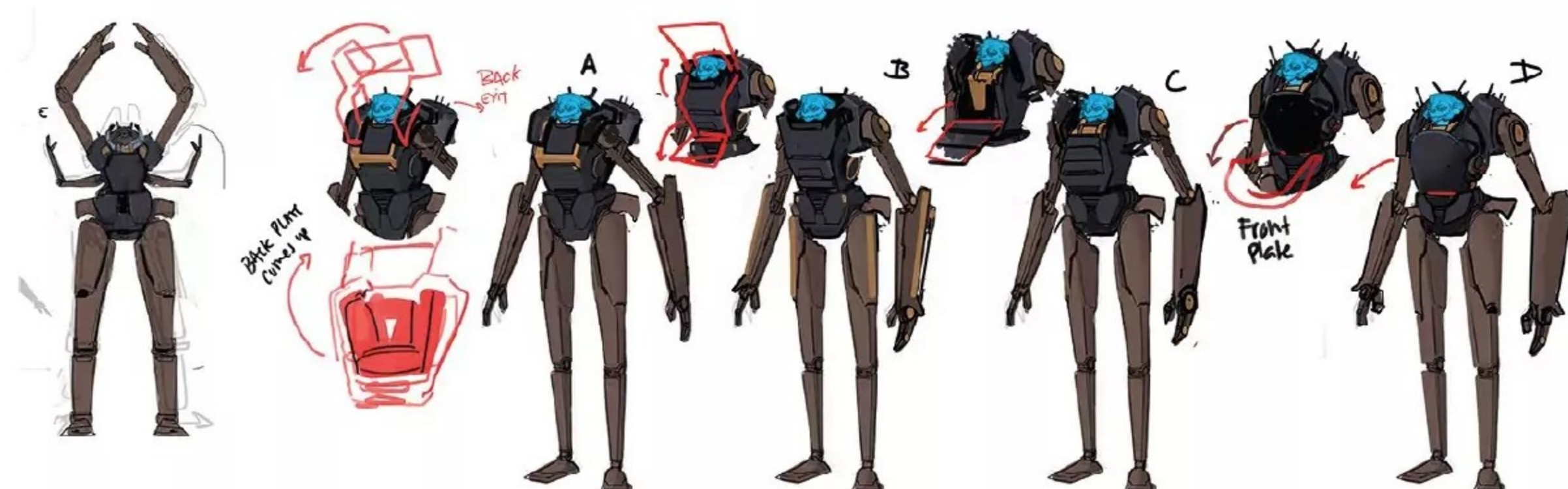
## STAR WARS WHIMSY

Andre Kirk discusses the creation of a cute, but dangerous, alien

“Looti Vario was fun to work on. We knew he was going to be an Aleena, a small lizard-type alien in the Star Wars universe, and we knew that we wanted to put him in a mech suit. So, a lot of discussion happens, between reading the script and talking to the supervising director, about what role does Looti have? When can we lean into the whimsical things like his teeny tiny gun? Those are sort of conscious decisions where you’re thinking: ‘We know what

### LOOTI VARIO EXOSKELETON

Sketches identify the mechanics of Looti Vario's exoskeleton and its fundamental shape.



### ATTENTION TO DETAIL

Concept design work for Looti Vario indicates attention paid to his mouth design, eye detail and clothing texture.

Aleenas have looked like before, in The Clone Wars and in live-action Star Wars. We started with those versions as a base and added in the flexibility that we knew we needed with the character. We always want to make sure we’re paying respect to the previous versions when we’re iterating on what’s come before, but also creating our own version of these characters. We knew that Looti Vario would have a lot of expressive emotions, so we concentrated on his open mouth, detailing out the teeth, gums, all of that to really realise his character. In a lot of the earlier versions

of Looti, we attempted various outfits for him. Was it Napoleonic, was it purely functional, what would his taste in fashion be? It was about trying to suggest a back story for the character because we always encourage designers to think of a back story when they’re designing. For example, asking: ‘How did this guy become a mob boss? Feel free to inject any of your ideas into there.’ If it’s not written down specifically, it could be that what you’re suggesting becomes what this character is. A lot of the time it just ends up being ‘head-canon’ where all the little details we add aren’t necessarily on the page or screen, but fully realised in our heads. For Looti Vario, we figured this fella out all the way from his birth through college, and then graduating as a crime lord. Thinking through everything really helps out when designing the character because there’s a real and character-driven validity to all the design decisions we need to make along the way.

# Development sheet

## Artist PROFILE

**Hardy Fowler**

LOCATION: US



Hardy Fowler is a concept artist and illustrator with advanced degrees in art and illustration. He has designed and painted

hundreds of characters, creatures, machines and environments for clients such as Disney, Wizards of the Coast and Games Workshop.

[www.artstation.com/hfowler](http://www.artstation.com/hfowler)

**PROJECT TITLE: AGEING METALWORKER**

**Hardy Fowler** Rosie - an ageing metalworker, the lines of his face and body shaped by decades of hard work, heavy equipment and long days. A concept art abstraction of 1920s skyscraper workers

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### Initial gesture, forms and pose

This is everything! The flow, weight, balance and proportions of the figure determine body language, physique and movement, and are the first step in capturing three-dimensional form and that elusive human factor. As simple as these first steps seem, most character designs are won or lost right here.



### Figure description and anatomy

We'll start by answering the question of who this character is. Let's give him a face that fits his role and his world and an expression that tells the right story. We will also give him muscles and forms that feel real and authentic so the viewer can accept him as a real person.



## Shape design

This is where we switch from figure drawing to concept art. Let's use shapes, researched real world references and visual storytelling to build a world for this character to inhabit. Every bit of gear, cut of clothing or belt buckle describes a world, so these steps need to be thoughtful and deliberate.



## Skin tones

Let's paint! The human being (specifically the face) is the most important part of a character, since it's where viewer attention will start, so let's use value and colour to paint a portrait that engages and resonates with our viewer. Every wrinkle, scar and nuance of expression tells a story.



## Clothing, gear and final polish

We will paint all of the clothing and gear to the same level of finish as the skin tones. But we don't stop there - this final step is our primary opportunity for artfulness and loose expressive brush strokes so that the painting doesn't end up feeling stiff or overworked.

## SEND US YOUR CONCEPTS!

Are you working on a fresh project or doodling your own development sketches that you'd like to share with us?

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# Ognjen Sporin

A teacher and illustrator, Ognjen's work showcases the skills and techniques he passes along to others

## Artist PROFILE

**Ognjen Sporin**

LOCATION: Serbia



Ognjen is a freelance illustrator and concept artist from Serbia.

Throughout his career, he's worked with major clients such as Netflix and Blizzard, but is currently focused on more indie TTRPG projects, as well as producing instructional videos on Patreon.

[www.patreon.com/cw/OSporin](http://www.patreon.com/cw/OSporin)

### SMAUGUST DRAGON

"Monthly challenges like Smaugust are a great way of taking pressure away from sketching and building a consistent drawing habit, since you have prompts and don't actually have to come up with ideas yourself."

### FROG STAR

"This little guy was made for a tutorial about lighting, which is why he's so simple, but I still wanted to give him some personality."





## DUNCE CLOWN

"As a warm-up before work, I often do some studies of random pictures I find on Pinterest. This drawing's idea came about from one of those references - a simple stock photo of a kid reading an oversized book."



## CHARACTER SHAPE STUDIES

"When studying characters, it really helps to establish what your focus is. In this drawing, it's about exaggerating each character's body shape."



## EXPLAINING

"These kinds of quick, small pose studies actually really helped me improve my character acting when drawing from invention, and I often do them in anticipation of a final illustration where I'll have multiple figures interacting."



## THE CAT

"In some cases, I have a very simple idea and just start sketching on it without any planning or much reference."

“These kinds of quick, small pose studies really helped me improve my character acting when drawing from invention”

### COSTUME STUDIES

"Sketching original and interesting characters without any reference is always a bit daunting to me, but I got a lot more comfortable with it through doing a bunch of these kinds of studies from reference."

### RYU

"A portrait sketch inspired by The Boxer, a manhwa I was reading at the time. I used this one to experiment with a way of mixing loose painting and line art."



## KNIGHT BOY IN A FIELD

"This sketch was made during a tough time in my life, when I used to take long walks in a field just outside the village where I live, trying to rehab a pretty bad weightlifting injury, so it's kind of a reflection of that period."

“ This was made during a tough time in my life, so it's kind of a reflection of that period ”





**PORTRAIT DOODLES**

"We're often so preoccupied with constantly improving, but there's nothing inherently wrong with spending some time within your drawing comfort zone to wind down a bit. If you're really familiar with drawing the subject matter, you can instead focus on different aspects of the image that you otherwise wouldn't even notice, like texture."

**WORKING CLOWN**

"I made this character during a time when I was feeling particularly burnt out by work, and his whole outfit serves as a sort of visual metaphor for that state of mind."

“ His outfit serves as a sort of visual metaphor for that state of mind ”

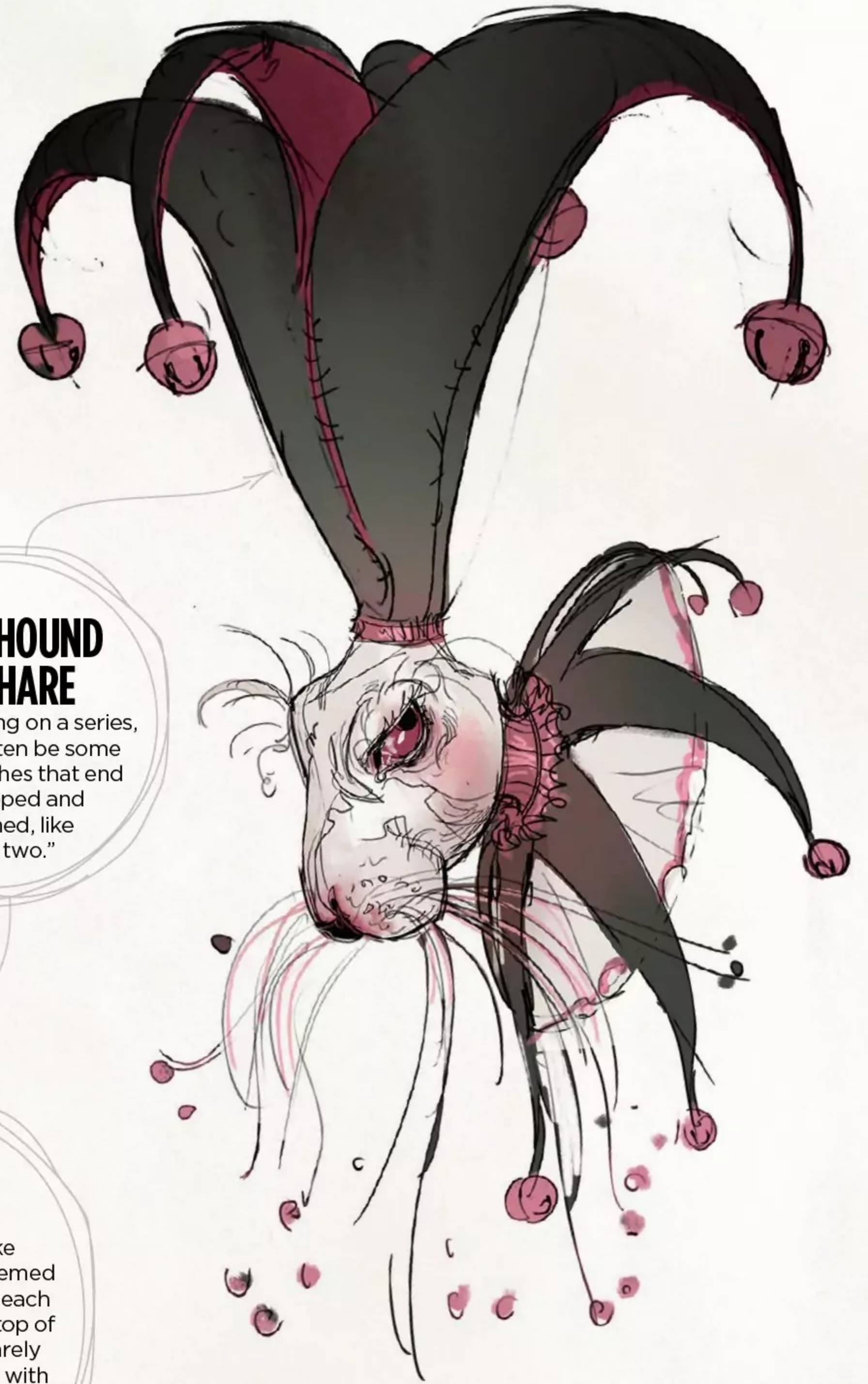
**STARRY SLEEVES**

"This quick drawing initially spawned as a random scribbly doodle in my sketchbook, which I then developed digitally."



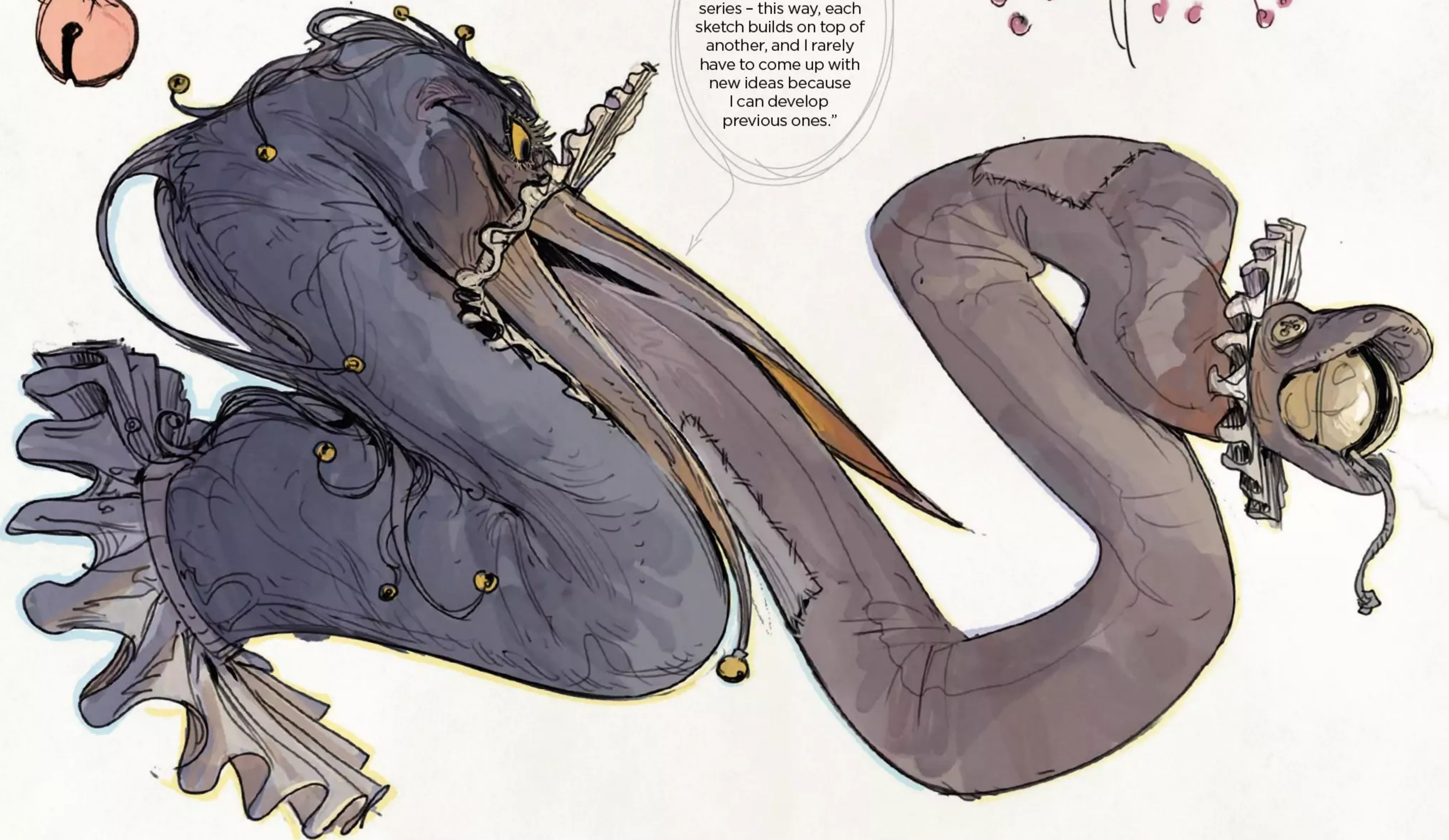
## BLOODHOUND AND HARE

"When working on a series, there will often be some rough sketches that end up scrapped and unfinished, like these two."



## THE HERON

"I mostly make personal art in themed series - this way, each sketch builds on top of another, and I rarely have to come up with new ideas because I can develop previous ones."



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](mailto:sketchbook@imaginefx.com)

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**FUTURE**  
ISSUE 267

THE IMPACT OF GREAT **BACKGROUND DESIGN** - AS EXPLAINED BY THE PROS

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## Advice from the world's best artists

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## This issue:

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## Photoshop

# MAKE YOUR OWN CHARACTERS ACT

Concept Artist **Riccardo Moscatello** explains how he uses gestures and poses to convey a character's personality

### Artist PROFILE

**Riccardo Moscatello**  
LOCATION: Italy

Riccardo is a concept artist working in tabletop and video games. He specialises in characters, worldbuilding and the fantasy genre.  
<https://bit.ly/3P7160u>



As character designers, we are trying to establish a connection with the viewers, pulling them into our story/world and making them buy into our fantasy.

In this tutorial, I'll show you my process in creating a character and how I try to communicate narrative aspects, such as their personality, through their design. In this case

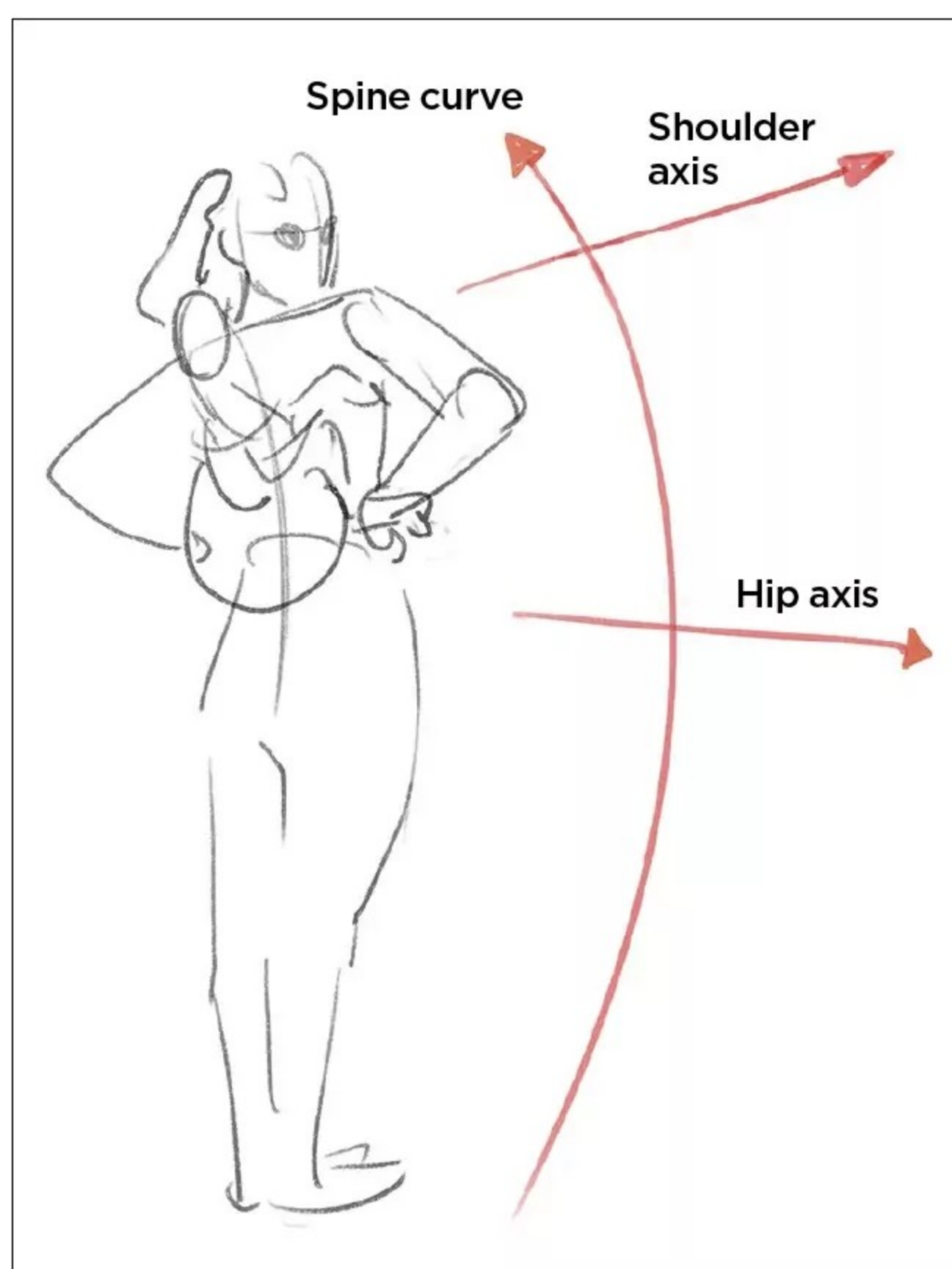
we'll focus especially on the use of pose, gesture and facial expressions.

Visually speaking, the silhouette is one of the most impactful aspects of a character. Just like the cover of a book, this is often the element that will capture the viewer's attention and stop them browsing elsewhere.

The so called 'first read' will dictate all the most fundamental assumptions that the viewer will make about the character's story,

personality or gameplay-role in a video game.

And a good pose and gesture, in a lot of cases, will be the main feature defining its silhouette. Therefore, as designers, it is important that we are able to use it as a tool to empower our images, creating characters that not only feel readable and visually appealing but also convey a specific narrative and ultimately drag the viewers into our story.



### 1 First iteration, exploring poses

Firstly, I establish the overarching narrative. In this case, I want the focal point to be revolving around the interaction between the girl and her monkey. They should feel dynamic, playful and showcasing some type of bonding between each other. Once I have a clear direction, I put down some scribbles to find main the lines of action. Usually in gestures, the axes of the shoulders and hips are crucial, along with curve of the spine.



### 2 Second iteration

In this example, I thought the girl twisting herself to face the pet might be an interesting addition to her pose: it could push the overall gesture and emphasise the dynamism. Narratively, this also plays into the character's story, as she is supposed to be a travelling circus performer; so we can imagine her to be very active, cheerful and hopping around stage in between tricks, to feed or talk with her monkey.



### 3 Fleshing out the volumes

As the main gesture is taking shape, I start to flesh out the characters' volumes a bit more and I want to focus on the interactions between the two figures. I'm establishing the overlaps of all the elements and making sure I don't create too many tangents that may flatten the drawing too much or make it difficult to read. ➡➡





## 4 Costume and props

At this stage, the thumbnail already gives me a clear enough idea of the general structure and pose, so I can redraw the character on top and focus on details like costumes, props and facial expressions. To do this stage, I keep the initial thumbnail underneath and turn it to cyan colour so that it doesn't create too much noise and doesn't interfere with the black lines on top.



## 5 Costume and props, part 2

It is important at this stage that I don't stick too closely to the thumbnail and try to approach it as if I was redoing it from scratch. I also want this step to be very quick: my goal is just to communicate the design effectively, but I'm aware that all elements might still be subject to change. I also tilt the angle of the monkey's head to face the girl so that the interaction feels a bit stronger.



## 6 Picking the winner and feedback

The second option is the client's pick. It does indeed feel more active and dynamic compared to the first one. Before moving to final drawing, they ask me to add some type of weapon to the character, something that she can use for fighting but also for her circus repertoire. I think this small change helps in creating a better silhouette too. Here I'm showing how I quickly have sketched it over the previous drawing.



## 7 Finalising the design

Now that I've updated the rough sketch, I can proceed to final drawing. You can also see that, along with the client's feedback, I've applied some other minor changes of my own. The girl's fan is now at her waist along with a bottle; the monkey is now looking at the grape while his arm is reaching out to grab it. I think it creates a better dynamic in terms of acting.



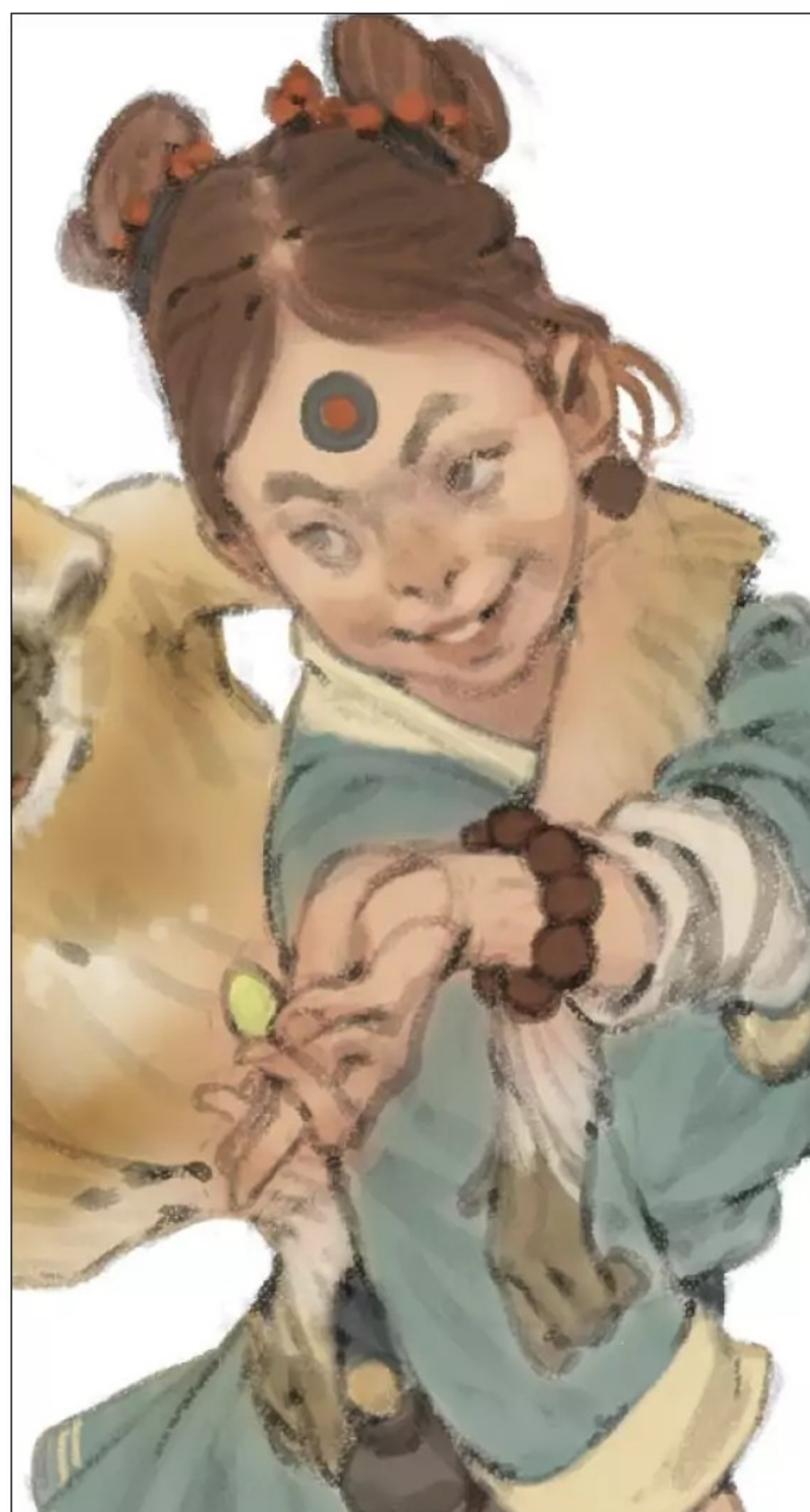
## 8 Finalising the design, part 2

For this final sketch, my goal is to be a bit more precise without losing too much of the gesture and expression of the initial sketch. To do that, I try again to approach it as if I'm drawing it from scratch and the previous sketch is left at a very low opacity underneath as a general guideline. I keep the lines understated and not too dark because it will make it easier to apply colours afterwards. ➤➤



## 9 Placing flat colours

I want to go with a watercolour-like feel to this character, so I start with some understated soft tones. I try to avoid too many hard edges or to fill in the shape of the objects too perfectly and add a bit of variation in hue to each of the flat colours.



## 10 Lights and shadows

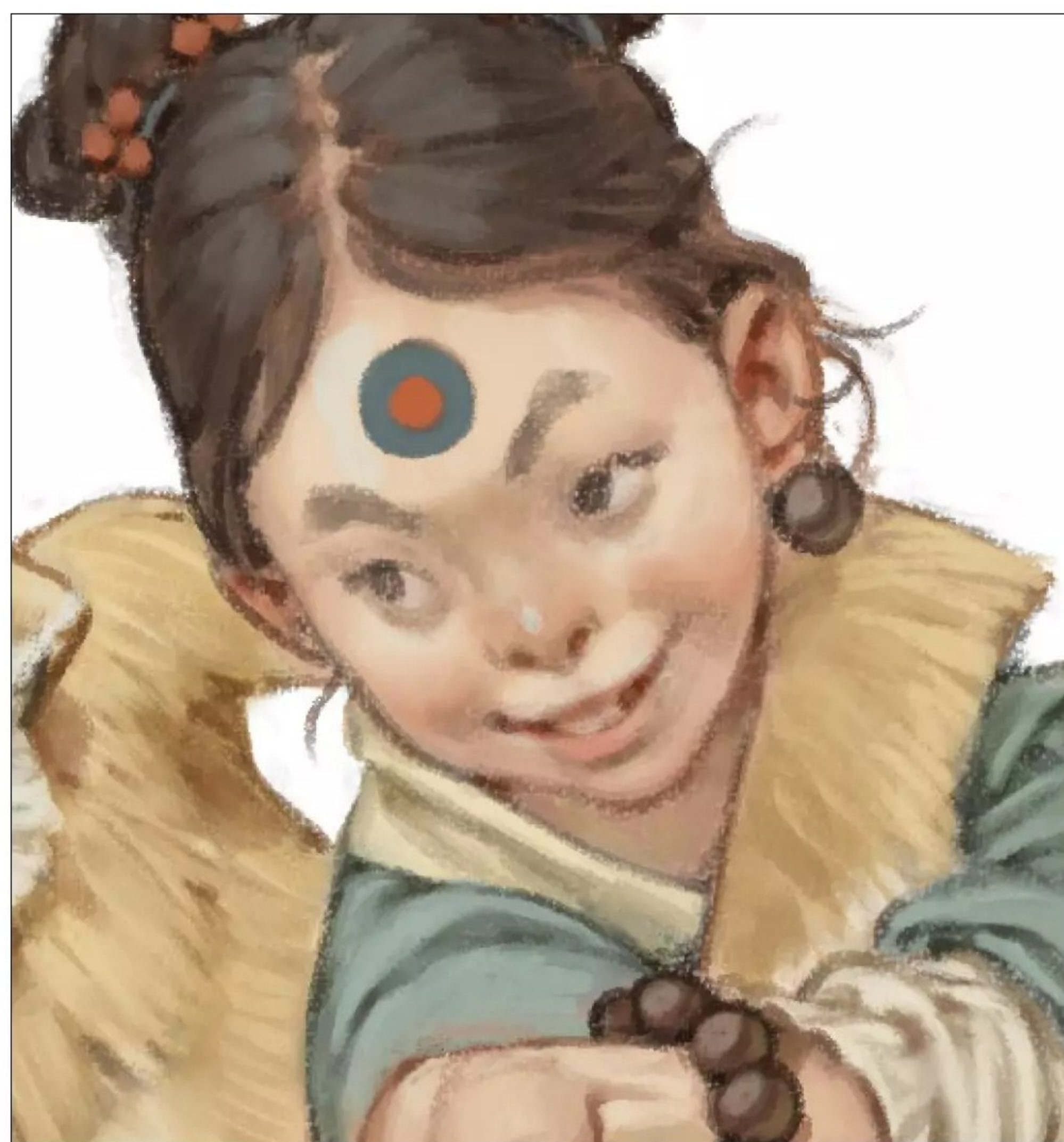
Here I'm intensifying the lights around the focal point, introducing some highlights and adding some slight temperature shifts from light to shadows. I'm also starting to add some occlusion and cast shadows, while still keeping it pretty loose. This is the step that I send to the client for approving the colours.



