

NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS ImagineFX

10 VITAL TIPS FOR
MAKING NARRATIVE
ENVIRONMENTS

Expert advice to help
your scenes tell a story

WORKSHOP

RENDER MOODY
DARK FANTASY

Go monochrome for
maximum atmosphere

BLACK & WHITE

Discover how to turn a lack of colour into
your next artistic **superpower**

44
INSPIRING
SKETCHES

EXPLORE A MONSTER
AND GOBLIN-FILLED
SKETCHBOOK

FUTURE
ISSUE 270

ALSO INSIDE

TOUR A SPLIT PIXEL
AND PIGMENT STUDIO

CREATE A DRAMATIC
DRAGON BOOK COVER

LEARN HOW TO DRAW
A FOREST TEMPLE

BENTE SCHLICK ON HER LOVE OF ESCAPISM THROUGH VISUAL TRADITION



Louris Maas

Illustrator
instagram.com/artbylouris

What I've really grown to appreciate about Clip Studio Paint is how thoughtfully built it is for artists.

The brush engine, layer system, rulers, and stabilization tools all offer a lot of flexibility and control that support the way I like to draw. I want my illustration to have textures and somewhat resemble a watercolor effect. I also want it to be sketchy with flowy lines, something that looks a bit like traditional artwork. Everything is already in the assets library.

I've been using Clip Studio Paint on my iPad, which has been super convenient. Sometimes I like to draw at a café or just change the scenery a bit, and it's nice knowing I still have access to all the features I rely on. It's like carrying a desktop version inside a small tablet and being able to use it anywhere and whenever I want.



**Get up to
3 months free**

Enjoy creating more.



CLIP STUDIO
PAINT Ver. 5

Take your art journey to the next level with the latest version of Clip Studio Paint. Complete with natural drawing tools, new 3D features, intuitive comic and animation tools and more, you can create exactly as you imagine.

<https://www.clipstudio.net/en/>

Windows / macOS / Android / iPad / iPhone

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



Colour is all around us. Everywhere you look, you will see every imaginable hue at all kinds of saturation levels and it is wonderful. But, what happens when we remove the colour and concentrate on other aspects? For artists it may feel like a drawback, but

actually it can be liberating to ditch the colour and focus on values, silhouettes, form and composition. That is why, this issue, we are taking a good look at just this, to help you understand the benefits of working in monochrome. Of course, colour will always have its place, but there's a lot of value in exploring other ways of working and we hope this helps you to see some opportunities.

That said, we do have plenty of colour this month too. Just take a look at the work of Bente Schlick, whose art we explore along with an interview. Then there is Joris Halgand and his environmental tips, or Peng Lu's vibrant book cover art featuring an epic dragon against a fiery sky. Safe to say, there's something for everyone.

Enjoy the issue.

Rob

Editor
Rob.Redman@futurenet.com

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



Bente Schlick

We talk to Bente about her love for the fantasy genre and her stunning commissioned work.



Fantasy cover art

Illustrator Peng Lu shares his thoughts on how to approach a classic fantasy dragon scene.



Moody dark fantasy

Sci-fi and fantasy artist Calder Moore teaches the art of creating atmospheric monochrome renders in 3D.

📷 @imaginefxmagazine

✉ @imaginefx

📘 facebook.com/imaginefx

📺 @imaginefxmagazine

📄 imaginefx.creativebloq.com



Subscribe today!

Save up to 40% on a new subscription, and receive the magazine direct to your door each month. See page 7 for details

Save up to 40% by starting a new subscription to ImagineFX
See page 7 for details



SUBSCRIBE & SAVE!

ImagineFX Contents

Your art

8 **FXPosé**

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

18 **The Rookies**

Up-and-coming artists share their work.

72 **The Gallery**

Get eyes on the finest traditional artwork.

News and events

20 **How to get the most out of black and white art**

Artists discuss unique creative possibilities found within an absence of colour.

26 **Artist in Residence: Yé Wei**

The mangaka shows us his "obsessively organised" space, complete with nap bed.

30 **The path of Isabella Nalin Fais**

The Brazilian-born artist looks back across her career so far.

Features

34 **The art of Bente Schlick**

The illustrator on balancing personal projects and commissioned work.

42 **Development Sheet: Deep in the forest**

Journey to a sacred shrine as Taeyoung Kim discusses colour and structure.

44 **Sketchbook: Ahmad Hilmi**

The concept artist shows off his monsters and finds freedom in his sketching.

Reviews

76 **Hardware**

79 **Courses and brushes**

Regulars

6 **Next month**

7 **Subscriptions**

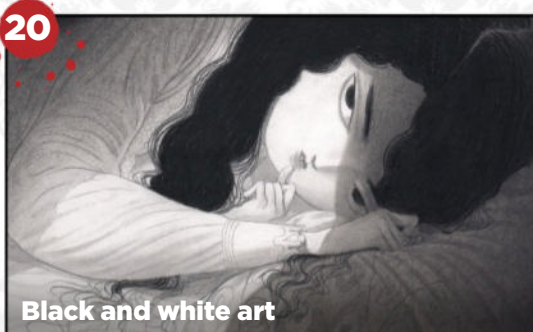
33 **Letters**

34



The art of Bente Schlick

20



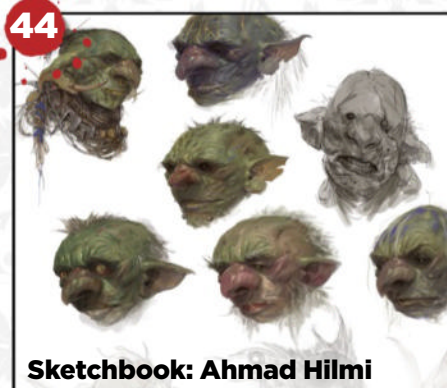
Black and white art

26



Artist in Residence: Yé Wei

44



Sketchbook: Ahmad Hilmi

FXPosé

THE PLACE TO SHARE YOUR DIGITAL ART



See page 8 for the best new art ➔

42



Development Sheet



ImagineFX

ImagineFX Workshops

Advice and techniques
from pro artists...



50 Illustrate indie comic covers

Partha Pratim Sarkar on dynamic B&W cover art.



54 Start your work with storytelling

Simon Pape explains how a story can help with creativity.



56 Adding humorous narrative touches

Comedy can make a scene, says Eilene Huang.



58 Paint a book cover illustration

Peng Lu shares his tips for illustrating fantasy novels.



62 World-building with logic

Your fantasy world needs rules, believes Oliver Chen.



64 Design effective environments

Joris Halgand on crafting settings for storytelling.



70 Harness the exclusion layer

Christian Angel on using the blend mode for atmosphere.

3D Artist

Industry experts pass on their 3D art techniques...

88



84 Showcase: Reader 3D art

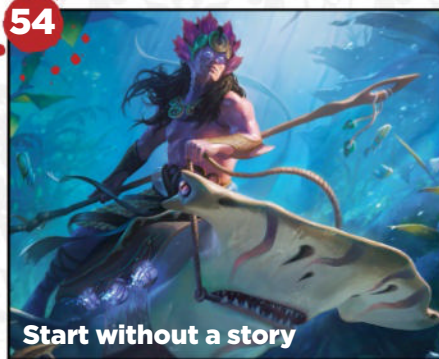
88 Make a detailed 3D dark fantasy landscape

94 Build and draw from a library

96 Back to 3D basics

98 Five minutes with Ian Vicknair

54



Start without a story

56



Adding humorous touches

50



Illustrate indie comic covers

58



Paint a book cover illustration

64



Design effective environments

98



Five minutes with Ian Vicknair



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/paintblackandwhite>
- 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

NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS
ImagineFX

Editorial

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

Art Editor **Daniel Vincent**

Sub Editors **Steve Wright, Stanley Bull, Phil King, Nikole Robinson**

Contributors

Brian Yuen, Marc Magliari, Edwin Vornig, Polina Kirillova, Alex Huneycutt, Teow Rui Qian, Dominic Carter, Sarah Koudelka-Mason, Joe Vriens, Isabella Mazzanti, Alexander Joseba, Yè Wei, Isabella Nalin Fais, Bente Schlick, James Clarke, Taeyoung Kim, Ahmad Hilmi, Partha Pratim Sarkar, Simon Pape, Eilene Huang, Peng Lu, Oliver Chen, Joris Halgand, Christian Angel, Fábio Simão dos Santos, Gabriel Ribeiro, Tom Newbury, Skander Mallouki, Juan Hernández, Calder Moore, Peter Olschinsky, Mike Griggs, Antony Ward, Ian Vicknair

Advertising

UK Group Commercial Director **Clare Dove**

Advertising Director **Matt Johnston**
mattjohnston@futurenet.com, 01225 442244

International Licensing

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

Subscriptions - turn to page 8!

Online orders www.magazinesdirect.com
Customer service email help@magazinesdirect.com
Consumer Revenues Director **Sharon Todd**

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

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

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

Production

Group Head of Production **Mark Constance**
Senior Production Manager **Matt Eglington**
Senior Ad Production Manager **Jo Crosby**
Production Manager **Vivienne Calvert**
Digital Editions Manager **Jason Hudson**

Management

Head of Design **Brad Merrett**
Content Director **Chris George**
Global Head of Design **Rodney Dive**
Managing Director **Stuart Williams**
Commercial Finance Director **Tania Bruning**

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

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

ISSN 1748-930X

All contents © 2026 Future Publishing Limited or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited (company number 2008885) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.

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

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

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

GPSR EU RP (for authorities only)
eucomply OÜ Pärnu mnt 139b-14 11317
Tallinn, Estonia
hello@eucompliancepartner.com
+3375690241

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

ImagineFX (ISSN 1748-930X, USPS 25891) is published monthly with an extra copy in October by Future plc, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA. Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA. Periodicals postage paid at Brooklyn, NY 11256. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Future plc, c/o World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15, 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA.

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



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

Chief Executive Officer **Kevin Li Ying**
Non-Executive Chairman **Mark Brooker**
Chief Financial Officer **Sharjeel Suleman**

Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244

Next month in...

NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS
ImagineFX

CHARACTER DESIGN

Learn new skills and techniques to imbue your characters with personality

Line work, light and texture

Jonny Sun shows how to take a sketch to a finished mystical scene

Create H.R. Giger-inspired sci-fi

Learn how Anna Balashova adds bionic elements to her characters

New Magic: The Gathering art

Creators of The Hobbit crossover card set discuss their new concepts

ISSUE 271 ON SALE 22ND SEPTEMBER
IN PRINT & DIGITAL

Content of next issue is subject to change



ImagineFX



HUGE SAVINGS

PLUS FREE DIGITAL ACCESS TO 150+ ISSUES*

Exclusive text-free covers



FIND THE BEST SUBSCRIPTION FOR YOU



PRINT PLUS FREE DIGITAL ACCESS

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



DIGITAL-ONLY SUBSCRIPTION

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

Special offers are only available by visiting
<https://bit.ly/4ba9F1B>



Call UK opening hours, Mon to Fri 8:30am-7pm, Sat 10am-3pm
+44 (0) 330 333 1113

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

ImagineFX



FXPosé

THE PLACE TO SHARE YOUR DIGITAL ART



Brian Yuen

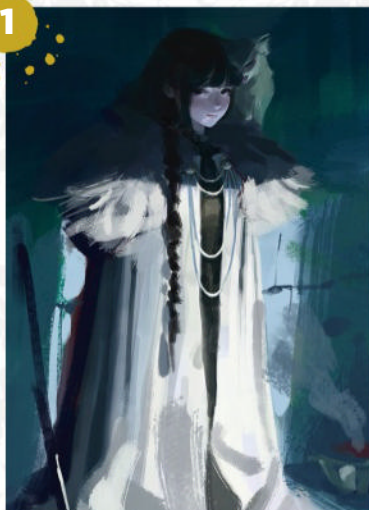
LOCATION: Hong Kong MEDIA: Photoshop WEB: www.brianyuenart.com

Brian is a freelance illustrator who loves using a painterly style. He started digital painting in 2016 and is inspired by the Old Masters, as well as modern artists such as Jaime Jones and Craig Mullins.

3



1



1 BLUE

"This was done as a quick paint-over practice on top of an old painting I did in 2019. I wanted to see how I can edit a painting to make it more interesting and in alignment with my current taste. I find I am now much more expressive with my mark-making."

2



2 SHOPKEEPING

"This image is inspired by Orientalist paintings that are pretty complex with a lot of props and materials. For this image, I tried to balance all of the different details while trying to imply some kind of narrative as well."

3 PIGEONS

"This is inspired by Old Master paintings. I was particularly interested in the hands; I wanted them to have some kind of swirling motion and gesture to them. Hands are always fun to paint."



ImagineFX

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

4 SPIRIT

"This is probably my favourite painting that I have done. I wanted to capture something spiritual and mystical, a sense of movement, yet stillness, while also letting the viewer's imagination interpret what's going on."

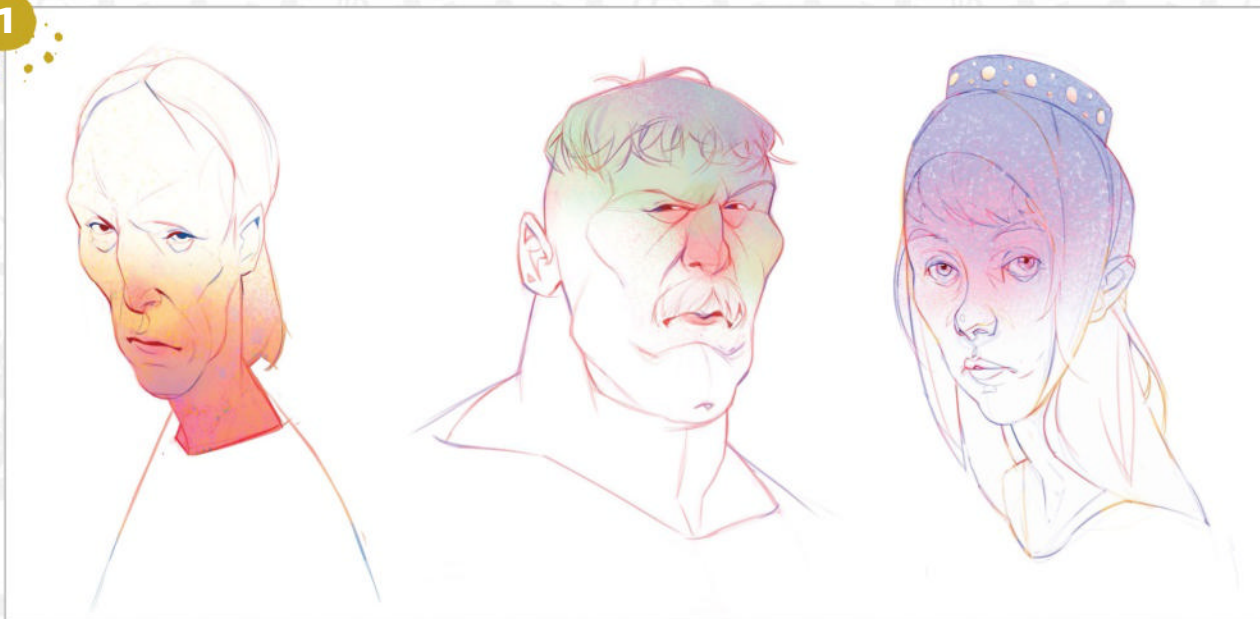


Marc Magliari

LOCATION: France **MEDIA:** Photoshop, Blender **WEB:** www.artstation.com/marcmagliari7

Animation and videogames are ideal for illustrator Marc, as his approach to colour and light – inspired by medieval art, 1970s posters and German expressionist movies – allow him to work in colour scripting and rendering.

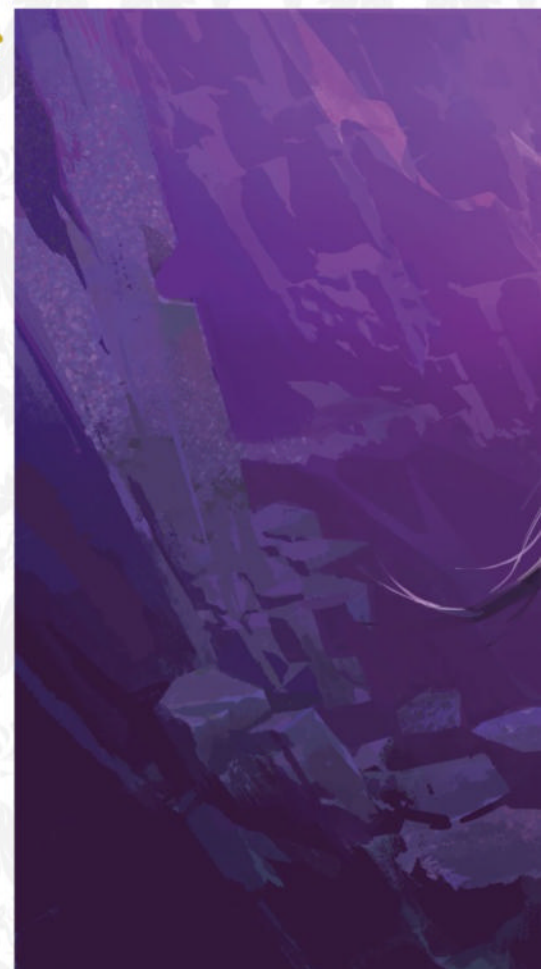
1

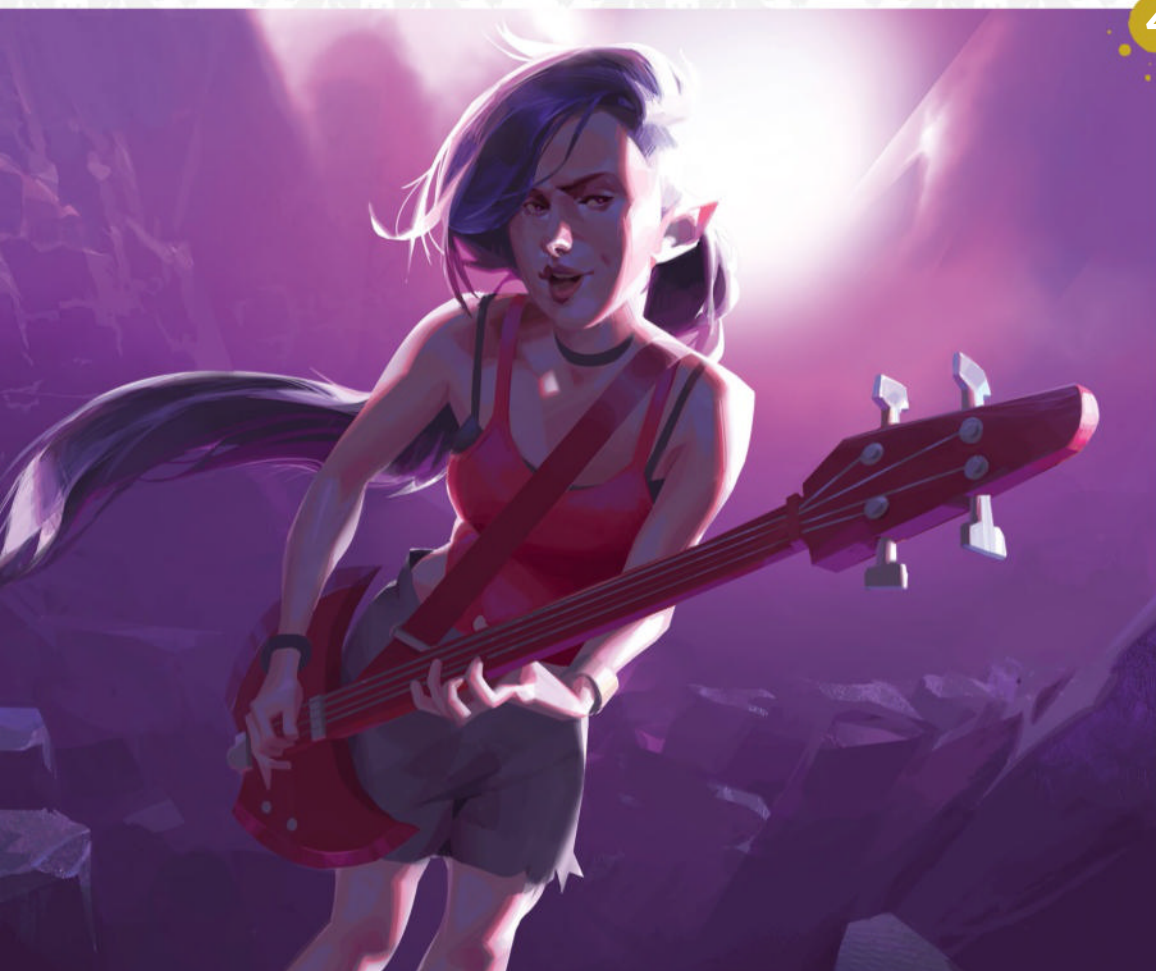


2



3





4

1 THE SICILIAN COURT PORTRAIT RESEARCH

"Portraits are my first research step. Defining a character's core emotion creates a strong foundation that guides later design decisions and research."