## 11 Painting on top

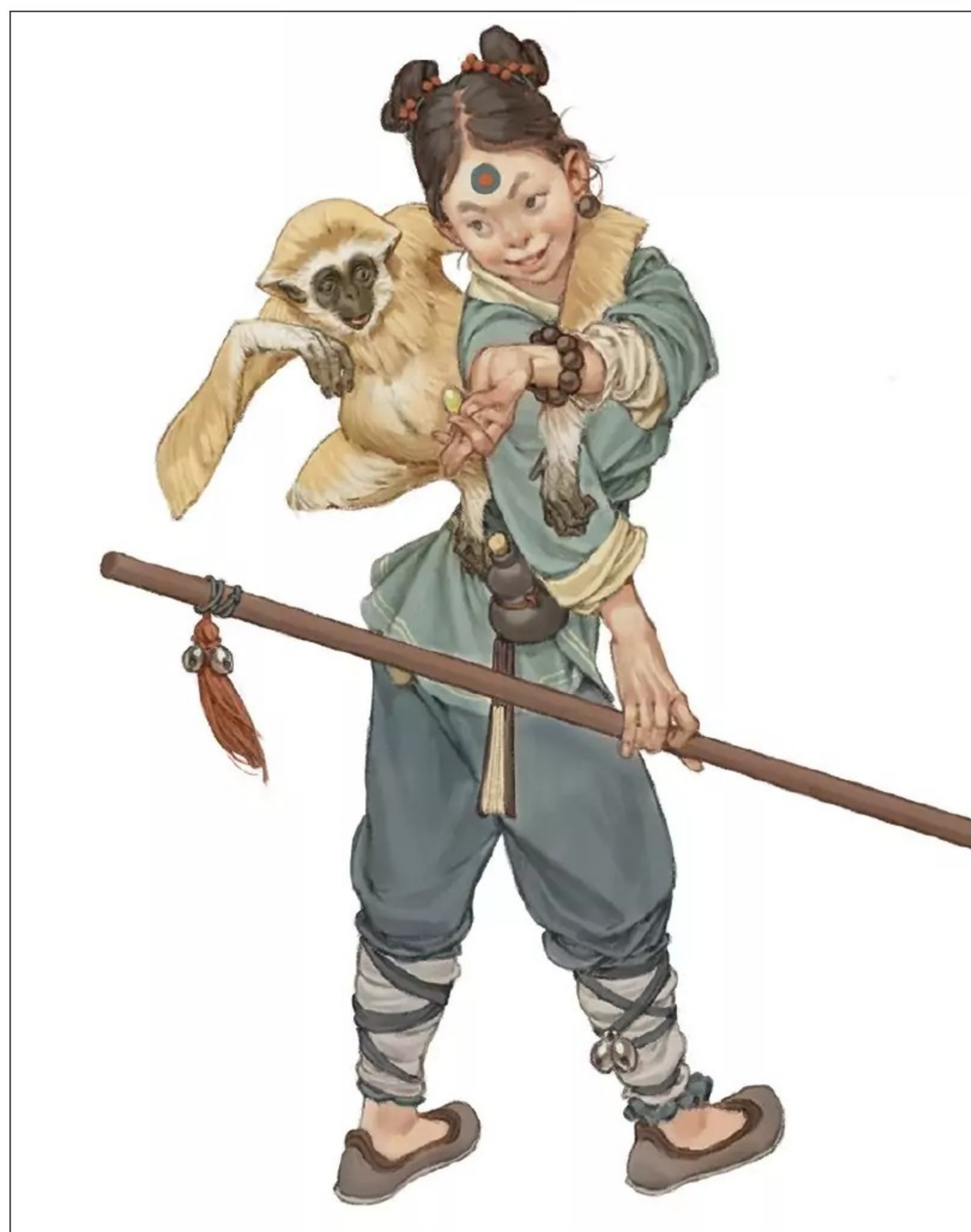
Previous colour steps were done underneath the lines; now I'm going on top and painting. The image will remain ideally the same, but I will turn some of the soft edges into harder ones. I want to emphasise the characters' facial expressions while keeping them 'soft' enough, so in this case I started defining the monkey, the hands and other elements important for conveying the gesture first, and left the girl's face for last.





## 12 Defining the girl's face

I want to do minimal changes to the original sketch, so I limit myself to just covering those desaturated shadows and transitions that transpire from the drawing with warmer and brighter shadows. At the same time, I push the contrast of a few areas where you would have occlusion shadows, to help the form read.



## 13 Tightening the rest of the image

At this stage, the image feels complete enough. All the elements of the character have been covered in terms of rendering and the gesture and acting of the two figures looks believable to me. But I am noticing some inconsistencies that I'll fix in the next stage.



## 14 Final adjustments

To finalise the character, I keep defining some of the major volumes, to make sure they read as tridimensional from a zoomed out view. I also ended up adjusting the gesture of the hand holding the staff and reducing the size of the other one. In the end, I think I captured the playful vibe that I was going for this character, although I'd probably approach it in a different way if I were to redo it now.

Technique focus

## USE EXPRESSIVE FEATURES

Concept artist **Javier Franco Santacreu** explains how he creates a powerful pose



"Drawing dragons has always felt like a very creative and fun process to me. They are creatures that can be depicted in a wide variety of types and forms. For this personal piece, I wanted to portray a dragon in a powerful and menacing pose, as if it were a great threat about to unfold. Just like human hands, wings on animals are very expressive. In this case, its wings take up almost the entire canvas, giving it a strong presence in the scene. The background reinforces its posture and adds narrative to depict an incoming calamity."





How I create...

## A DRAGON IN A METEOR STORM



### 1 Test colours

To start, I made some initial sketches of what the dragon would look like. Its posture and body movement are the main focus. Once I had a clear vision, I did some colour tests. Since it's a cold scene, I used a colour scheme consisting mainly of blues and greens.



### 2 Guide gaze

For the background, I used broad brushstrokes to blend the mountains and sky. It's crucial to pay attention to the negative space and use the directional lines of the image elements to guide the viewer's gaze. The light in the background frames the silhouette of the wings.



### 3 Adding details

I added detail to the scales, cleaned up the shapes to define the planes of depth, and added the meteorites and blizzard. You can always add more detail, but the key to finishing an illustration is ensuring the planes of depth are clearly defined in relation to one another.

### Artist PROFILE

**Javier Franco Santacreu**  
LOCATION: Spain

Javier is a concept artist based in Spain working at MercurySteam. He loves creature design and always strives to create unique and believable designs through drawing.  
<https://bit.ly/3PuwUeV>

## Artist insight

# BUILDING REALISTIC FANTASY ART

### Artist PROFILE

**Billy Christian**

LOCATION: Indonesia

An art director and studio owner, creating fantasy illustrations, living with artist wife Livia Prima, their baby, and their cat.  
<https://blt.ly/4uFPQ9A>

**Billy Christian** on how to use simple 3D blockouts alongside expressive digital painting techniques



The brief calls for an awe-inspiring illustration of a Dungeons & Dragons core class character, capturing a cinematic moment that reflects the wizard's power and intellect. The subject is a female human wizard in her mid-20s, levitating inside her tower as she casts a spell. She is surrounded by

swirling tomes and a glowing, semi-transparent magical sphere filled with intricate, illegible runes and geometric patterns.

Her design emphasises authority intelligence and composure. A staff inspired by the Staff of the Magi hovers before her, while her eyes glow in harmony with the spell. Subtle African-inspired elements inform her costume design through

the choices of both fabric and ornamentation, without directly referencing real-world sources.

In approaching the brief, I chose a low angle to enhance her sense of superior intellect, positioning the viewer beneath her as if in awe. Her costume is designed with a clean, readable silhouette, using white as a dominant colour to reinforce a sense of clarity and authority.

### How I create...

## AN AWE-INSPIRING WIZARD IN 3D



### 1 Draft several variations

With a clear composition in mind, the process felt quite straightforward. A low camera angle seemed like the best choice. In this illustration, I made the design while sketching, constantly checking how the silhouette supports the gesture. Good design alone isn't enough as it needs to work with the pose. I explored three variations, adding simple values and lighting for clarity. The client chose a mix of the third sketch and the second's hairstyle.



### 2 Create a base layer

I then move into Blender to build simple mockups. For the base figure, I use a paid Human Generator add-on. It's fast and produces models that are sufficient for my needs. Facial details aren't a priority since they'll be repainted later. From there, I block in the clothing and armour. Sometimes it's enough to repaint over the base or use existing assets as reference, but here I model key pieces like the armour and selected garments.



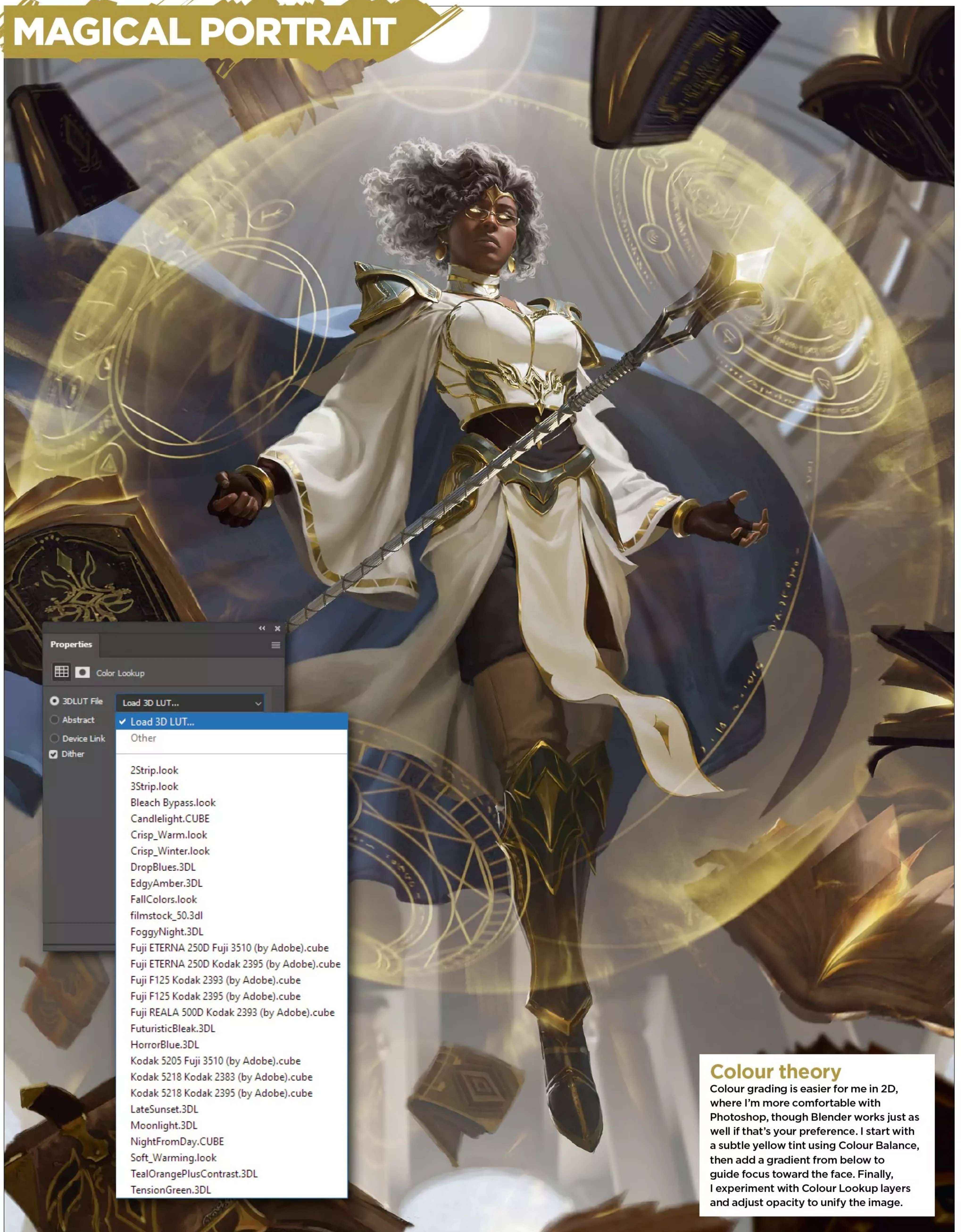
### 3 Let there be light

The background is also modelled, but kept simple. I then add a backlight, a direct key light on the character, and a subtle warm glow from the magic. The scene is rendered in Cycles, then brought to Photoshop for repainting. To achieve crisp detail, I paint over the render, aligning it with the initial sketch. Many elements are easier to handle in 2D, so please keep that in mind. Effects and colour grading come last, tying everything together.

In depth Fantasy portraits



## MAGICAL PORTRAIT



### Colour theory

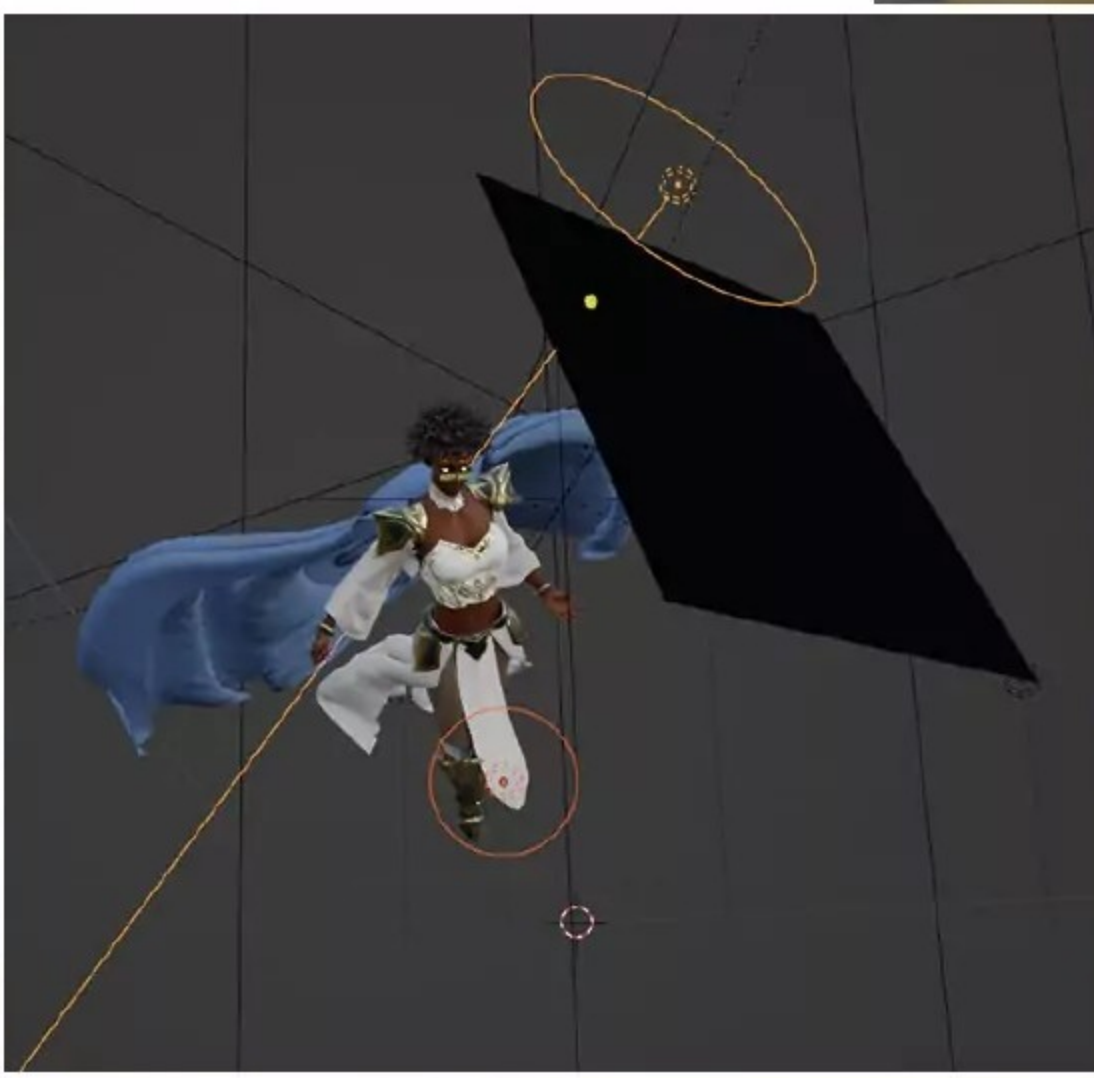
Colour grading is easier for me in 2D, where I'm more comfortable with Photoshop, though Blender works just as well if that's your preference. I start with a subtle yellow tint using Colour Balance, then add a gradient from below to guide focus toward the face. Finally, I experiment with Colour Lookup layers and adjust opacity to unify the image.

## Facial features

The head is usually the first area to refine before moving on. Once it feels solid, the rest tends to fall into place. This type of hair is difficult to achieve in 3D, so handling it in 2D saves time and offers more control. Gathering references is essential, especially to understand how the hair behaves under similar lighting conditions.

## A light touch

Lighting plays a crucial role in achieving realism. Even strong models can fall flat without it, so careful setup is essential. A soft backlight adds a sense of power, while a side spotlight helps define facial features. Additional lights support the magical effects, with intensity balanced so one remains dominant and others stay subtle.



## Robe structure

For drapery and clothing, I keep the 3D simple – just enough to establish the overall value structure before painting. Fabric folds are more enjoyable and flexible to refine in 2D. Strong reference is key in this step for believable results. Keep the render nearby for guidance, and avoid pushing values too far early on.



## The finer details

Hard-surface elements benefit greatly from 3D, so I let it handle the heavy lifting and save energy for the enjoyable parts. Armour and props are usually blocked in, even if only at a basic level, depending on time. Later, everything is repainted to match the final painterly style.

## RESOURCES

### WORKSHOP BRUSHES

#### PHOTOSHOP

##### CUSTOM BRUSHES: PAINTERLY BRUSH

It's the best for painterly aesthetics. It's not too sharp, and has a colour dynamic on.

##### RECTANGLE BRUSH

It's my main brush from sketching to rendering. The shape is a regular rectangle, but it has a dual brush that I like.

## Technique focus

# USE REAL-LIFE REFERENCE MATERIAL

**Kevin Glint** reveals how real-world references help him create fantasy art



"This piece depicts a High Priestess witch from the lunar coven. In her fantasy world, she attempts to bless a particular sword using chaos magic for mercenaries pursuing the darker path toward greater rewards. Years of accumulated experience in the art industry have gone into this piece, as well as my desire to fully commit to illustration, complete with careful planning and drafting. Alongside this I also make use of reference material. Having references on your side really helps you along the way, especially when you have doubts halfway through the process." 🍷



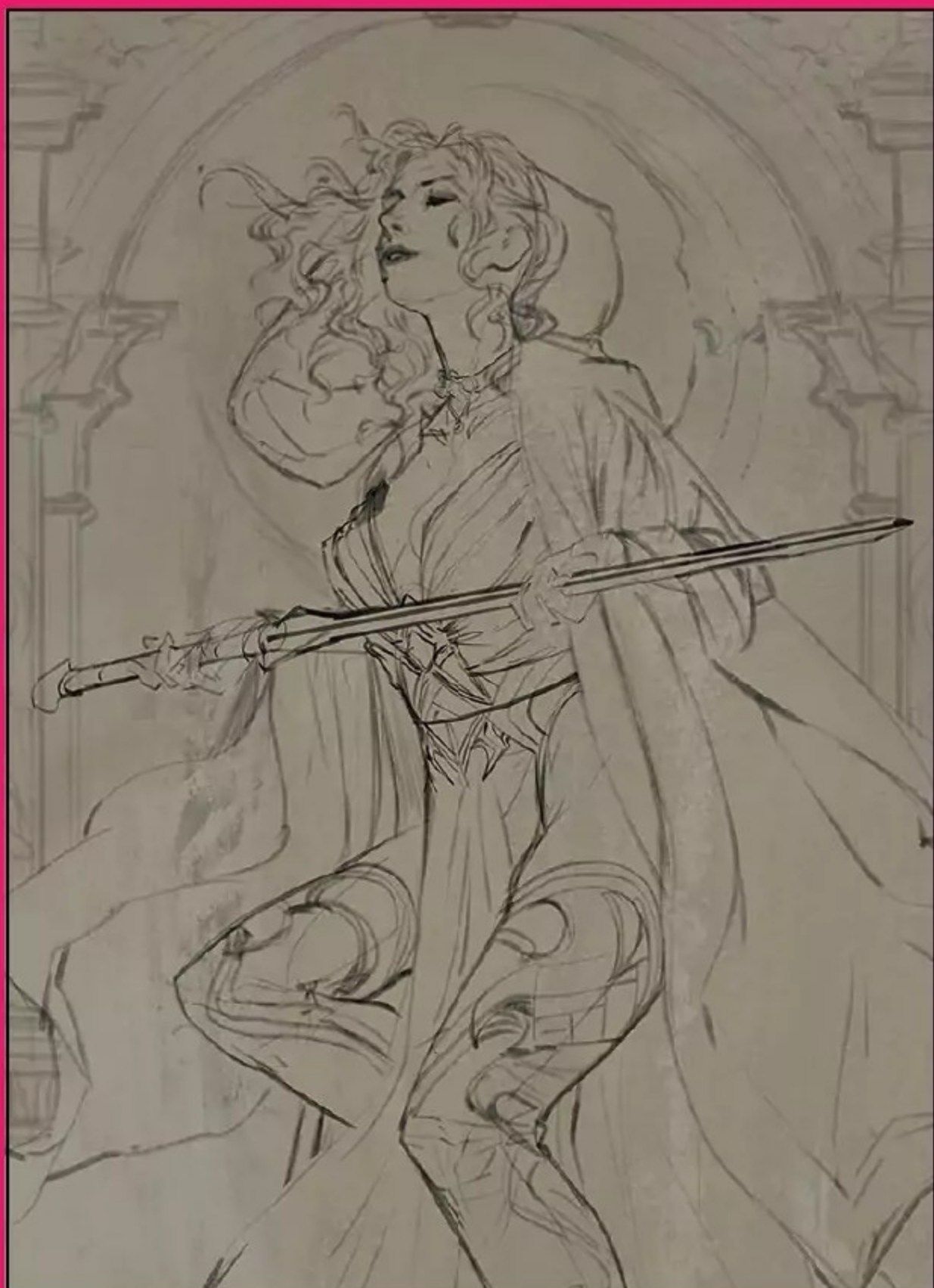
## Artist PROFILE

**Kevin Glint**  
LOCATION: Malaysia

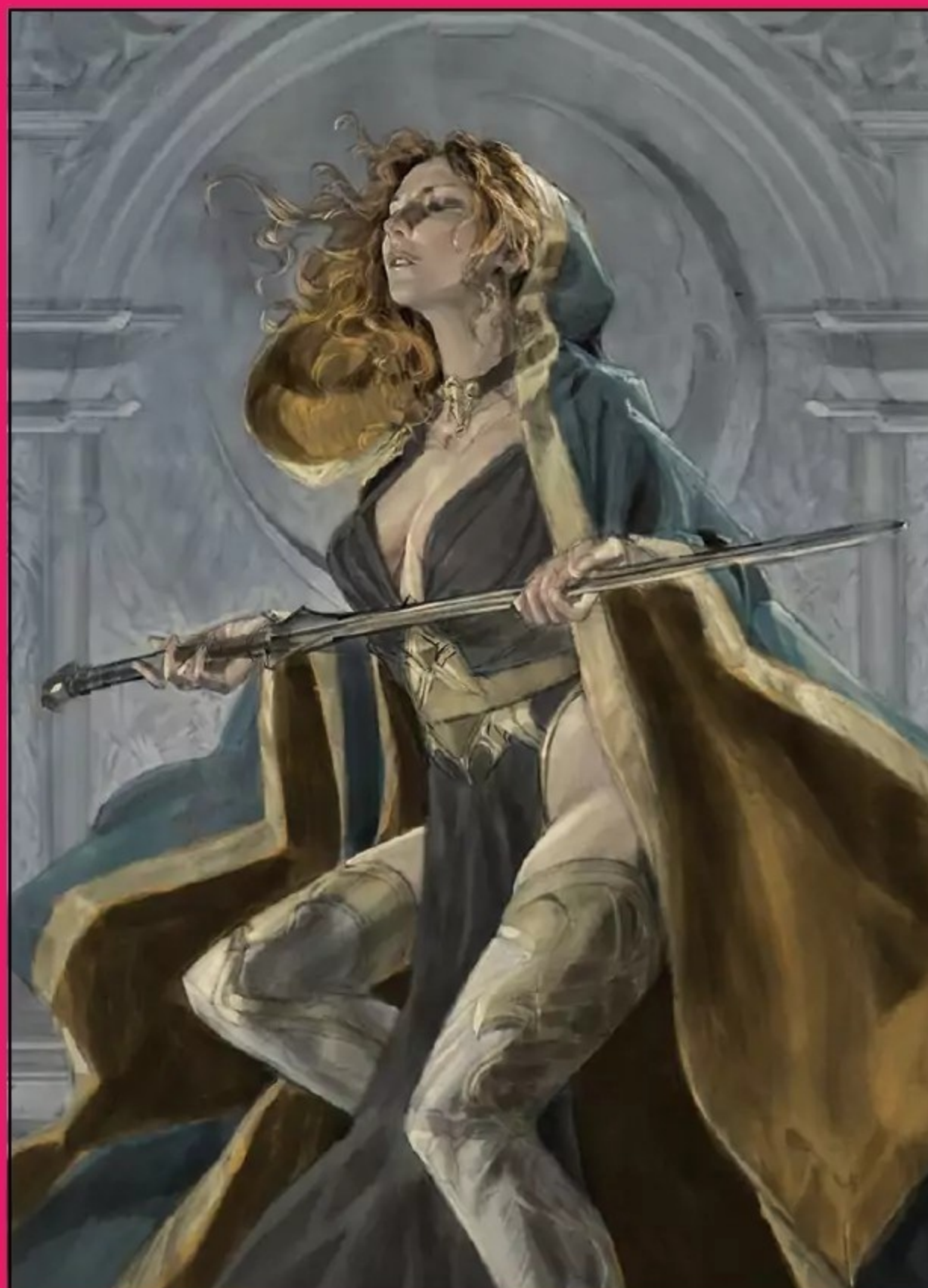
Kevin Glint is a professional concept artist, character designer, and marketing illustrator. His projects include Warframe, Magic: The Gathering, Diablo 4, League of Legends and more.  
<https://blt.ly/4wf4upF>

## How I create...

# A SORCERESS CHARMING A SWORD



**1 Gathering references**  
I started with a loose sketch. Real-world references and a model for visual aid help a lot in this stage as they often carry the essence that people can recognise and resonate with. To keep things on theme, I used Baroque and Rococo elements to fit the fantasy setting. For the clothes, I kept them long and big because witches generally don't require large movements.



**2 Add shading**  
I tend to keep the light and shadow rough. Once I'm good with the values, I begin adding colours over the shading, similar to how a traditional oil painter builds up layers. Warm colours bring the viewer closer and act as a focal point to lead the eye. Cool-tone rim lights add depth and act as an anchor to the composition: they lead the eye back to the warm tones.



**3 Finishing touches**  
Polishing a painting part by part is integral to keeping it coherent and consistent. Do not rush it, or you will burn yourself out quickly. I would normally take breaks and days to complete each part, such as the face, hair, hands and so on. When in doubt about refining the materials, use references and logically check how the surroundings reflect light onto them.



# Workshops



# Photoshop STRANGE SCI-FI FROM REAL LIFE

Illustrator **Lê Long** explains how to transform an everyday street corner into an extraordinary scene from his own perspective

**Artist PROFILE**  
**Lê Long**  
LOCATION: Vietnam

A freelance illustrator and concept artist, Lê is inspired by daily life and everyday surroundings.  
<https://bit.ly/3QK3byR>



This painting is based on a view I see every Friday morning while I'm having tea with a close friend.

The main subject is the old 1980s Hanoi apartment blocks. These buildings are famous for their "tiger cages" – extra living spaces built (without permission) by residents

using temporary materials. This creates a messy and chaotic look, but it also has a lively, modern rhythm. To me, it feels both dangerous and full of character.

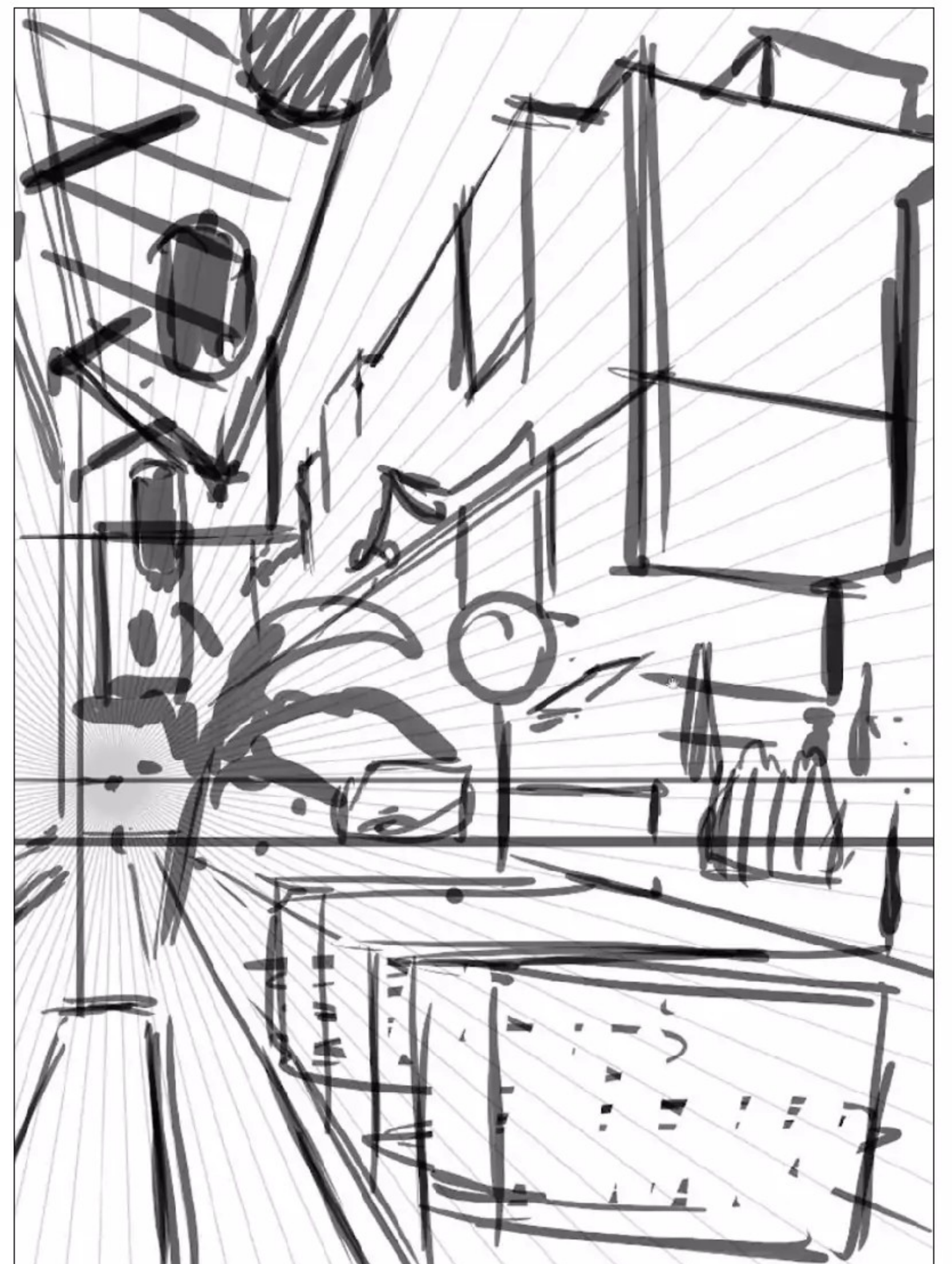
I wanted to capture this scene with a touch of imagination. I turned it into a future world with flying cars and floating buildings while keeping the "organised mess" that's

so typical of Hanoi and Southeast Asian streets. Technically, I didn't use anything special – just basic knowledge of perspective. The rest is about arranging the composition, creating the atmosphere, and adding creative details. My goal was to combine all of these elements to make the final scene look both imaginative and believable.



## 1 Reference photo and inspiration

This is the real-life photo of the view I wanted to capture. The focal point of the scene is an old apartment block featuring messy, improvised extensions. While these structures appear somewhat chaotic and unsafe, they possess a unique architectural character that's very specific to the heart of Hanoi.



## 2 Initial rough sketch

Don't worry about whether your lines look "good" or "bad." Many artists feel pressured to be perfect, but at this stage, focus only on the camera angle and composition. The most important thing is setting the horizon line and the ratio between sky and ground. Cleanliness doesn't matter at this point; just focus on capturing the vision in your head. ➡



### 3 Blocking and shape design

Next, I refine the lines and focus on large-scale shape design. I adjust the proportions of the main elements to ensure they have enough cohesion while remaining distinct. I also start visualising elements I will add later. This helps establish a sense of depth and distance through relative scale, showing how big or small objects are compared to each other.



### 4 Light setting

I determine a light source and define the boundary between light and shadow. By limiting the values to a range of three to five tones, I can effectively establish the overall atmosphere and highlight the primary and secondary focal points. This simplified lighting scheme ensures the composition remains clear and helps guide the viewer's eye to the most important areas.



### 5 Colour palette and tones

The original scene already has a harmonious palette, with yellow as the dominant colour, accented by red and green against a pale-blue sky. My main focus here is deciding whether to exaggerate the warm and cool contrast between the light and dark sides of the main building. I want to see if heightening the difference between the sunlit surfaces and the shaded areas will make the atmosphere more dynamic and engaging.



### 6 Adding foreground details

Typically, the background is detailed first to define the environment around the main subject. However, as my focal point is the apartment block in the distance, I start with the foreground instead. This helps establish a solid sense of space and acts as a foundation for the more detailed elements I will imagine and integrate in the following steps.



## 7 Defining the main building

With the foreground set, I define the apartment blocks' shapes. I repeat box structures with varying proportions and add green and yellow accents. I introduce a second vanishing point far to the right for upcoming details. Although it doesn't perfectly match the foreground's perspective, the large spatial gap between planes allows me to "get away" with this slight inconsistency.



## 8 Colour adjustment and forms

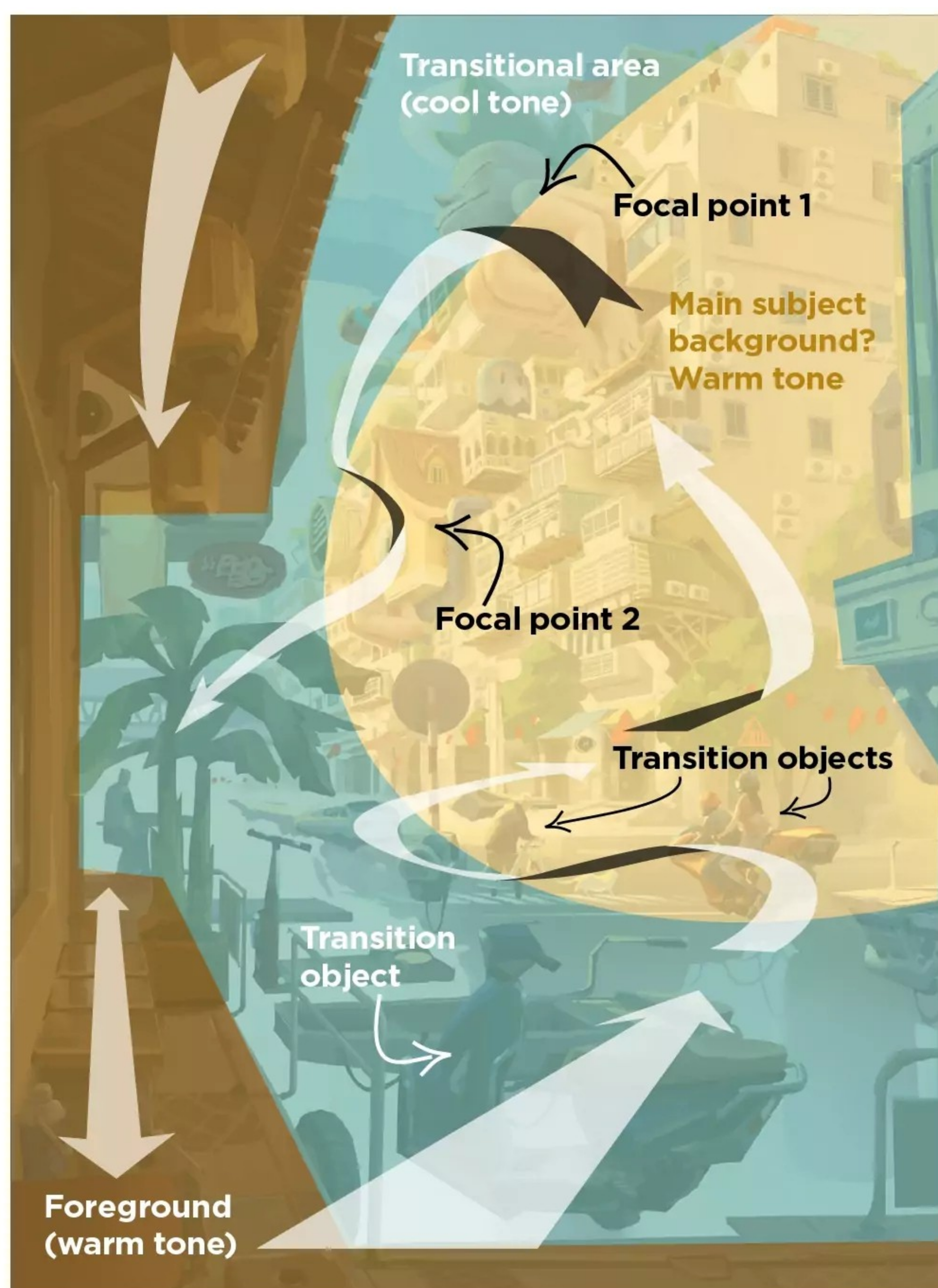
I add details to the main building. After evaluating the progress, I abandon the blue tints on the building's shadow sides. Instead, I unify everything with a warm yellow tone to capture the essence of a sunny day. This emphasises the humid yet vibrant tropical atmosphere characteristic of Hanoi's old apartment blocks.



## 9 Designing focal point highlights

With the atmosphere set, I detail the focal point by integrating playful, imaginative elements into the original structure. These "fantasy" additions transform the familiar apartment block into something more unusual, provoking contrast while seeking unity. My goal is to preserve the authentic character and "organised mess" that defines the soul of these iconic Hanoi apartments. ➡➡



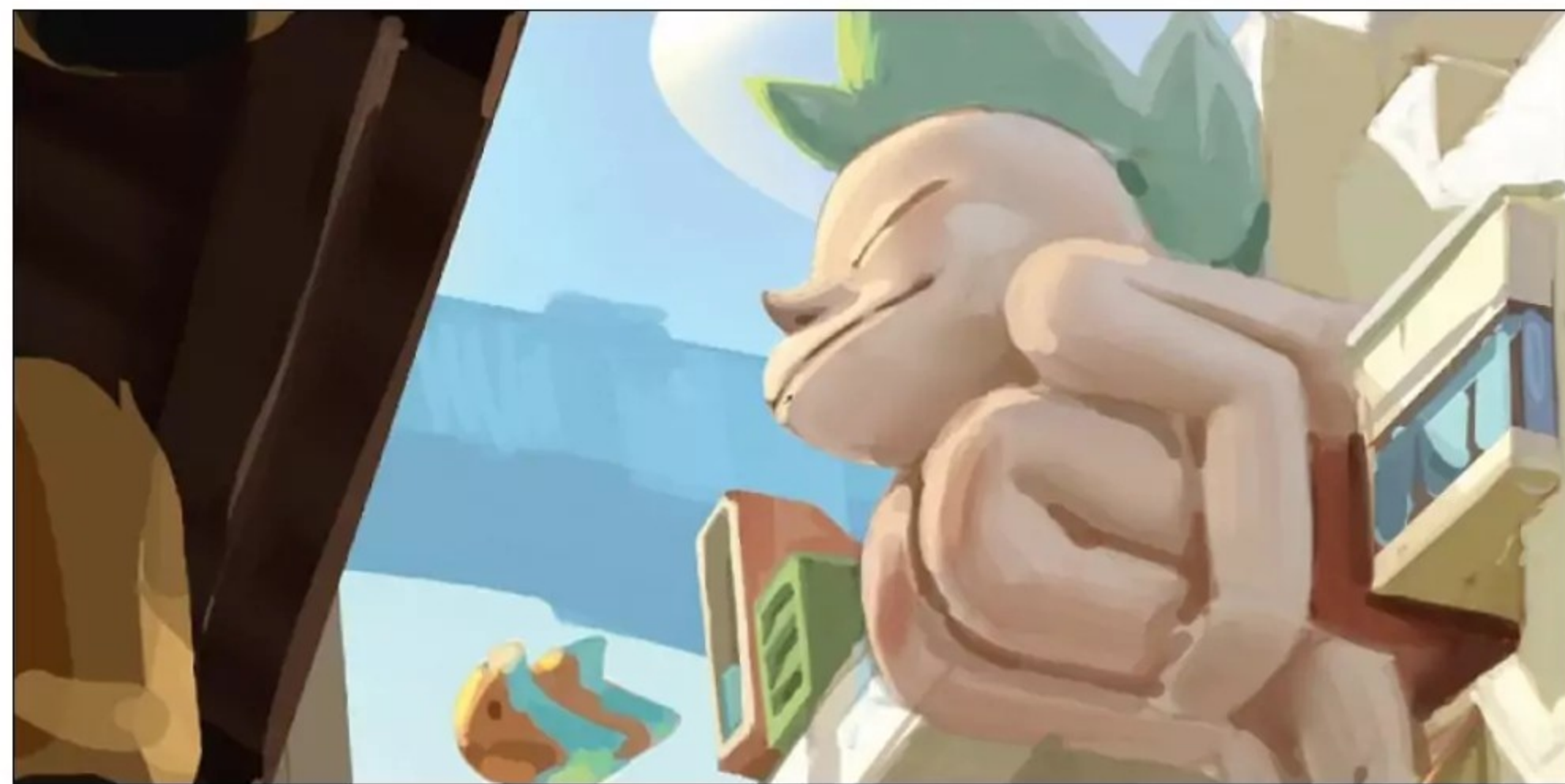


## 10 Planning compositional flow

I step back to review the compositional plan one more time. This diagram illustrates how I try to arrange transition areas and leading movements to guide the viewer's eye. I hope the audience may discover the story and details in the specific order I intended.

## 12 Refining key elements

A strange figure on the façade? A couple on a fancy sport bike waiting for an old lady and her cat to cross the street? I hope these details create some contrast and curiosity to make viewers search for a hidden story. I'm never quite sure if these subtle touches are effective, or even noticeable, but for me they're the essential sparks of imagination that bring the scene to life.



### The figure on the façade

This shape is adapted from the boxy forms of the building's improvised extensions. Its crouching pose is inspired by countryside children jumping into rivers during summer, while the Mohawk is a nod to 1970s punk rock, which is also the era these buildings first appeared in my country.



## 11 Balancing light and colour

Both the foreground and central block share a dominant yellow tone, but the foreground sits in shadow to remain less prominent. In contrast, the apartment block receives direct sunlight, creating the high contrast and vitality needed for a focal point. Splashes of green and red add variety, while the overall yellow and brown scheme keeps the composition unified.



### Pedestrians and the big bike

These characters bridge the foreground and midground, suggesting a moment of tension: is the biker impatient or polite? The vibrant red of the bike might suggest the couple's impatience, while the old lady's futuristic walker, in white and dull tones, emphasises her slow and steady pace.



## 13 A second focal point

The real-life scene featured a Thai restaurant with a traditional curved roof. I wanted to keep this reference, but pushed the design further by adding eyes and hands in a prayer-like gesture. This transforms the building into a “hybrid” creature – a fusion of architecture and living being – unlike the Mohawk character, a strange boy “sitting” on the building.



## 14 Building technical systems

I handle the mechanical sections underneath, which enable the structure to “float” in mid-air. I keep these details subtle, using just enough silhouette to suggest a massive machinery system hidden below the building’s foundation. This addition is enough to spark the imagination of a sci-fi world where traffic and residential districts exist high in the sky.



## 15 Final touches

I give the scene a final review, focusing on atmosphere and edge management. This helps separate overlapping layers that are physically far apart in the 3D space. Finally, I add micro-details like windows, AC units, and windowsill plants. These small touches make the building look believable and “lived-in”, showing how each resident has uniquely personalised their own living space. ●





## Technique focus

# BLENDING 3D AND 2D EFFECTS

**Darek Zabrocki** reveals how he uses a combination of effects to create a striking scene



"This is a piece of key art I created back in early 2025 for the game *Veil of Ashes* by Greifenmaer Games Studio. *Veil of Ashes* is a real-time tactics game set in a dark steampunk universe, focused on tanks and infantry skirmishes.

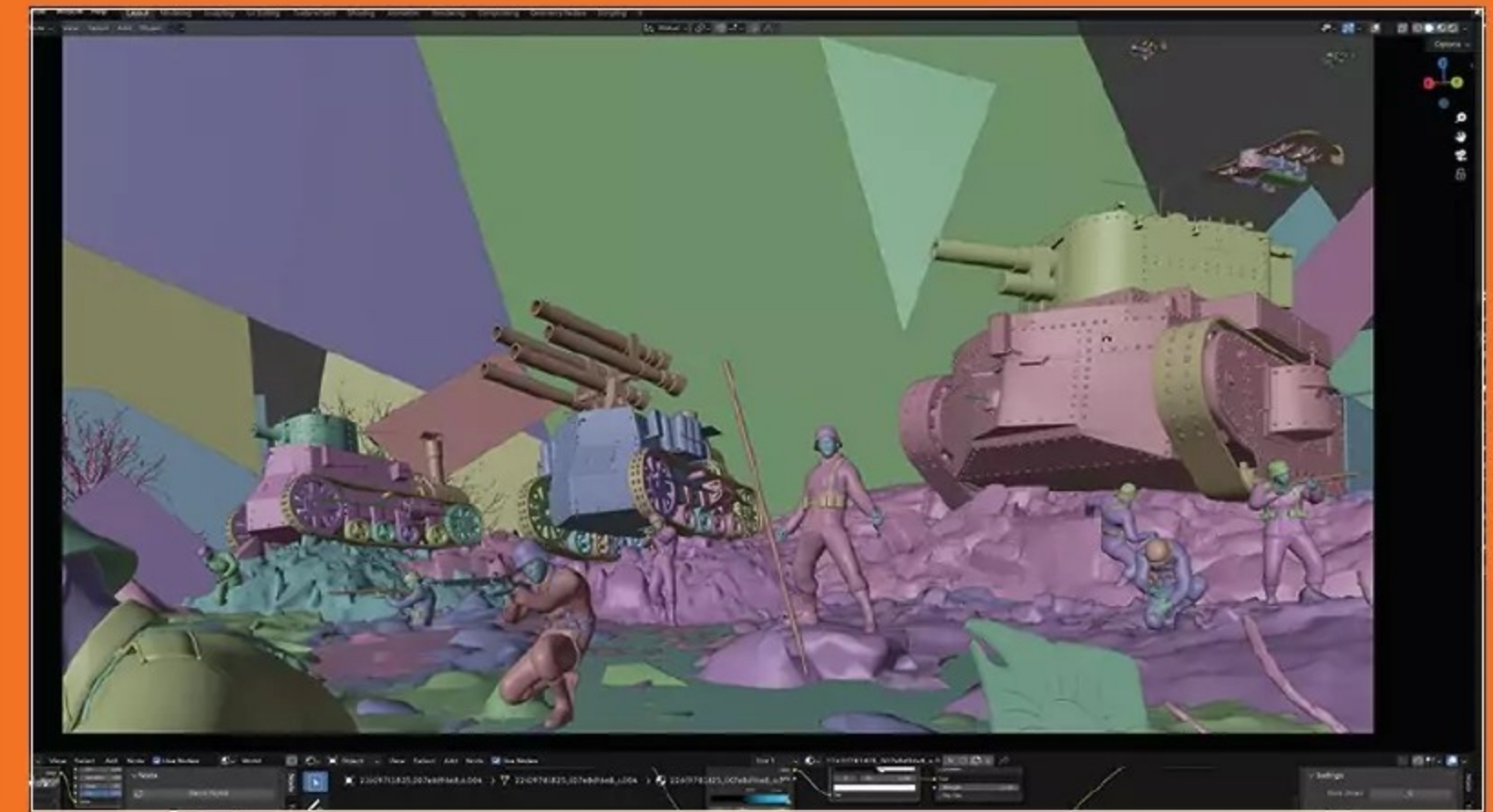
"I was excited when they reached out to me as I enjoy blending history with fictional battlefields. Creating an epic piece of key art that reflects the nature of the game was both a rewarding and challenging task. The team had a general vision and fully trusted my skills and design sense to craft a striking image." 🟠





How I create...

## AN EXPLOSIVE BATTLE SCENE



### 1 Layering and composition

I started in 3D since I was provided with some 3D hero assets for the main tanks and aircraft. The team at Greifenmaer also sent their initial in-game layouts to help kick off the creative brief. I quickly moved on to blocking out the full scene in Blender, building the environment and placing basic rigged soldiers.



### 2 Translating 2D knowledge into 3D

I had to plan all VFX effects and post-production from the start. Blender's Compositor lets me control and tweak colour balance, exposure, lens effects, etc. For most of the additional VFX, I used 2D image planes either with emission (explosions) or alpha planes (dust, particles). This saved a lot of resources.



### 3 Final steps

I could then render high-resolution passes in Blender and polish the image in Photoshop. I was given the creative freedom to introduce some 2D touches, like brushstrokes along the edges and subtle painterly effects to soften parts of the 'fake' 3D look.

### Artist PROFILE

**Darek Zabrocki**

LOCATION: Poland

Darek is a concept artist and creative director, specialising in creating new worlds and designs for films, games, etc. He runs the Focal Point concept art school. <https://bit.ly/3Pb2ApB>

# The Gallery

SHOWCASING THE FINEST  
TRADITIONAL ARTISTS

1



2





## Grzegorz 'Greg' Rutkowski

**LOCATION:** Poland **MEDIA:** Oils and acrylics **WEB:** [www.greg-rutkowski.com](http://www.greg-rutkowski.com)

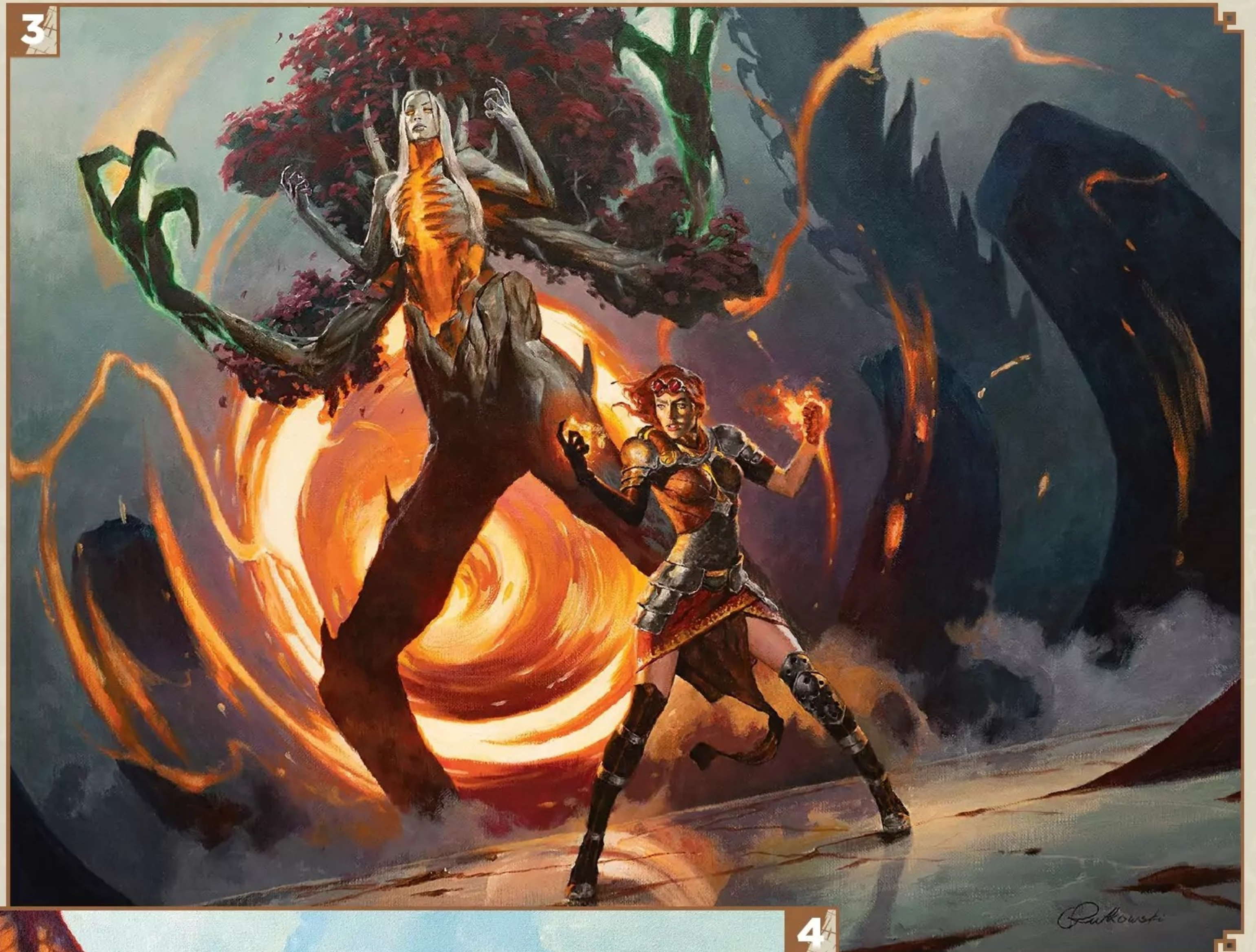
Greg is a fine artist, digital painter, illustrator and concept artist who started his career in 2009. He has been commissioned by major entertainment firms including Wizards of the Coast, Blizzard, Disney and Games Workshop.

### 1 LEGEND

"This scene depicts a knight returning from a victorious battle. People are treating him like a hero, like a legend. This oil painting was created in 2023, on a linen canvas measuring 100 x 70cm."

### 2 FOR HONOR AND FREEDOM

"It took me around 10 months to complete this oil painting on linen canvas (200 x 130cm). I finished it in 2024 and recorded the whole process, available on my website as a complete course." (<https://bit.ly/4tQ3UgE>)



### 3 GO IT ALONE

"This painting was commissioned by Wizards of the Coast for its Magic: The Gathering TCG. It was painted with acrylics in 2022 on linen canvas (80 x 60cm)."

### 4 CHAOS DRAGON

"Another 2022 MTG commission for Wizards of the Coast. Once again, I used acrylics but on cotton canvas, measuring 70 x 50cm."



## Warpsol

LOCATION: US MEDIA: Ink and watercolour WEB: <https://warpsol.com>

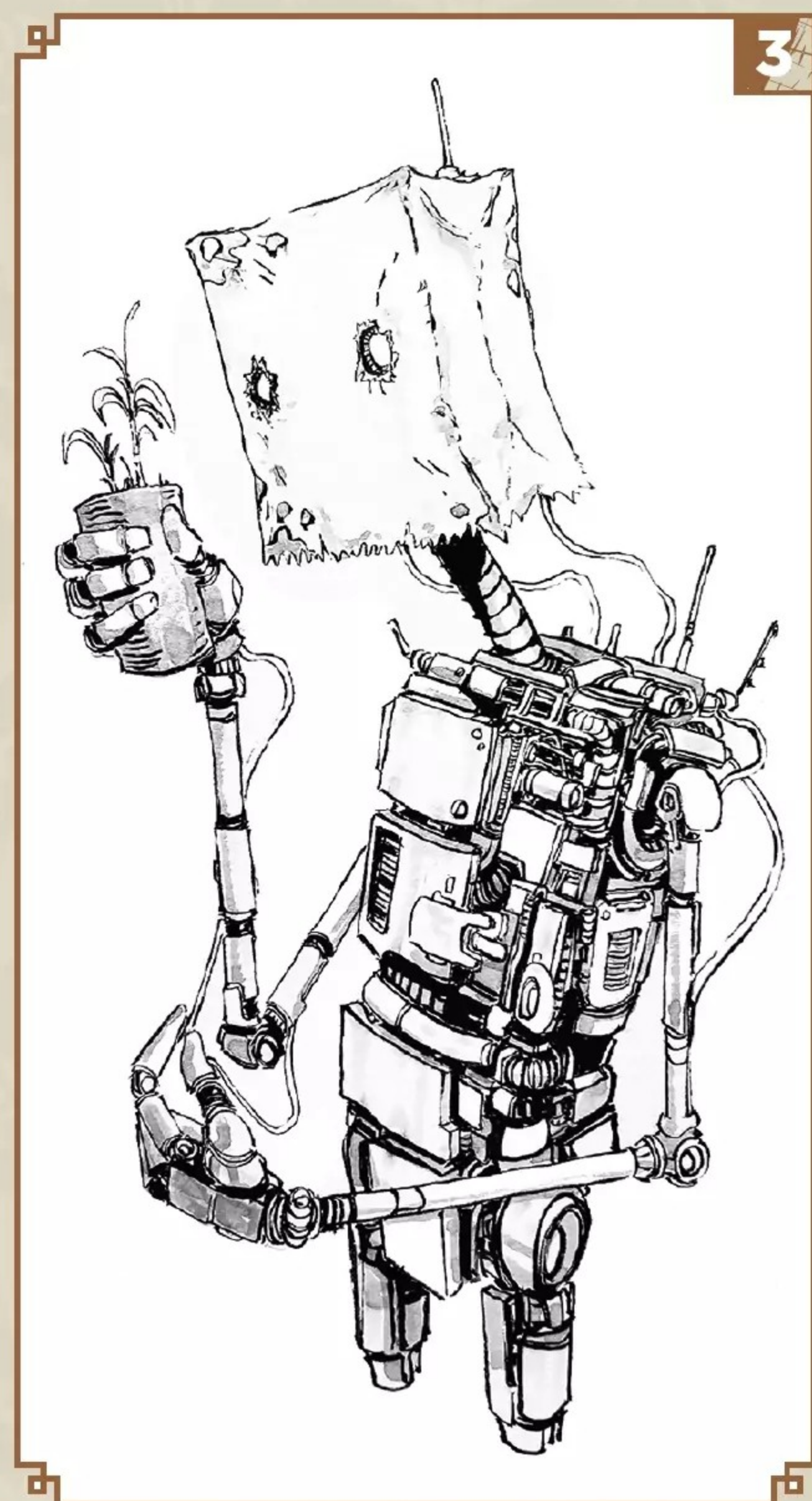
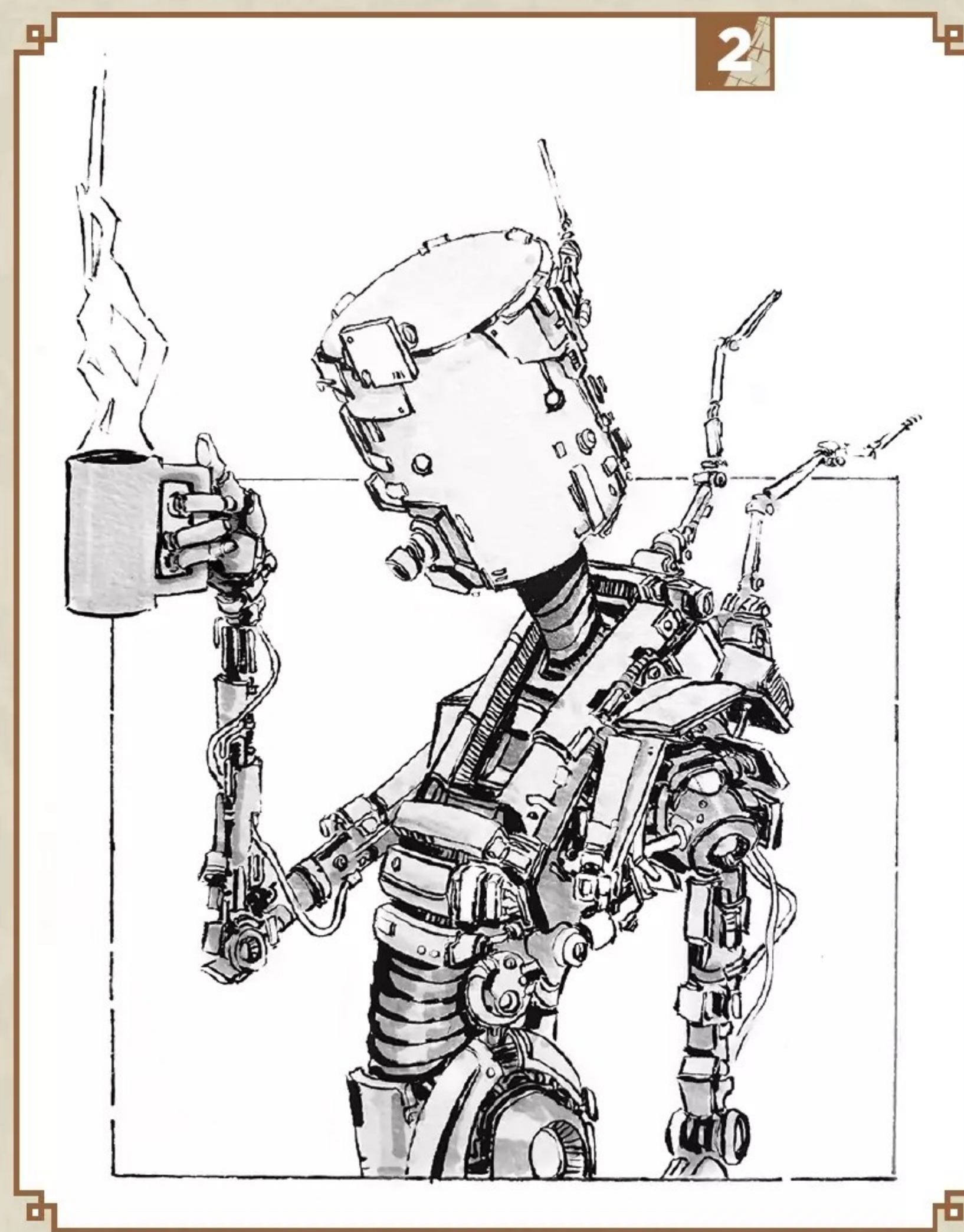
Indiana-based Warpsol uses inks and watercolours to create small narrative moments centred around robots and machines. These characters might be mechanical, but the intention behind them is human.

### 1 WALLACE

"A character-driven piece exploring imperfection, inspired by the Dark Souls video game series. Wallace was built with intention but the execution was flawed, making the robot heavy and powerful, yet ultimately unreliable."

### 2 COFFEE BOT

"A simple moment built around routine, translating an everyday human habit into something mechanical and reflective. I also love coffee!"

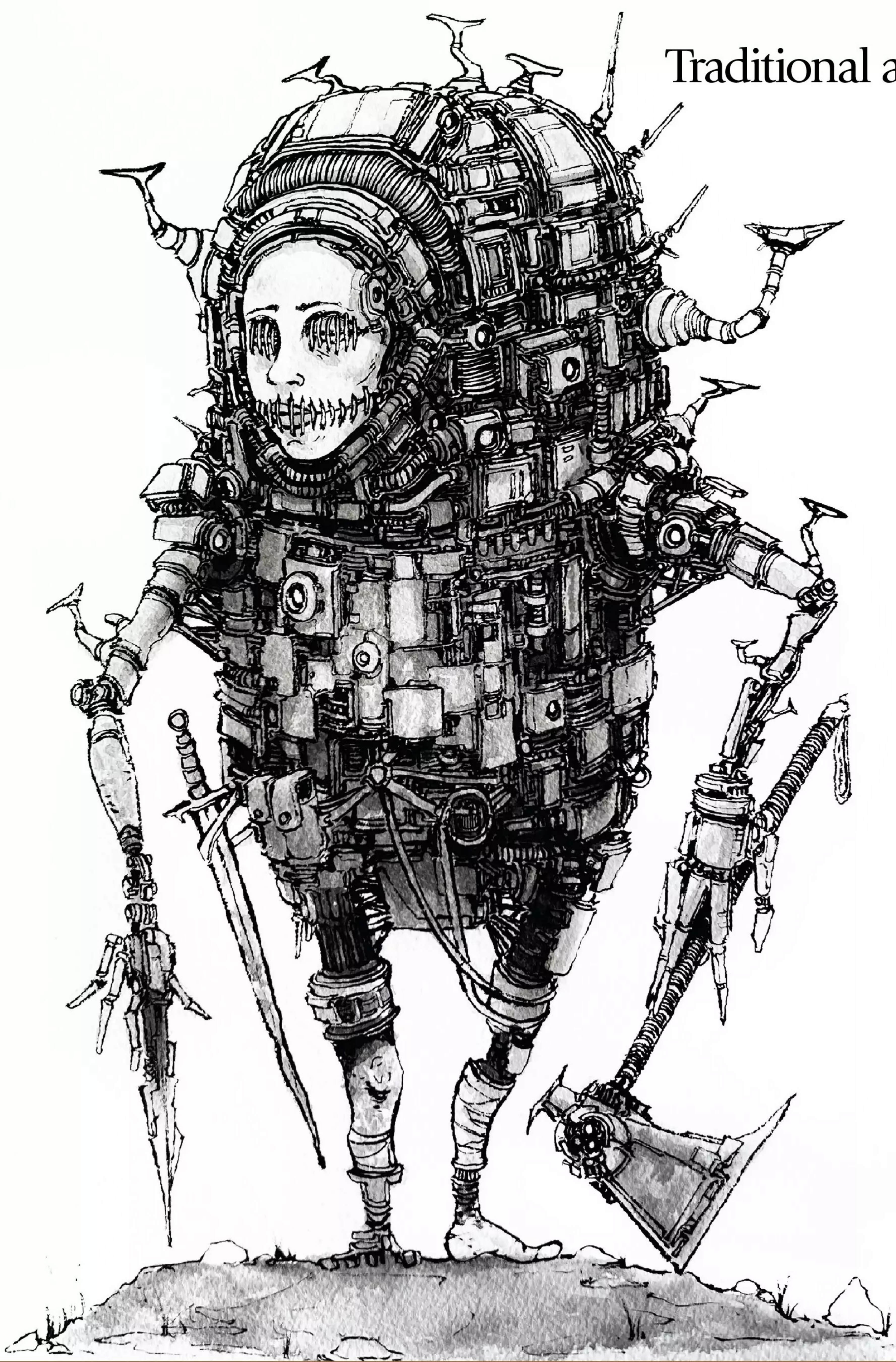


### 3 PLANT BOT

"A quieter piece focused on care and growth. Plant Bot explores the relationship between artificial life and nature, by placing something mechanical into a role that feels soft and human."