2 LORD OF BAUX

"This illustration began with abstract complementary blue, orange and yellow shapes. This opposition is a nice narrative framework to contrast the brooding baron with the feast behind him."

3 THE TOWER OF ATLAN

"This environment piece began with loose three-value sketches and a colour pass. I designed the architecture in Blender, overlaid the 3D with the colour key, and completed the rendering on Photoshop."

4 MARCELINE

"Fan art helps me escape my habits. Recreating Distant Lands: Obsidian let me explore saturated purples, artificial lighting, and subjects beyond my usual knights."



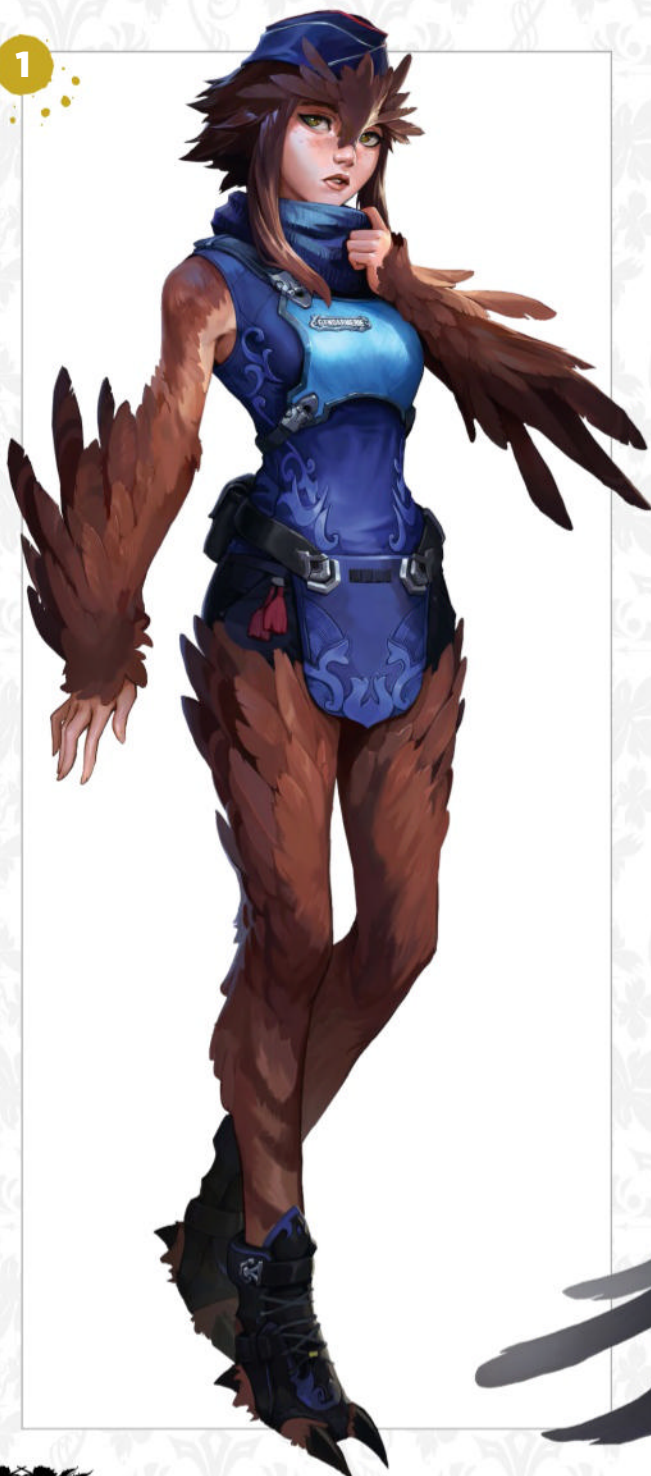
Edwin Vorng

LOCATION: France **MEDIA:** Photoshop **WEB:** www.artstation.com/edouin

A concept artist who specialises in character design, Edwin works as an art lead at Envar Entertainment. He loves the challenge of showing a character's complex personality visually: 'I want to feel the story just by looking at them.'

1 CÉLÉANA

"This is Céléana, the main character from my one of my personal projects: Stone Decay. It's really fun to put a fantasy character in a more modern world."



2 GENERAL FAIRLOIS

"This is Céléana's mother, General Fairlois. It was fun to create visual clues that show their family connections, but also highlight their differences."



3 FRANK

"Finally, this is Frank from the same universe. He's a centaur working as a taxi. It was really fun to imagine people using the centaur as a transportation service."





Polina Kirillova

LOCATION: Serbia **MEDIA:** Photoshop, Clip Studio, Art studio, Blender **WEB:** www.artstation.com/lina_phantom

Polina has been working as a game artist for 10 years. She loves D&D and likes to explore her characters through art. "I enjoy experimenting with colour and finding new ways to make colours more expressive."

1 LAIN

"In this art, I used the lasso tool while still aiming to retain a painterly feel."

2 MASTER FROG

"In this piece, I wanted the contrasting colours to almost glow on the screen. It was also my way of paying tribute to my D&D Dungeon Master."

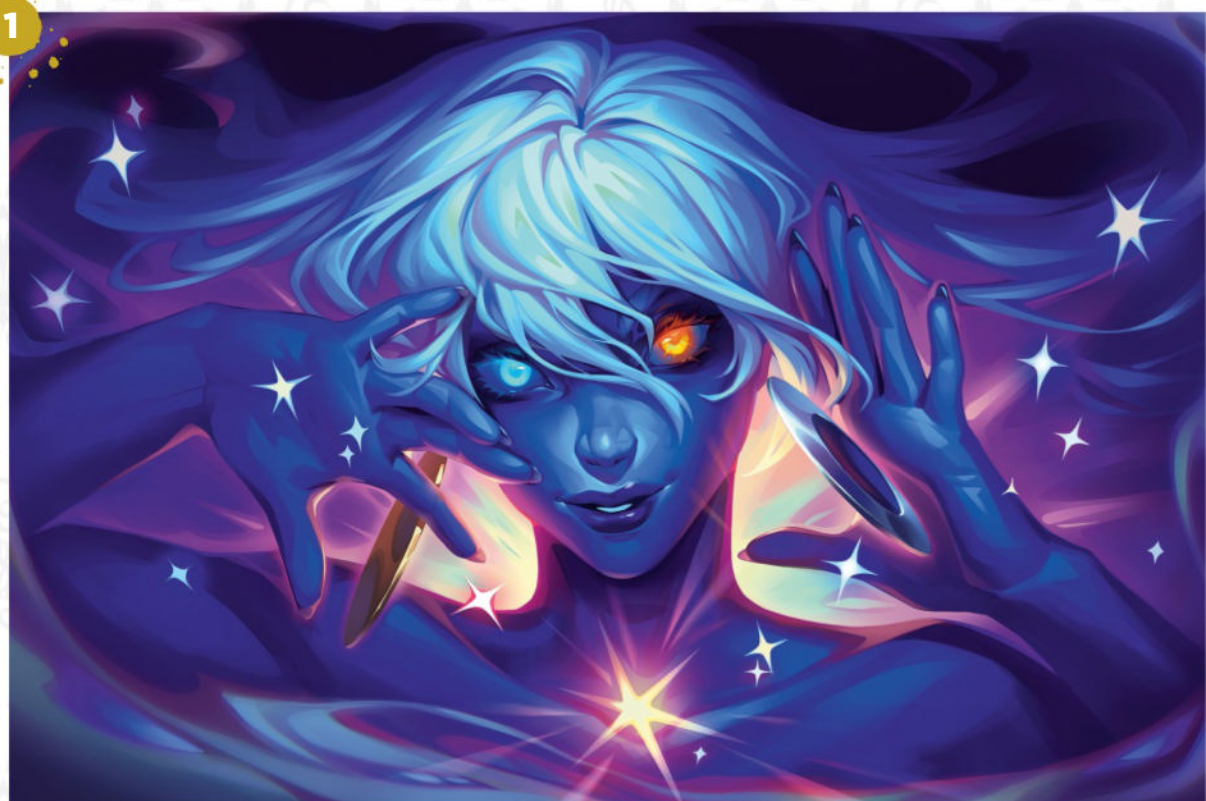
3 ELVEN QUEEN

"For this piece, I challenged myself to work with a limited, high-key palette. I wanted to preserve depth while using mostly light colours where I could."

4 MENA

"This is my favourite character. I wanted to make a vertical composition, but it took me a long time to find the right pose and angle."

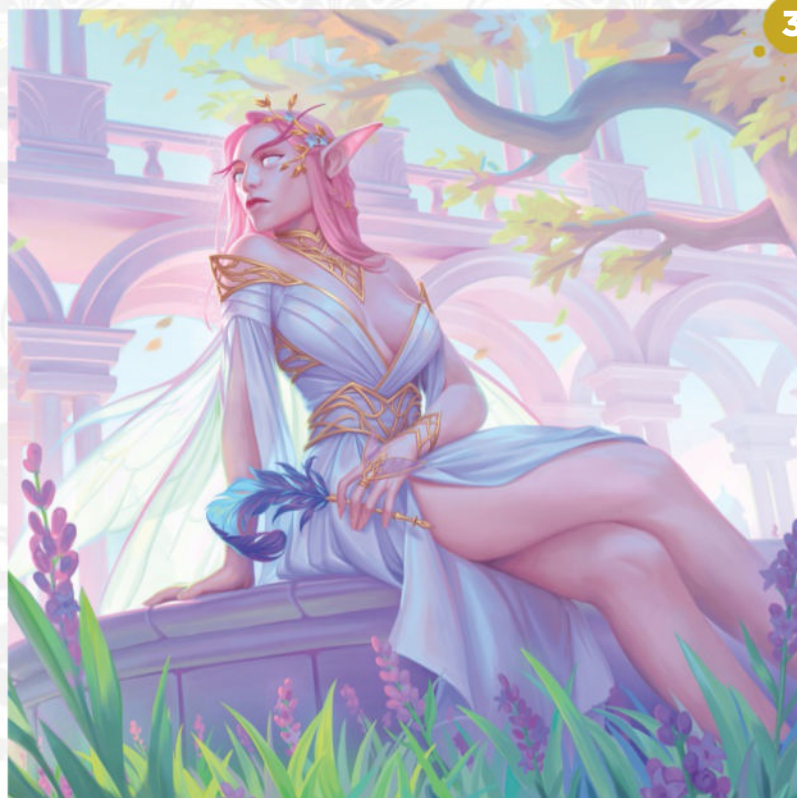
1



2



3







Alex Huneycutt

LOCATION: US MEDIA: Procreate WEB: www.artstation.com/alexhuneycutt

A concept artist who specialises in story-driven characters, environments, comics and illustration, Alex taught himself through online courses and YouTube before moving into professional work.

1 GOBLIN CHIRURGEON REIMAGINED

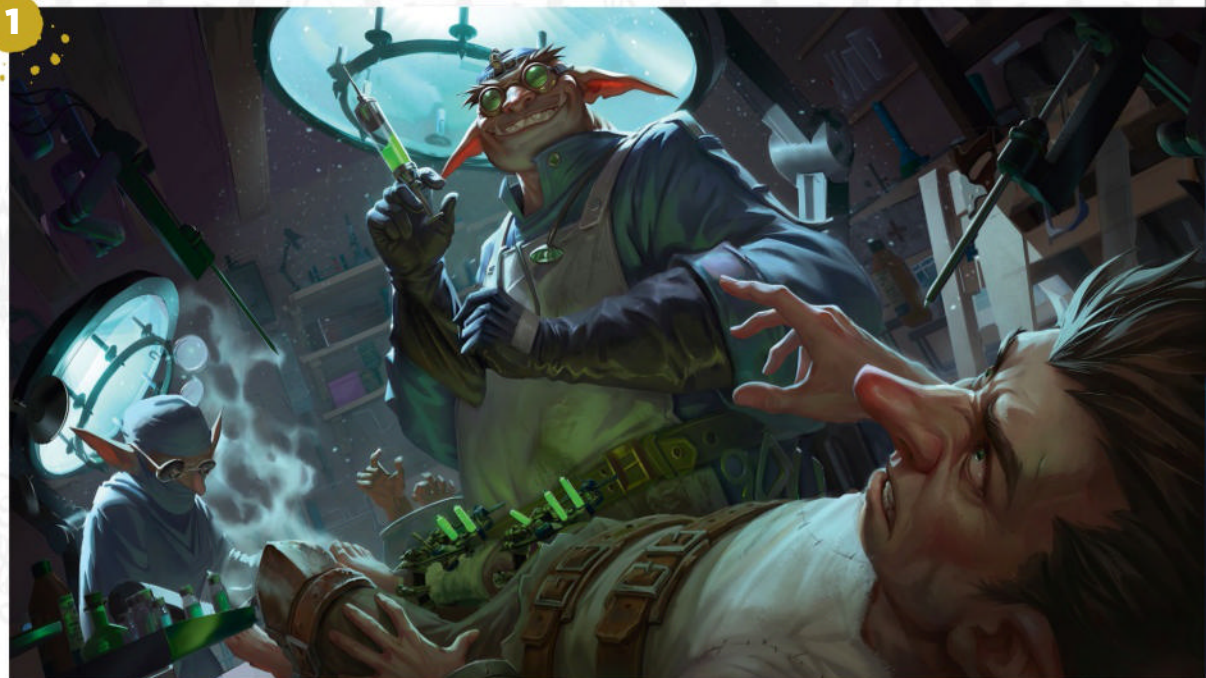
"A reimagining of MtG's Goblin Chirurgeon Card, this piece transforms the original goblin with a hacksaw into a dark surgical session."

2 DRAGON TAMER

"This was created for a book with my mentor Kenny Vo based on the prompt Land of Legends. Exploring the girl's story resulted in the tattoo ritual depicted here."

3 ETHEREAL GODDESS

"This began as a portrait study from reference before evolving into freeform exploration. I pushed the image even further with fantastical elements."



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





THE
ROOKIES

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

WWW.THEROOKIES.CO



Tales of Divine Retribution - Hui

YEAR CREATED: 2025 MEDIA: Photoshop

“Hui is a character created to explore both personal style and workflow. She was inspired by mythology and fantasy, allowing these influences to be channelled into her design. Hui represents a culmination of personal growth and development, both as an artist and as an individual.”



18

ImagineFX



Artist **PROFILE**

Teow Rui Qian

LOCATION: Malaysia



Rui Qian is a concept artist from Malaysia with a passion for the games and film industry. Inspired by games she played during her childhood, she aims to craft breathtaking worlds to get lost in.

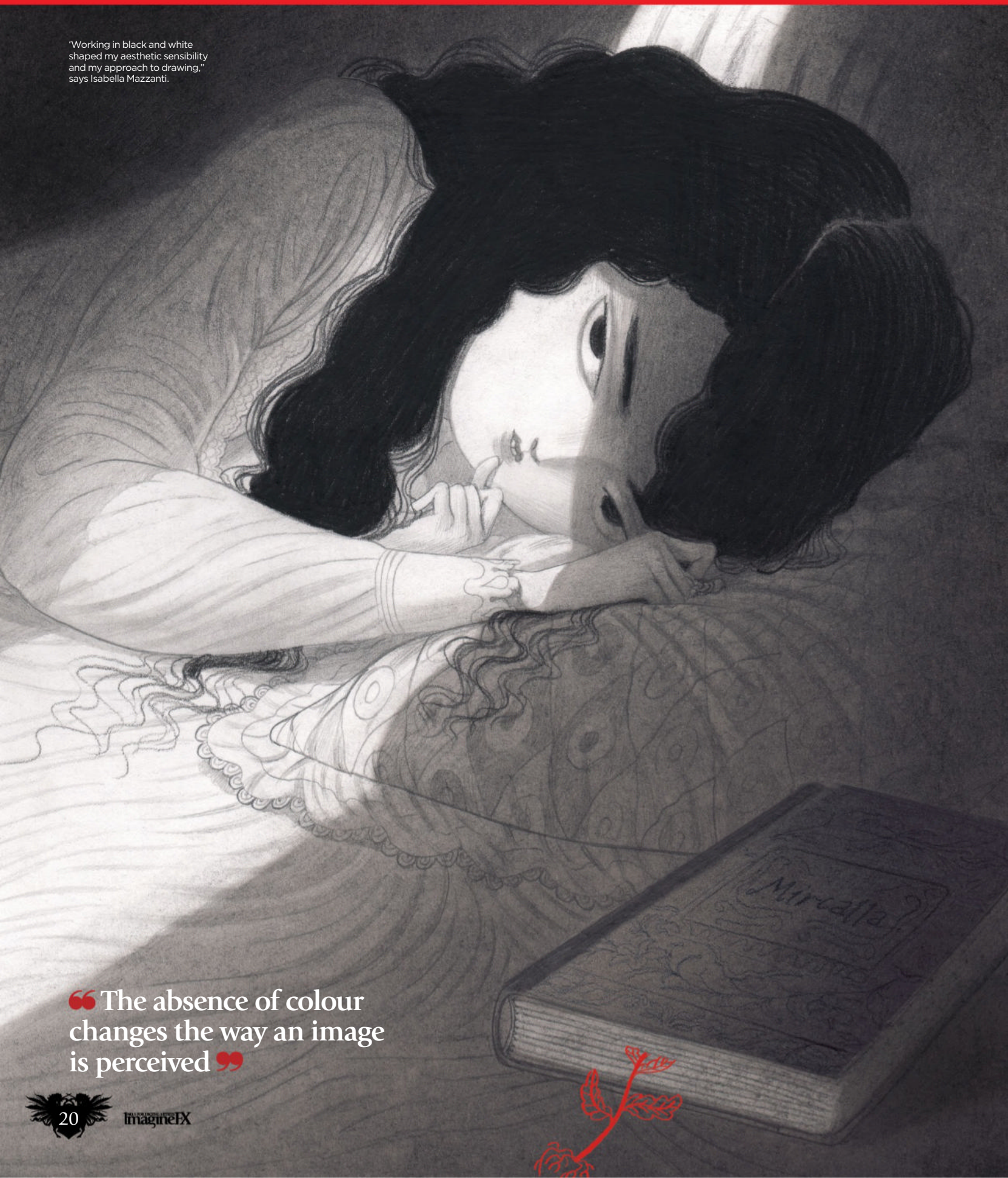
www.therookies.co/projects/96847

ARTIST NEWS, SOFTWARE & EVENTS

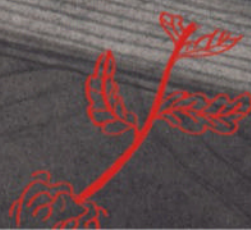
ImagineNation

AT THE CORE OF THE DIGITAL ART COMMUNITY

"Working in black and white shaped my aesthetic sensibility and my approach to drawing," says Isabella Mazzanti.