### 4 CLAUDIA

"Claudia features a more introspective design, leaning into weight and identity. It's something constructed, yet still carries a sense of presence."



**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](mailto:fxpose@imaginefx.com)

# Reviews



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

**Artist's Choice Award**  
Art resources with a five-star rating receive the ImagineFX Artist's Choice award!



It looks great on your desk, especially if you've got the height-adjustable stand.

All images © Apple

## Apple Studio Display (2026)

**SMALL CHANGES** The refreshed Studio Display is great, but extremely similar to the old model. So it still worth the premium price?

**Price** From £1,499/\$1,599 **Company** Apple **Web** [www.apple.com](http://www.apple.com)

**F**our long years ago, we reviewed Apple's Studio Display. It was a 27-inch 5K LED-backlit panel with 600 nits of brightness and a bunch of USB-C ports on the back, plus a built-in camera, some bits out of an iPhone, speakers and an adjustable stand. It cost \$1,599 in the US and £1,499 in the UK.

And here we are in 2026 with a new Apple Studio Display. It's a 27-inch 5K LED-backlit panel with 600 nits of brightness, a bunch of USB-C ports

on the back, plus a built-in camera, some bits out of an iPhone, speakers and an adjustable stand. It costs \$1,599 in the US and £1,499 in the UK.

So what has changed? Really very little. The iPhone bits are new – the display has an Apple A19 from the iPhone 17 instead of the original's A13 Bionic from the iPhone 11 – the input socket is now Thunderbolt 5 rather than Thunderbolt 3, and there's a second Thunderbolt port for daisy-chaining purposes. If you're looking for one of the best monitors for graphic

artists, it's still got the goods and, perhaps just as importantly for many, the Apple logo, but there are plenty of other choices out there for less outlay.

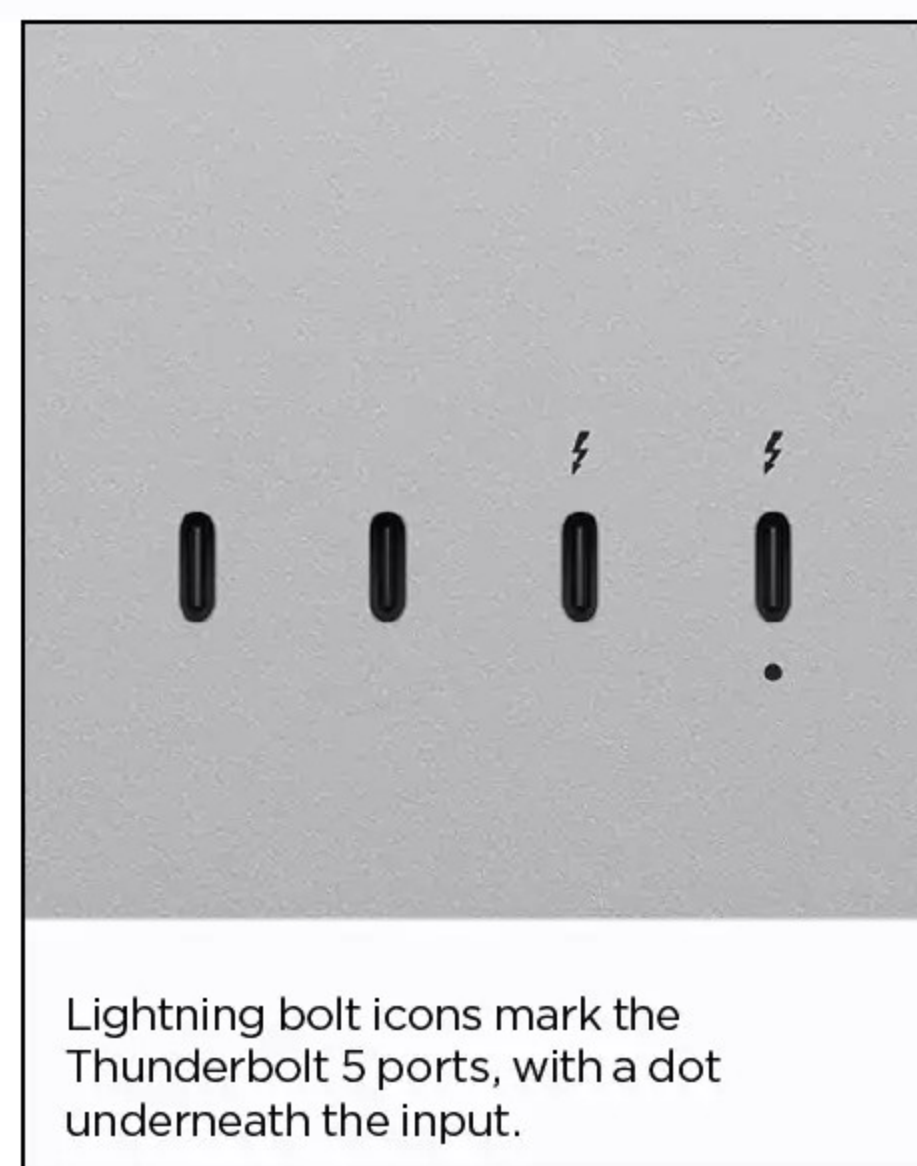
### ELEGANT DESIGN

This new Apple Studio Display is bound to come in for some criticism, but here's one thing you can definitely say about it: this is a lovely-looking thing to have on your desk. The one we've got here has a height-adjustable stand that raises it to 58.3cm from a starting height of 47.9cm. Anyone





This is the tilting stand, but there's the option of a tilt- and height-adjustable one for an extra £400/\$400.



Lightning bolt icons mark the Thunderbolt 5 ports, with a dot underneath the input.

buying the entry-level version will have to fall back on the age-old technique of piling books or magazines underneath it to bump up the height.

All the adjustments on the Studio Display are superbly smooth, the base is wide enough to rest a MacBook on (and if your MacBook is silver, it's exactly the same colour), and you can switch it on and off with your laptop without needing to fiddle around with a button hidden on the back of the screen. It's genuinely a lovely thing.

It has a problem, however, in the form of the Studio Display XDR. This screen, also launched at the beginning of 2026, is everything the refreshed

Studio Display should have been: it looks identical and has the same resolution, but offers twice the brightness and refresh rate. It's also a lot more expensive, and Apple didn't send us one for review.

There's little to break the smooth metal skin of the Studio Display, just four USB-C ports, an Apple logo, and a grille around the edges to help the heat escape. You might not think monitors generate much in the way of exhaust, but with the innards of an iPhone 17 (including 128GB of storage) inside, plus the ability to pass 96W of power to your laptop, there's a lot going on.

“If you're looking for one of the best monitors for graphic artists, it's still got the goods... and the Apple logo”

## VERDICT

You'd think the Apple Studio Display would be the ultimate screen for Mac lovers, but this refreshed 2026 model is too similar to the older model. All the really good stuff has been saved for the even pricier Studio Display XDR, leaving this perfectly competent 5K LED-backlit screen to wonder who it was made for.

### Pros

- Bright
- Colourful
- Mac-loving

### Cons

- Pricey
- No 120Hz
- No HDR

### Rating



What the Studio Display doesn't have is a traditional video input. No HDMI or DisplayPort here, though you can use an adapter to get it working with a non-Apple machine. Connecting it to a Windows PC means you lose out on Center Stage functionality from the webcam, and you may need to install colour profiles manually.

## MADE FOR MAC

No one's going to be using this with a Windows machine, though, as there are better native options available. It really comes alive when attached to a Mac, and anything with an M-series chip running macOS 26.3.1 or later will work. Note that this leaves out the recent MacBook Neo, which can't drive the Studio Display at its native resolution, but supplies a scaled input instead.

New on this 2026 model is a Thunderbolt output alongside the input - they're both Thunderbolt 5, so you can daisy-chain monitors if you have two. The USB ports alongside them are 10 Gbit/s powered ports, ideal for external SSDs or connecting your camera. The Thunderbolt ports are marked with a lightning bolt symbol, while the input port is further enhanced with a little dot, so you know which plug to put where. This is much better than the unmarked ports on the MacBook Neo.

The A19 chip is used to handle spatial audio from the display's speakers, to pick up 'Hey Siri' voice commands, and for the Center Stage webcam, carrying out this processing on the screen itself rather than offloading it to your Mac. The camera is a big upgrade from the previous version of the screen, its wide field of view is cropped to keep you in the frame, delivering a 12MP image, but it can do some tricks, such as Desk View, which allows you to show a section of your workspace so you can demonstrate your projects.

Image quality from the display is immaculate, just as it was four years ago. It's bright, the colour is accurate, and the 60Hz display rate is... fine. We've seen a lot of excellent screens in the past few years, though, many of which cost less than this does, and offer features like HDR and faster refresh rates that the basic Studio Display doesn't have. ●

Ian Evenden



With a chassis a mere 18.9mm thick, this is a slimline machine that will easily slip into a laptop wallet.



All images © Acer

# Acer Predator Helios Neo 16S AI

**MAGIC MIRROR** This capable laptop has an outstanding resolution display – but why is it so reflective?

**Price** From £1,499/\$1,599 **Company** Acer **Web** [www.acer.com](http://www.acer.com)

**T**he Acer Predator Helios Neo 16S AI packs an NVIDIA GeForce RTX 5070 Ti Laptop GPU and high-TOPS AI capabilities into a sub-19mm chassis, which makes it a good fit for the modern hybrid user.

The most demanding of creatives and gamers will crave a higher-specced machine, but if you want one machine to indulge in both worlds, then this mid-range laptop will cover most of the required bases.

For Acer, the Predator Helios Neo 16S AI is a shift from budget-friendly Neo roots to a premium, AI-focused identity. It aims to bridge the gap between the bulky Helios powerhouses and the sleek Triton series and serves as the flagship for Acer's transition into silicon-aware, AI-native hardware.

The Acer Predator Helios Neo 16S AI attempts to blend gaming aesthetics and professional minimalism, and it does a pretty good job of it. Compared to its predecessor, the makers have opted for a much slimmer chassis, measuring just 18.9mm thick, which means it slips right into a laptop wallet with ease. It's a far cry from the 'heavy' gaming laptops that we're used to.

There's RGB lighting, including an RGB light bar at the rear, but it's nowhere near as edgy or defined as gamers might expect.

One of the main reasons to buy the Predator Helios Neo 16S AI is the 16-inch OLED WQXGA display, which features an exceptional 2560 x 1600 pixel resolution. Unfortunately, it's a little too reflective

for our liking. On the more positive side, it does have a wide DCI-P3 100% colour gamut.

At rear of the device you'll find the power input, an HDMI 2.1 port for 4K/120Hz output, and two Thunderbolt 4 USB-C ports that support both power delivery and DisplayPort.

The sides feature three USB 3.2 Gen 2 Type-A ports, an RJ-45 Ethernet jack, rounded off by a dedicated microSD card reader.

The 240Hz refresh rate on the OLED panel provides smooth animations and excellent gaming performance; it's just a shame the display is a little too shiny.

In short, if you can put up with some fan noise and are happy never being too far from a charger, then this capable machine won't disappoint. For the price, you're getting some cracking CPU and GPU performance that will cover a wide range of creative tasks as well as some gaming on the side.

**Paul Hatton**

## VERDICT

The Acer Predator Helios Neo 16S AI boasts a cutting-edge RTX 5070 Ti and a stunning 16-inch OLED display, making it an ideal hybrid for creatives and gamers. The cost of portability and power means there's some unwanted fan noise and a modest battery life, but if you're happy accommodating those limitations, then you won't be disappointed by the performance.

### Pros

- 2560 x 1600px OLED display
- Lightweight and portable
- An abundance of ports
- Good value for performance

### Cons

- The display is too reflective
- Loud fans at times
- Poor battery life

### Rating



“The 240Hz refresh rate on the OLED panel provides smooth animations and excellent gaming performance”

The mesh is supple but strong, easily cleanable and supremely comfortable.



The back can be raised or lowered separately to the base.



## Doro C300 Pro

**BUST A MOVE** This new ergonomic office chair from Sihoo is the most versatile seat we have tested

**Price** £589/\$499 **Company** Sihoo **Web** [www.uk.sihoooffice.com](http://www.uk.sihoooffice.com)

**T**he Doro C300 Pro (which we'll refer to as the C300 for now) offers all the pro features you could want from an office chair.

In a nutshell, this is the most comfortable chair we have yet to test, and we have tried a lot.

Shipping in two large boxes, there is a little construction needed to get up and running, but it is very straightforward, with all tools and fixings supplied. Everything is neatly labelled and the instructions are clear. It takes around 15 minutes in total and can be done by one person, although two might be wise if you don't have great upper body strength, as this is a heavy chair, at 25.1kg.

Once set up, it can be moved around on very smooth castors and as soon as you sit on it, the level of

comfort is immediately noticeable. This is down to a number of factors. First off, it is a mesh chair, rather than foam and fabric, which is a major plus. Mesh chairs lend themselves well to long use, with great breathability and great weight distribution. The mesh used here is strong but supple and very comfortable indeed.

Then there's the sheer amount of adaptability. The C300 moves in all kinds of ways, making it very easy to fit it any body type and shape. The back tilts 105, 120 and 135 degrees and has an automatic lumbar support that moves to fit perfectly. The head/neck support has bags of vertical movement, as well as tilt, for excellent all-day support. Then there are the arms, which Sihoo calls 6D. They move in and out, as well as being adjustable for horizontal angle,

“ Mesh chairs lend themselves well to long use, with great breathability and great weight distribution ”



The Doro C300 Pro comes in black and this off-white, and there's an optional foot rest.



A single three-way paddle controls all the movements of the C300, except the back.



vertical angle and have elbow supports that can be angled back to flat, using a ratcheting system. Seat height has a range of 46 to 56cm, a good range that will suit most. There's an optional swing-out foot rest too, for even more comfort.

All of this might make you think you'd be hunting for handles and levers underneath, but all adjustments are made with one single paddle that cleverly links all the different areas and makes it really easy to dial in.

After weeks of use over long working days, the Doro C300 Pro has performed impeccably and is highly recommended for any office or studio.

**Rob Redman**

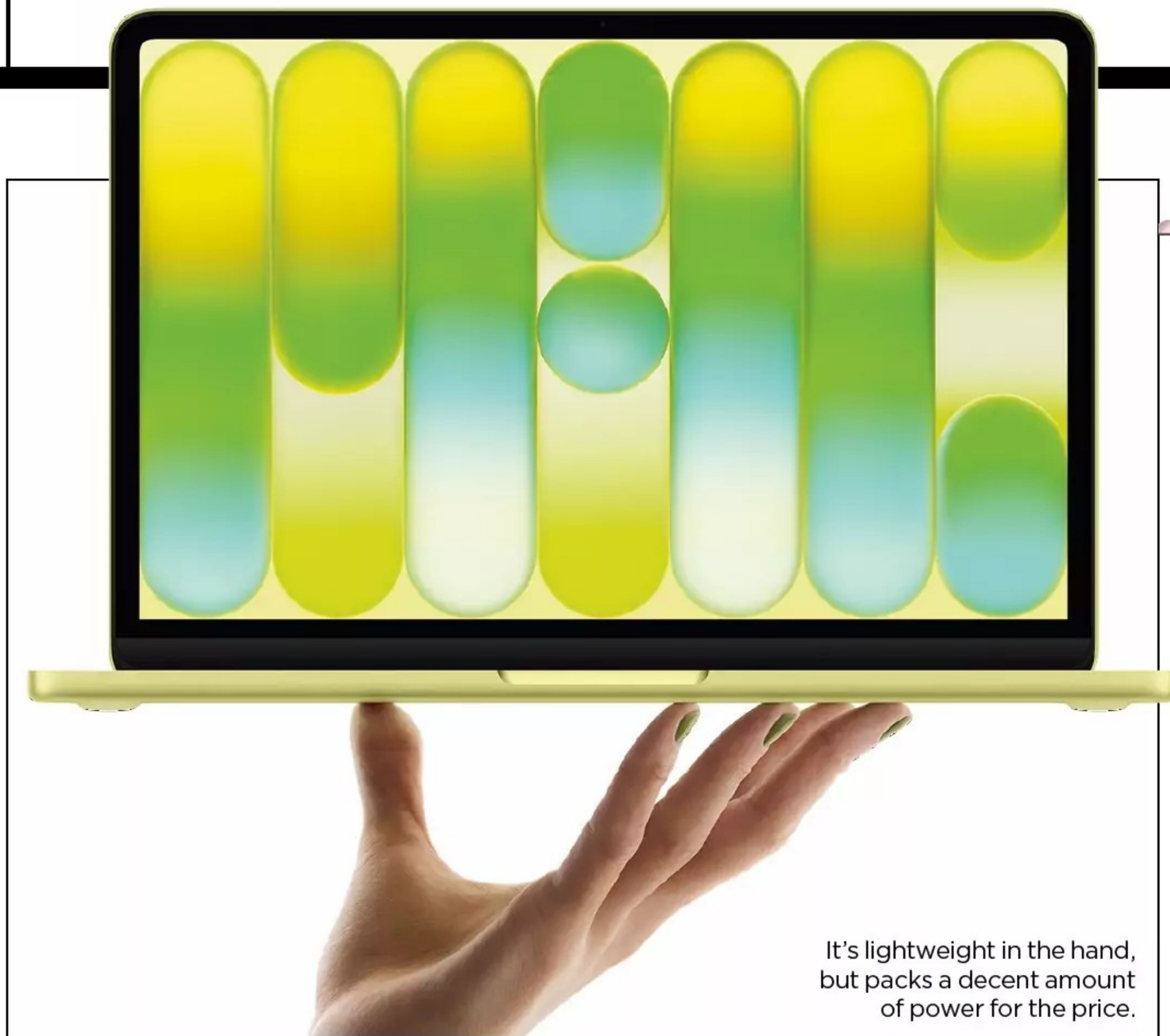
### VERDICT

The C300 Pro is a top-notch office chair, which will fit anybody (max load: 136kg). The levels of adaptability make it easy to dial in the perfect fit and it remains comfortable for long working days.

**Pros**  
 ■ Excellent comfort  
 ■ Adaptable  
 ■ Easy to use

**Cons**  
 ■ It is heavy

**Rating**  
 ★★★★★



It's lightweight in the hand, but packs a decent amount of power for the price.



All images © Apple

A colour-matched Magic Keyboard makes for comfortable typing, although it lacks a backlight.

# Apple MacBook Neo

**BANG FOR BUCK** Did Apple just become a budget-friendly tech company? This new entry-level MacBook has enough power to be useful

**Price** From £599/\$599 **Company** Apple **Web** [www.apple.com](http://www.apple.com)

**A**pple has surprised us all with just how good the MacBook Neo is for its low price. It's powered by an iPhone processor, but none the worse for it until you start trying to move 3D or video really fast.

Things like a paucity of GPU cores and a small puddle of RAM begin to show quite fast when you do that. For most other uses, however, including writing, giving presentations and image editing, the Neo does well enough to make it a useful addition to any creative's toolkit.

Unlike the MacBook Pro, the Neo doesn't have its name written



Some users won't appreciate the small selection of ports, including a low-speed USB 2.0 one.

anywhere on its body. Even the bottom of the screen is unadorned, and the Apple logo on the lid is body-coloured and not deeply recessed. As such, it's almost a stealth MacBook, if such a thing were possible for a laptop that's bright green (one of four colours available).

Being small, there's less room for a large battery, but the 36.5Wh cell in the Neo does well enough, averaging just over 12 hours before needing to be charged, so should be good for a day's work.

You only get two ports on the side of the MacBook Neo, and some people aren't going to like this at all. One is USB 3.2, with a 10Gbps data rate and the ability to hook up to an external screen. The other is, somehow, only USB 2.0, and can transfer data pretty slowly as a result.

The A18 Pro at the heart of the MacBook Neo is also found in the iPhone 16 Pro phones. You get six cores in total, two of them high-performance at 4GHz and the other four energy-efficient at 2.4GHz.



The MacBook Neo comes in a range of four shades: silver, blush, lime and indigo.

The GPU only has five cores (one less than in the iPhones), and there's the usual Apple Neural Engine NPU with 16 cores. Another drawback of this SoC is that it only supports 8GB of RAM, a very small amount in 2026.

In Photoshop it's near the bottom of the table but far from the worst we've seen. It's perfectly capable of importing, cropping, colour-correcting and messing about with a few layers, but heavy video editing asks too much of it.

This is a pretty good showing for something so cheap, positioning the Neo as a great secondary machine, perhaps alongside a Mac Studio for the heavy lifting. If you're into music production, YouTubers have shown the Neo running Logic Pro and Ableton quite happily at up to around 150 tracks, just taking a bit longer to do things than an M5 machine.

**Ian Evenden**

## VERDICT

A Mac for just under \$600/£600? We've been here before, with underpowered models that didn't satisfy creative needs. The Neo is a much better prospect, though it's still not the machine for grinding through video encoding or rendering tasks. It excels at being small, nippy, and lasting just about long enough to get everything done. It's stripped back compared to some of the laptops we've tested, but it has enough power to be useful, and comes in a lovely range of colours.

### Pros

- Better performance than you might expect
- Decent screen
- Nice price

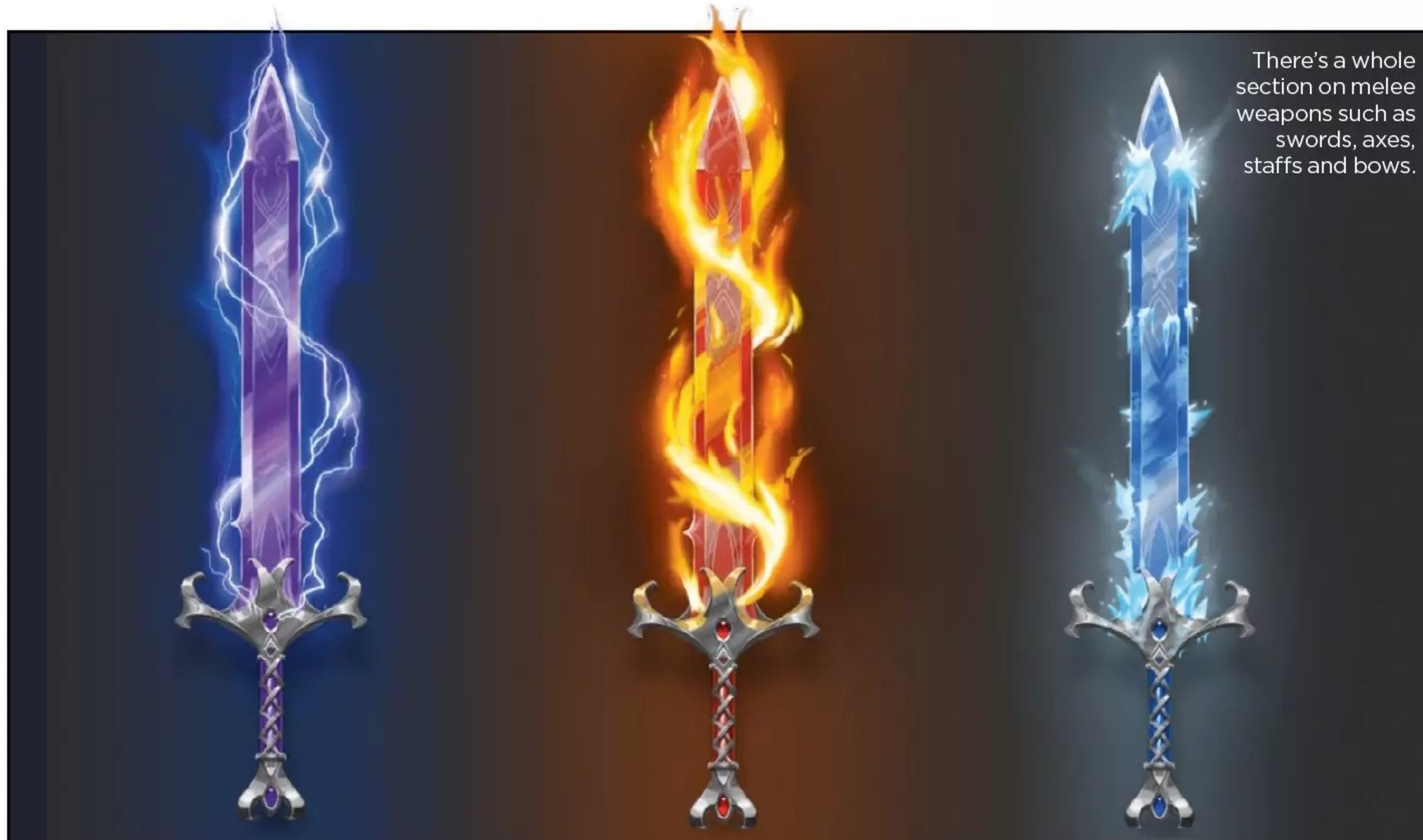
### Cons

- Only 8GB RAM
- No keyboard backlight
- Strange choice of ports

### Rating



“For most uses, the Neo does well enough to make it a useful addition to any creative's toolkit”



There's a whole section on melee weapons such as swords, axes, staffs and bows.

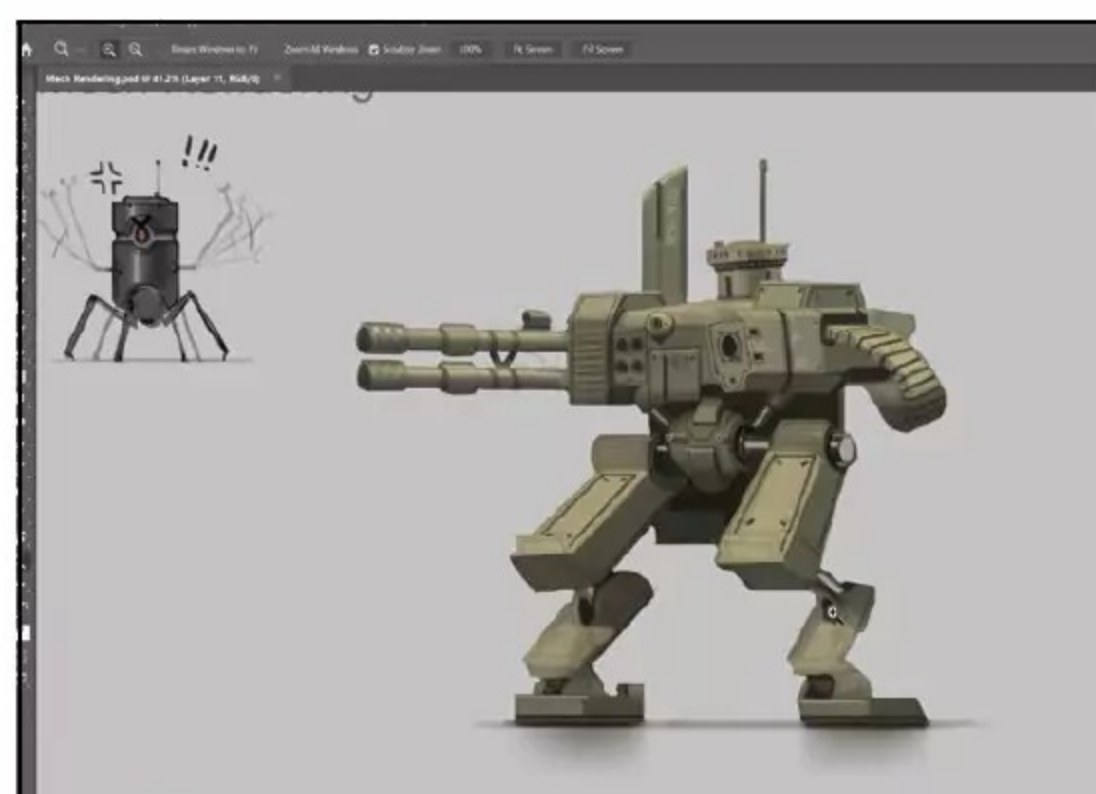
## Concept Art: Draw and Paint Fantasy and Scifi Weapons

**HARDCORE TRAINING** Colton Dubell's marathon Photoshop course tackles weapons, vehicles and mechs in one sitting

**Publisher** Udemy **Price** £19.99/\$64.99 **Format** Online video course (lifetime access)  
**Length** 55 lectures (25h 16m) **Web** www.udemy.com

**W**e think it's great to see a professional artist like Colton Dubell, who has worked on AAA games, focus on creative artist mentoring as another revenue stream, and this hard surface boot camp is literally that, a hardcore training ground that can make anyone with the slightest interest in creating art.

And there is a lot here: 25 hours of Photoshop training in drawing the 'stuff' that makes characters and scenes feel 'alive'; in many cases, the creations become characters in their own right. After working through the fundamentals of drawing in Photoshop, it's then time to plough into the creation of melee weapons such as swords and axes (which also



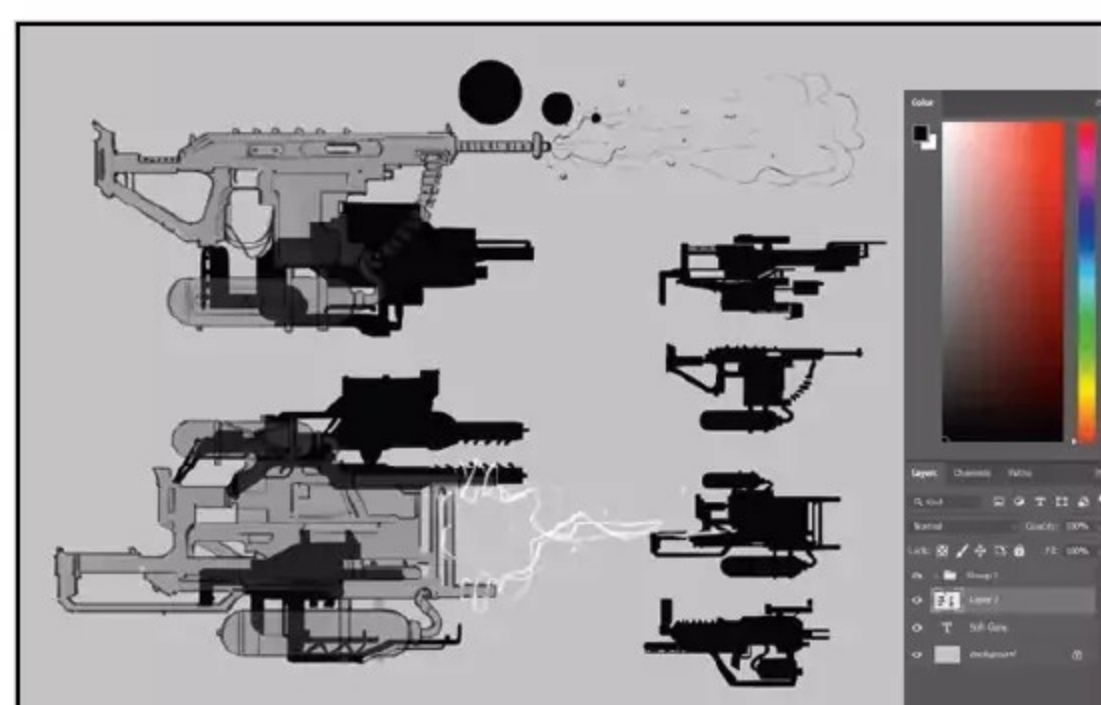
Mechs are a mainstay of science fiction, so the lessons on sketching and rendering them may well prove useful.

get their own dedicated magical FX chapters), then guns, sci-fi guns with lasers, vehicles, tanks, boats, airships, spaceships and finally mechs... phew.

Dubell's course is incredibly detailed. The issue is that his delivery, while structured, is free-form, as if he is talking to you, which can create long pauses. This can be great for artists, but you may find yourself wishing for better playback speed tools.

However, for those new to art and content creation and who have always aspired to turn doodles into something more - even though the course has not been updated since 2021 - it could be the ideal course for unlocking your creative potential, especially if found on discount.

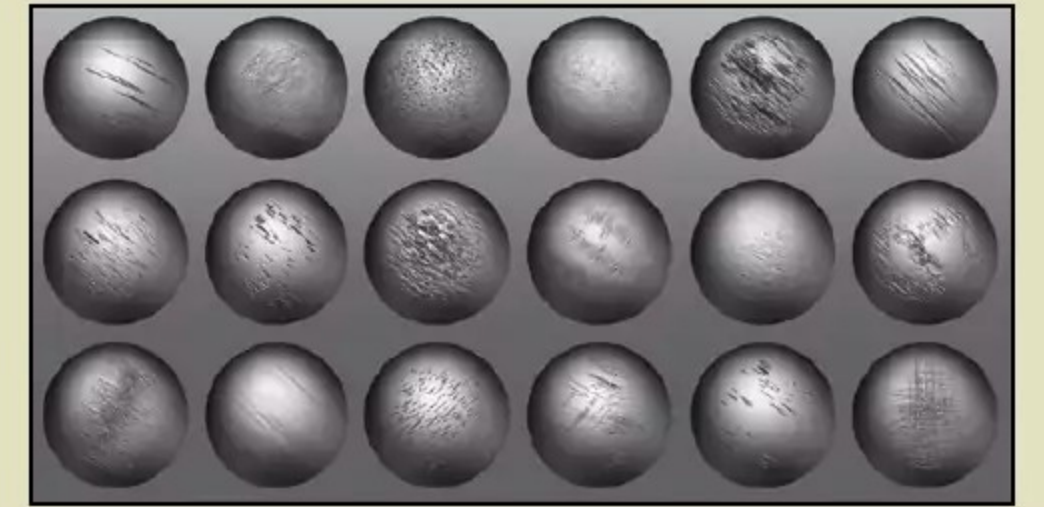
**Mike Griggs**



Learn to draw a wide range of firearms, including pistols, rifles, shotguns, sniper rifles, and sci-fi guns.

## Brushing up...

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



### Hard Surface Alphas: 150x Metal Scratches

**Artist** Pampel Art

**Software** Photoshop, 3D apps

**Brushes** 150 (100 scratches + 50 noises) **Price** From £2.31/\$2.99

**Rating** ★★★★★

This handy library, in PNG and PSD form, has a wide range of applications. Layer one over another and you've got believable worn metal in seconds.

<https://bit.ly/42Zrz2h>



### 80 Smoke and Fire Brushes

**Artist** xresch

**Software** Photoshop, Affinity

Photo, Procreate **Brushes** 80

**Price** £17/\$23 **Rating** ★★★★★

Eighty high-resolution PNGs of smoke and fire, black on transparent, ready to drop into any layer-based app. It's very useful for creating evocative textures, not just fire, making it worth the price.

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

## VERDICT

A great grounding for anyone with no art background in how to, well, draw what's in their head, especially if it relates to weapons and vehicles. There is a lot in this course, and it could do with an edit, but it still offers excellent value.

### Pros

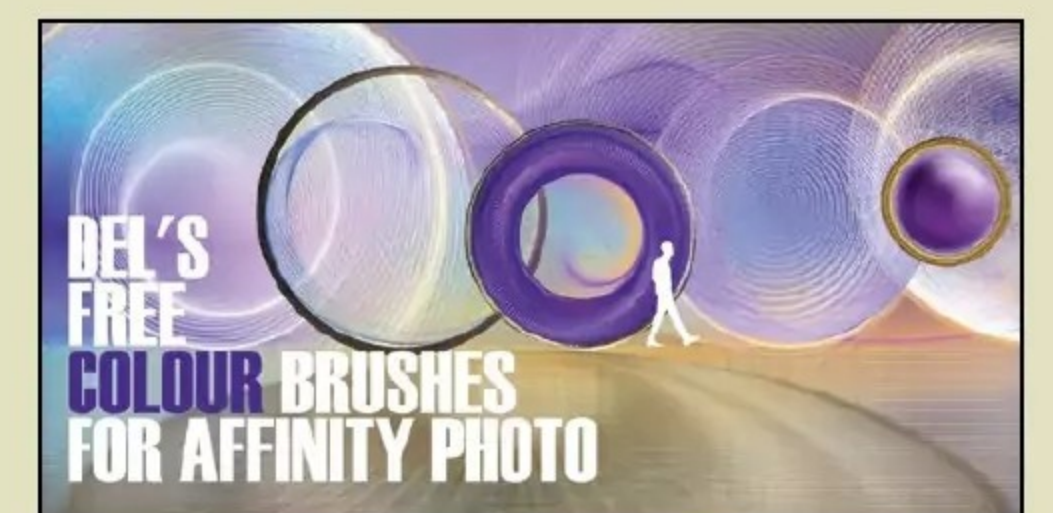
- 25 hours of content
- Incredibly detailed fundamentals
- Great for beginners

### Cons

- Free-form nature of script could annoy
- Hasn't been updated since 2021

### Rating

★★★★★



### Free Textures Brush Collection

**Artist** DelN

**Software** Affinity Photo

**Brushes** 12 themed sets (300dpi)

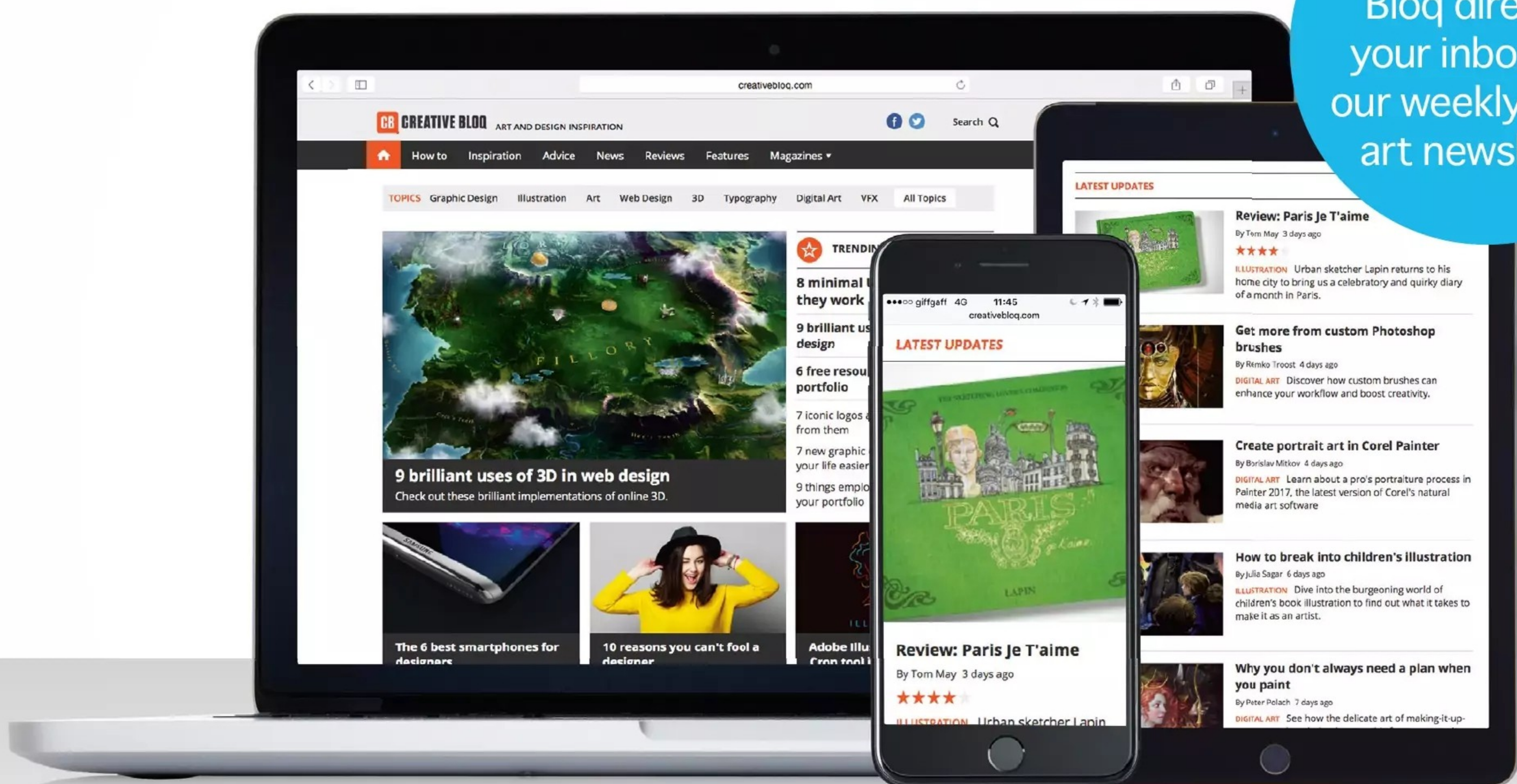
**Price** Free **Rating** ★★★★★

DelN has a huge array of free brushes available for Affinity Photo, and this is where we'd start. These brushes have a huge variety of edge detail, making them great for hard surface objects.

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

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# 3D Artist

Your ultimate source for art, inspiration and know-how

88



## CRAFT YOUR WORLD WITH STORYTELLING

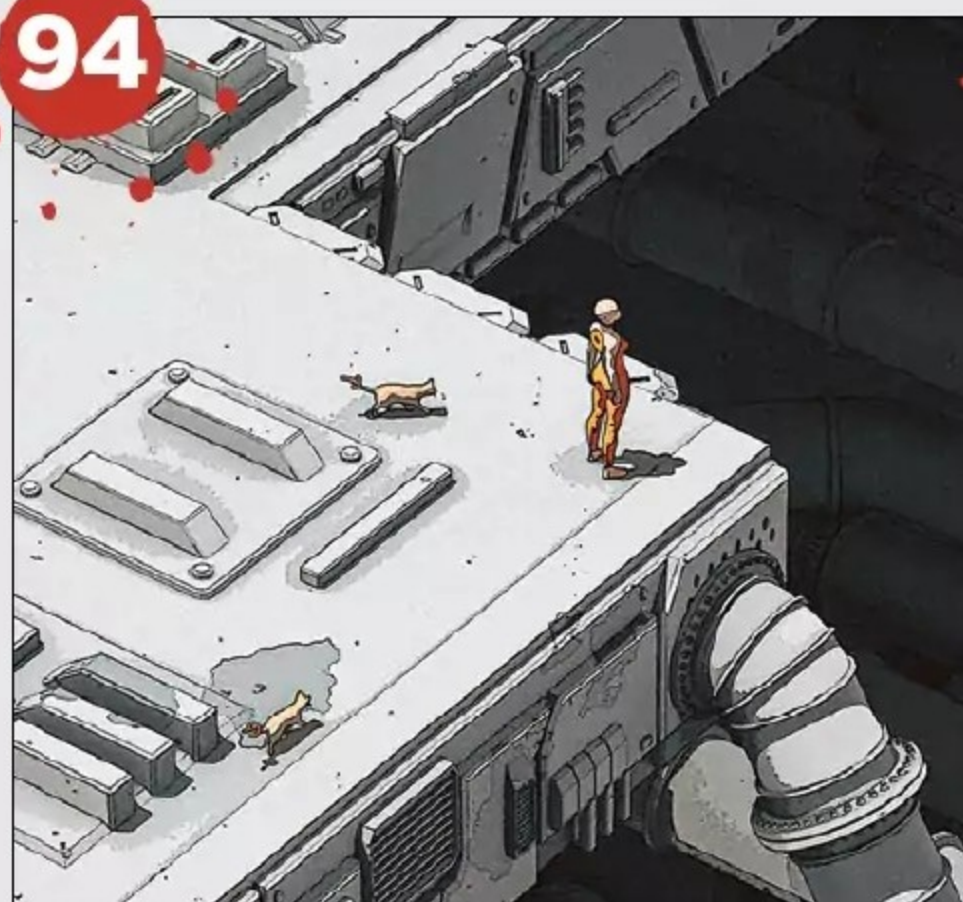
Kan Rongrueangkul shows how narrative details shape worlds

84



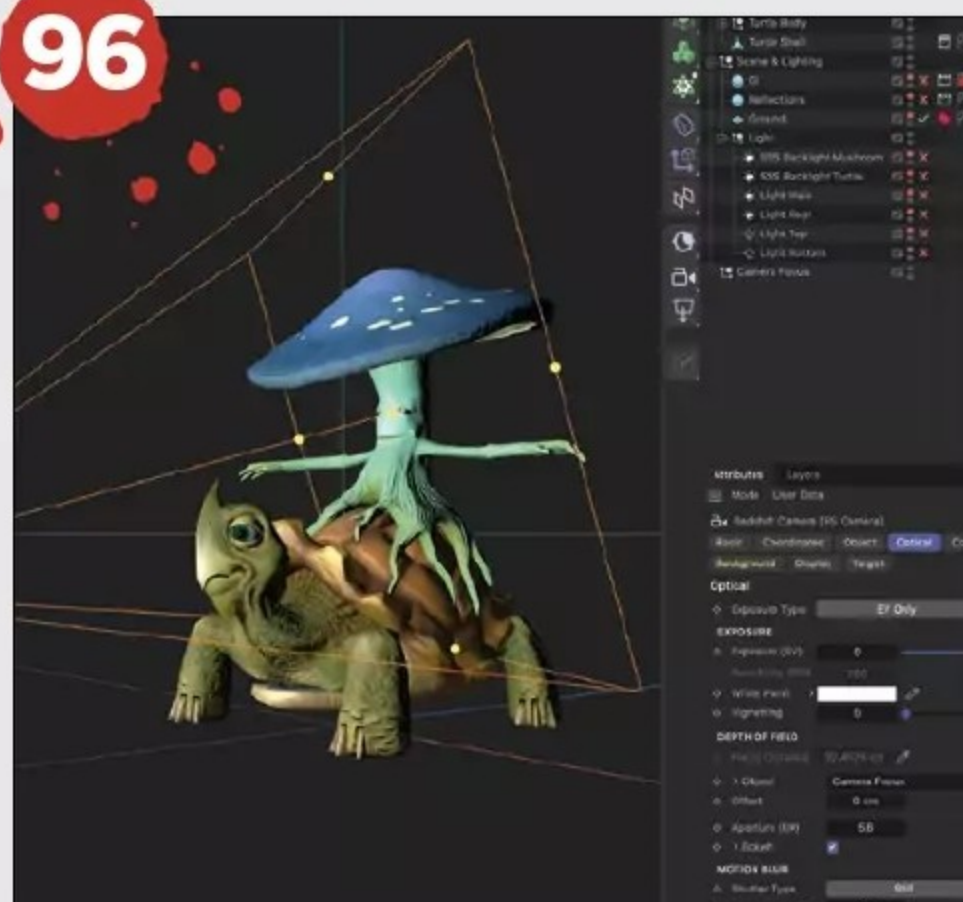
**The best 3D art around**  
Explore the amazing work of character artists Giovane Henriques and Lukas Lima.

94



**Model a future dystopia**  
Discover the techniques used to imbue your environments with a feeling of unease.

96



**Back to basics**  
Use the camera object to frame your shot, and morph models with blendshapes.

98



**Five minutes with...**  
Amir Zand explains how he finds beauty in unexpected places to inspire his designs.

# 3D Artist Showcase

BE INSPIRED BY THE BEST DIGITAL ART AROUND

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**ImagineFX**  
**ARTIST**  
**MONTH**



## Giovane Henriques

**LOCATION:** Brazil **MEDIA:** ZBrush, Maya, Marvelous Designer, Substance Painter, Marmoset, Unreal, V-Ray, Arnold, Photoshop, Illustrator, DaVinci Resolve **WEB:** [www.artstation.com/giovanehenriques](http://www.artstation.com/giovanehenriques)

Giovane works as a freelance 3D character artist for games and cinematics. He doesn't stick to a set modelling technique – each concept has a story, a learning experience, and this is developed throughout the process.

### 1 ORC

"This started as a challenge with some friends, but I ended up taking it a bit further, exploring lighting and colour grading with Arnold... I love to experiment with colour in renders. It's based on concept art by Minjun Kim."

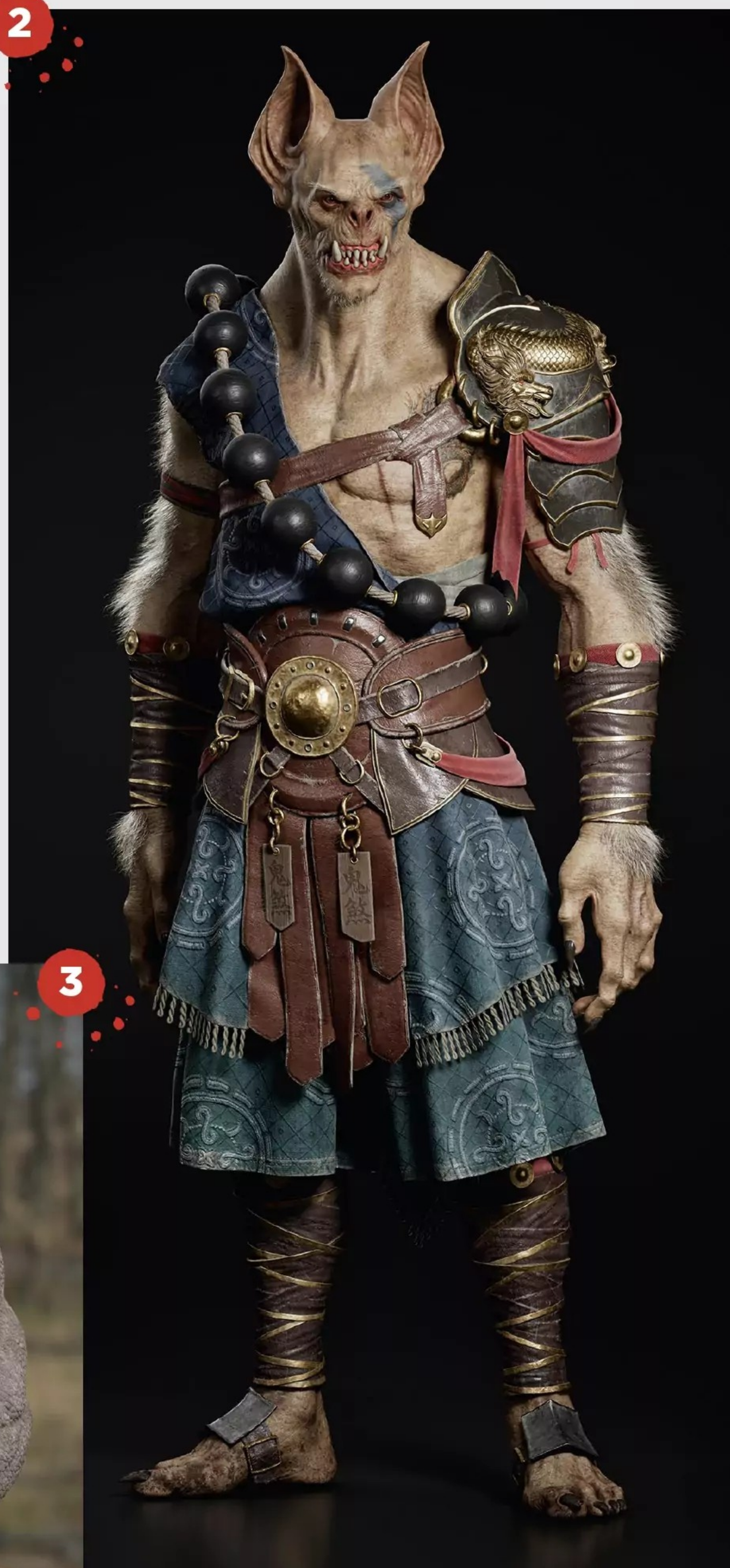
### 2 GUISHA

"I've been wanting to do something in the universe of Black Myth: Wukong for a while and I also took the time to explore the Unreal Engine a bit more. I created this character based on Bobosagy's concept."

1



2



### 3 RHINOCEROS

"This is a character I made for the Artstation Challenge: When Animals Ruled the World."

### 4 DEMON

"I tried to explore a slightly different workflow using HD geometry with displacement and Arnold. Based on the wonderful concept by Adrian Smith."



3





## Lukas Lima

**LOCATION:** Brazil **MEDIA:** Blender, ZBrush, Substance Painter, Marmoset **WEB:** [www.artstation.com/lukaslima](http://www.artstation.com/lukaslima)

Based in Fortaleza, Brazil, Lukas is a freelance 3D character artist. With 13 years of experience in the games and collectibles industry, his work is mostly focused on stylised art.



### 1 OWL SPIRIT

"Looking within myself for inspiration for something stylised yet detailed and related to nature, I explored the idea of something that symbolises a type of nature entity. Inspired by the concept of Chengwei Pan."

### 2 FAREWELL

"I love creating detailed and robotic things, so the idea of explosions and cyborgs was perfect for exploring that and creating a harmony behind it. Inspired by the concept of Chengwei Pan."

### 3 JINX

"After watching Arcane, I felt very inspired to try and produce something in that style. I loved the idea of stylised sculpture mixed with hand-painting, so I tried to do something similar."





**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 [mail@imaginefx.com](mailto:mail@imaginefx.com)

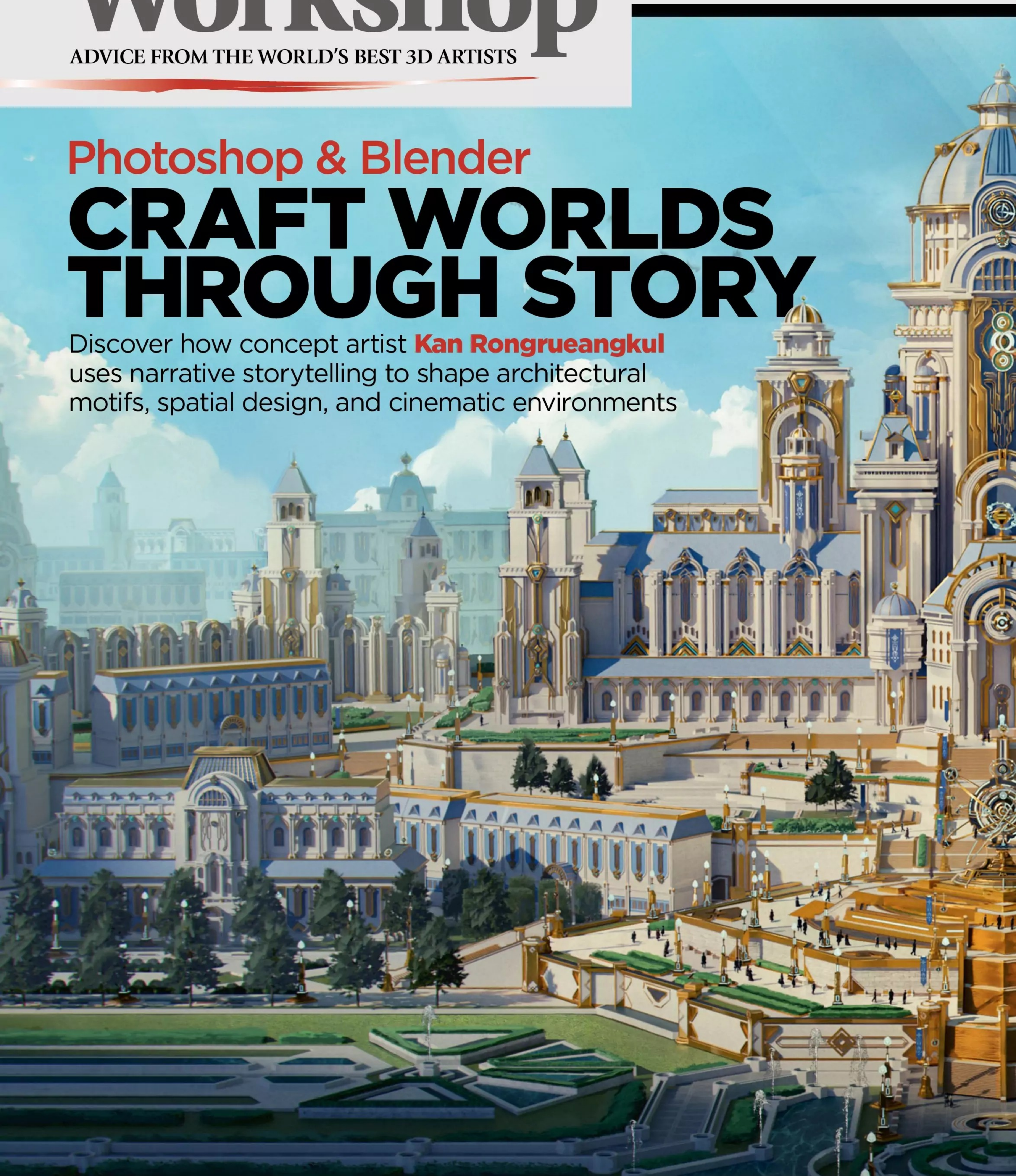
# 3D Artist Workshop

ADVICE FROM THE WORLD'S BEST 3D ARTISTS

Photoshop & Blender

# CRAFT WORLDS THROUGH STORY

Discover how concept artist **Kan Rongrueangkul** uses narrative storytelling to shape architectural motifs, spatial design, and cinematic environments





# 3D Artist Workshop

## Artist PROFILE

**Kan Rongrueangkul**  
LOCATION: Thailand

A story-based concept artist, he graduated from MAGES Institute of Excellence's Concept Art diploma program in Singapore. He loves to craft visual designs through storytelling.  
<https://bit.ly/4u8YGwJ>



Bringing ideas and stories to life is one of the core passions of concept artists, yet transforming imagination into reality requires strong designs and storytelling. In this tutorial, I'll guide you through the creative process behind Astravale – Centre of Resonance Astrum, focusing on how narrative details shape architecture, motifs and environment design.

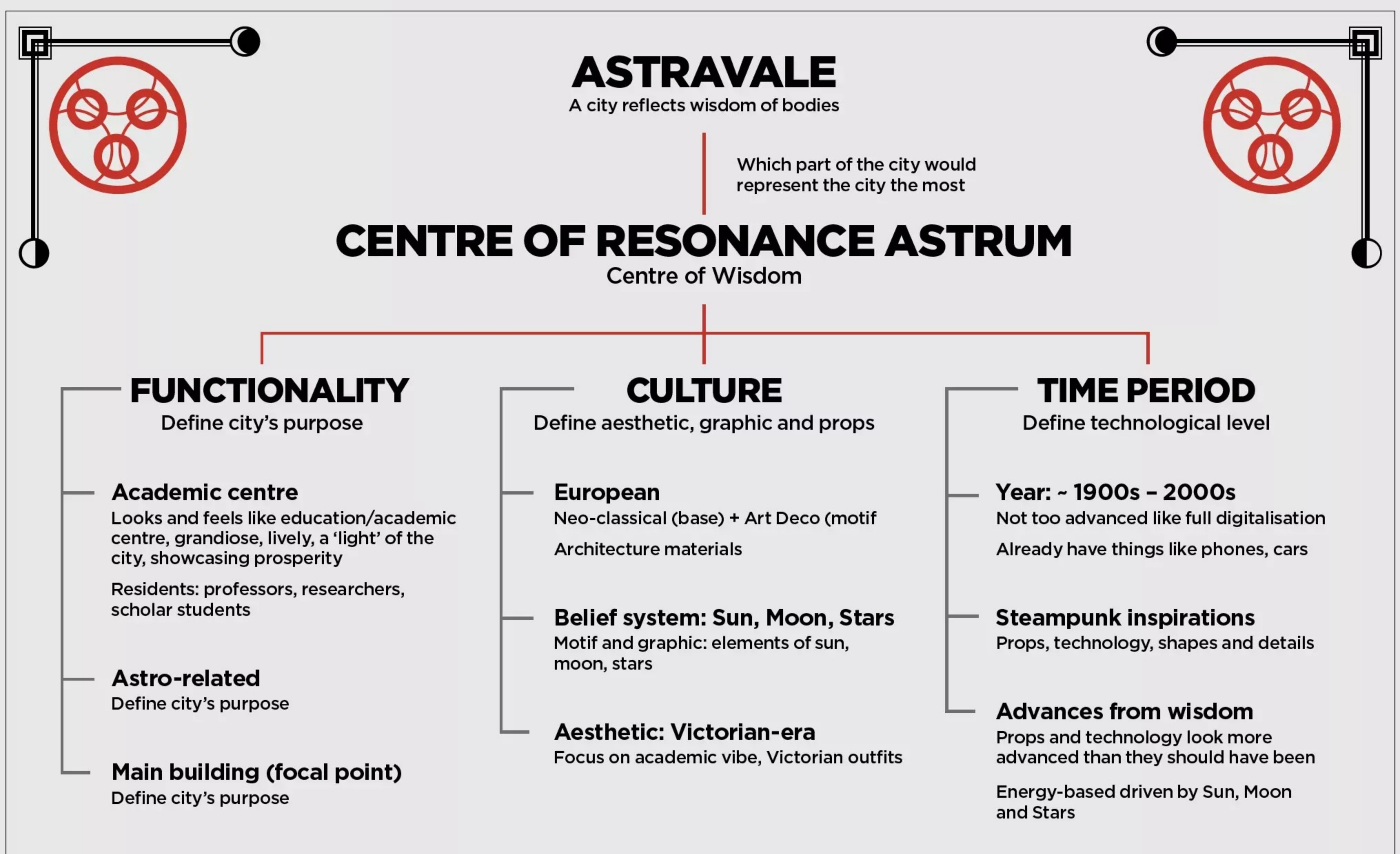
While I'll also cover parts of my workflow using Photoshop, Blender

and PureRef ([www.pureref.com](http://www.pureref.com)), this workshop focuses primarily on extracting design ideas and visual language from storytelling.

Today's digital landscape allows artists to access learning resources and artistic tools more easily. While strong execution and efficiency remain essential within a production pipeline, what truly shapes an artist's identity is their ability to solve problems, communicate ideas and tell stories through design. To me, 'concept' is about communicating ideas and solutions through

ideation and storytelling, while 'art' becomes the language used to bring imagination to life.

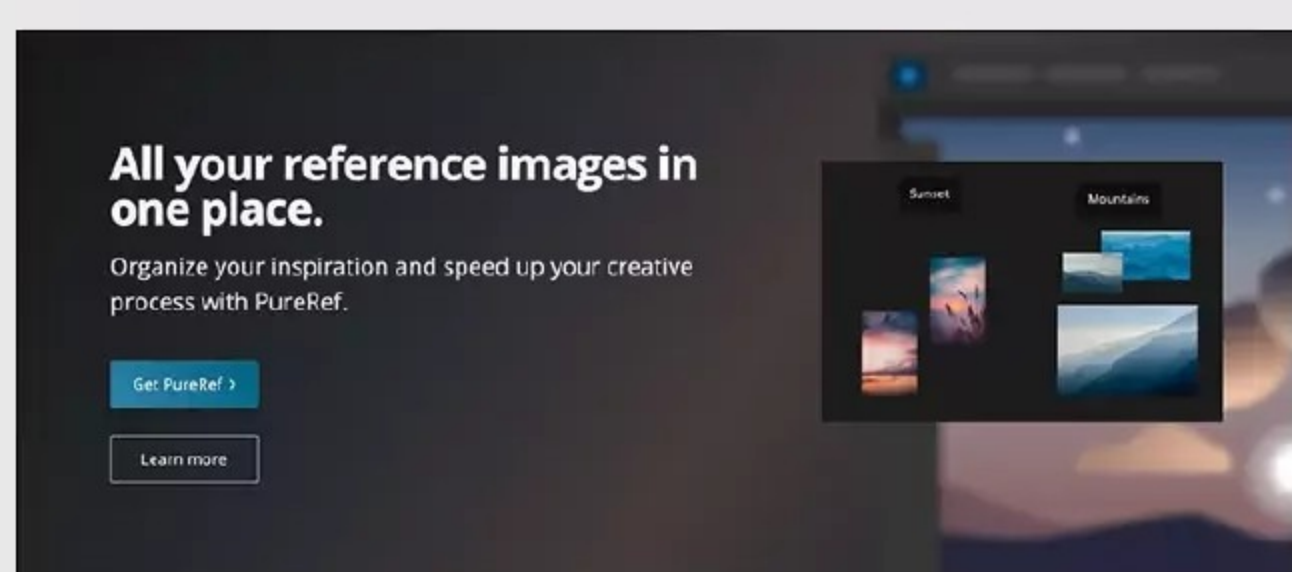
Throughout this workshop, I'll share my approach to ideation, research and developing design language through shape exploration, architecture, motifs, spatial composition and atmosphere to create emotionally grounded environments. My goal is to show how storytelling and design choices can reinforce the identity, culture and emotional tone of a fictional world.