“The absence of colour changes the way an image is perceived”





DOUBLE-DESK DRAWING DEN

French mangaka Yé Wei (aka Esquisewei) shows us around his bedroom-conversion studio, split into two distinct parts: one for pixels, one for ink. **Page 26**



FOLLOW YOUR DREAMS

Brazilian vis dev and concept artist Isabella Nalin Fais tells us about her influences, career, future plans and the importance of enjoying the process. **Page 30**

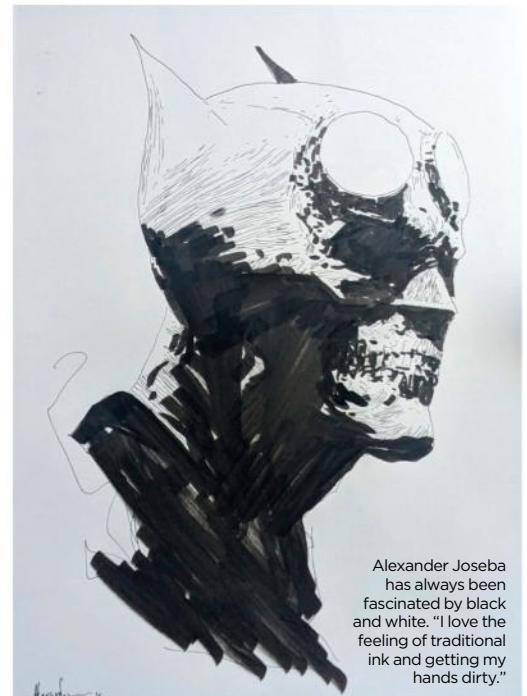


YOUR VIEWS, YOUR ART

Praise for Himesh Anand's sketches, Andrea Piparo's dragon and the idea of blending different art styles. Plus artworks by readers. **Page 33**



In Sarah's opinion, working in black and white is easier than creating in colour.



Alexander Joseba has always been fascinated by black and white. "I love the feeling of traditional ink and getting my hands dirty."

How to get the most out of black and white art

Monochrome masters There's more to black and white art than just an absence of colour. **Dominic Carter** hears about its unique creative possibilities

With a whole spectrum of colours only a few clicks away, perhaps it's not surprising that working in black and white is somewhat overlooked. But whether you're working monochromatically to draft an illustration or using it for a finished piece, a black and white approach is full of benefits. It can even make you stand out in a landscape saturated with vibrant talent.

Foregoing colour can be an intentional creative choice rather than the result of a limitation, but for illustrator **Sarah Koudelka-Mason** it was borne out of convenience. "After



trying out all sorts of tools, I found pencils to be the simplest, least fussy medium," she says. "All you need is a pencil and

paper, which you can bring anywhere. Perhaps because pencils were also my first and most consistent tool in my art journey, I feel the most comfortable with them."

For character artist and illustrator **Joe Vriens**, a black and white approach was the result of a fear of colour theory mixed with a dash of impatience. "I'd always get excited to see the bare line work of a comic, too; it seemed much more achievable," he reveals. "I could grab a pen and paper and make a comic without expensive markers, paints or digital tools.

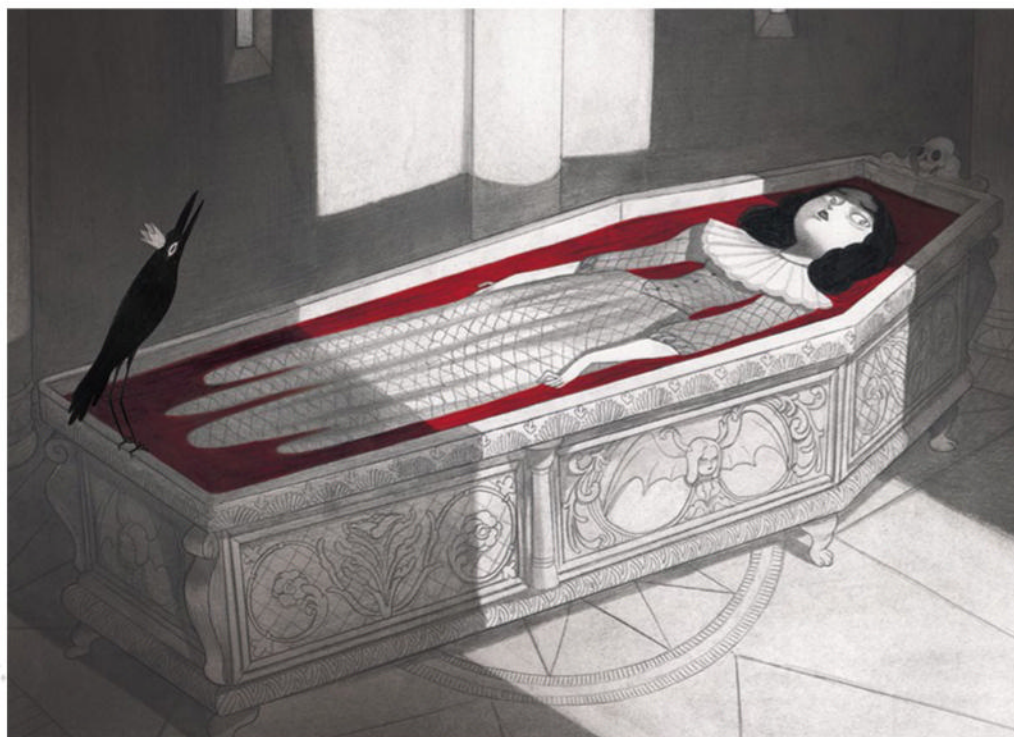
"I'm also old enough to remember King Kong in black and white. I made my parents rent that thing probably once a month. In retrospect, maybe King Kong informed my approach all along?" ➡



Black and white photography inspired Joe to start working monochromatically.

For Sarah, working in colour can get messy because values have to factor in added values.

Isabella argues that black and white art creates more room for the viewer's personal interpretation.



➔ Illustrator **Isabella Mazzanti** points out that working in black and white plays into a long tradition of art styles, including her own influences which range from Gustave Doré's engravings to contemporary manga. "They seemed accessible and reproducible to me," she says. "These early experiences were fundamental, because they shaped my aesthetic sensibility and my approach to drawing."



FINDING BALANCE

Seeing as working in black in white is a deliberate approach, it also depends on specific considerations. "You have to make sure the shading values are balanced well," Sarah advises. "It's easy for your shading to look flat or 'muddy' if your tones are too similar, so you really have to figure out your darks, mediums and lights, and then tie them together with the between shading. I personally like to work lighter and work my way to the crisp dark lines at the end. So satisfying."

"Line weight and shape design are also key," says concept artist



Alexander Joseba. "A strong silhouette can communicate a character or object very quickly, and different line weights

can help separate forms and create depth. Since you cannot use colour to separate materials or planes, you need to do it through values, textures, edges and rhythm.

"For me, black and white forces you to be more disciplined, although I also like to play with a more wild and instinctive approach. If the image works in black and white, it usually means that the composition, lighting and structure are solid."

Isabella warns against assuming that working in black and white is a

“You have to make sure the shading values are balanced well”

Without colour, Alexander advises using values, textures and edges to define form.



simpler approach. "A solid grasp of the visual language is essential in order to use it effectively," she argues.

"Black and white is not simply the absence of colour; when working with chiaroscuro, one chooses to tell a story based on duality, contrast and the exaggeration of ambiguity. I believe it is vitally important for an artist to understand this element, which has the power to intensify the viewer's emotional engagement."

THROWING SHADE

When it comes to making black and white art work professionally, Isabella stresses that economic forces may be influencing publishers just as much as aesthetic considerations. "It lends images a classic, refined and timeless quality," she says. "Even when telling a certain type of story – for example, Gothic literature – black and white seems to be the most natural choice. It can be a risky choice, because one is foregoing the emotional appeal of colour, but when used in the right way and in the right context, it's a winning decision."

Sarah claims that black and white art is underrated, and that it's not ➔

INDUSTRY INSIGHT

ALEXANDER JOSEBA

The concept artist's thoughts on working in monochrome

Why do you choose to create artwork in black and white?

My interest started when I was very young. I grew up looking at the work of great artists such as John Buscema, Mike Mignola, Alberto Breccia and many others. I was fascinated by the way they were able to communicate so much with ink: how they separated planes, created depth, controlled light and shadow, and made the whole image work so clearly, each one with their own very distinct style.

What extra considerations are required when working in black and white?

I think the most important consideration is readability. Without colour, you have to rely much more on values, contrast, shapes, silhouettes and composition to guide the viewer's eye. Everything needs to be clear from the beginning: what the focal point is, what belongs to the foreground, middle ground and background, and where the main light is coming from.

How does working in black and white enhance an artist's overall skills?

It forces you to focus on the foundation of the image. Without relying on colour, you need to solve composition, lighting, values, silhouette, volume and overall readability properly. I think any artist who works well in black and white will also improve their colour work, because they understand values, light and structure better. Colour does not replace that foundation; it complements it.



Alexander Joseba is a senior concept artist who has worked for Epic Games, HBO, Ubisoft and more.

<https://bit.ly/4wC0yzh>



Working in black and white requires a more direct and precise way of thinking, says Alexander.

Joe likes to use a couple of grey Copic markers when sketching out his poses.





"Black and white forces you to simplify, make stronger decisions, build an image from its foundation," says Alexander.



➔ the usual approach commissioners are looking for. "But at the same time, if there are clients specifically looking for works of that nature and you've established yourself in that niche, you will find them. This applies to any unique niche of art, and I personally enjoy the challenge of going against the grain!"

For Alexander, black and white artwork is useful for both commercial production pipelines and for final illustration styles. "It depends on the project: sometimes it is a practical development tool, and sometimes it becomes the final artistic language," he says.

SEEING THE LIGHT

Even if artists don't gear their black and white artwork towards clients, focusing on it can still improve their overall craft. "Balancing tones in a final image is super-important, so if you can master greys then moving on to colour will feel easier," says Joe.

"You can guide the viewer's eye with tones alone, so it can help your compositions greatly. Focusing on greys or even black and white can take a lot of the pressure off as well, which allows you to really dig into lighting and form."

Meanwhile Sarah is a firm believer that practising black and white art is one of the best ways to strengthen your understanding of the fundamentals. "Without the

For Isabella, black and white art lends itself to the realms of dreams and imagination.

By its very nature, Isabella claims that black and white art is a reflection of the past.

"Copic markers hit the page dark and dry much lighter, so it's really handy for testing the waters," says Joe.



distraction or support of vibrant colours, you are encouraged to look at your work in a simpler and more intentional way," she says. "You start to see shape language, values, lighting, contrast, composition and depth a lot clearer."

Isabella agrees: "The absence of colour changes the way an image is perceived," she says. "Rather than depriving the image of something, a black and white approach reveals its essential and most intimate nature; it speaks to the viewer in a more universal, almost archetypal language." ●

Working in black and white has sharpened Sarah's skills as an animator and character designer.



“You start to see shape language, values, lighting, contrast, composition and depth a lot clearer”

Comics and concept art are two of the areas where black and white work are in demand, says Joe.



Whilst she also enjoys working in colour, Sarah is happiest when putting pencil to paper.



This one's for a hundred thousand subscribers on my manga drawing channel. I'm at 550,000 now, but I keep the old trophy in view precisely because it's out of date - it reminds me I started from absolutely nothing, and that the million is still out there somewhere.

All three screens are running my own drawings. When I'm working on my new manga I want my previous pages permanently in front of me, so I'm always referencing myself rather than hunting through folders.

Nami is on my desk because we share one very specific trait: an excellent sense of direction. Whenever I travel with friends, I'm always the one navigating - nobody else even tries anymore.

Two and a half metres of solid wood, weighing around 100kg and rated for 300kg of load. I had it built to carry everything at once - Mac, PC, drawing setup and the full streaming rig - without a single wobble.

My very first published manga, which came out when I was 40. I'd spent years teaching manga online while quietly wondering whether I had the right to - this book is what settled that question, for good.

Yé Wei (aka Esquissewei)

Split studio Two desks, one for pixels and one for ink, 3,000 markers and a bed for napping – welcome inside...



My studio is about 30 square metres, and it has a slightly odd history: it used to be two bedrooms – mine

and my older brother's – in my parents' house just outside Paris, until we knocked the wall through. My brother's bed is still in here, and I'll come back to why that matters.

The space is split in two. On one side, everything digital: a Wacom Cintiq Pro 24 hooked up to a MacBook Pro M2 Max, running Clip Studio Paint. For manga specifically, nothing else comes close – the pen stabilisation, the panel tools, the screentones, it's all built for exactly what I do. On the other side, everything traditional, and this is where things get out of hand. I own more than 3,000 markers. Not a typo. Plus dozens and dozens of ➡

This is an illustration of Sana, a character from the Astral universe, drawn in Clip Studio Paint.

These are pieces I've inked and coloured with alcohol markers. I've never picked a side between traditional and digital – I work in both every week, and each one feeds the other.

Gohan is my favourite character in all of manga. He's the kid who inherits enormous potential and has to decide what to do with it, and every single day he pushes me to go and build my own version of that.



At my desk, where my day starts at 7am sharp – pen in hand, pages everywhere as usual.



➡ nibs, pencils and screentone sheets. I'm an ambassador for a few art brands, including Clairefontaine and Graph'it, so material arrives constantly and I ran out of places to put it. Everything now lives in labelled boxes, because otherwise I'd never find anything again.

There's a third layer to the room too: I've been shooting photo and video since 2011, and I still use that gear every day. A Sony FX30, a Sennheiser MKH 416 shotgun mic and big

I'm a serious figure collector: 12 large-scale statues and a small army of smaller ones. Owning them is a childhood dream made literal – as a kid these were completely out of reach, and now I get to work inside the universe that made me want to draw in the first place. They're also genuinely useful for lighting and anatomy reference.



“I’m obsessively organised. Clean desk, batteries charged, every pen where it should be, or I feel half-lost”

continuous softboxes – the proper studio kind – because I film courses and live critique sessions for my drawing school, and for the 550,000 people who follow the channel.

FIRM FOUNDATION

The desk itself is custom-built: a huge solid wood worktop weighing around 100 kilos, which is not something you move on a whim. I sit on an HBADA X7, which has built-in massage, heating and ventilation – it sounds ridiculous until you've spent six straight hours inking a page. Next to me is a manga library of over a thousand volumes that I raid constantly for reference, plus copies of my own manga, Astral.

My day is very rigid. Up at 5:30, sport at 6, at my desk by 7. If I start at 8 I feel like I've already lost the day – which is ridiculous, but there it is. I

work until noon, then my energy collapses, so I sleep from 2pm to 3:30pm. That's what the bed is for: cutting the day in half is non-negotiable. Back at it until 6 or 7pm, then in bed by 10.

I'm obsessively organised. Clean desk, batteries charged, every pen where it should be, or I feel half-lost before I've started.

The biggest lesson? For years I called myself a mangaka online and quietly felt like a fraud, because I was teaching manga without having published one. Then Astral came out in 2025 and the impostor syndrome simply vanished. I'm on my second book now.

Yé Wei (aka Esquissewei) is a French mangaka and author of Astral. He founded Manga Dojo, an online drawing school, and is currently working on his second book.
www.esquissewei.fr

Artist news, software & events



Astral is the story of Nejma, a young woman searching for meaning, and Elane, a druidess, who are bound by Merlin's lost grimoire as ancient Celtic legends come to life.



Apprendre à Dessiner des Mangas is a practical guide book designed for those who truly want to learn to draw - not just watch tutorials, but pick up a pencil and get started.



This is my second desk, dedicated entirely to traditional work, with the marker and liner wall standing right in front of it. Everything is arranged so I can reach any colour without standing up or breaking concentration - that's the whole point. I sit down here and just sink into the drawing. After a morning of screens, the smell of alcohol markers is what tells my brain it's time to make something with my hands.



I built this machine myself, and I'd be lying if I said it was purely for work - I'm a lifelong geek and gamer. The water-cooling loop was a project in itself. When I need to reset my eye before going back to a page, this is where I go.

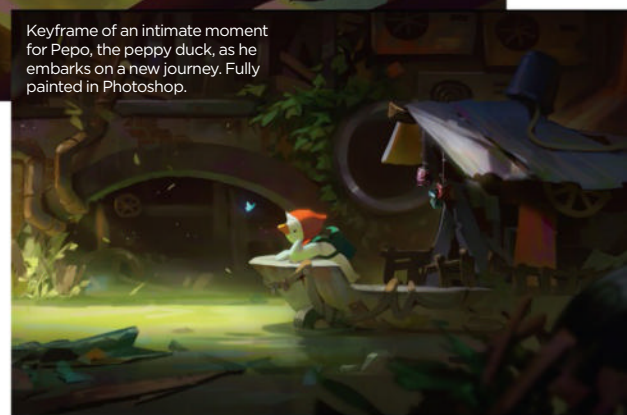
Over a thousand volumes, and I use them constantly as reference when I'm teaching or building a page. And yes, that's a bed directly in front of it - my brother's old one, kept for my afternoon nap. Never without my bed. It's the single most important piece of furniture in this room and I will not be taking questions.



Keyframe of passing by the factory village in a caravan. A 3D base with colours added in 2D.



Keyframe of an intimate moment for Pepo, the peppy duck, as he embarks on a new journey. Fully painted in Photoshop.



The path of... Isabella Nalin Fais

Colourful creations The Brazilian-born concept artist talks about her career and cartoon characters

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

I grew up in the south of Brazil, where the weather is pretty hot. I remember being surrounded by nature and vibrant colours, and that translated to the way I pick colours when I paint.

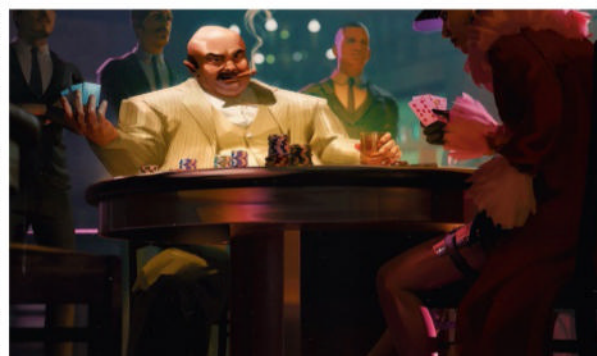
What, outside of art, has most influenced your artwork through the years?

Animated films and cartoons always had a major influence in my art. Especially the old ones, like Winnie the Pooh, and stop-motion movies like Coraline. I always try to paint in a way that you could relate to the character as if you're watching a movie. Besides that, having an interest in musical instruments influences me to think of brushstrokes as they have a rhythm so the read of a piece feels like a flow.

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

My first paid commission was an illustration for a stream pack, for Twitch. It was a lo-fi bedroom at night, pretty cosy. It was not the most technically impressive work, but people liked it because of the purple mood and colours I used. It was years ago, so today the quality would

A poker match between a mafia chief and a disguised bounty hunter. The 3D base was done in Blender.



hopefully be better, but everything has its own time.

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

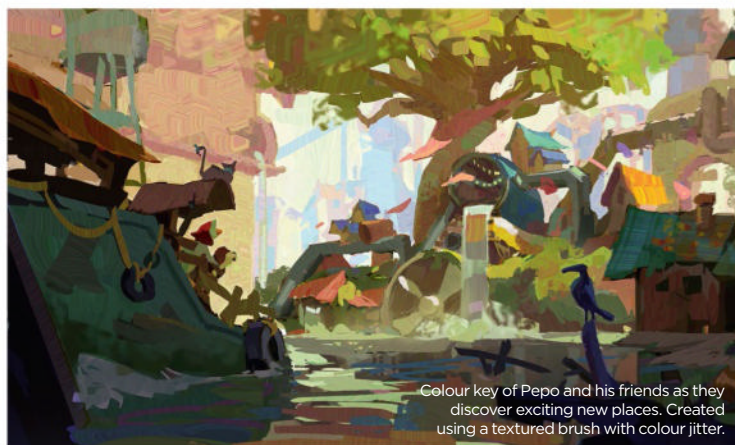
If I could talk to my younger self, I would advise her to be confident while making mistakes. When you're starting, sometimes it's easy to be frustrated with results, but it's the failure that makes you a better artist. Enjoying the process and then moving on to the next piece is the best thing to do to improve.

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

I really identify with my latest project, Pepo. It's a world-building project about a little duck who leaves home to seek his dreams. It reminds me of the innocence of being young and ambitious without knowing where it will lead you, even when you're



A character design project called Yona, where humans are transformed into birds in a mysterious cult.



Colour key of Pepo and his friends as they discover exciting new places. Created using a textured brush with colour jitter.



“Enjoying the process and then moving on to the next piece is the best thing to do to improve”

scared. I left home at a young age to study animation and it feels somewhat similar to that.

What is your next step in art or life?

My next step is to keep growing and improving, especially making more room for plain air painting. I want to work on the readability and simplification of my pieces as well as keep working to make my moods and storytelling sharper than ever. The goal is to be able to communicate

feelings through my art, hopefully to a point I can help animated movies or game productions to bond with the audience with meaningful stories.



Isabella Nalin Fais is a vis dev and concept artist from Brazil, currently living in Paris.

Growing up in Brazil has influenced her art to be colourful and expressive. She always tries to include storytelling in pieces to create a connection, sometimes mixing 3D with 2D techniques.
www.artstation.com/redtreacle

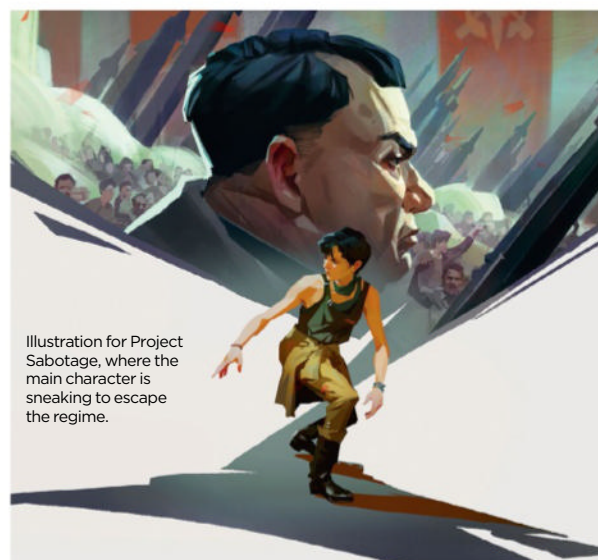


Illustration for Project Sabotage, where the main character is sneaking to escape the regime.

GET **IMAGINEFX** DELIVERED DIGITALLY!



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

Available via our online shop

www.magazinesdirect.com

Available on iOS or Android



Letters

YOUR FEEDBACK & OPINIONS



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



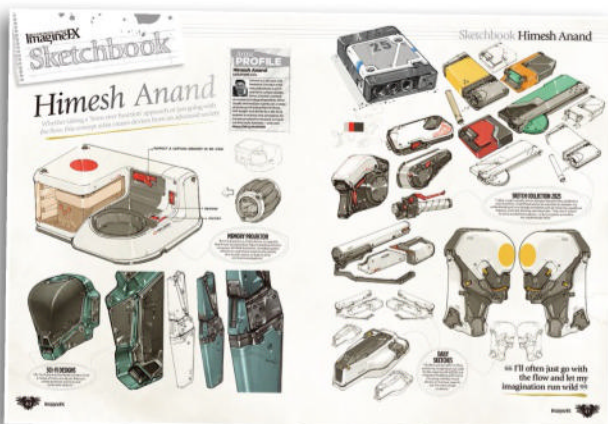
Follow us on X:
x.com/imaginefx



Find us on Facebook:
facebook.com/imaginefx



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



Hard-surface sketches

Hi. Please pass on my thanks to Himesh Anand for his incredible sketchbook in your latest magazine. I do love all the creatures and things you include there; however, it was really nice to see some hard-surface drawings. I struggle with these myself, so being able to pore over his was great.

Seb, via email

Rob replies Hi Seb. I'll absolutely pass that along and I'm so pleased to hear you like his work. Hard surfaces can prove tricky for many, with it being more obvious when certain aspects aren't quite right. Of course, there is nothing wrong with those struggles and they can often lead to breakthroughs that help you turn a corner and inject something new into your work. Himesh does excellent work and I'm really pleased his sketchbook had this effect.

Classic fantasy

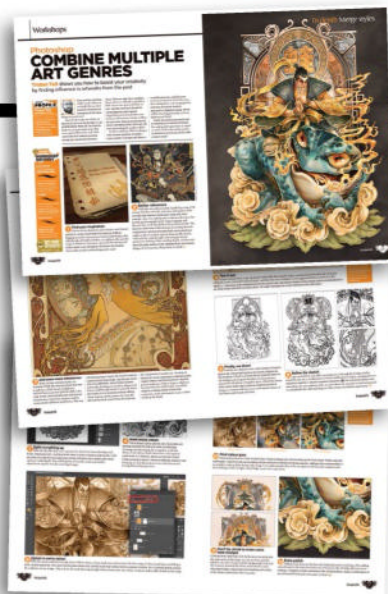
Hello Rob. This is a quick email to say thanks for Andrea's dragon piece last month. It is really good to see something

Himesh Anand showed off his spectacular hard-surface drawing skills in his sketchbook.



DID YOU MISS THE PREVIOUS PACKED ISSUE?

Don't worry – you can get hold of issue 269 at ifxm.ag/single-iffx.



Learn how to blend genres with a step-by-step guide from artist Tristan Tait.

a bit more classic in the magazine. I love a lot of what you publish, but this style of more old-school fantasy art has seemed to be missing for a while, so thank you. More of this, please!

Charmagne, via email

Rob replies Hi Charmagne. Great to hear from you and your praise of Andrea Piparo's art. While we try to reflect evolving styles and tastes, it is nice to see something a little more old-school and so well rendered too. I'll keep that in mind for future issues.

Genre blending

I was really pleased when the latest issue of ImagineFX arrived. I've been toying with the idea of blending different art styles but wasn't really sure how to approach it, without it looking clumsy, so was very happy to see you had a tutorial on doing just that. Some fantastic advice in there and it has sparked me on to have a proper go at doing it for an upcoming project. I'm a fan of movies that do this sort of thing. You sometimes see sci-fi movies where the future looks a bit art deco, or has a feeling of earthiness that reminds me of ancient designs. Please keep doing things like this. It's good to get some new ideas.

Jeremy, via email

Rob replies Hi Jeremy. Thanks for writing in. I totally agree. Tristan did a wonderful job of showcasing how mixing inspirations can help you breathe something new into your work. His finished piece clearly shows those inspirations, but the whole is cohesive and fresh-feeling. I'm so glad that you feel that way about it and that it has moved you to experiment with your projects. Wishing you all the best with them.



New works that have grabbed our attention



Zayed Affan
[@zayed_affan](https://zayed_affan)



B.C. Maxwell
[@illumax.art](https://illumax.art)



Collin Chan
[@collinchan](https://collinchan)

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

Interview

The art of

BENTE SCHLICK

The illustrator discusses her process working to commission and in her personal work, as told to **James Clarke**



FORSYTHIA

Forsythia draws on the Bauhaus influence for an image that combines realism with a more graphic quality.



or illustrator and concept artist Bente Schlick, commissioned work has offered the opportunity to bring her own creative sensibility to projects including cover images for the Landovel trilogy of novels for young readers.

Thanks to a long-standing interest in fantasy images and ideas, Bente's work is suffused with qualities of the otherworldly.

In this conversation, Bente discusses aspects of her process when working to commission, and also her affinity for images and visual traditions that satisfy the desire that we all have to escape. Bente has worked with major publishing houses in Germany such as HarperCollins and Carlsen and with international publishers including Bloomsbury and US Games.

Artist PROFILE

Bente Schlick



LOCATION: Germany
FAVOURITE ARTISTS:
Rembrandt, William James,
J.M.W. Turner, Alphonse Mucha,
John William Waterhouse and
Ivan (Hovhannes) Aivazovsky

MEDIA: Photoshop
WEB: <https://benteschlick.com>

SCAR

Bente applies a traditional approach to this personal project depiction of Scar from The Lion King.

In a fitting and rather touching note, Bente recalls, "I did a cover for ImagineFX in 2009, and that was exactly during the time that I was studying at art school. To be having this conversation for the magazine 17 years later is a bit like coming full circle."

Bente, what is your art education and training background?

I started as a traditional artist when I was younger, when I was 17, and I got

"Most things I taught myself... I don't know if I really needed that school"

my first graphic tablet. And then, I taught myself how to do digital painting. After finishing school, I worked in an advertising agency for six months to learn more about the programs – not just Photoshop, but also InDesign and Illustrator – and it was required for my art school later. When I was about 20, I started studying illustration and design at art school for three years. And then, when I was finished, I immediately ➡



ORANGE BLOOM

This new image, entitled Orange Bloom, draws on the influence of Rembrandt and of Mucha.



OLD MASTERS, NEW IMAGES

Bente identifies several artists whose work continues to influence her images

"I'm still influenced by all the old masters, like **William Turner** for lighting. And **John William Waterhouse** for figures and the atmosphere; and Casper David Friedrich for the landscapes. Rembrandt, of course, for the light. You learn from it, right? And when you start painting, you just look at the images and make it in a similar way. Also, I like to curate my Instagram, which is where I discover new, smaller artists. So that also inspires me. I'm not following a particular style. I follow wildlife artists, fantasy artists, but also book cover artists, graphic designers and book publishers for inspiration. I just love looking at art from people with skills instead of from AI. Early in my career, it was the cinematography in *The Lord of the Rings* and *Game of Thrones* that inspired me. Now, I'm looking at the old masters, but at Instagram I created it in a way that I constantly see great art."

Buyenlarge/Getty Images and Photo12/Universal Images Group via Getty Images



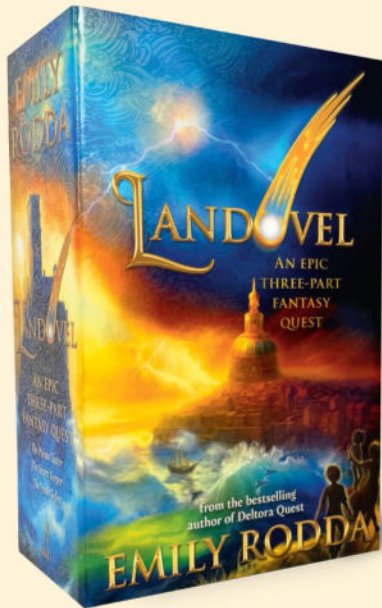
VEINS OF GOLD

Where realistically depicted animal anatomy meets the fantastical is a long-standing characteristic of Bente's art.



PYRACANTHA

Pyracantha showcases Bente's application of lighting and compositional approaches of 'old master' painters to a fantastical subject; particularly the work of William-Adolphe Bouguereau.



LANDOVEL

A key influence on Bente's work for the Landovel series of covers were the paintings of Ivan Aivazovsky, such as *The Ninth Wave*.

© Allen & Unwin / Bente Schlick

➡ started to work as a freelancer. Most things I taught myself, actually. I don't know if I really needed that school, but I guess when I was younger I thought, 'I need to study something in this direction to get into the field.' During my studies, I started getting jobs for book publishers and then I was also published by Ballistic

What do fantasy images offer to you as an artist?

I think it's just that you can imagine anything that you can come up with. You put your emotion into what you want to illustrate. There are no guidelines. I think especially nowadays with the world and how it is and I think one prefers just to paint

“The escape is most important for me: you can imagine any creature that you want to create”

Publishing. And then I was discovered by a licensing agency (MGL) in London, and I've been with them for 15 years. It's not just that I'm working on book partnerships, but also the images that I create for myself – they get licensed for puzzles or calendars, and of course for an artist that's also an income.

fantasy. I also worked for book publishers where I had to illustrate wildlife, but that's something different. The escape is most important for me: you can imagine any creature that you want to create, or a landscape that is maybe not real. You can add things that wouldn't work in the normal world.



FENGUANG

The influence of Rembrandt's use of shadow, and the impression of golden light, suffuses this fantasy painting entitled Fenguang.

LANDOVEL COVERS

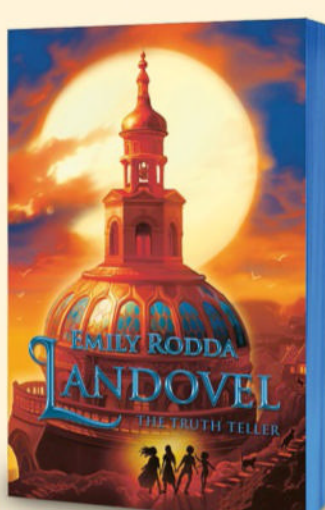
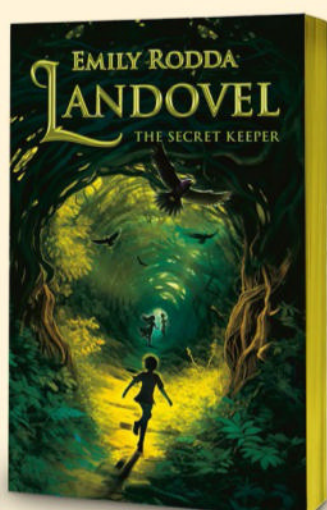
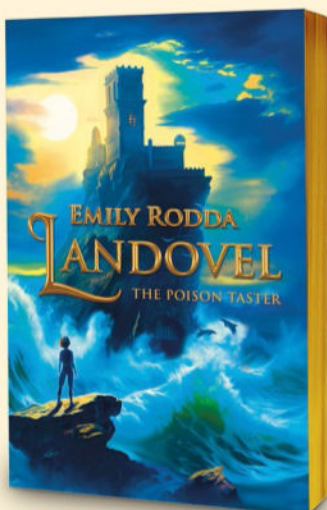
The trilogy of Landovel covers each emphasise a key colour value, and the placement of silhouetted protagonists indicate a sense of scale.

How do you employ digital tools?

I only work digitally, really. It's just easier and quicker. I work with Photoshop, and of course I have my Wacom and that's it. And sometimes I'm working a bit with a 3D program just to get anatomy right, for example. It's just really been Photoshop and my Wacom since forever. I've never used anything else.

What project provides an example of your process?

We could talk about the book covers and wraparound that I did. It was three books. It's from the Landovel series of novels by Emily Rodda, for the publisher Allen & Unwin. I also had to do a wraparound cover. These books came out at the same time, and so the challenge was to create three covers that somehow worked together in the same world, but of course with different colours for each book. You can also see that the type had to work with the illustration, and that's

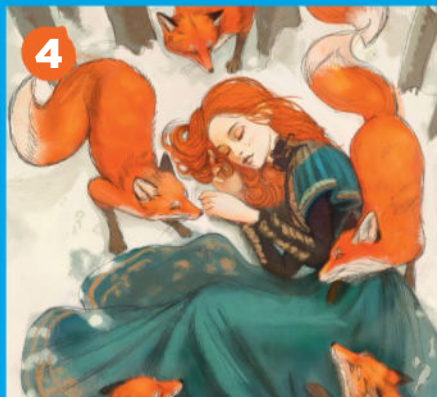
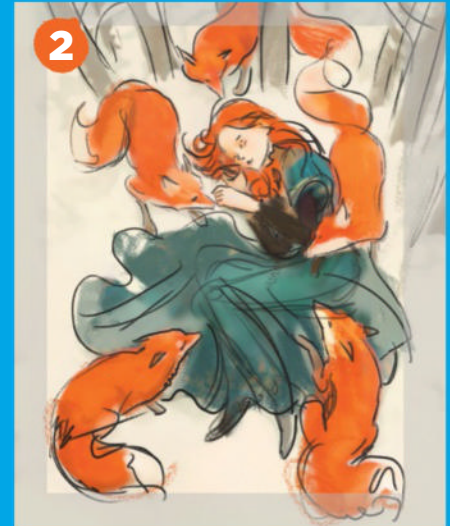


© Allen & Unwin / Bente Schlick

THINKING AND INTUITION

Bente acknowledges the place of spontaneity and feeling in her process

"I don't have a plan in my head for what I want to create. I have ideas. At some point I just start, and I'm looking at references and stuff, and then doing a little sketch and I'll start with the colours. I'm not thinking too much when I start. I'm just doing it. If I'm thinking too much, then I can't work. My head is like somewhere else when I'm painting: it's escaped to work on fantasy images. Maybe I'll like the image and I finish it, or maybe I won't like it and I will put it aside. I don't think I ever like my work when it's finished."



1 Selecting colours

Since this artwork has a very reduced colour palette, I pick two main colours for the characters and animals, and two for the background. From these base colours, I start mixing different shades without veering too far from them. The warm/cool colour contrasts create a lively combination.

2 Establishing the poses and dynamic

At this stage, I work on establishing the poses and dynamic of the characters, where they look, what their expressions are and how they interact. I also start getting an idea of the surrounding environment.

3 Fine-tuning the details

I start fine-tuning the details, in this case by working on the line art. Some artists begin with line art, but I prefer to establish the colours and overall idea first. Since the full image often develops during the process, I sometimes add the line art later.

4 Almost final

A continuation of the previous step with even more detail. Towards the end, I gradually reduce the line art so the painting itself can emerge over it. As an overlay, I add scanned watercolour paper to give the artwork a more traditional feel.

Interview

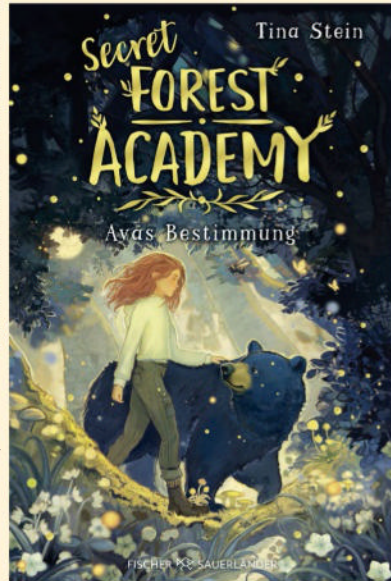
➡ something you always have to think of when you create a book cover. The wraparound was challenging because you have to create a very wide illustration. You have to think in 3D, like how you wrap around it. And, also, the type on the back and the front has to work.

The first thing I did for each cover, of course, was create coloured sketches. Then I also created the spines with a graphic showing the most important things of each book: a tower, a tree and waves. Those spines are little icons. And then, of course, the people were important to each cover. There was one character on the first book and then four people on the second and five on the third. And so, you have to work out how you do the composition.

Then, I did some sketches of how it could look. The publisher didn't know where they wanted to place the type. So, I had several options: they could put it above or in the middle or at the bottom. And then I got feedback and that's usually when you do a little revision. My cover illustrations are a bit inspired by very Turner-like lighting, and I really like that. Usually, I am more focused on characters in my work. So, this was also a challenge for me, and this is what I like about working as an illustrator. You learn

SECRET FOREST ACADEMY

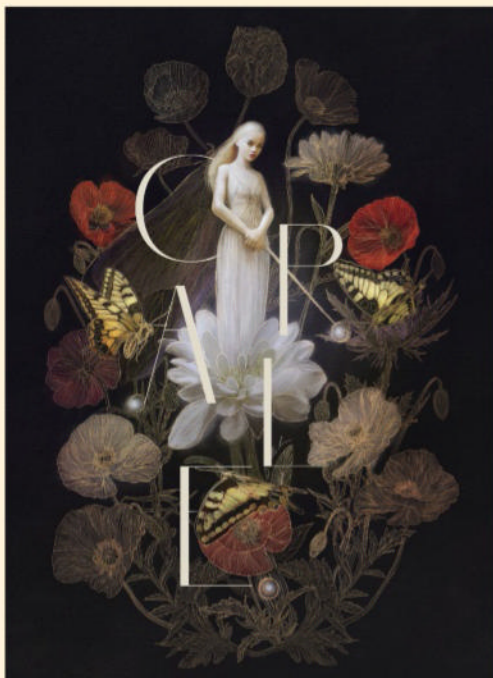
Bente's cover image for Secret Forest Academy by Tina Stein frames the characters with foliage and uses colour/lighting to evoke a sense of mystery.



© Fischer Sauerländer/Bente Schlick

new things or focus not just on the stuff you usually do. But with the Landoval book covers, you have to do something else with the little shadow figures. I really like those. It was a bit different from things that I usually do and paint. It's a challenge for yourself. And of course, you learn with every commission. You learn how to approach different subjects or colour or even composition.

“ You learn with every commission: how to approach different subjects or colour or even composition ”



FAUNA OF FAE

Bente's enthusiasm for fantasy as a way of capturing reality is evident in this image, Fauna of Fae.

OPALE

Bente's sketch (left) defines proportion, placement and the interaction of lettering with natural forms. The final image (right) combines the realistic depiction of light (as seen in Rembrandt's work) with the line-art influence of Mucha.