**1 Story establishes worlds**  
Establishing a story helps define the world we aim to create. During this stage, I focus on three foundations: function and occupation (what/who), culture (where) and time period (when). These elements shape the world's identity and design direction. For

Astravale, I wanted to create a European city shaped by cosmic order, where wisdom and technology draw inspiration from the sun, moon and stars during a steampunk era. Based on these foundations, I further develop keywords that help define the project's visual identity. For Astravale, the sun, moon, stars

and time became the core themes, reflecting a society shaped by astronomical knowledge and cosmic beliefs. Since wisdom plays an important role in the city, I chose to focus on designing Astravale's central academy hub, a place where knowledge, politics and celestial symbolism coexist within the architecture.



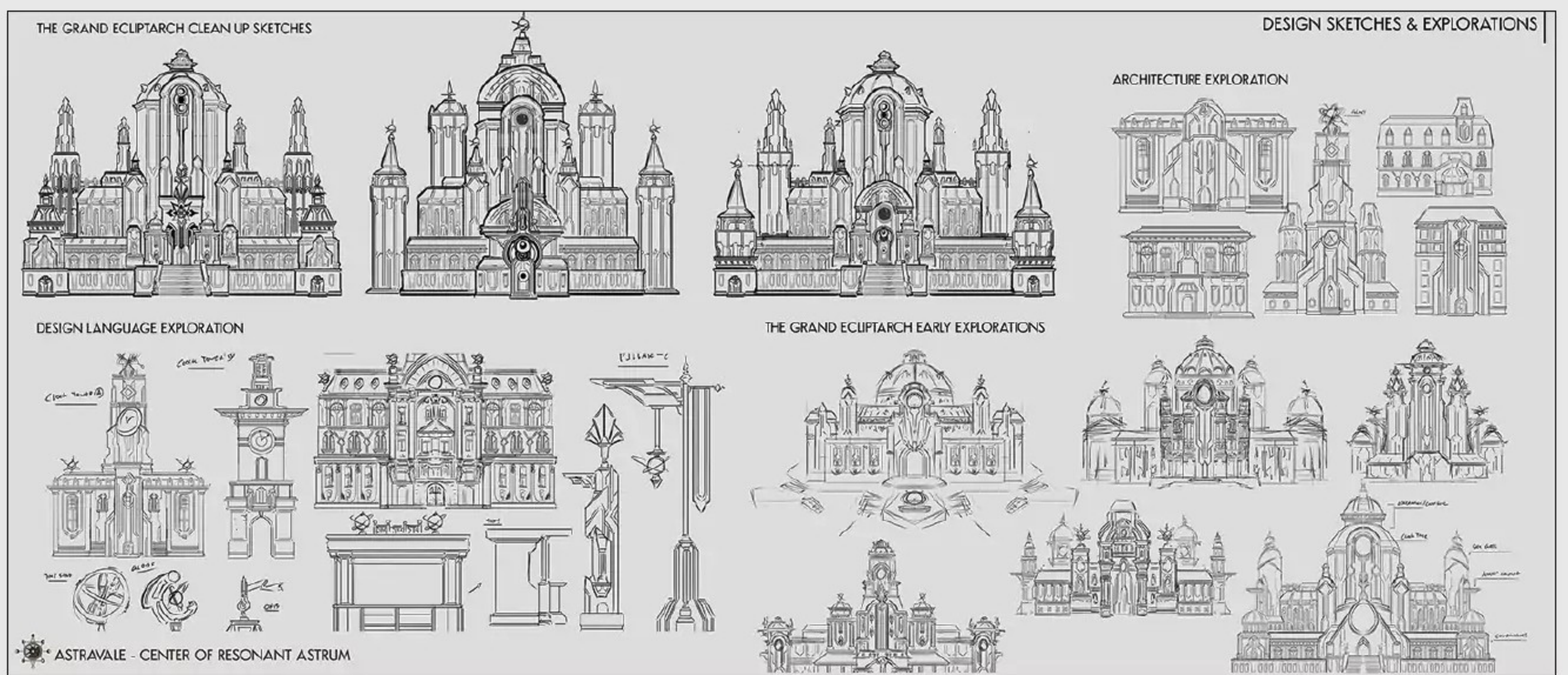
**2 Gathering visual references**  
Reference gathering is one of the most important stages of my workflow, as strong design often grows from thoughtful research and ideation. Building a visual library helps establish the project's artistic foundation and design language. Using keywords like neo-classical architecture, Art Deco motifs and celestial graphic design, I collect both direct references for contextual accuracy and indirect references for shape, atmosphere and symbolic inspiration that influence the final environment design.

## TOP BAR BRUSH TOOL OPTIONS



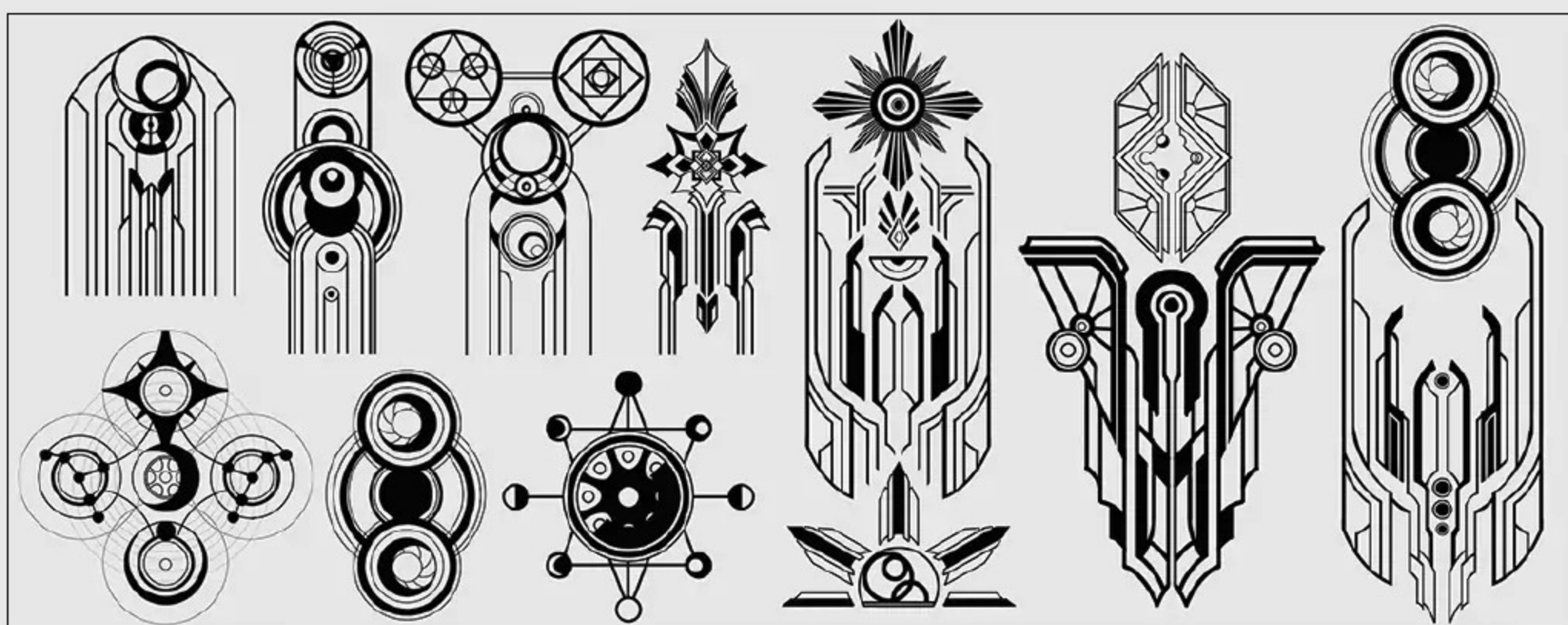
Turn on Opacity and pen pressure

## BRUSHES WINDOW



## 3 Exploring architectural language

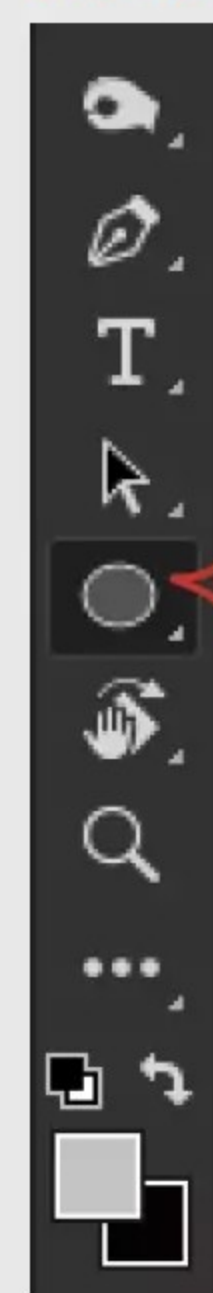
I begin exploring architectural sketches by focusing on large shapes and primary structures first, especially the hero building. This helps define the visual language for the rest of the environment, including secondary buildings and smaller set-dressings such as street lights. For sketching, I mainly use Photoshop's default brushes with slight adjustments to quickly explore shapes, proportions and silhouette variations.



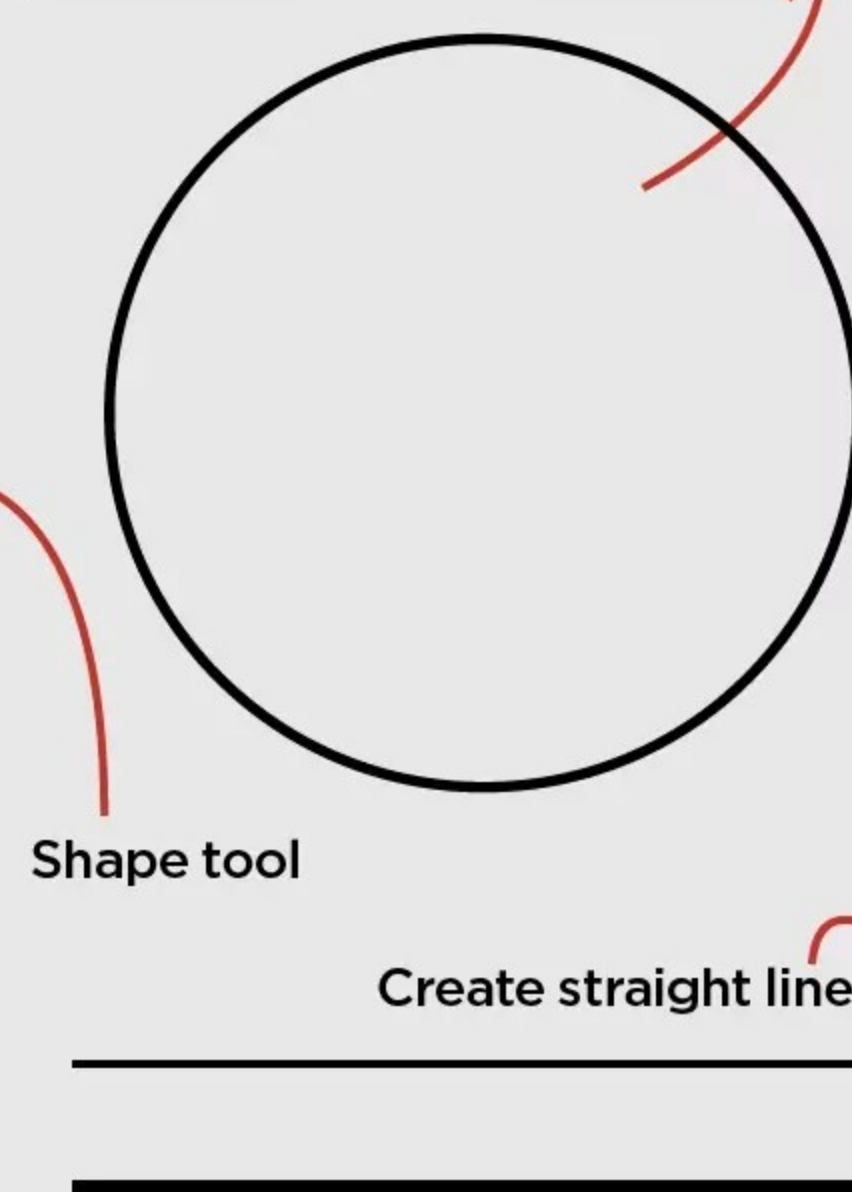
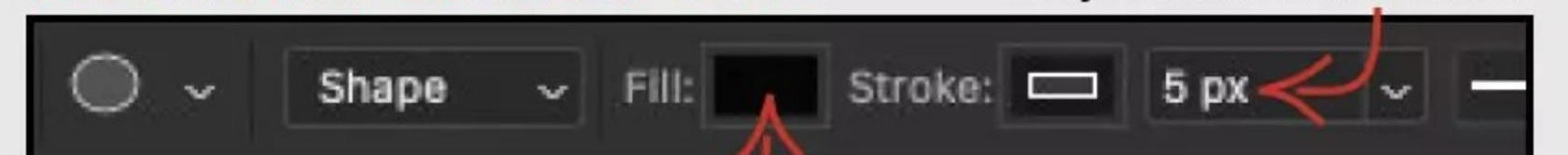
## 4 Developing symbolic motifs

Graphic motifs play a key role in establishing a culture's identity, as humanity has long used art to communicate beliefs and values. During this stage, I explore symbols and motifs that reflect the story and themes of my world. I experiment with different shapes that can fit various architectural elements, such as pillars. After sketching, I refine the designs using Photoshop's default round brush and shape tools.

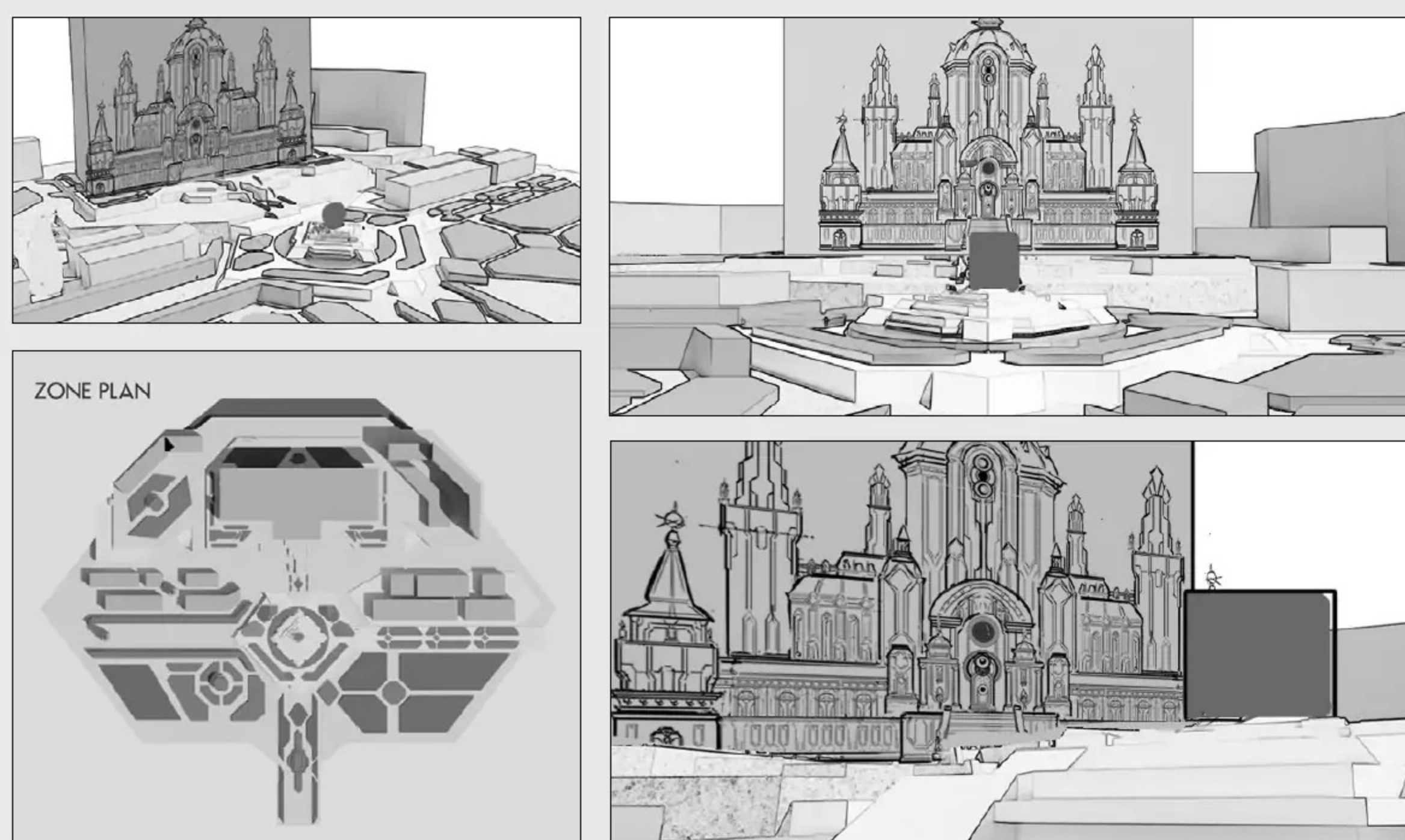
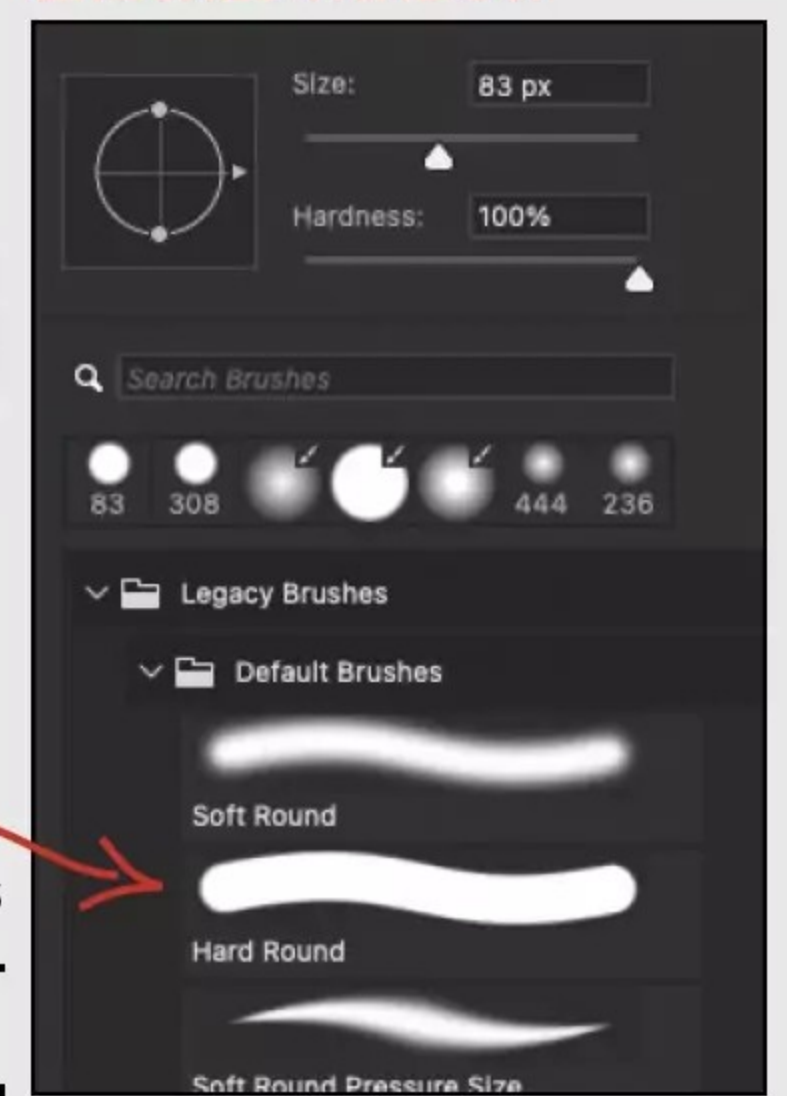
## TOOL SIDEBAR



## TOP BAR SHAPE TOOL OPTIONS



## BRUSHES WINDOW



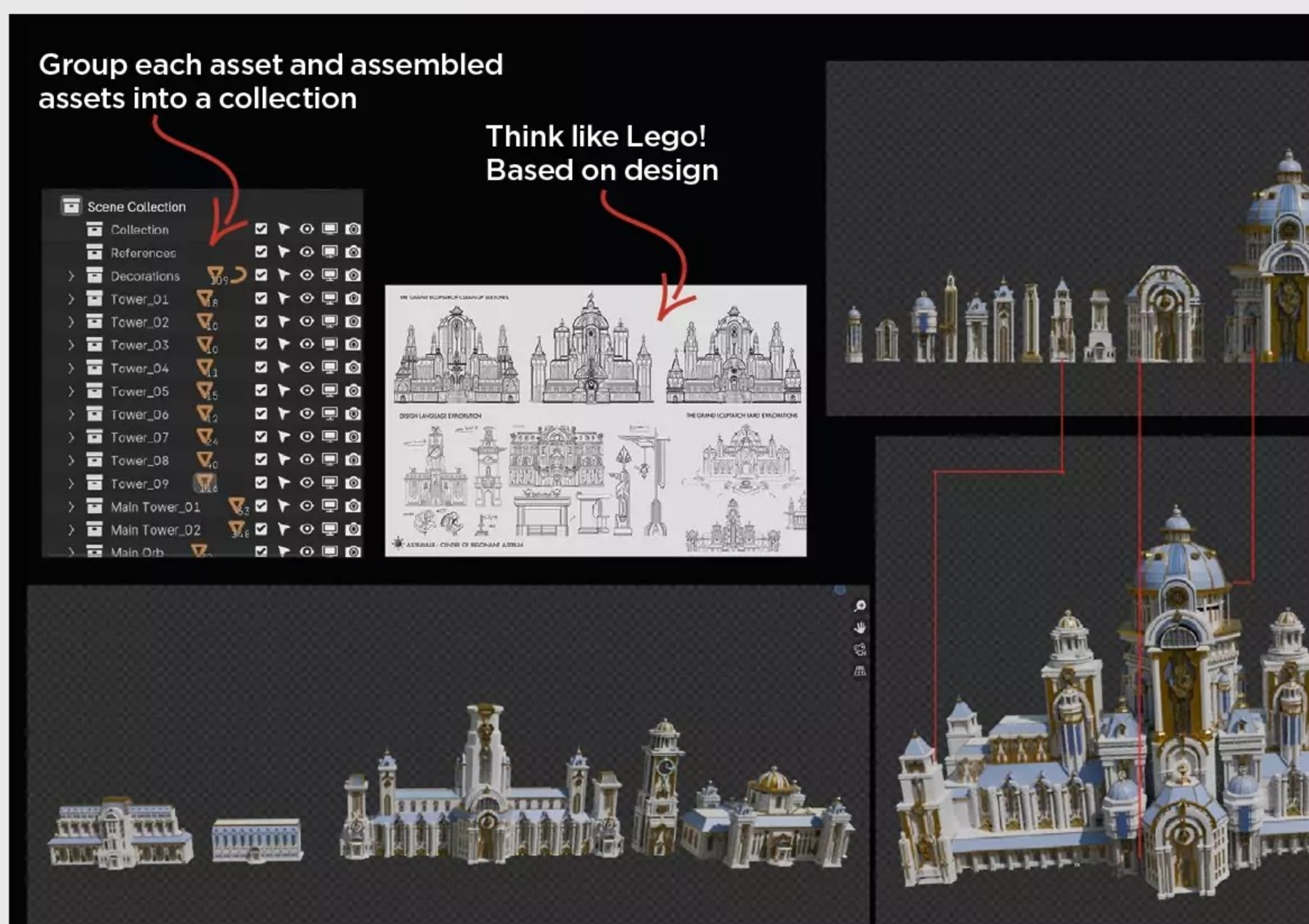
## 5 Finding the right composition

After developing the environment elements, I create rough thumbnail sketches to establish the focal point and guide the viewer's eye through the scene. During this stage, I also use 3D for simple blockouts to explore layouts and compositions that best communicate the story. I avoid focusing on details too early, prioritising the overall silhouette, visual balance and larger shapes to strengthen the scene's cinematic readability and atmosphere.



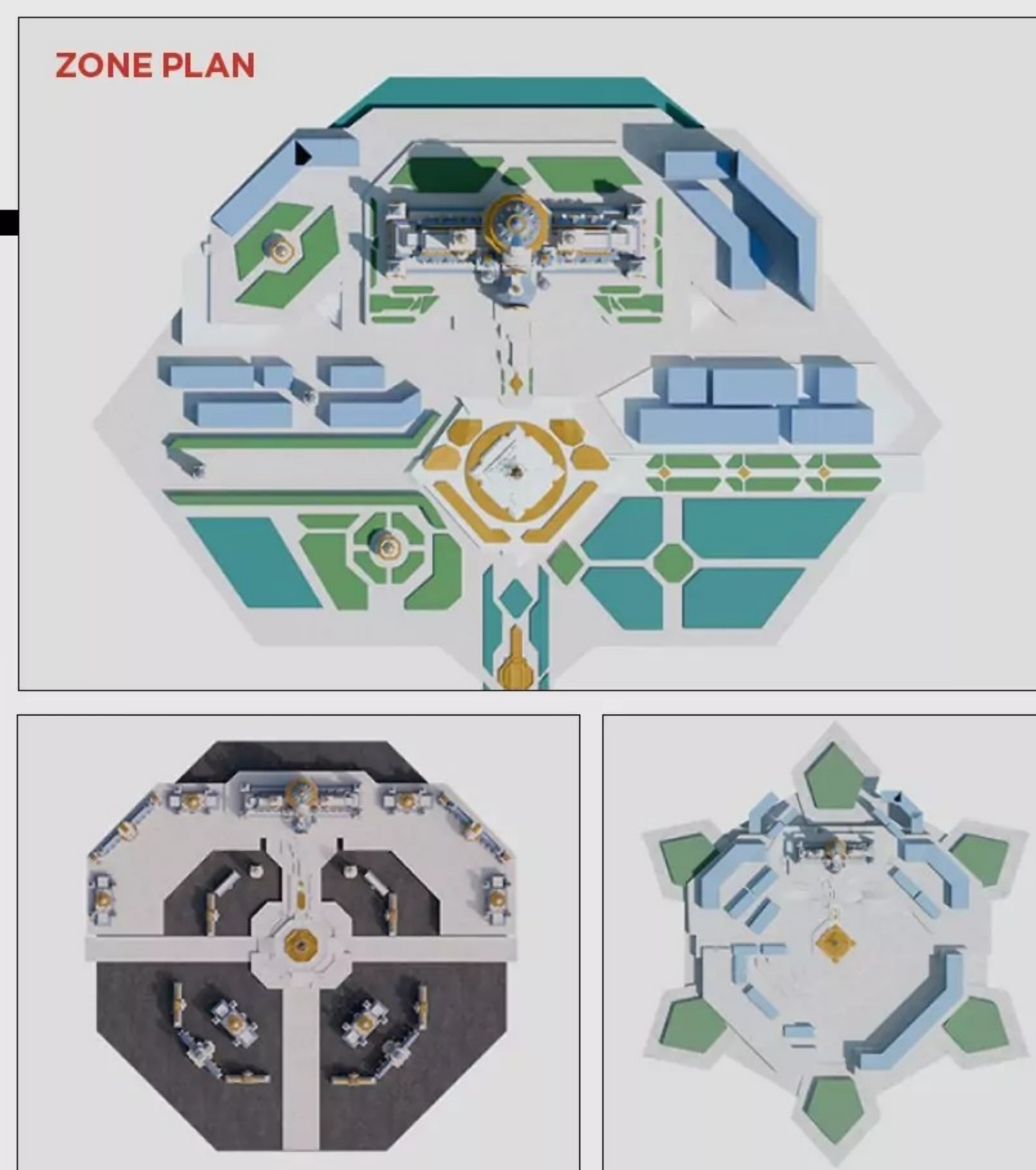
## 6 Sketching with 3D

This is where the project begins moving into 3D using Blender. To achieve stronger perspective, scale and structural consistency, I approach the workflow like an environment artist by planning modular building parts such as bases, pillars, windows and hero structures. This helps maintain both asset organisation and visual consistency throughout the scene. Rather than creating perfect models, I treat 3D as another form of sketching used to explore design ideas efficiently. ➡➡



## 7 Thinking like Lego

The next stage is assembling the modular assets, almost like building with Lego. I experiment by repeating, rotating and combining elements to create variations for buildings and environment props. I usually begin with the main structure before expanding into surrounding buildings based on earlier sketches. In Blender, organising assets into clearly named collections helps maintain a cleaner workflow and makes scene management much easier during production.



## 8 Planning the environment

This stage feels similar to urban planning. I begin by blocking the environment using simple shapes to establish landscape, focal points and building placement. Starting with rough townscape blockouts around the hero structure, I divide the environment into functional zones to determine suitable buildings and set dressings. I also consider material contrast between zones, such as nature versus man-made elements, to strengthen composition and create visual variety throughout the environment.

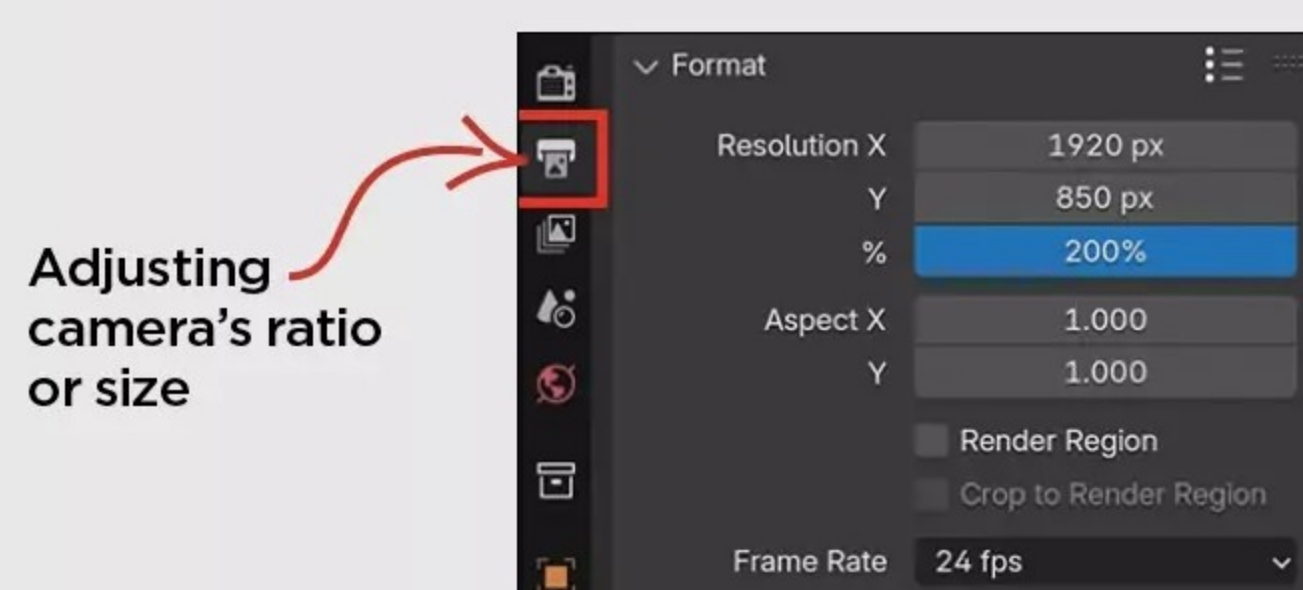
## 9 Composing the final scene

With the planned environment, I begin assembling the final scene using the established blockouts, zones and modular assets. Terrain can be modelled manually or with purchased assets when needed. During detailing and set dressing, I imagine walking through the environment as if living inside the world itself. Thinking about the audience's journey through the space helps create believable compositions, storytelling moments and environmental interactions throughout the scene.