Sometimes, clients say, 'You can do whatever you want, and just try different styles.' In the end, they do have the vision. So, it's better for them to say 'Okay: we want blue, green, and orange, or red,' and then I'm working with it, and it's definitely more helpful. I can work quicker with it. I really liked working on Landoval because I did have a lot of freedom.

In the top-left corner of the box for the Landoval set, there's a graphic element rather than a painted one.

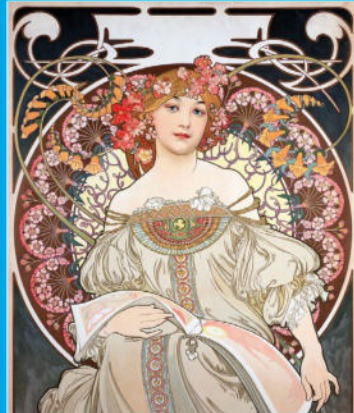
What was the creative process for it? They did some sort of glazing over the print. They used a wave that I had illustrated; a very graphic wave. I did it for the spine, and then I made some sort of pattern so that when you move the box (containing all three Landoval novels), you see the waves in the light. I like that combination of graphic design and illustration.

What's the creative impulse for your personal piece entitled Forsythia?

It's a bit different from the stuff that I usually do. It has bold colours and it's more reduced in details. And it's something I started to try recently. I love my style – the super-realistic, photorealistic painting – but I also love to try new things. It's still in my range. It's still a bit realistic, right? I'm trying to mix things; and, so Forsythia was actually a bit inspired by the Bauhaus style. The colours are very flat and very bold, and I do love that style. I love both: very realistic like William Turner, but I also like the style from

CHARACTER FRAMING DEVICE

Mucha often used a 'Q' formation as a framing device for characters. This formal element has influenced many artists working in the space where illustration and graphic design converge.



Eugenlargo/Getty Images

Leonard Corbis via Getty Images

ARTISTIC INFLUENCE

Bente indicates the influence of Alphonse Mucha on her work

"I'm not sitting there and starting and saying 'Okay, I'm doing Mucha.' But what I really like with Mucha is that you have a bit of realism in the faces and in the clothes, but they also have this graphic style. You see that influence in my picture Forsythia, and in Flame with its bold colours. Alphonse Mucha started as an illustrator and he did advertising. So that's different to Waterhouse or Rembrandt. I know that many artists have just one style, and that's totally fine. But personally, I like to evolve or just try new things."



© HarperCollins/ Bente Schlick

THE LION QUEEN

The Lion Queen is contemporary in its visual tone whilst also acknowledging the influence of 19th century art.



WARRIOR CATS

Bente's cover image for Erin Hunter's Warrior Cats series (book 5) suggests the fantastical qualities of the story.

THE LAST VAMPIRE

Bente's latest commissioned illustration is for the cover of the novel The Last Vampire, by Romina Garber, published by Fischer Sauerländer in September 2026.



the Bauhaus. So that was what I started to get more into. I also have a puzzle (of Forsythia) from Buffalo Games. Forsythia started as a personal piece, and when I have free-time I send personal work to my agency.

When working to a commission, is there still an opportunity to express yourself within that work?

It's different from client to client. Sometimes I just need to go by the brief, and that's fine because I'm separating my personal work from my commissioned work. I also have client commissions where I can mix my personal style with the vision of the client and I'm taking the brief as the foundation. And then I'm adding what I think would look good within the briefing requirements. Some clients come to me, and they say 'Okay: do what you want. We have a brief, but you don't need to do it in detail' and other clients will say 'We want it like this.' If I'm creating something for myself, it's different. If I can add my vision or not, that's not a problem for me. When I started out, I did a lot of scary paintings that were very, very realistic and I just got a bit away from that. I like to try new things, but also combine styles. ●

© Fischer Sauerländer/ Bente Schlick

Development sheet

Artist PROFILE

Taeyoung Kim

LOCATION: South Korea



With over 10 years of experience, Taeyoung is a professional concept artist and illustrator who has worked on numerous major projects. He is currently a freelancer and art instructor, specialising in building logical visual worlds grounded in solid classical foundations.

www.artstation.com/user-6183

NO. 1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS
ImagineFX

PROJECT TITLE: DEEP IN THE FOREST

Journey into the heart of an ancient forest to a sacred shrine with artist **Taeyoung Kim**, who explains the creation process, from collecting references and sketching ideas to adding structure and colour



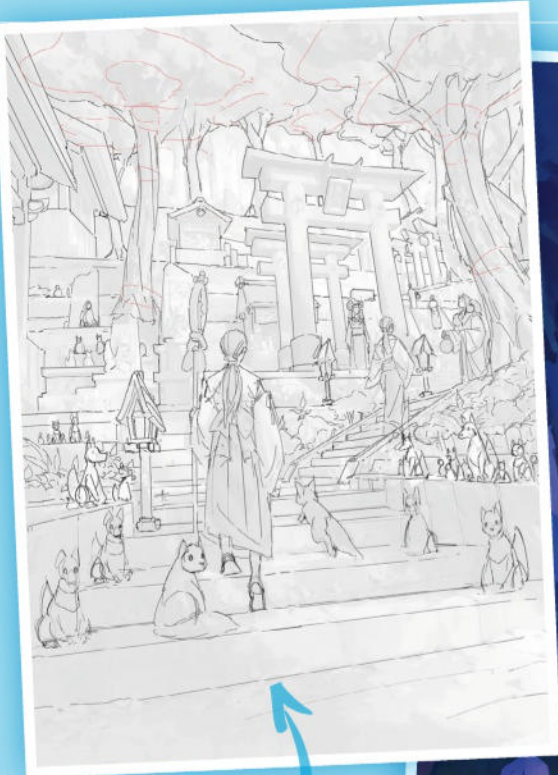
Collecting references

This work is based on a photo I took at Fushimi Inari Shrine during my trip to Japan. The image on the right captures the intricate architectural details of Toshogu Shrine in Nikko. By blending these two distinct cultural and visual elements, I integrated them into the overall design concept, enriching the narrative and atmosphere of the project.

Idea sketching

I began this project by creating a detailed travel sketch based on real-world locations, allowing me to carefully imagine the various stories and hidden scenes that might exist around them. Especially when darkness falls, these serene places transform, feeling truly mysterious to me as I feel the atmosphere coming alive.





Refining the rough concepts

Building upon the initial idea sketches, I further refined and detailed the design. This stage focuses on translating rough concepts into clearer, more structured forms, establishing accurate proportions, and defining the core elements to prepare for the next phase of production.



Value structure

When building a value structure as seen in my artwork, I carefully determine the main focal point and establish a clear visual path for the viewer to follow. I truly believe that value is the most important element of my work, it serves as the essential fundamental for my entire creative process.

Adding colour

I build a harmonious colour balance and further develop narrative concepts upon my initial value structure. To me, colour is the strong language that conveys complex emotions, deep narrative and the overall mood of the artwork. By choosing a specific, intentional colour harmony – such as vibrant red, cool blue and rich violet – I ensure that the delicate balance of the entire piece is consistently maintained throughout the final render.



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?

LET US KNOW! Email your WIPs and final images to mail@imaginefx.com

Ahmad Hilmi

Concept artist Ahmad finds freedom in sketching and loves to combine elements and experiment with anatomical features

Artist PROFILE

Ahmad Hilmi

LOCATION: Malaysia



Ahmad is a freelance artist focusing on character concept and creature design. He started his career drawing comics, then as a cover artist for a local publisher and into concept art in 2016. He has worked for Streamline Studios, Passion Republic and Lemon Sky Studios. Projects include Hogwarts Legacy, Demon Souls, Giga Bash, Guild Wars and Cross the Ages.
www.artstation.com/hilmi

FREEDOM

"Sketching allows you to free yourself from your jobs. Sketching can spark your love for arts again. Sketching can feed your needs when your job is lacking. So pick up your pen/pencil and start scribbling/sketching in your sketchbook or on your PC."

“ Sometimes it helps to revisit an old unfinished piece ”



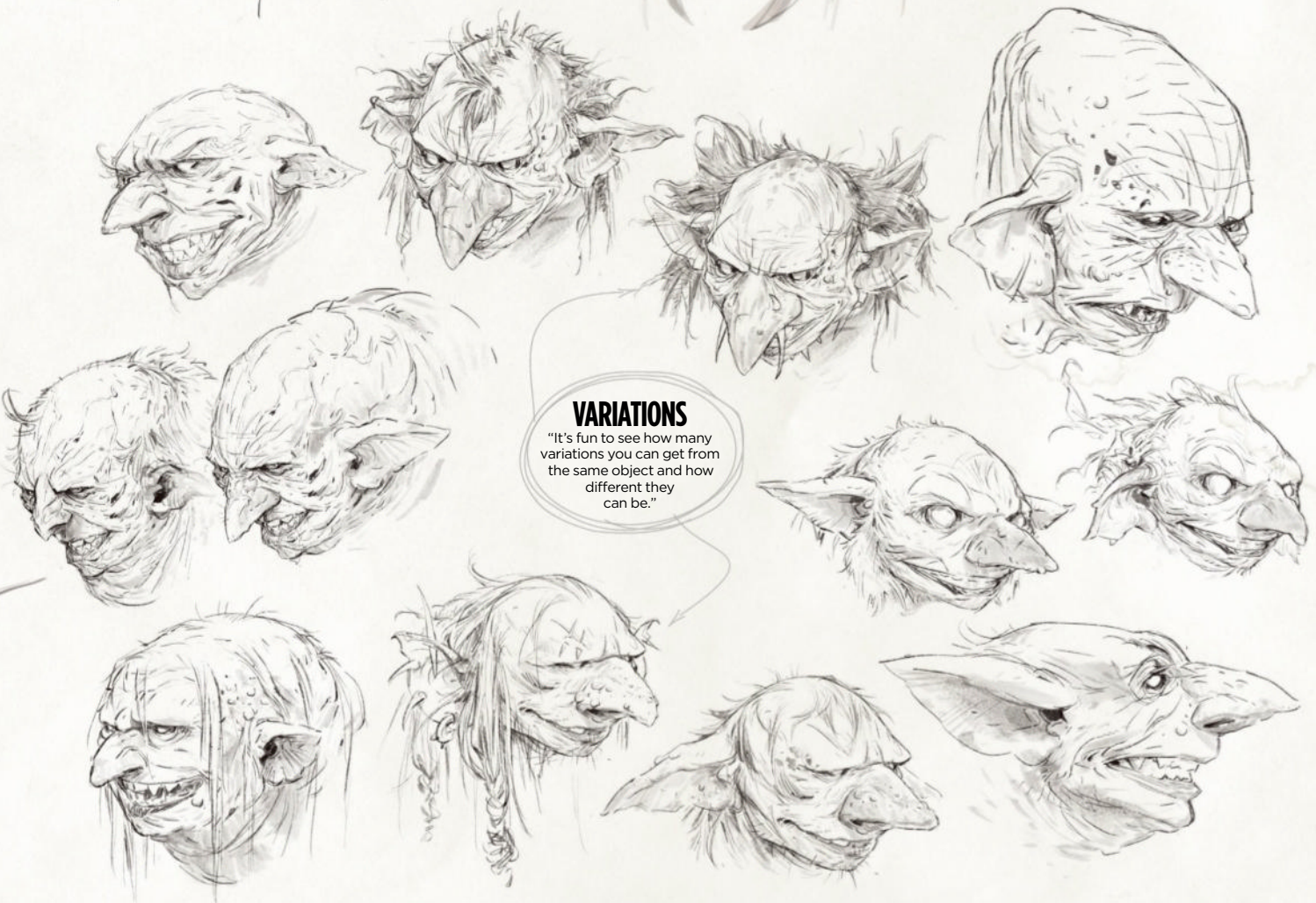
REVISIT OLD WORK

Sometimes it helps to revisit an old unfinished piece. Taking the same idea, shape, form or object and changing a small part of it and introducing a new item, function or direction can make a huge difference.



VARIATIONS

"It's fun to see how many variations you can get from the same object and how different they can be."





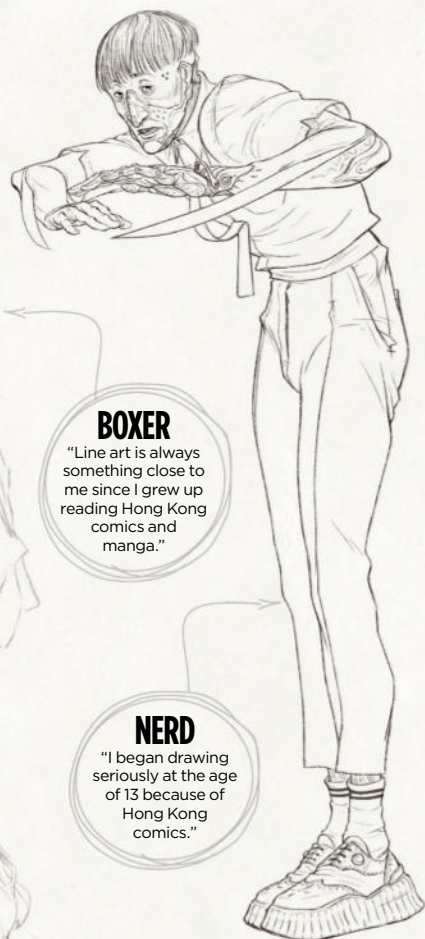
MIXING IT

"I love many things. Here are some of my attempts to combine them into one artwork."



BOXER

"Line art is always something close to me since I grew up reading Hong Kong comics and manga."



NERD

"I began drawing seriously at the age of 13 because of Hong Kong comics."



MONSTER EXPERIMENTS

"For me, this series is about taking a moment, following the flow, rendering, generating ideas and having fun. It's always fun to sketch monsters because you can go wild with it, even while having some limitations. I always love to design muscle, anatomy, multiple limbs, features, etc. The challenge is how to make it somewhat believable and grounded."

“It's always fun to sketch monsters because you can go wild with it, even with limitations”

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

HOPE
AND
HOMES
FOR
CHILDREN



URGENT APPEAL



Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine is not just a humanitarian crisis for the Ukrainian people; it's a child protection emergency.

Up to 100,000 children warehoused in Ukraine's vast orphanage system – a network of over 700 buildings – risk being forgotten. Left to face the dangers of war alone as staff flee. As families are torn apart or forced from their homes, many more children are at risk of being separated from the love and protection they desperately need. Worse still, they are at risk of trafficking, or being placed in overcrowded, understaffed and poorly resourced orphanages in border countries.

We must act now.

Born out of the Balkans conflict 30 years ago, we've championed the vital importance of family and community-based care of children and our teams are on the ground in Ukraine, Moldova and Romania to ensure this war does not rob children of the love and protection they need now more than ever. Across all three countries, we're directly supporting displaced families and unaccompanied children with material and emotional

support. We're working closely with authorities to keep families together when they are at their most vulnerable and to fight for the safe tracking, monitoring and care for children without parental care. And we won't stop when the fighting stops.

Will you help us by donating?

With your help, we can avert a child protection crisis of epic proportions and ensure children are protected and kept in families. Never orphanages.

To help protect vulnerable children, donate online at:

www.hopeandhomes.org/donate. Or call **01722 790 111**

Monday – Friday 9am – 5pm.

Please quote **FP22 - Tec** when making your donation.

In the event that funds raised exceed what is needed to deliver Hope and Homes for Children immediate and longer-term response to this crisis, we will use donations where the need is greatest.

HOPE AND HOMES
FOR CHILDREN



I would like to make a donation to Hope and Homes for Children:

Name	Address
Tel	Email

I enclose a cheque for £ made payable to Hope and

Homes for Children or please debit £

from my credit/debit card (details below)

I would like to donate by debit/credit card

☐ Visa	☐ Mastercard	☐ Maestro	☐ CAF card	Maestro only
Card no.				
Start date	Expiry date	Issue no.	Security no.	on signature strip
Signature		Date		

giftaid it

Make your gift grow by 25% at no extra cost to you

☐ I want to Gift Aid my donation and any donations I make in the future or have made in the past 4 years to Hope and Homes for Children. I am a UK taxpayer and understand that if I pay less Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax than the amount of Gift Aid claimed on all my donations in that tax year it is my responsibility to pay any difference. Gift Aid will be used to fund Hope and Homes for Children's general work.

Name of taxpayer	Today's date
------------------	--------------

Please let us know if you would like to hear from us:

☐ by phone ☐ by email

☐ please tick here if you would NOT like to hear from us by post.

Please make cheques payable to 'Hope and Homes for Children' and send to Hope and Homes for Children, FREEPOST RTKX-TYLS-JHHB, East Clyffe Farm Barn, Salisbury Road, Steeple Langford, Salisbury SP3 4BF.

You can view our privacy policy here www.hopeandhomes.org/privacy.

Registered charity (No. 1089490) FP22 - Tec

NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS
ImagineFX

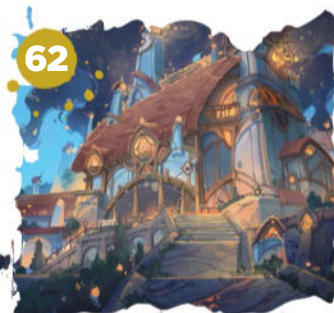
Workshops

**Workshop assets
are available...**

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



Advice from the world's best artists



This issue:

50 Illustrate indie comic covers

Partha Pratim Sarkar shares his advice for creating dynamic black and white compositions.

54 Start your work with storytelling

Illustrator Simon Pape explains how having a narrative helps you to make creative decisions.

56 Adding humorous narrative touches

Eilene Huang uses comedic moments to enhance the storytelling within a scene.

58 Paint a book cover illustration

Peng Lu shares the creative process behind a dramatic dragon scene for a fantasy novel.

62 World-building with logic

Oliver Chen explains how every part of a fantasy world should follow its own clear rules.

64 Design effective environments

Joris Halgand on how to craft unique settings and incorporate powerful storytelling into them.

70 Harness the exclusion layer

Christian Angel uses the blend mode to finesse a high fantasy scene for extra atmosphere.

Artist insight

CREATE A HEROIC INDIE COMIC COVER

Artist **Partha Pratim Sarkar** shows how storytelling and bold inks can create a dynamic black and white composition before colouring

Artist PROFILE

Partha Pratim Sarkar

LOCATION: India

Comics Artist Partha Pratim Sarkar has worked with Marvel, Z2, Image, Dark Horse and Skybound, and is currently illustrating a Skybound project. <https://bit.ly/4z9bkyc>



A comic book cover has one job: to make the reader stop, look and want to know what happens next.

That's where the journey begins.

In this workshop, I'll take you through my complete thought process behind creating a cover, from the very first idea to the finished line art. We'll look at how I develop the concept, build a composition that guides the viewer's eye, establish

clear focal points, and use lighting, depth and contrast to strengthen the story. More importantly, I'll explain the reasoning behind every decision, because a cover is more than simply technique – it's visual storytelling.

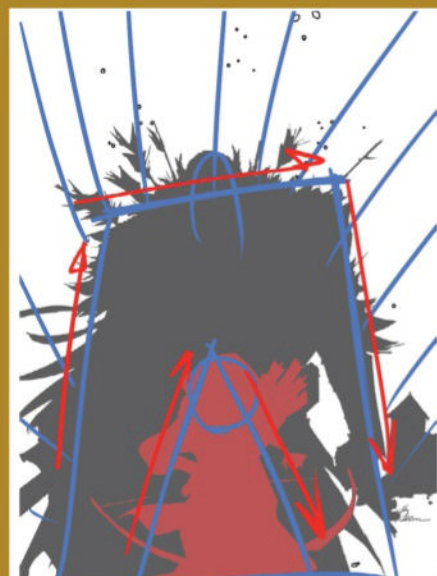
For this workshop I've chosen the Corpse Knight: Story So Far variant cover. This special edition brings together the story from the first three volumes of the series. I was commissioned to create all three variant covers within a very tight

schedule of about a week, and that challenge made every decision even more important. There wasn't time to overthink, so every line, shape and design choice had to be clear, purposeful, and serve the story.

Today, we'll follow the first of those covers, from the initial concept to the finished artwork. By the end, I hope you'll understand not just how this cover was created, but why each choice helps turn a single image into an invitation to read.

How I create...

A COMIC COVER LAYOUT



1 Ideas and rough layouts

Every strong cover starts with a clear idea. My editor's brief was simple: "Corpse Knight is born. Protecting his daughter." I ask myself, "What's the one image that tells this story?" With the idea in place, I start several quick sketches. No clean lines and no detail, just exploring compositions and finding silhouettes. Fast, messy, and honest, so I can see what reads best.

2 Composition and negative spacing

Of the initial layout concepts, this one was chosen for the final cover. From this stage on, my focus shifts to composition and to the effective use of negative space. I also design around the comic's logo and other cover elements so that they support rather than compete with the art. A strong cover communicates its story instantly.

3 Exaggeration and pushing the design further

With the characters established, I push their proportions, shapes and gestures to enhance clarity, energy and readability, while staying true to their personality and role in the story. Coming from an animation background, I always check the silhouette first. Each character is given a distinct shape so they remain recognisable.



INDIE COMIC BOOK COVER



Spot Blacks

With lighting established, I use spot blacks to strengthen composition and direct the reader's eye. Big, black shapes can add contrast and weight. I keep checking the cover at thumbnail size to be sure the focal point reads instantly. That keeps it clean and distinct from lighting and depth.

Refinement and fleshing out the world

I tighten the anatomy, costumes and supporting details without losing that energy. I also add light particles and subtle atmospheric touches to create that haunting vibe of an undead presence, but not overloading it with fantasy.

Character acting

With the composition set, I focus on the character's performance. The pose needs to express personality and role in the story. I'm not picking a pose for drama alone; I'm asking, how would this character act in this moment? Strong body language carries the story before a word is even read.

Inking with the decisions made

The inks reinforce the focus - bold silhouettes, deliberate line weight, spot blacks that guide the eye. And this sequence keeps it simple and your process easy to follow. For thick and thin lines I use several brushes from my Brush preset on Clip Studio Paint.

Lighting and depth

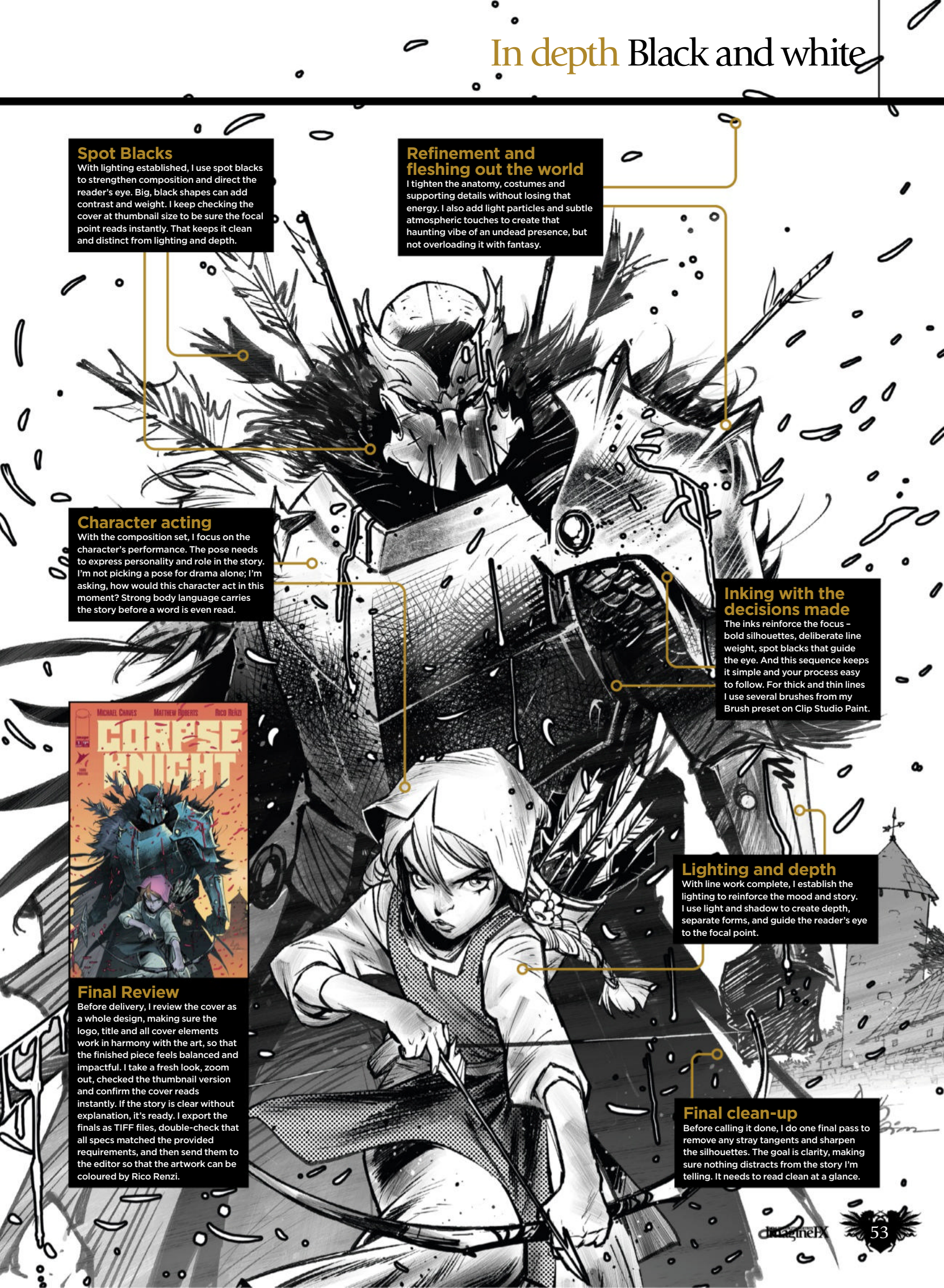
With line work complete, I establish the lighting to reinforce the mood and story. I use light and shadow to create depth, separate forms, and guide the reader's eye to the focal point.

Final clean-up

Before calling it done, I do one final pass to remove any stray tangents and sharpen the silhouettes. The goal is clarity, making sure nothing distracts from the story I'm telling. It needs to read clean at a glance.

Final Review

Before delivery, I review the cover as a whole design, making sure the logo, title and all cover elements work in harmony with the art, so that the finished piece feels balanced and impactful. I take a fresh look, zoom out, checked the thumbnail version and confirm the cover reads instantly. If the story is clear without explanation, it's ready. I export the finals as TIFF files, double-check that all specs matched the provided requirements, and then send them to the editor so that the artwork can be coloured by Rico Renzi.



Technique focus

START OUT WITH A STORY

Freelance illustrator **Simon Pape** explains how a narrative is vital for inspiring creative decisions



"This illustration is the result of a 2025 workshop with Paul Scott Canavan, titled Mastering Imaginative

Realism. It depicts a merfolk-type figure riding on his shark companion as he hunts for jellyfish leviathans. Although I don't depict them, they are an essential part of

the narrative; they serve as a background story element to inform and inspire consecutive decisions made during the creation process. Having a solid story idea really helps at all stages and keeps you focused on what's important. However, what made the biggest difference on the technical side was using 3D and a proper reference board."

Artist PROFILE

Simon Pape

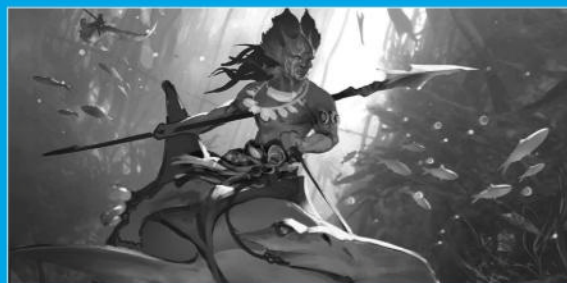
LOCATION: Germany

Simon Pape is a freelance illustrator and concept artist from Germany. He has worked on IPs such as Daggerheart, Hellbreak TCG and Robin Hobb's Realm of the Elderlings book series.
www.simonpape.com



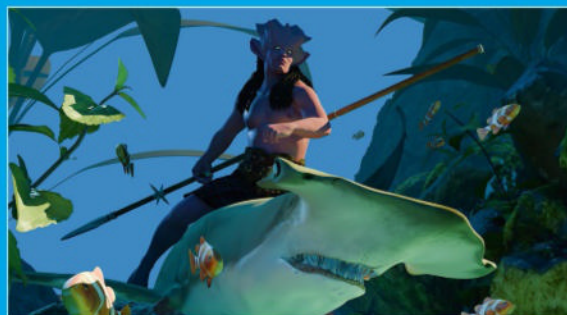
How I create...

AN UNDERWATER FANTASY SCENE



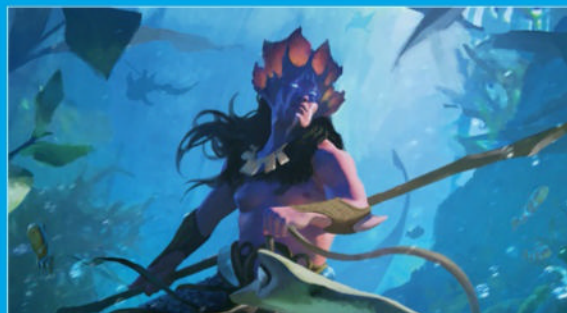
1 Thinking in scribbles

For me, drawing is like thinking out loud on canvas. Following that concept, I played around with as many ideas as possible early on, to filter out the bad ideas before committing to a direction. My main focus was on thumbnails, concept sketches and reference gathering, which culminated in two distinct sketches.



2 Blending into 3D

I created a 3D base using Daz Studio for posing the main figure. I imported this into Blender to further build out the scene using assets from the Blender Kit library, setting up the lighting and adjusting the models using basic sculpting. It's a very useful process if you don't want to repaint every adjustment from scratch.



3 Paint, paint and even more paint

With a solid 3D base and my reference board and concept sketches on hand, I started the overpainting process in Photoshop whilst paying attention to the overall mood, language, colours and values, etc. These elements make up the overall contrast: the primary way to guide the viewer's eye throughout a composition.



Technique focus

ADDING HUMOROUS NARRATIVE TOUCHES

Artist PROFILE

Eilene Huang
LOCATION: Indonesia

Eilene is a freelance concept artist and illustrator from Indonesia. She has worked with Wizards of the Coast, Marvel Snap, Blizzard Entertainment, Fireball Studio, and Envar Studio.
<https://bit.ly/4w5Ugqw>

Eilene Huang reveals how adding comedic touches can enhance the storytelling in a scene



"This scene is from my personal project, Blue Stained, a fantasy world where mysterious blue plants

shape the lives of tribes that use them as everyday ingredients. This scene introduces a kind yet mad doctor who endlessly experiments with these plants. Inspired by

traditional Asian apothecaries and their tools, I wanted to create something with a striking contrast between the dark, monochromatic setting of an old, serious apothecary and the vibrant team within it. To strengthen the storytelling, I enjoy adding comedic moments, like this nervous child being held back by the monkey during a doctor's visit."





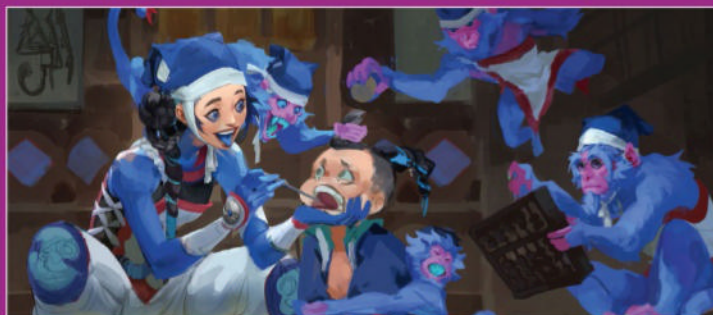
How I create...

A CAPTURED MOMENT



1 Draft the composition

Each project begins with rough sketches, exploring the idea through composition, lighting and perspective. I carefully arrange each element to make sure the scene feels natural and intentional. Since my work is heavily focused on storytelling, clear gestures and expressions are very important to me. I aim to create images that feel like a captured moment, where the story is immediately understood.



2 Guide with colour

I limit the palette to guide the viewer's focus. The dominant colour is a striking blue, contrasted with the dark brown tones of the background. The doctor has the highest visual hierarchy, with brighter values and dominant white fabrics. The child and the monkey nurses are the secondary focal points through a consistent blue and pink palette, creating a cohesive group while serving as a supporting crowd.



3 Balancing detail

During the render stage, I constantly check the image in greyscale to evaluate contrast and focus, ensuring the characters stand out clearly. The level of detail also needs to be carefully balanced to create breathing space. The highest level of detail is placed on the main characters in the centre, while the surrounding elements are simplified into silhouettes and larger shapes to support the overall composition.

Photoshop

PAINT A COVER ILLUSTRATION

Peng Lu shares the creative process behind the cover illustration for the fantasy novel *A Bleeding of Heavens*



The client commissioned me to design an original book cover for a new fantasy novel, whose central protagonist is a powerful dragon. He hoped the overall atmosphere would

echo the iconic scene of Daenerys travelling with her fleet across the ocean at sunset in *Game of Thrones*.

Once I got the design requirements, I started planning the overall layout right away. I depicted the main dragon in a vivid dynamic stance, dashing forward from a distance in the frame, straight towards audiences with its mouth wide open in a fierce roar. Floating clouds and sailing fleets spread across the sea in the lower part of the picture. The huge dragon and the tiny distant ships form a sharp contrast, building remarkable spatial depth. The whole scene is set against a glowing backlit sunset sky, and striking light rays enrich the visual layers. For the back cover, I drew the other two dragons from the novel locked in an intense battle. I arranged the three dragons with clear visual hierarchy, and concentrated the finest details on the main dragon's head on the front cover to highlight the core character.

Artist PROFILE

Peng Lu

LOCATION: China

Peng Lu is a freelance concept artist specialising in fantasy and science fiction.
<https://bit.ly/4b0m7AP>



DRAGON BATTLE SCENE

RESOURCES

WORKSHOP BRUSHES

PHOTOSHOP

CUSTOM BRUSHES:
PENGLU_BRUSH



For brushes, these three types greatly facilitate wave painting. Combined with the Lasso tool, they quickly create various foam shapes. The bundled ABR file, penglu_brush, can be used directly in Photoshop.

GET YOUR RESOURCES
See page 5 now!

Cloud formation

I use cloud brushes to quickly block out shapes. I intentionally vary the size of near and distant clouds to create depth. Additionally, it's important to differentiate warm and cool tones between sunlit areas and shadowed back sides of the clouds. As you can see in the illustration, I tint the rear sides of the clouds with cool blue hues.



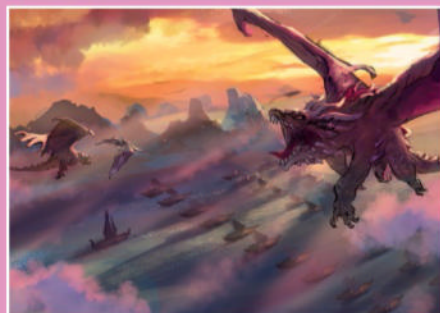
Fine details

Given the top-down perspective requiring abundant details, I added figures on ships and multicoloured foliage atop island hills to amplify the sense of scale.



How I create...

A DRAMATIC BOOK COVER



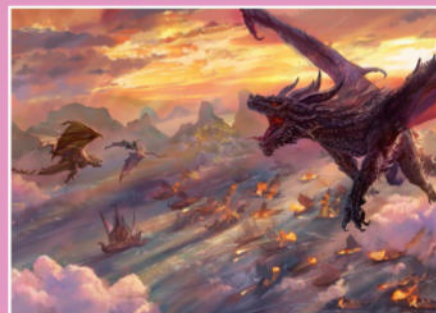
1 First sketch

I quickly sketched out the overall composition and mood. Using simple photobashing, I overlaid some scene photos on the bottom layer, then blended elements into the scene with broad textured brushstrokes. For the dragon, I referred to 3D models posed in Blender.



2 Lighting effects

After the client approved the sketch, I moved on to lighting rendering. Following backlighting rules, I focused on reflections across the sea, rim-lit clouds and subsurface scattering on the dragon's wings. Once roughly 60-70% complete, I sent the draft for detail checks.



3 Adding drama

The client quickly approved most elements and requested that the lower fleet should be depicted in battle to match the chaotic tone of Jasmine Young's fantasy novel (the fifth in the Dragon Breaker series). I revised accordingly and refined the artwork to final completion.

Colour effect

The vivid red on the dragon's wings and bright pink within clouds stem from subsurface light reflection, enhancing the overall luminous effect.

Sea foam

My tip for detailing: paint sea foam only on lit water and leave shadowed areas under ships sparse. This draws eyes to highlights, saves work and boosts visual impact.

Chaotic layout

For the ships, I arranged multiple vessel orientations with 3D models in Blender to create a chaotic layout and avoid tedious perspective issues.

Cloud painting

Here's my tip for cloud painting: keep shadows unified and focus on lit areas to build volume, while keeping the scene's perspective in mind.



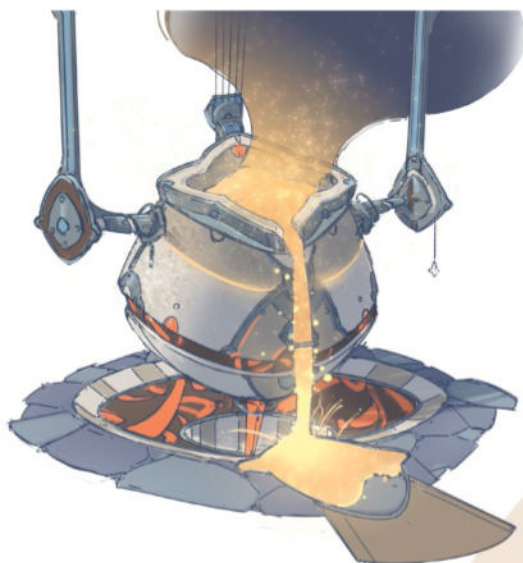
Technique focus

WORLD-BUILD WITH LOGIC

Oliver Chen explains how every part of a fantasy world must follow its own clear rules and logic

"This piece depicts the workshop district of Nording Town, part of my world-building project. In this world, divine blessings descend from the stars, passing through the veil above and condensing into star sand, the region's primary source of energy. This magical resource shapes not only the local industry but also the

culture and daily lives of its people. I wanted the architecture to reflect the relationship between technology and faith, while using the starry sky as the visual core of the scene. Small props and workshop tools were added to enrich the world and make it feel lived in. Every element reflects the logic of the world." ●



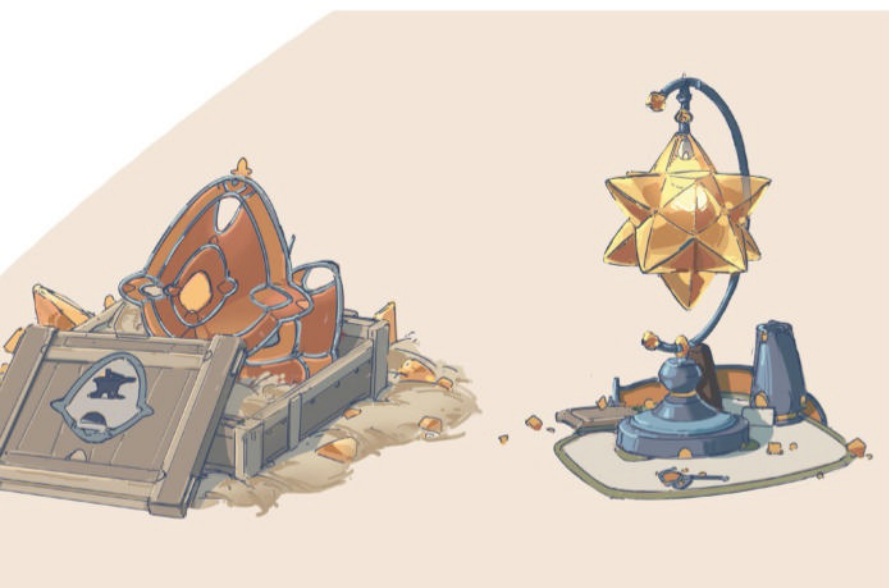


Artist PROFILE

Oliver Chen

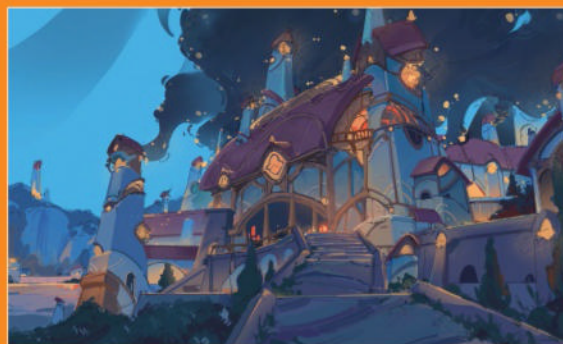
LOCATION: China

Oliver Chen is an environment concept artist who has worked previously at miHoYo and Lilith Games. He enjoys exploring personal world-building and visual storytelling. bit.ly/45CKEby



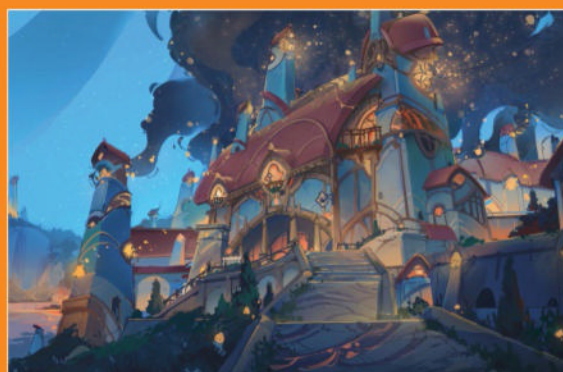
How I create...