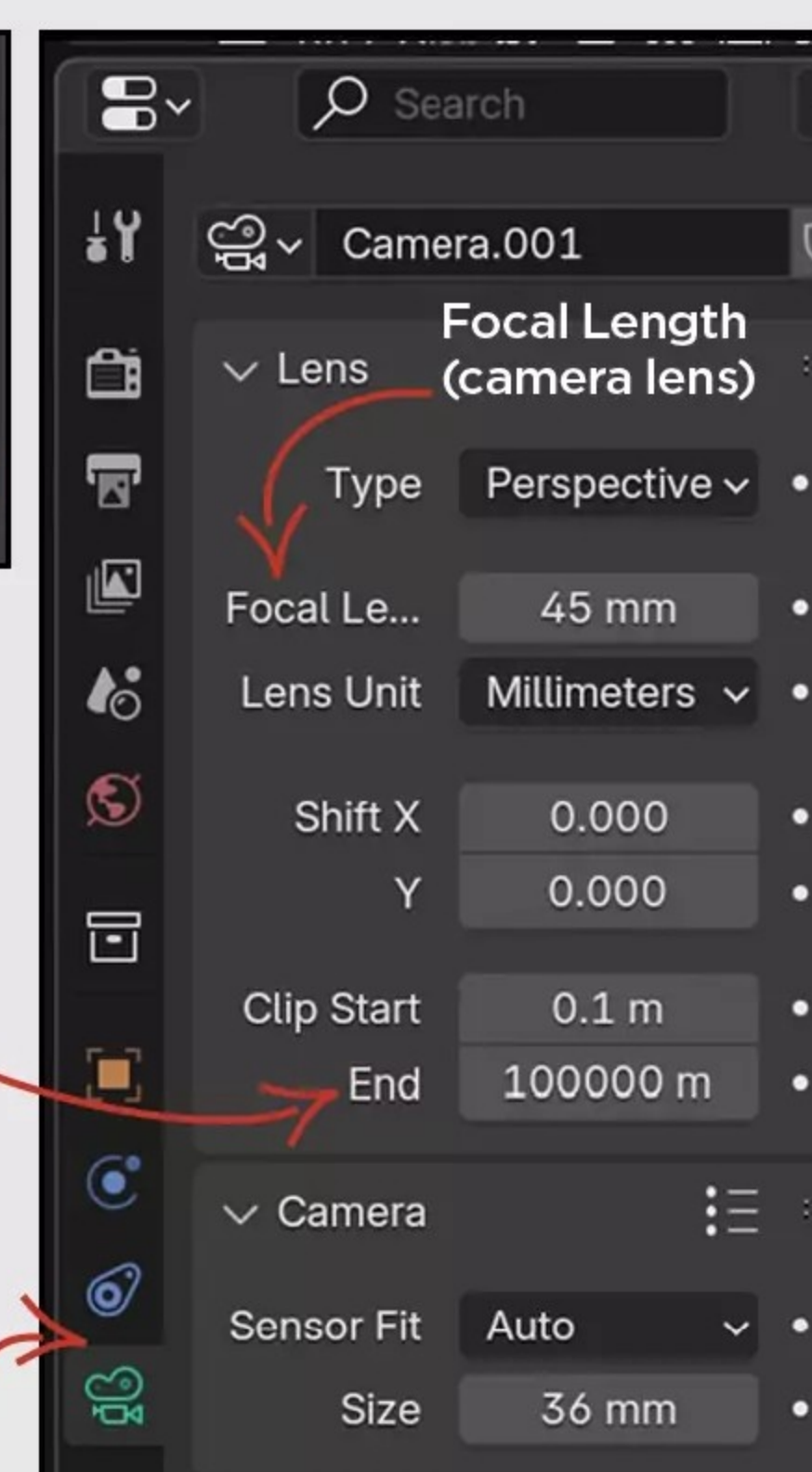
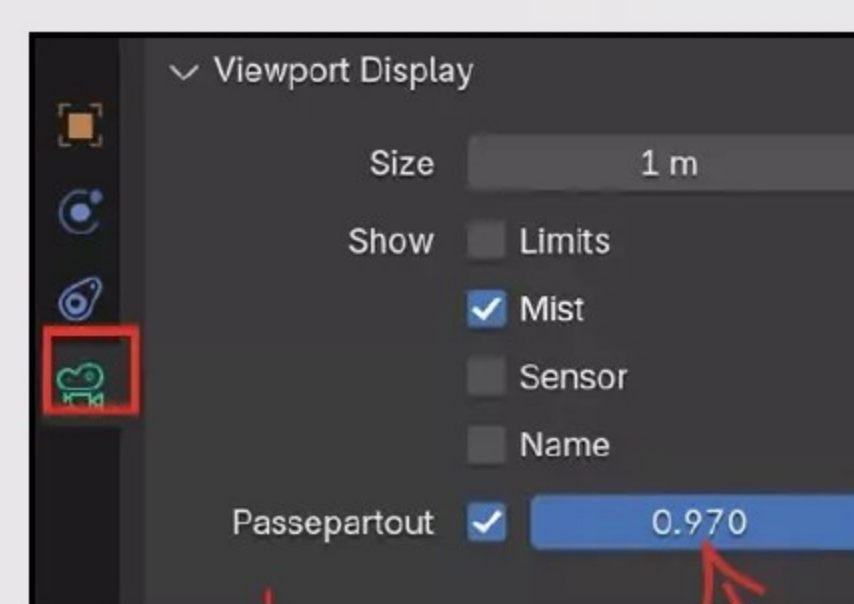
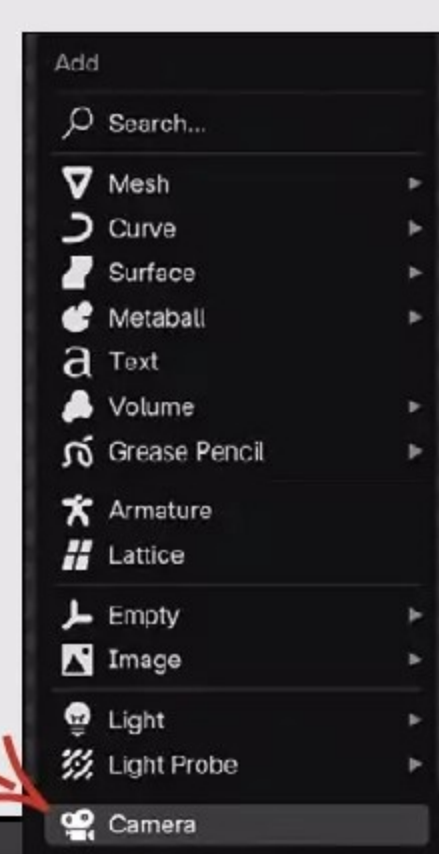
## 10 Setting up cinematic shots

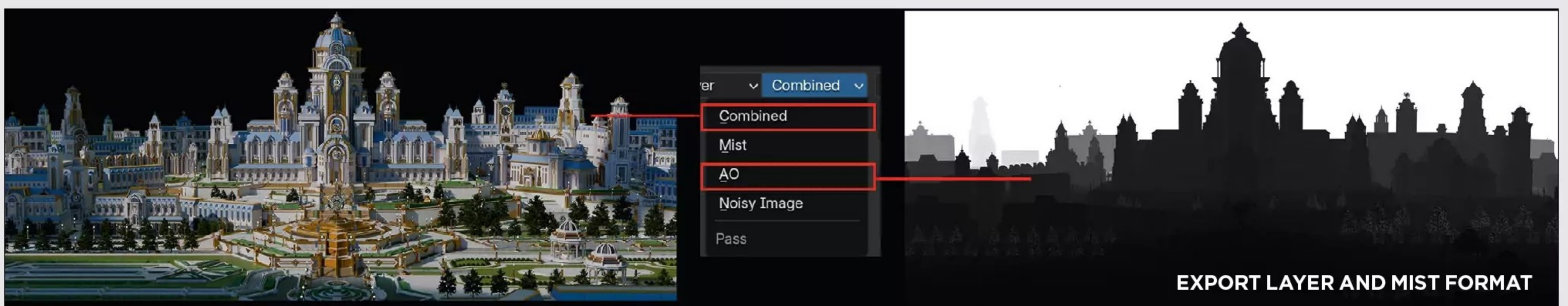
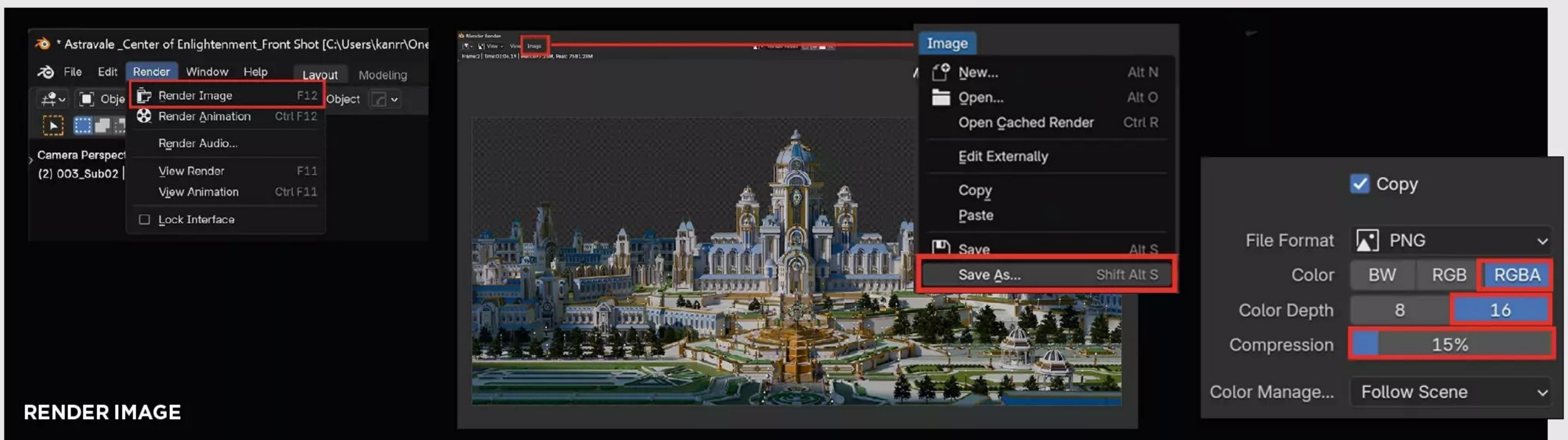
This is the final stage before polishing the artwork. For cinematic keyframes, I focus on capturing as much visual information as possible through wider camera lenses (18–50mm). I prefer using a 2.35:1 ratio because it presents the environment on a more cinematic scale. When choosing shots, I imagine walking through the city as a visitor, asking myself which views best communicate the world's atmosphere and story.



Press: Shift+A (Add object/light/etc)

Add camera



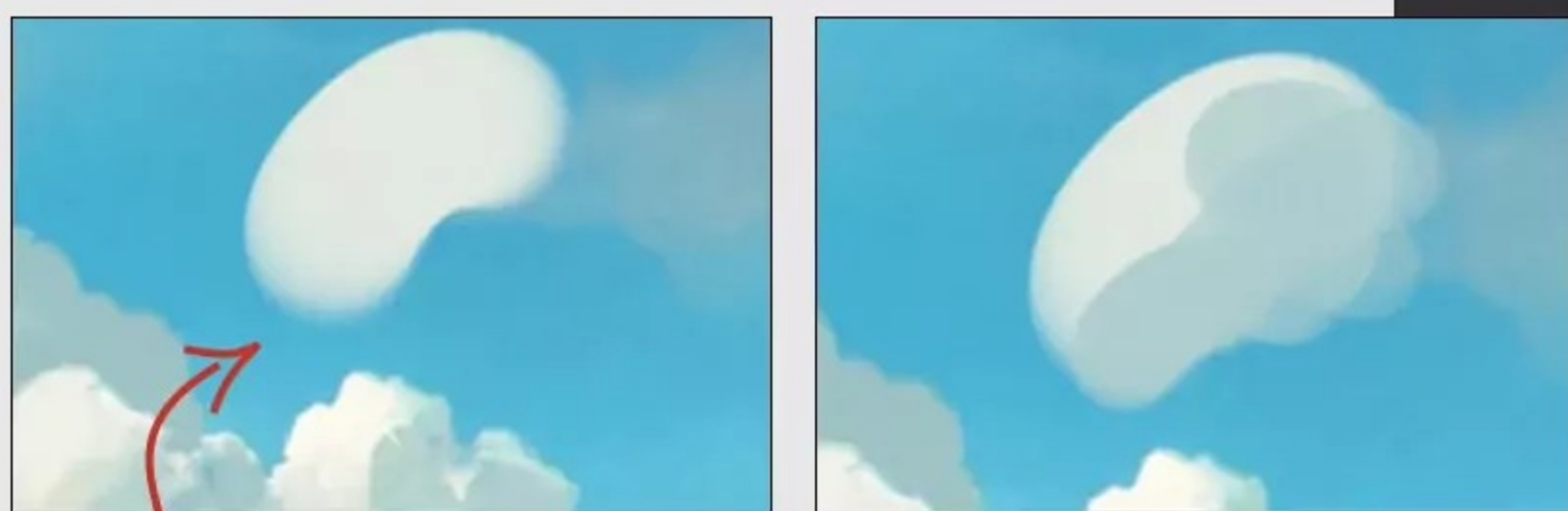


## 11 Bringing renders into Photoshop

With the final camera view selected, I render the scene and enable the Mist Pass to help manage depth and distance. I export the image as a PNG with RGBA colour, 16-bit colour depth and low compression for cleaner results. I then import everything into Photoshop, where the mist layer is useful for selecting different distance zones through greyscale values, helping improve atmospheric control during the paintover process.



Use the mist export to select zones using magic wand tool



Paint example: Hard Round Pressure Opacity Brush

Alternative brush: Hard Round Opacity Brush (Both brushes are Photoshop default brushes)



## 12 Enhancing atmosphere and details

This stage is where I bring artistic personality into the scene. Since raw 3D renders can feel too clean or perfect, I use Photoshop paintovers, texture brushes, and photobashing to add imperfections, atmosphere and material variation. Elements such as erosion, colour and value adjustments help reinforce the world's history and mood. For this project, I chose a semi-realistic style with painterly skies to strengthen the artistic direction.

## 13 Artistic final touches

Once I'm satisfied with the overall scene, I add final touches to strengthen the atmosphere and visual consistency. Using layer modes such as Overlay, Screen and Multiply, I adjust tone, lighting and mood across the keyframes. I also paint additional atmospheric effects to enhance depth and immersion. To finalise the artwork, I apply subtle noise and chromatic aberration, helping the image feel more cinematic and resemble a real captured screen.



## Artist **PROFILE**

**Darius Puia**

LOCATION: Germany

Darius is a digital artist specialising in hyperdetailed cyberpunk and dystopian worlds, blending 3D and digital painting. His work focuses on atmosphere, storytelling and immersive environments inspired by science fiction and anime.

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

## Technique focus

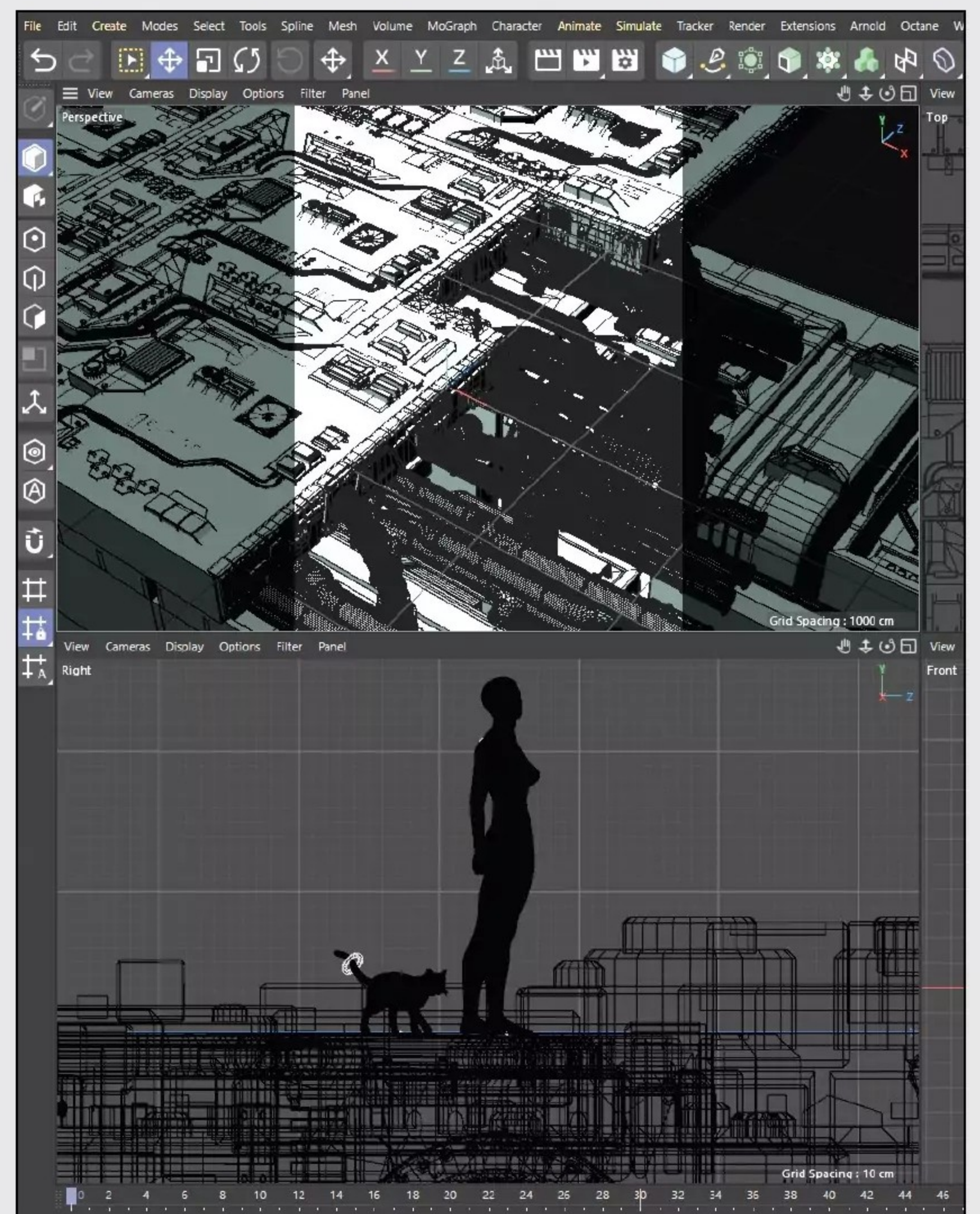
# MODEL A FUTURE DYSTOPIAN VISTA

**Darius Puia** on the inspiration and techniques used to imbue environments with a feeling of unease



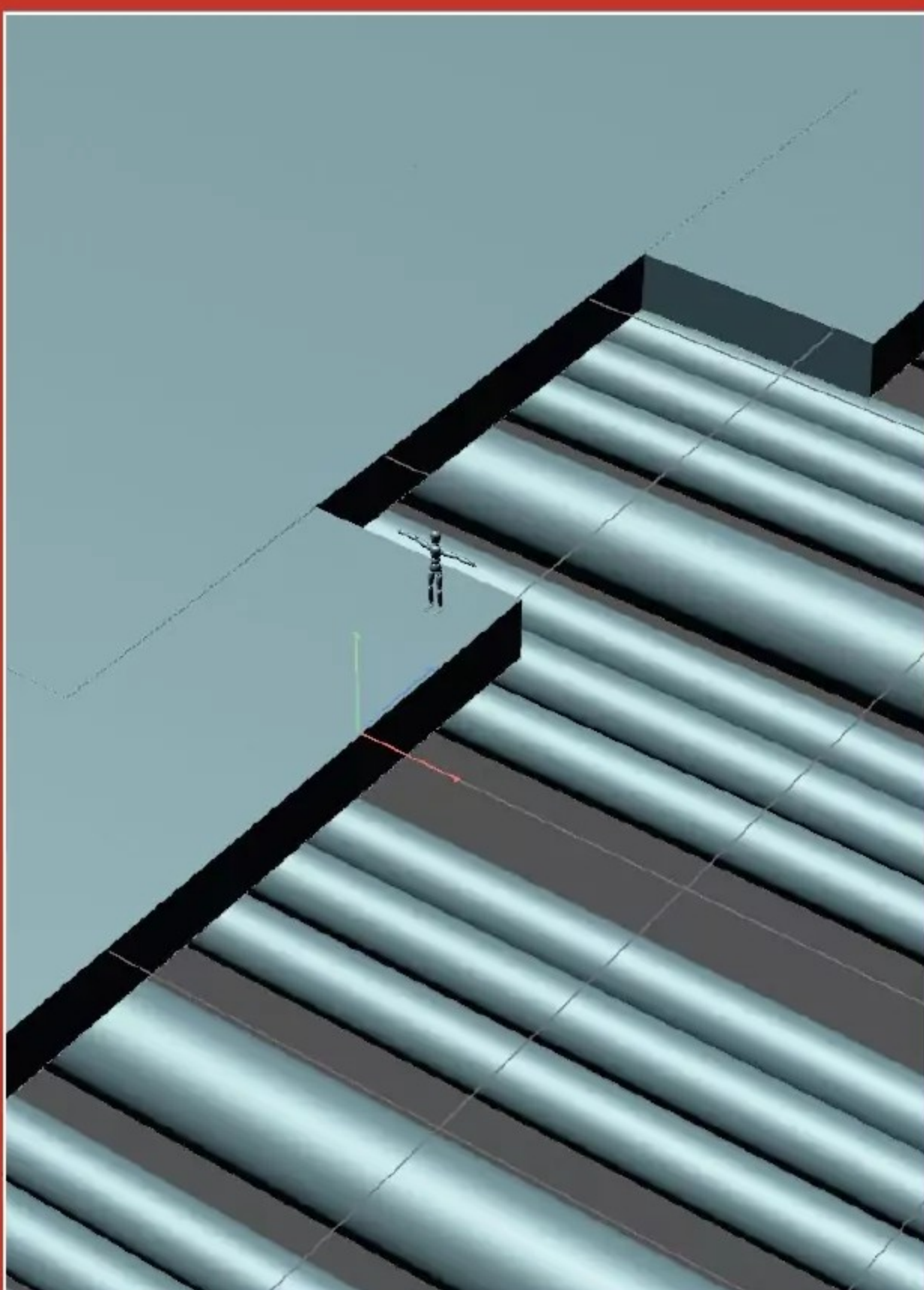
"Lost in the Endless' draws inspiration from the manga Blame!, written and illustrated by Tsutomu Nihei [and featured in Monthly Afternoon magazine from 1997–2003]. I was particularly influenced by its vast industrial environments and the constant sense of unease they create. I wanted to capture that feeling of exploration within an unknown hostile space, where danger feels ever-present but is never fully revealed, keeping the viewer in suspense.

"I also incorporated hallmarks of my work. The girl and the cat are a recurring theme, to provide a subtle emotional anchor within the overwhelming scale of the environment. To reinforce the dystopian atmosphere, I kept the colour palette muted and desaturated, enhancing the sense of isolation and tension. The base scene was created in Maxon Cinema4D, with shading, lighting and rendering handled in Autodesk Arnold. Final adjustments, colour grading, and additional details were completed in Adobe Photoshop."



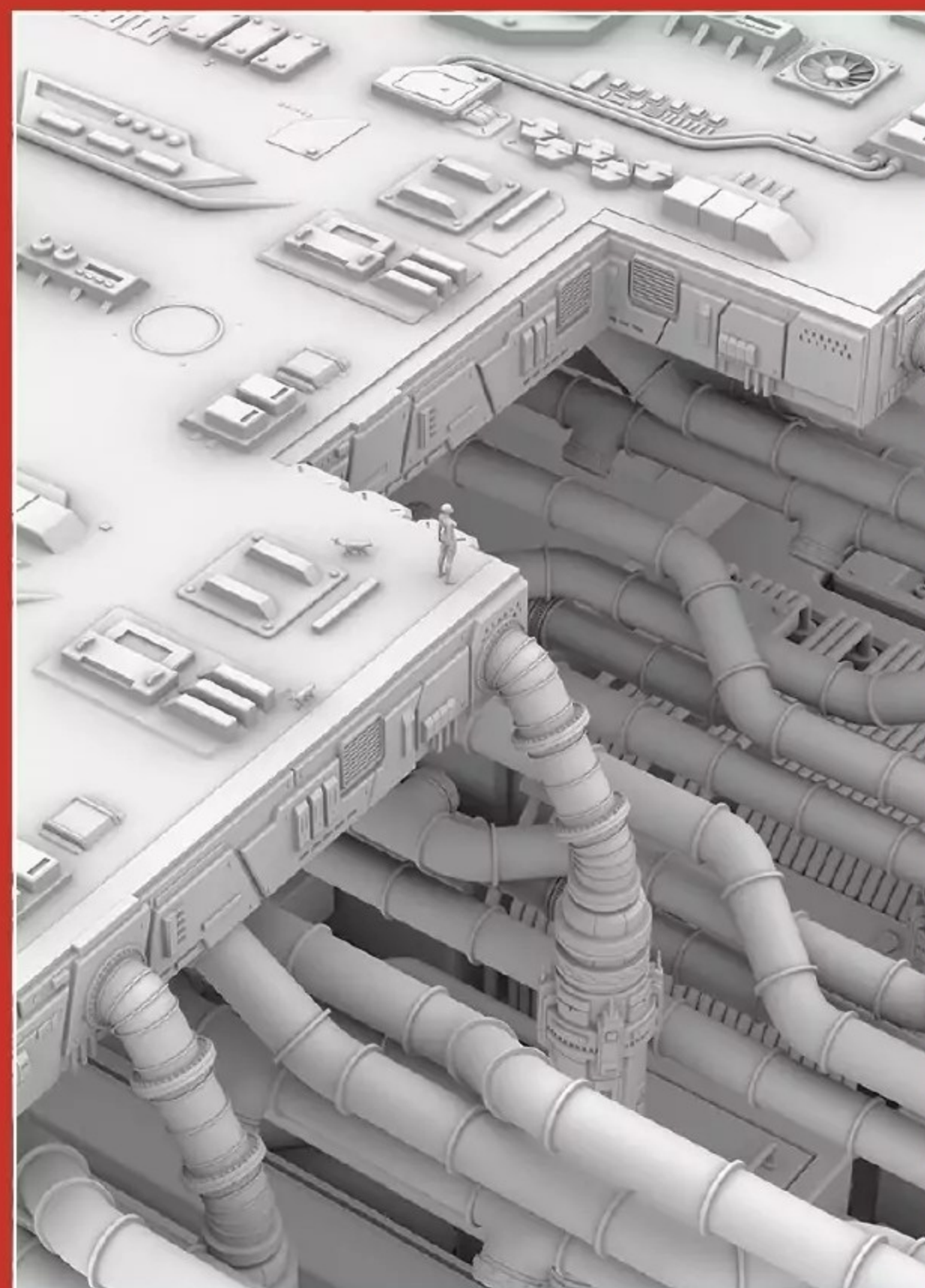
## How I create...

# A SPRAWLING CYBERPUNK EXPANSE



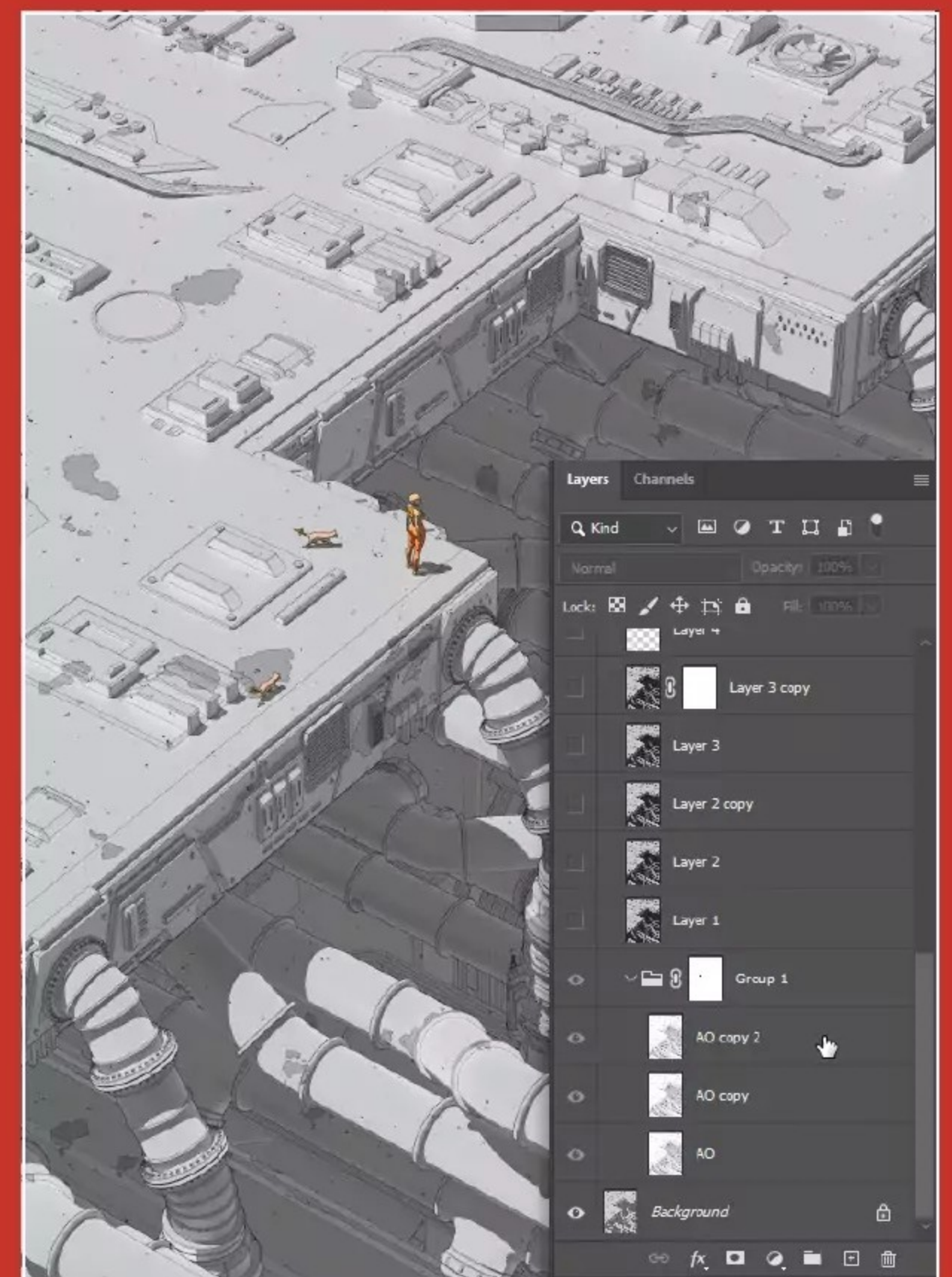
### 1 Blocking and composition

I start by blocking out the scene to define the overall idea. I quickly dress the environment and position the camera early, because I like to see the composition take shape fast. I keep a mood board, on my iPad, nearby to constantly reference and guide the direction of the artwork.



### 2 Lighting and textures

Once the composition is set, I focus on the lighting and textures. I use strong, hard lighting to create sharp, defined shadows and a bold look. I refine materials to achieve a retro anime feel, using Arnold's node system while adding noise for subtle imperfections.