A BELIEVABLE FANTASY WORLD



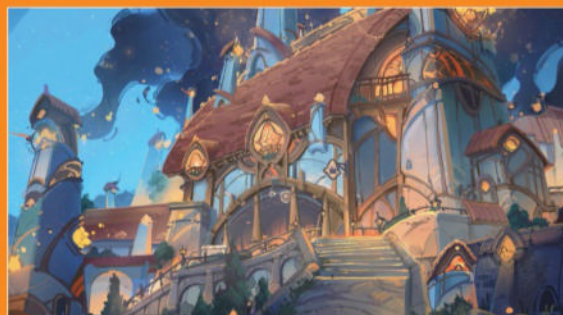
1 Define core design

I began by establishing the story, architectural language and composition of Nording Town's workshop district. Key motifs, such as glowing chimneys and starlight-infused smoke, were used to connect the workshops to the night sky.



2 Refine lighting and colour

Once the design was set, I refined lighting, colour balance and depth. Warm interior lights contrast with the cool night sky, while secondary architectural details enrich the scene and improve visual rhythm.



3 Add atmosphere and world-building elements

For the final touches, I added atmospheric effects, star particles, textures and small props such as containers, tools and decorative lights to reinforce the setting and make the world feel alive.

Artist insight

DESIGN EFFECTIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Joris Halgand shares his expertise on how to craft unique settings and incorporate powerful storytelling into them

Artist PROFILE

Joris Halgand
LOCATION: France

Joris is an environment concept artist and illustrator working mainly in video games and animation. He loves creating stories and building new worlds.
<https://bit.ly/4fFylw5>



I've learned that an impactful environment is about more than just a beautiful image or a spectacular landscape: it acts as a character in its own right, capable of conveying emotion all on its own.

Having started my career as a concept artist, I realised that environments don't only serve as background for characters – they are a powerful narrative tool!

All visual elements I design must serve the story being told by revealing the stakes, the history or the identity of the location.

Before I even begin sketching, I always ask myself: "What happened here?" This helps me define my initial narrative intent.

Every visual choice made is as much about building an atmosphere as it is about solving challenges related to composition, readability, or credibility.

I like to think that my images spark the viewer's curiosity, inviting them to form their own interpretation of the scene.

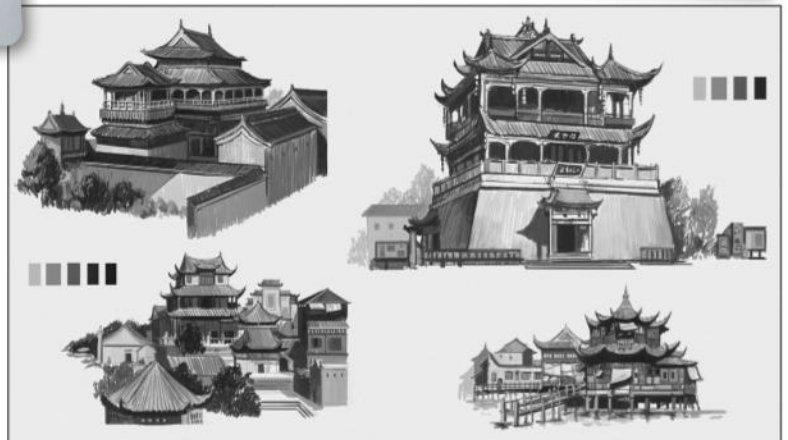
Through elements like composition, lighting or colour, a simple environment can tell its own story, inviting the viewer to imagine what took place there.

I'll share some of the key techniques I use daily to bring environments to life with a strong identity and visual storytelling.



1 INSPIRATION FROM THE REAL WORLD

Before I even begin drawing or creating my initial sketches, I always dedicate time to researching all the references needed for my project. I build a library of reference images based on real-world elements such as landscape photographs, architectural details, traditional western paintings, nature, historical documents, animals, objects, etc. The world around us is an endless source of inspiration! That is also why I enjoy observational drawing and studying my subjects before creating a unique image from my imagination. I might do this using traditional media directly in my sketchbook or digitally; I like to vary my techniques.





2 BUILDING A COHERENT WORLD

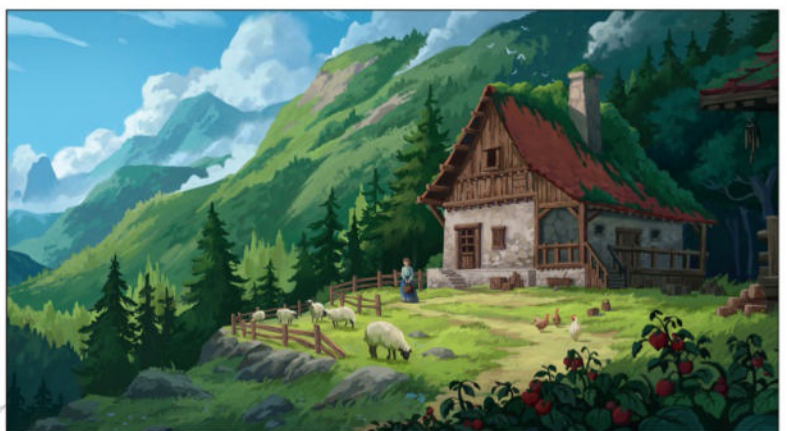
I always try to give each environment its own distinct personality and identity. It is this identity that guides my artistic choices and shapes every design decision I make after that. An environment that feels like part of a much larger universe is always more impactful and credible.

To achieve this, I always consider architectural elements, the location's history, culture, climate and technology, along with anything else that helps build a world the viewer wants to explore. The real challenge is successfully turning this environment into a veritable character in its own right within the story.



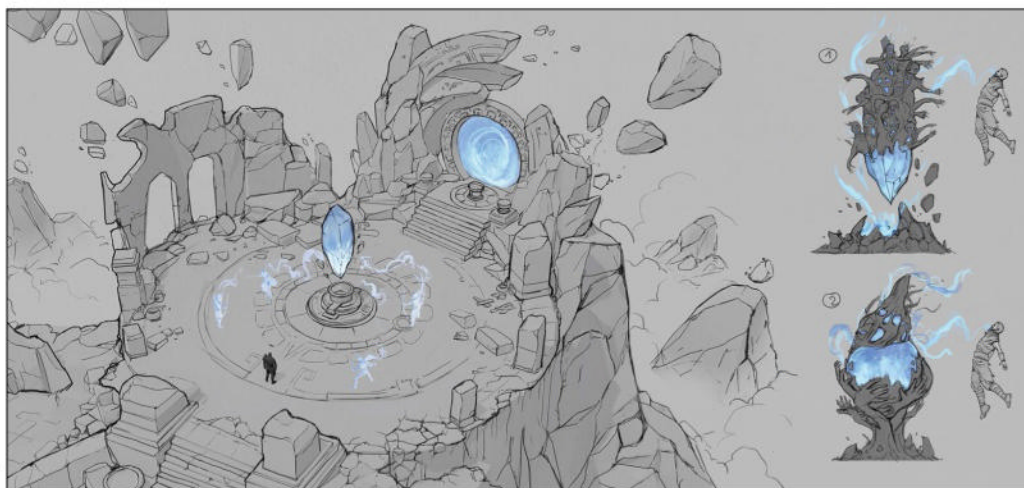
3 EXPLORING SHAPES AND SILHOUETTES

During my creative process, I often explore silhouettes and shapes before diving into the details. This allows me to focus on the overall forms and define the primary forms. Finding strong, impactful silhouettes, even from a distance, ensures the design is instantly recognisable and readable. This might take the form of quick sketches of various architectural or natural elements. My goal here is to explore multiple possibilities and generate as many iterations as possible to find an interesting design. The silhouettes need to be expressive and recognisable at a glance.



4 LIGHT AS A NARRATIVE TOOL

Light is a powerful compositional tool; it helps convey a clear intent and guides the viewer's eye. I always strive to craft the lighting to create an interesting focal point within the image. Carefully designed lighting can transform an ordinary setting into a memorable scene that evokes a specific emotion. I often use light as a narrative element to suggest the time of day, the atmosphere or a particular emotion; I view it as a true emotional language. Strong contrast around the main subject immediately draws the eye. Conversely, softer areas allow the viewer's gaze to rest. ➡



5 DESIGN BY LINE

The design phase is probably the most important, which is why, when I have more complex designs to create, I often proceed with a more precise outline to establish a truly solid foundation. This allows me to resolve any challenges that arise when conceptualising a specific environment or architectural style. I start by establishing the main shapes, then gradually work in the details. It is a decisive step for the rest of the project as during this stage I determine the function of my various designs. Using this process is common in video games.

“I start by establishing the main shapes, then gradually work in the details”



6 PLAYING WITH SCALES (BIG, MEDIUM, SMALL)

To bring my environments to life, I enjoy playing with proportions and varying scales. Pairing small elements with gigantic structures instantly captures the viewer's attention and lends the image an almost mythological aspect. This dramatic contrast in scale also allows me to create compositions that reinforce this sense of exploration and travel. These contrasts further amplify the feeling of wonder. I love the idea of the viewer imagining themselves exploring these places, much like they would in a video game, for instance.

7 CREATE FANTASY ARCHITECTURAL DESIGNS

How to draw convincing buildings using real-world references



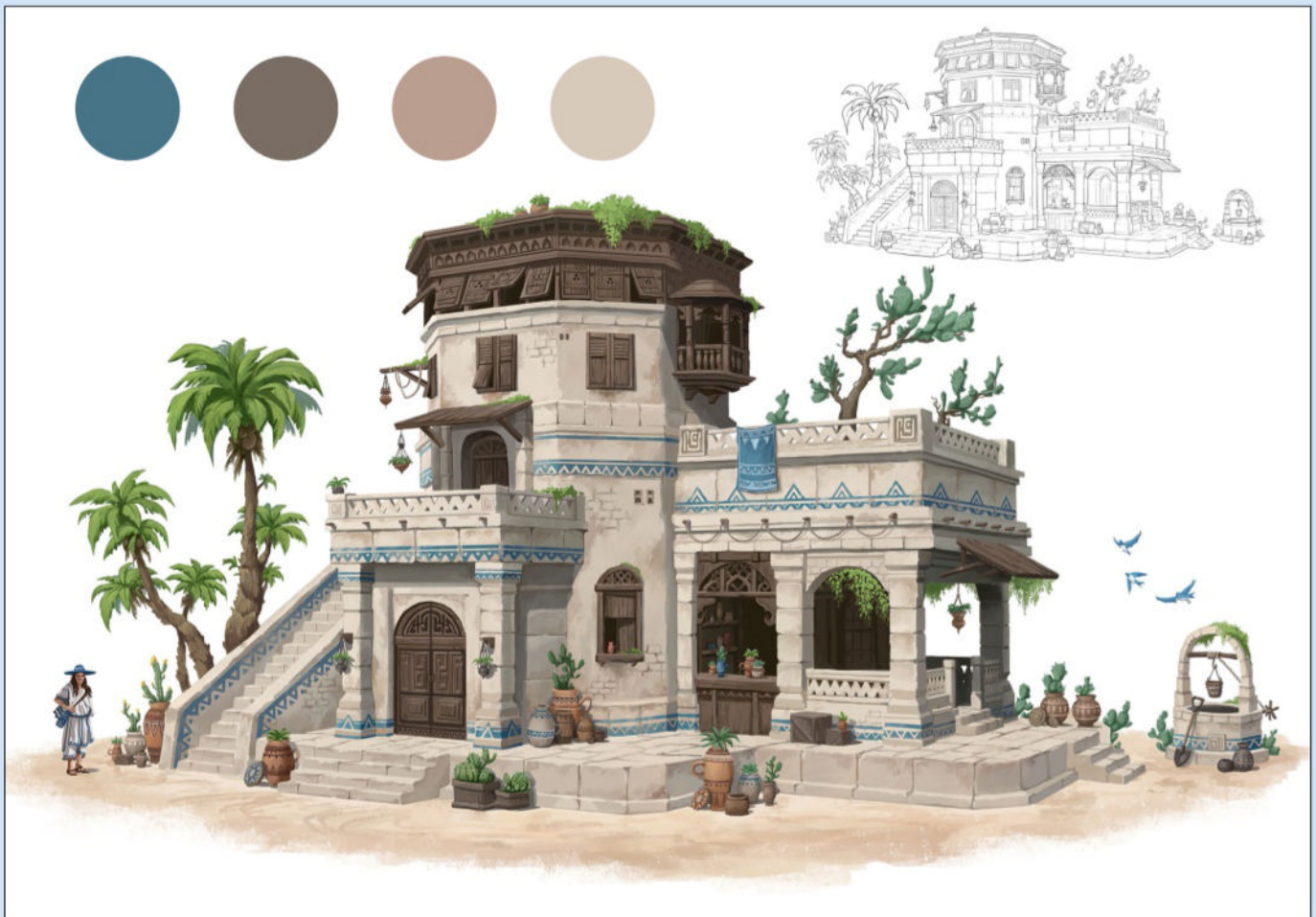
A Work in large shapes

After gathering photo references of architectural elements for this world, I begin working on the main masses. 3D can be a great tool for laying out initial, very simple shapes made up of primitives like cubes or cylinders. I model my 3D base using Blender.



B Adding a precise line

Once I've blocked in the main shapes, I start drawing over them with more precise line work. This allows me to refine the designs and add small details like decorations, props, vegetation, etc. This line work serves as a solid foundation for moving on to colour.



C Bring your design to life

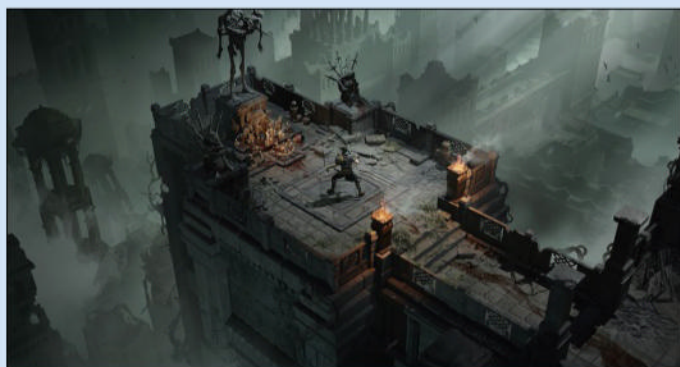
For the final stage, I focus on colours and textures. I aim to achieve a pleasing colour harmony and bring the buildings to life by adding details that suggest imperfection: signs of wear, dirt and stains, etc. I wanted to depict a peaceful and unique place. ➡



8 EMOTION THROUGH COLOUR

Colours define the mood, but they also convey emotion. I love using vibrant shades and harmonies that evoke a sense of wonder. Nature is my primary source of inspiration, though I also draw from the worlds of Studio Ghibli and the work of great western painters. I view colour as a tool that lends a unique feel to my images and serves as a key narrative element. Much like light, colour allows me to highlight and draw attention to a crucial element within the image.

“I love using vibrant shades and harmonies that evoke a sense of wonder”

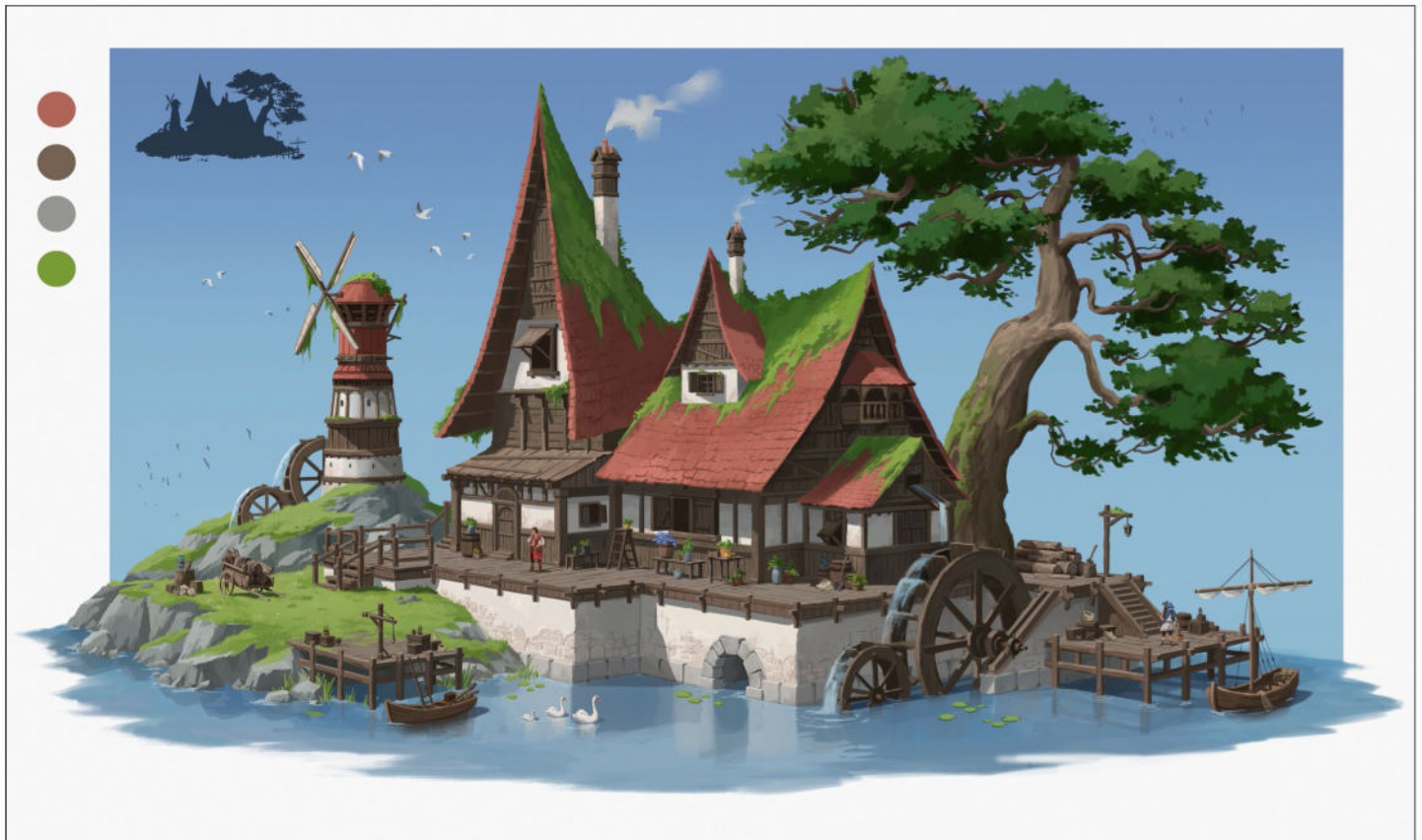


9 CREATING A MOOD

When creating an illustration, I always strive to ensure the atmosphere aligns with the emotion or story I wish to convey. I place great importance on crafting a unique atmosphere that transforms the setting into a true protagonist of the story being told. Mystery is



also a powerful narrative device; it is an element I love to incorporate into my images because it allows the viewer's imagination and interpretation to run free. Lighting, composition, the depth of the various planes and colour harmony all play a role in creating this feeling and bringing it to life.