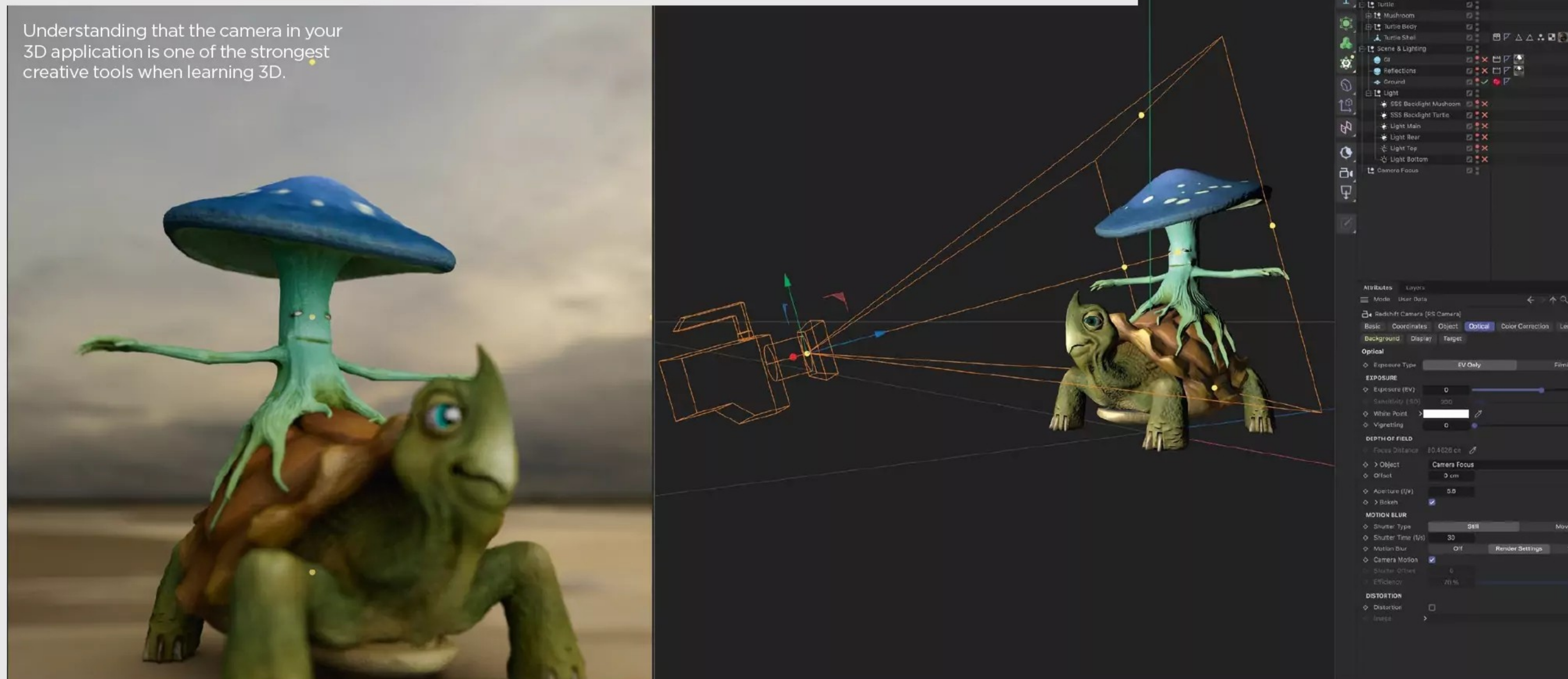
### 3 Final polish in post

After rendering, I move into Adobe Photoshop for the final touches. I enhance the storytelling by adding small details, props or character accents like glowing tattoos. I also handle colour grading and lighting at this stage, often using Adobe Camera Raw presets for consistency.

# 3D Artist Back to basics

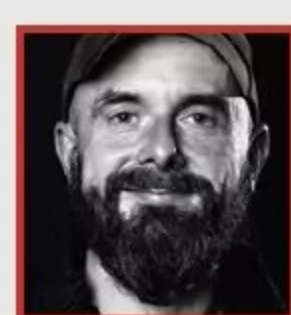
OUR 3D EXPERTS ARE HERE TO SHARE THEIR KNOWLEDGE...

Understanding that the camera in your 3D application is one of the strongest creative tools when learning 3D.



## WHAT IS A CAMERA IN A 3D APPLICATION?

For newcomers to creating 3D scenes, the render output may not be what they're expecting. **Mike Griggs** explains how to use the camera object to remedy this



One of the most confusing aspects when starting with 3D is that when you render your first 3D scene, the output you get isn't what you're seeing in the 3D application's viewport.

This is because nine times out of ten the camera object in the 3D scene is not being used to view the scene, and that's what the 3D application will typically default to when rendering.

It's useful to remember that a 3D application is essentially an empty

void in which you can create whatever you wish. Within this environment, you are going to need a camera to take the picture or the movie that you want, and this is what the camera object in a 3D application is for.

As so many 3D applications render using approximations of how light and materials work in the real world, it's the same for a camera object.

Camera objects work just like a real camera. The beauty of working within a 3D application is that you can just

define the type of camera, lens, shutter and the exposure speed you want to use without spending thousands on expensive camera kit.

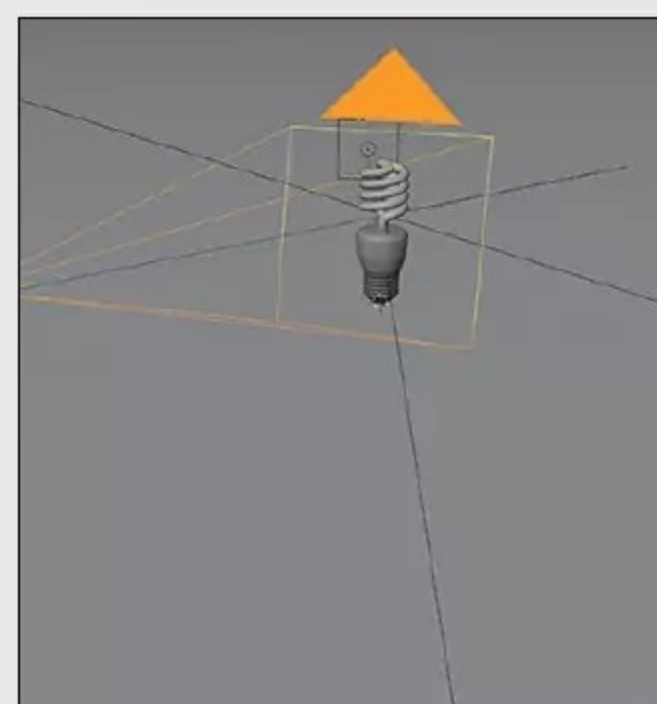
If you already have a background in photography or filmmaking, this can be invaluable to create much more authentic and realistic scenes more quickly than those artists who do not.

**Mike Griggs is the founder of Creative Bloke and has experience in content creation, workflow design and emerging creative technology. [www.creativebloke.com](http://www.creativebloke.com).**

## How to use the camera object to achieve better renders

### 1 The camera is an object

Your 3D camera exists in the scene like any other object; most 3D applications show it as a movie camera or pyramid. It has a



position, rotation, and can be moved. Practically all 3D applications have a clear split between a camera view and a viewport view, and figuring out which is which is critical.

### 2 Frame your shot

The camera object defines the render view of the 3D application, whether it is a still or an animation. It can also define the focus



point using the depth of field command available in most camera objects, dependent upon the render settings used. This can be a powerful tool for storytelling.

### 3 Control the output

As the camera object works like a real camera, we can do things like adjust the focal length to define the lensing of how an



object looks. A wide-angle length will make an object look distorted; telephoto may make it look more realistic or, when pushed to an extreme, diagrammatic.



## USE BLENDSHAPES TO MORPH YOUR MODELS

**Antony Ward** explains what blendshapes are and how to use them in your 3D animations



From here on we are going to start to gently ease our way into slightly more advanced areas of 3D, and the first we'll look at are blendshapes.

Blendshapes are used in animation as a way to change the shape of a model over time. Imagine a face in a neutral pose, one which needs to smile. Well, a blendshape would be perfect for this because adding a smile 'morph target' and connecting it to the main model will let us blend gradually to the smile and back again.

The way they work is you are essentially animating each vertex on the main model, telling them to go from point A to point B, point B being

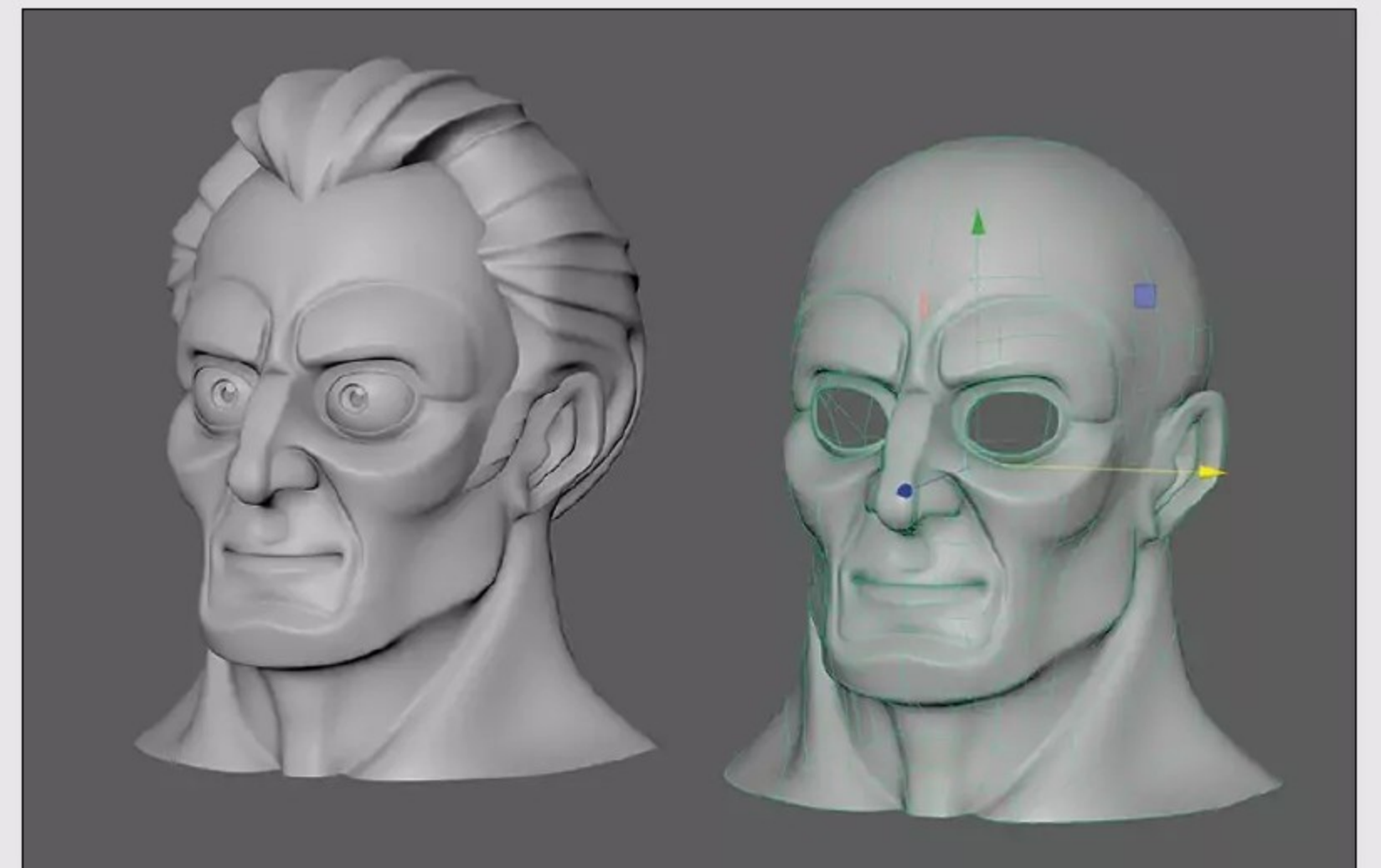
where the same vertex now exists on the smile morph target.

The downside is that they travel in a direct line, from A to B, so blendshapes are no good for animating something that needs to follow an arc, like an eyelid moving over an eyeball.

What's great about blendshapes is they are easy to set up but can give very organic feeling movements, so let's take a look at how we go about setting them up.

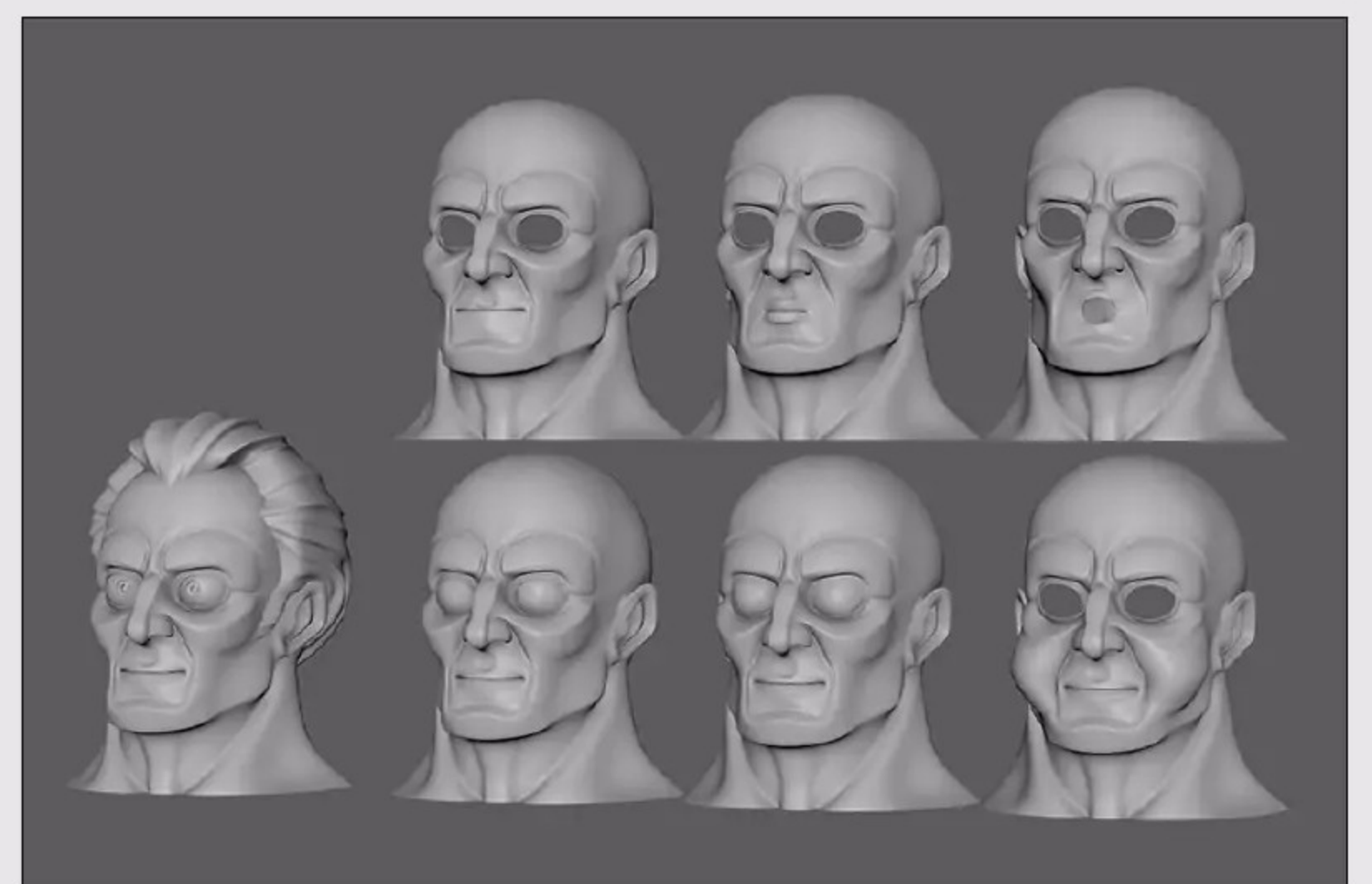
*Antony Ward, aka antCGi, has created digital content for over three decades. Be it game development, rigging or recording video courses, he boasts experience in most areas of 3D. See <https://bit.ly/49BhX1n>.*

## Three steps to creating animation blendshapes



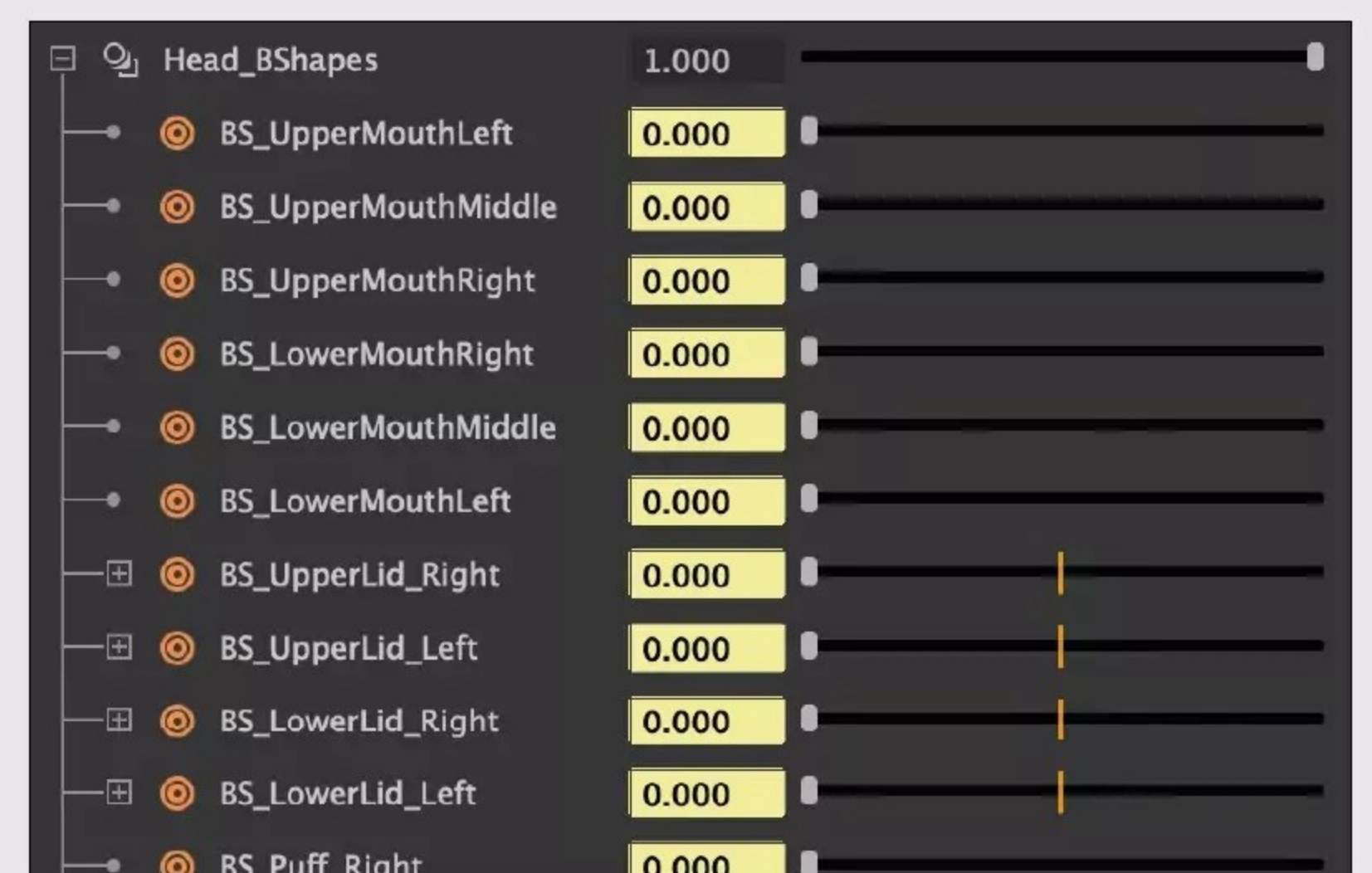
### 1 Create your morph targets

The first step when setting up blendshapes is to duplicate your main model, once for each face shape you need. These new models are your morph targets. It's best when working on these to move them apart so you can see them all individually.



### 2 Generate the shapes

Next, work your way through the morph targets, adjusting them to form the various shapes you need. This can be done by editing the vertices individually, but sculpting tools can often give you a quicker and more organic-looking result.



### 3 Connect using a blendshape

Finally, use your application's blendshape tool to connect the morph targets to the main model. The resulting blendshape node will now contain a list of the morph targets with a slider next to each; these can then be animated to bring your character to life.

## FIVE MINUTES WITH

# AMIR ZAND

The Iranian illustrator on finding beauty in unexpected places

**What is your main source of inspiration for your work?**

I don't have a single, defined source of inspiration. I think, one of the most powerful tools we already have is our eyes. Being an artist, for me, is not only about what I produce or my technical ability, but about how I see the world around me. I believe it's about finding beauty in places others might overlook or often pass unnoticed.

It can come from anywhere, real-life experiences, emotions, other art forms like films, music, paintings, conversations, poetry, dreams, or simply from life as it happens. At the same time, I'm very mindful of what I consume. Too much visual input can create noise, so I try to be selective.

If I would suggest something to readers, it would be to build a taste beyond what feels familiar. Look into poetry, fashion, other art movements, photography, explore things that are not directly related to your field, and see what you can translate back into your own work.

**Tell us about your first paid commission, and does it stand as a representation of your talent?**

My first commission came through



### QUIET BELOW

Part of the Dreamer series, which reflects a period of emotional intensity in Amir's life.



### SOUVERAIN

"Rose from the quiet Depths, bearing heart carved from Light, not to rule, but to reveal the forgotten kingdom of Love..."

DeviantArt, where I used to post my work. At the time, I was already creating my own imaginary posters and book covers, vertical compositions with titles and graphic elements, because I always loved that format.

An indie author reached out for a cover, for the Nysta series, and I remember how meaningful that moment was. I was around 20, and it felt like something quietly began. What mattered was that someone trusted me to create his cover, and that meant a lot.

**“It starts with a decision, an inner clarity that this is what you want to do”**

We ended up working together on several of his books. Years later, I was approached to work on The Illustrated World of Mortal Engines, and they specifically referenced the work I had done for Nysta. Then later, Black Library reached out after seeing my work on Mortal Engines, which led to covers for the Warhammer 40K Crime series.

Looking back, that first piece wasn't the best representation of my abilities, but it was the beginning.

**What's the most recent piece of artwork that you've finished?**

The last piece that I completed is part of my Dreamer Series, titled Quiet Below. It's a very personal and emotional work.

After years of developing this series, I reached a point where I felt the need to close a chapter. In this piece, and in the ones that came before it, the Dreamer falls and eventually dies or maybe just rests (drama... haha). It reflects a period of emotional intensity in my life.

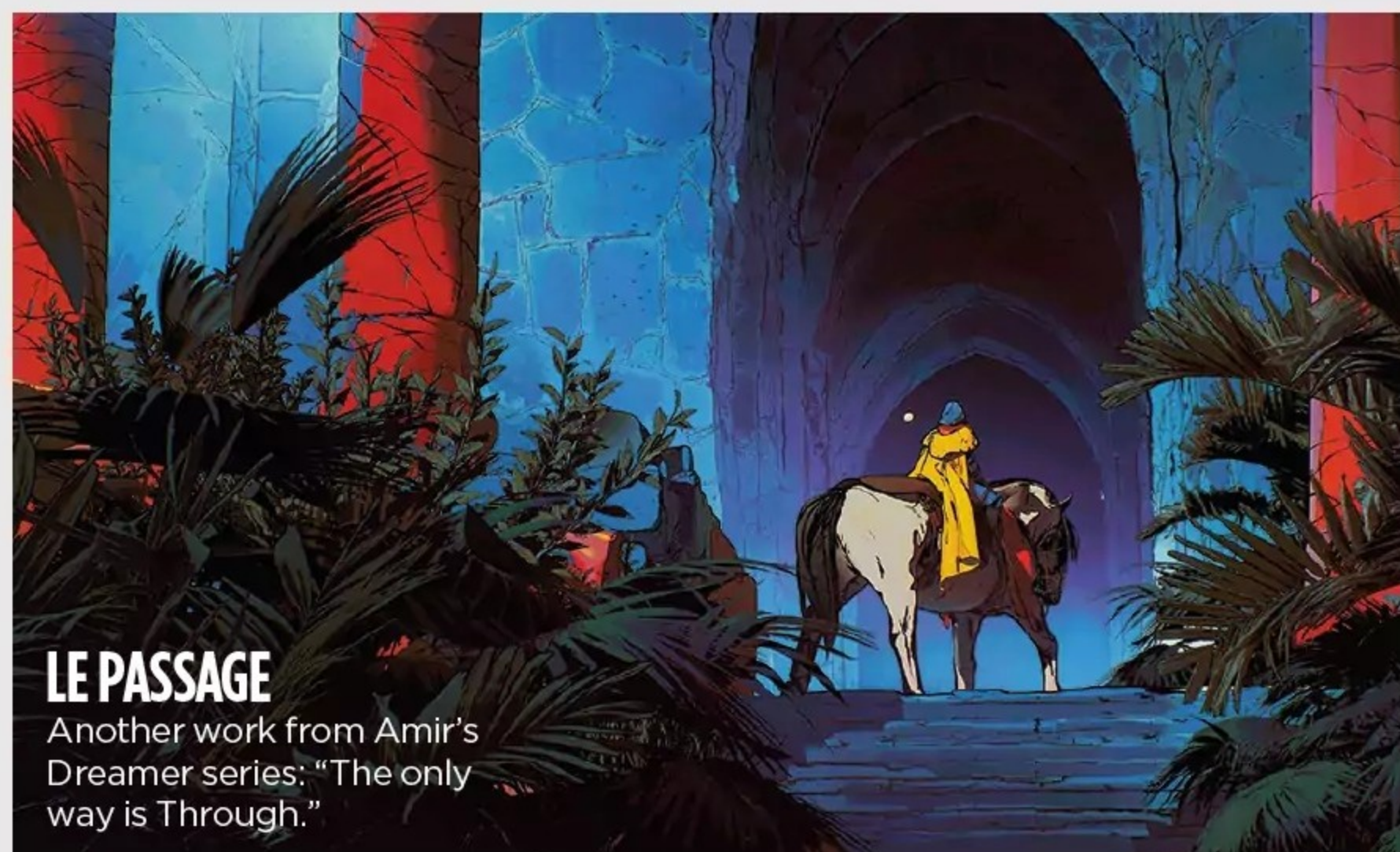
At the same time, it introduces the emergence of a new character, 'Reclaimer', suggesting a shift toward something different.

**If you were starting out now, what words of wisdom would you most appreciate?**

I would say, dare to dream, and be patient and persistent. For me, creative fields have always been connected to the heart. Before anything technical, it starts with a decision, an inner clarity that this is what you want to do. Once you accept that, the path becomes something you commit to fully.

I remember feeling unseen, and there was a point where I decided to create for myself, to print my work, to hang it on my wall or share on socials, to live with it, until the right people would come and resonate with it. That stayed with me.

**Amir Zand is an Iranian illustrator and senior concept artist specialising in vis-dev and design. After six years contributing design to the AAA video game Star Wars Eclipse, he now continues to expand his personal project, Anomaly, alongside his professional work. Over the past 15 years, he has created more than 75 book covers.**  
[www.amirzand.art](http://www.amirzand.art)



### LE PASSAGE

Another work from Amir's Dreamer series: "The only way is Through."



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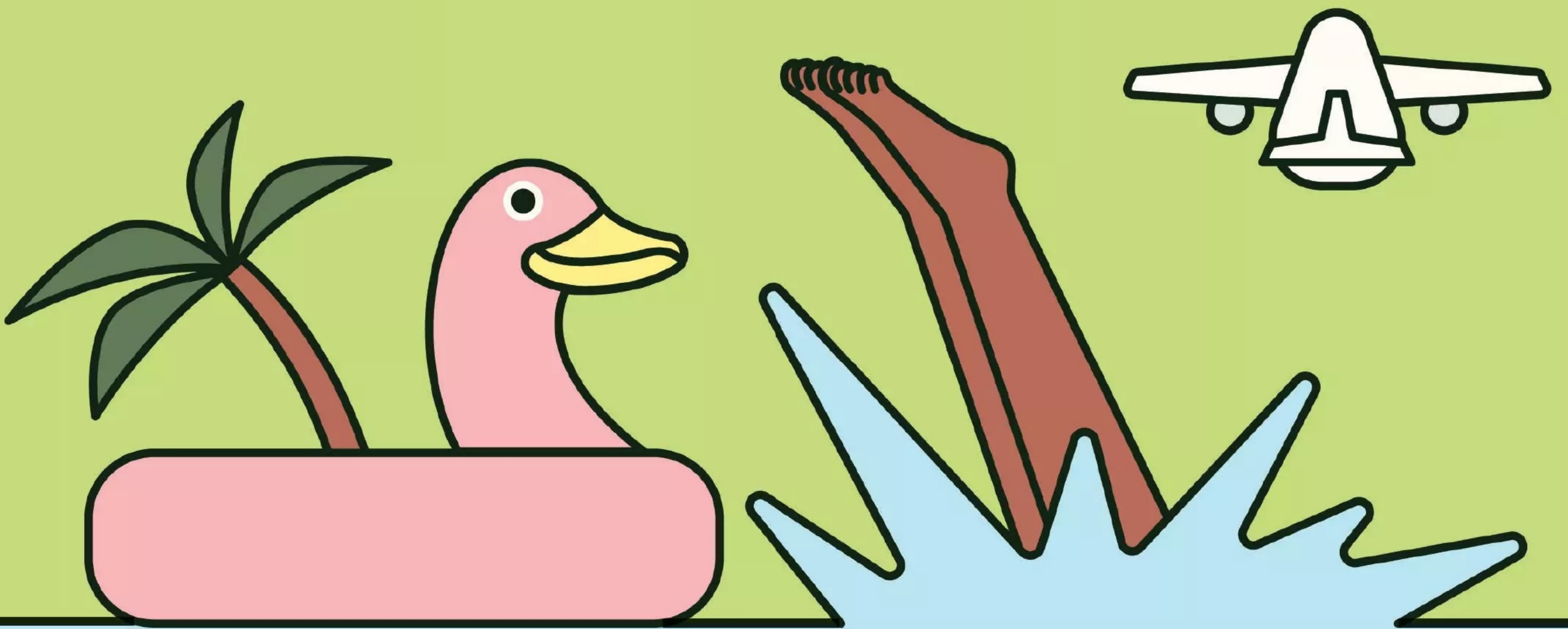
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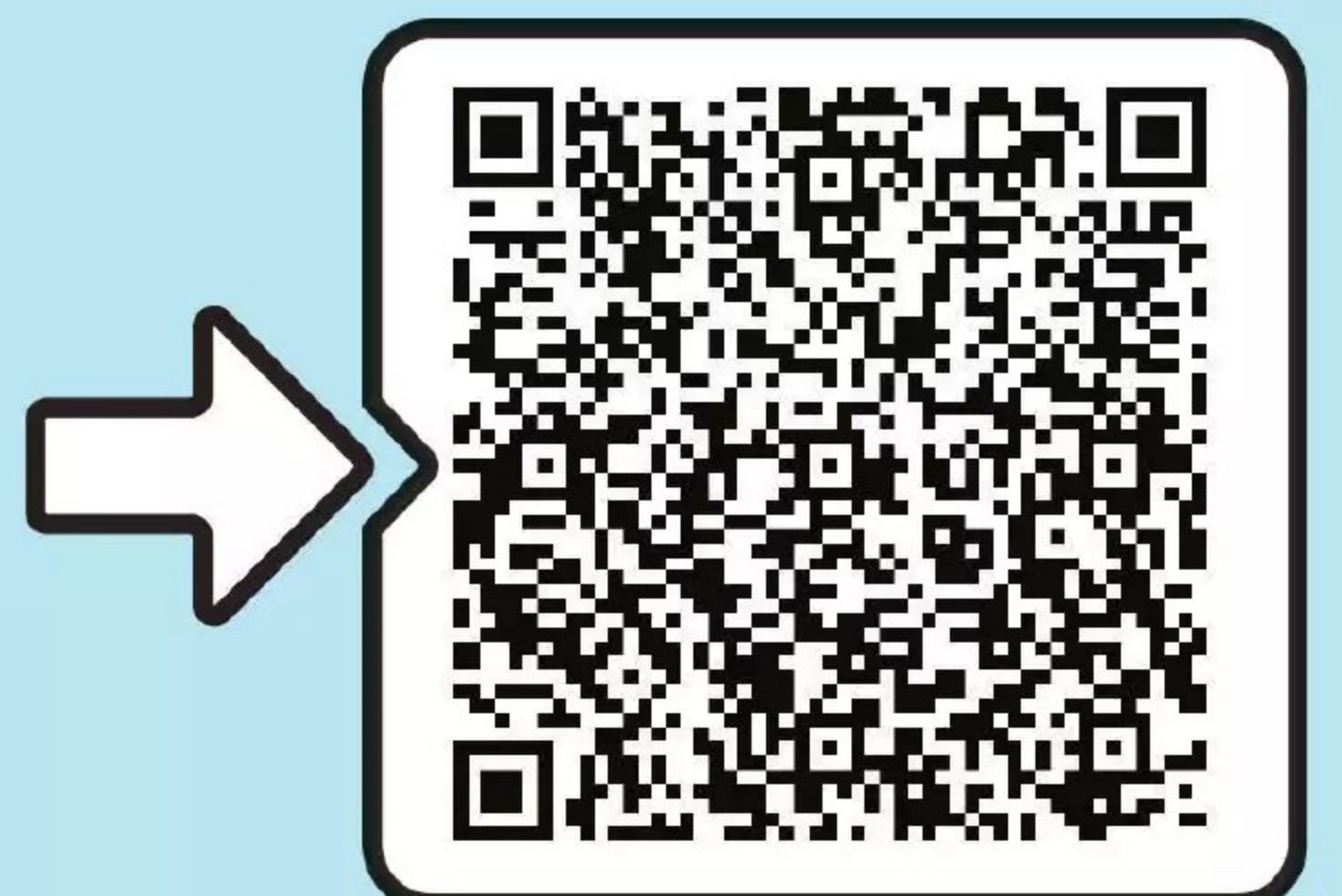
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