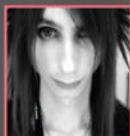
10 ADAPTING AND EXPLORING DIFFERENT TECHNIQUES / STYLES

Over the years, I've had the opportunity to experiment with various techniques and acquire a range of skills, allowing me to adapt to different media and graphic styles. In a constantly changing world, adaptability is a valuable asset. I strongly encourage exploring different mediums. Learning tools like 3D software (specifically Blender) proved to be a real asset early in my career. It's always a great way to satisfy one's curiosity and challenge oneself. However, I believe the tool itself shouldn't become the ultimate goal, as it's easy to get lost in the process. ●

Technique focus

HARNESS THE EXCLUSION LAYER

Christian Angel on finessing a high fantasy character scene to add extra atmosphere



"This piece is called Oiran Summoner. It's a passion project that was created in my free time, and I'm currently working on a world based on the Oiran who summon monsters with their musical instruments. I started by sketching in Procreate, then painted in Photoshop. I would often go back and forth with parts of the piece by using the exclusion layer over it. This allowed me to attempt something a little different every time. The exclusion layer is also great for atmosphere, resetting your values and unifying your colour a little bit if you feel you went too far on your contrast range too early."



Artist PROFILE

**Christian
Angel**

LOCATION: US

Christian is a freelance illustrator based in Los Angeles with a dark fantasy art style influenced by French symbolist painters. His clients include Wizards of the Coast and Magic the Gathering.
<https://bit.ly/4w7afEC>

How I create...

A MONSTER-SUMMONING MUSICIAN



1 Character sketch

After conceiving my character, I made a couple of thumbnail sketches and ended up going with this one. I knew I wanted the light source to kind of hit her lap and not her face directly. It's important to your character design so you can use any outfit parts for the flow of the image.



2 Refining the design

At this point my character was somewhat fleshed out, but not high fantasy enough. I felt that it was getting way too literal, with only the beast that she's riding not in my vision. I needed to make this fantasy version of an Oiran read while still keeping the theme I was going for.



3 Finishing details

After changing the hair, I wanted her guitar to have a lacquer finish, and for her 'uchikake' outer robe to feature lots of designs. I painted some orbs with subtle colours and contrast shifts, then sampled them with the mixer brush to paint the embroidery designs onto the fabric.

The Gallery

SHOWCASING THE FINEST
TRADITIONAL ARTISTS



© Chameleon Studios Comics



Fábio Simão dos Santos

LOCATION: Brazil **MEDIA:** Pencils, ink wash **WEB:** <https://payhip.com/fabiosimaoart>

Fábio has been making a living as an artist since 2019. The rising talent in the American indie comic industry says: "It was a long road to achieve this dream, and having to fight for each step like there was no tomorrow."

1 THE NECROMANCER

"I am very influenced by a number of fantasy and RPG games, and for this piece I tried my take on a dark, evil necromancer. This could be a cool boss in a game, right? It was done with pencils over a light blue sketch on A4."

2 CHAMELEON STUDIOS PREVIEW #0

"Original art for Chameleon Studios Comics. My first published cover for the studio back in 2020, and a reminder of my early steps. I was a rookie, but with the determination to keep improving."

3 VALKYRIE

"This is a fantasy-themed illustration of a Valkyrie, a fierce female warrior who was prominently represented throughout Norse mythology. This piece was done on A3-size cardstock, with pencils over a light red sketch."

4 JUSTICE #4

"This is the original art for Justice issue #4 from Wingless Comics. I'm the regular penciller for this ongoing comic series. This was done on 11-by-17-in cardstock, with pencils and an ink wash to get some watercolour textures."







Gabriel Ribeiro

LOCATION: France **MEDIA:** Ink, watercolours, and coloured pencils **WEB:** www.drawgabedraw.com

Brazilian-born Gabriel is an author and illustrator, inspired by the magic and wonder he found in books and nature as a kid, as well as while an immigrant in the US. He continues to find inspiration where he can.

1 PORTOBELLO AND THE HATMAKER

"A character study I did for a book that I hope to work on in the future. I wanted to focus more on creating strong silhouettes and character design, while trying to tell a full story with just a couple of characters."



2 FIN AND THE FOUL ROOT

"I created this fun concept over the course of a week-long workshop. It was the most planning that I had ever put into a piece. I began working more with colour compositions and character design before moving on to the final piece."

3 ANIMAL BAND

"This was one of the first pieces where I started to work with a warmer colour palette and began to dive a bit deeper into narrative. In this story, during every fall, the animals and fairies welcome in autumn by staging a concert and a festival."

4 FIREWOOD BRIGADE

"A continuation from 'Animal Band'. I wanted to show more of their village, including glimpses of everyday life. This one depicts the firewood brigade that delivers firewood to all the animals and fae folk on especially cold nights."

3



4



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

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!



The Prestige is great to interact with, but is a little lacking in the power department.

MSI Prestige 14 Flip AI+

ADAPTABLE OPTION This hybrid laptop has a good screen and excellent stylus, but its integrated graphics present one weakness for creatives

Price £1,349/\$1,299.99 **Company** MSI **Web** www.msi.com

The MSI Prestige 14 Flip AI+ is one of those machines that feels immediately useful to anyone who works across multiple creative modes. We got it in to see if it belongs with our best laptops for drawing, and spent two weeks using it for writing, sketching, photo work and general daily tasks.

For us, the hybrid form factor has been the standout feature. The tablet mode feels natural and the stylus input is responsive enough to make quick creative work feel genuinely enjoyable. It is not a perfect machine and heavier

graphics workloads push it past its comfort zone, but as a flexible creative companion it has a lot going for it. Enough to bother the leaders in the market? Well...

EASY TO CARRY

The Prestige 14 Flip AI+ is clearly built for people who want a laptop that adapts to them rather than the other way around. The chassis is slim, tidy and easy to carry, and the hinge feels reassuringly solid when flipping between laptop, tent and tablet modes. The Nano Pen lives inside the body, charges automatically and is always ready to go. It is a small detail

that makes a big difference by removing the usual stylus faff.

The OLED screen is the real showstopper. The 14-inch panel is bright, rich and wonderfully contrasty. Blacks look genuinely deep, and colours have the kind of punch that makes photo editing and illustration feel more immersive. The 100% DCI P3 coverage is a major win for creative users who need reliable colour. Touch response is smooth and accurate, and the glass surface feels good under the stylus. It is not a high-refresh display, but for creative work the clarity and colour accuracy matter far more. Despite maxing out at 1920x1200



Ignore laptop mode and make the most of the tablet mode.



A good selection of ports are offered for attaching peripherals and an external display.

“The tablet mode feels natural and the stylus input is responsive”

resolution, the screen gives the laptop a premium feel and makes visual tasks genuinely enjoyable.

Inside, the Prestige 14 Flip AI+ uses Intel's Core Ultra Series 3 processor and Intel Arc graphics. For everyday creative work, the combination is fast and responsive. Writing, browsing, photo edits, sketching and light video work all feel smooth.

Where the machine struggles is with heavier graphics workloads. While Intel Arc is capable for light creative tasks, once you push into more demanding video timelines, 3D work or large-batch photo processing, the limits soon become apparent. Export times slow down, and real-time previews can stutter. Make no mistake: this is not a workstation-class device, and creative users who rely on GPU acceleration will notice the ceiling. For hybrid creators who mix writing, design, illustration and light editing, however, it performs well.

Battery life is good too, although we doubt whether it will meet the advertised 30-plus hours.

Erlingur Einarsson

VERDICT

A flexible creative laptop that shines in tablet mode. The OLED screen is excellent and the overall design feels well suited to hybrid creators who move between writing, sketching, photo work and general productivity. It is not built for demanding graphics workloads and users who rely on GPU acceleration will find its limits quickly. For others it offers a compelling mix of portability, versatility and visual quality that makes it a strong creative companion.

Pros

- Great OLED
- Excellent tablet mode
- Strong battery

Cons

- Weak GPU
- Not suitable for heavy video
- Premium pricing

Rating



LightWave 3D 2026

NEW WAVE Rig and animate vehicles, generate lightning, and create an ocean like a pro

Price £795/\$1,070 or upgrade LightWave 3D 2024 £550/\$740
Company LightWave Digital **Web** <https://lightwave3d.com>

That LightWave 3D still exists is a little bit of a miracle. When 2023 rolled around, it had been in exile for three years, but in April 2023 its fortunes began to be turned around.

In November 2023, LightWave 3D 2023 was released with the introduction of a number of long-desired features, including Procedural Geometry Nodes, Turbulence FD and Text Generator.

Now at version 2026, LightWave 3D continues to go from strength to strength with new features for vehicle rigging and animation, realistic lighting effects, ocean generation, 3D snow and more.

The first of these is MotoRig, a comprehensive, professional-grade vehicle rigging and animation tool. It can handle all types of wheeled vehicles, even up to 8+ wheels, and can accurately follow even the most complex types of terrain. The result is realistic motion physics and outstanding suspension dynamics.

The second main new feature is THOR Lightning Generator, a plug-in for creating realistic procedural lightning effects between two



© LightWave Digital

Dynamic physics-based vehicle rigging is easy with the new MotoRig tool.

objects. It is easy to use and produces realistic effects quickly and effortlessly.

LightWave 3D is made up of a number of independent packages, with the two primary ones being Modeler and Layout. It is possible to use these in conjunction with each other and if you have more than one of them open, the LightWave Hub will open up and take on the responsibility of synchronising data between them.

One of the best things about LightWave 3D is how accessible the team are. They produce relatively regular feature rundowns on YouTube, and their love for the software shows in their enthusiasm.

Paul Hatton

VERDICT

LightWave 3D 2026 offers an impressive set of new features that elevate the software, providing advanced functionality and fast results. Unfortunately, the user interface looks no different to what it did 10 years ago.

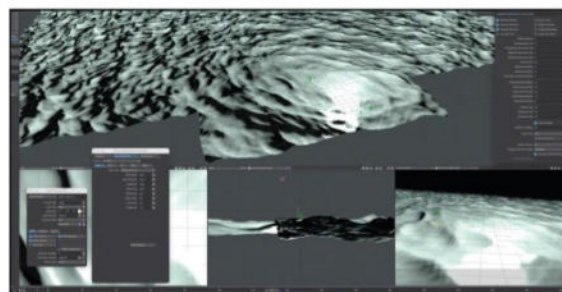
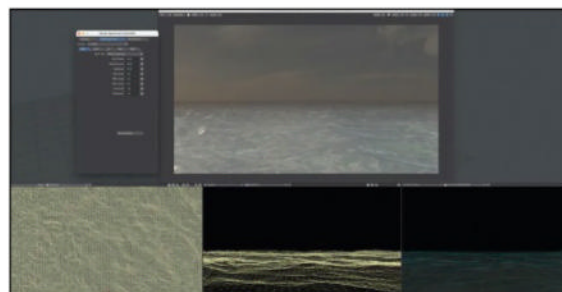
Pros

- A slew of good new features
- Regular updates and good pricing
- Fast and responsive interface

Cons

- Remains split into multiple programs
- Dated interface

Rating



New tools include snow and ocean generators, all of which work well.

ASUS ProArt PZ14

TWO-IN-ONE ASUS's newest creative tablet is great for drawing on, but the compromises are felt elsewhere

Price From £1,999/\$1,899 **Company** ASUS **Web** www.asus.com

A SUS's latest two-in-one, the **ASUS ProArt PZ14**, sits under the ProArt umbrella, which has also produced some of the best laptops for graphic design, as well as for other creative endeavours. On paper, it should appeal to a broad range of users including digital artists, photographers, content creators and others needing a portable device.

With a new second-generation Snapdragon processor on board, as well as a sharp and bright OLED touchscreen, the PZ14 is thin, light and capable. There is one thing that's annoying about it, however, though it will only become a problem if you want to use it like a traditional laptop rather than a digital art platform (perhaps a tablet for drawing?).

The PZ14 is a two-in-one design, but it doesn't have a hinge. Instead, the keyboard takes a leaf out of Microsoft's book and attaches using a magnet, connecting wirelessly. The keyboard has a useful niche in which to store your stylus – there's an ASUS Pen 3.0 in the box.

This is an advantage if you can make use of it. Discard the keyboard, and you've got an A4-ish drawing surface that's easy enough to hold and take with you, the display full of detail and colour. It's plenty responsive too, with the Pen 3.0's



© ASUS

The magnetically attached folding keyboard is the weak spot of the PZ14.

Microsoft Pen Protocol 2.6 compatibility, 4,096 levels of pressure sensitivity and magnetic wireless charging providing a smooth sketching experience.

The OLED is really bright – ASUS claims 1,000 nits with 98% of the P3 colour gamut, 92% of Adobe RGB and 100% of sRGB. It's a beautiful display.

The biggest downside of the PZ14 is the keyboard. It's awkward to use, doesn't adjust much and if you're unlucky, the pocket for the stylus can flip open and spill it out.

Though perhaps none of that matters. This isn't a device that's built to be used like a MacBook Neo, The creatives who buy this might be thinking of the keyboard as a secondary input device, and will leave it unattached for days on end.

Battery life is decent, though not exceptional, at 13h 20m; it'll see you through a working day, plus some.

Ian Evenden

VERDICT

The ASUS ProArt PZ14 wants to be a tablet rather than a laptop, but is saddled with Windows 11, which while improved still can't really make the best of it. It combines decent performance in creative apps with a really lovely screen, but is let down by a keyboard that's not really comfortable for long-term use.

Pros

- Excellent OLED touchscreen
- Stylus in the box
- USB4

Cons

- Bundled keyboard is suboptimal
- Windows still isn't great for tablets
- Other Snapdragon laptops have better performance

Rating



The display is rich, colour accurate and very bright.

Big on capacity, small in form factor, the Elite 10 is a viable companion for on-the-go power.



Bluetti Elite 10 Power Station

POWER BANK With the Bluetti Elite 10, you can hike like a survivalist

Price £149/\$119

Company Bluetti

Web <https://bluettipower.co.uk>

RATING ★★★★★

After a couple of months with the Bluetti Elite 10, we've come to know it in ways that transcend normal product testing. We've used it at home, on shoots and during regular wanderings into the untamed wilderness.

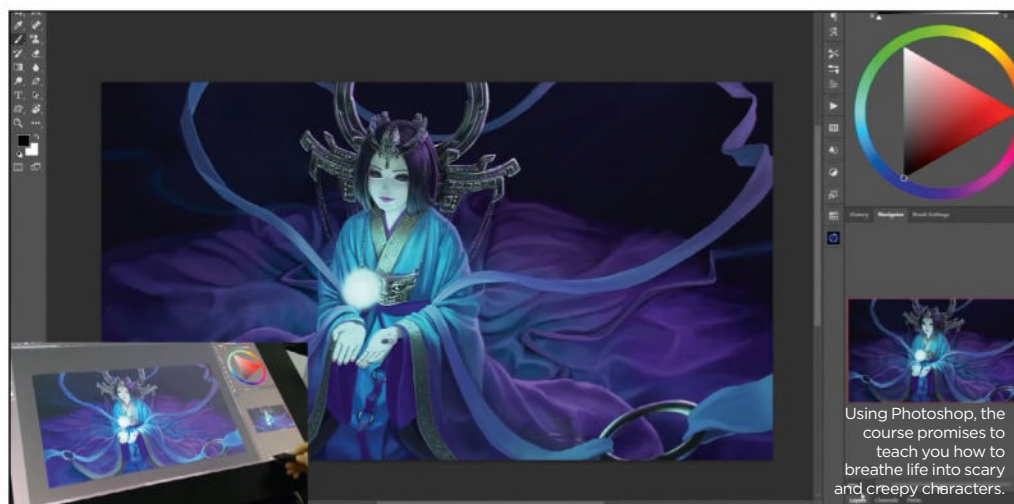
Out there, surrounded by the trees, flowers, birds and the occasional confused dog walker, the Elite 10 has become a portable lifeline, beyond that of a normal tiny regular power bank. It is compact, capable and oddly comforting.

The Elite 10 is built for movement. The embedded handle is one of those features you don't appreciate until you've used it constantly. The unit is reasonably light (1.8kg), small enough to fit in a backpack and has simple, easy-to-use controls.

Performance has been consistently solid as well. The Elite 10 retains its charge remarkably well, even when abandoned for days while recovering from heroic expeditions. The USB ports are modest at 15W, but three ports is still handy for accessories and smaller devices.

The real star is the 128Wh capacity. For such a compact unit, it can power proper gear. We've used it to charge and run camera equipment and accessories during outdoor shoots. Filmmakers could easily rely on it for location work.

Erlingur Einarsson



Dark Fantasy Character Design with Xiaofan Zhang

FANTASY HORROR Toronto concept artist Xiaofan Zhang shows how to design moody, narrative-driven dark-fantasy characters

Publisher 21 Draw **Price** £19/\$25 **Format** Online video course **Length** 16 lessons (3h+) **Web** www.21-draw.com/dark-fantasy-characters

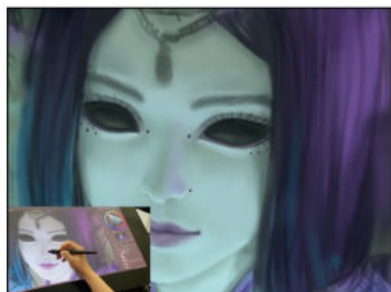
Xiaofan Zhang is a Toronto-based concept artist who specialises, as she says herself, in dark, cinematic, narrative-driven fantasy and horror, and in this course she shows her creative pathway to a character to help you bring your dreams (or nightmares) to life, gulp!

For those new to Photoshop, Zhang is explicit from the get-go that this is a course for artists familiar with the software, and that its focus is instead on character development – story as much as art.

In the narrative development she sets herself boundaries, such as a culture and a time period, combines real history and myth, and her methodology is to create a 'dichotomy': combining two opposite things, safe and unsafe, to make a



The subject of drawing folds in clothing is covered, but all too briefly alongside other details.



Zhang shows how to sketch, colour and light a character, adding effects for an ethereal feel.

character unsettling. There's a lot of depth to the background, with a fascinating standout being how colour carries different meanings in western and Chinese culture.

The creative phases are all in Photoshop, with demos of painting metals and fabric folds, and great side sections on how to build your own chain and magic brushes. Her teaching style is kind and honest, always admitting when something needs more time.

As mentioned, it assumes some drawing experience, especially the basics of anatomy – but as a resource course it is a great teaching set, with brushes and layered render files making it genuinely good value. 🍷

Mike Griggs

Brushing up...

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



Tuhis Brush Set 2025

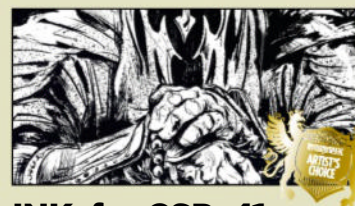
Artist Tuhis

Software Procreate

Brushes 24 **Price** Free

Rating ★★★★★

A handy all-round Procreate-optimised set with 24 sketching, inking and painting brushes covering most of a character workflow. Free for personal and commercial use, but worth the tip. <https://bit.ly/4xfpFHS>



INK. for CSP: 41 Sub-Tools for Inking

Artist Eldar Zakirov (Ldarro)

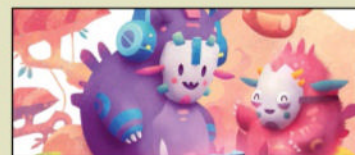
Software Clip Studio Paint

Brushes 41 **Price** £10.45/\$14

Rating ★★★★★

This inking kit features 41 pen and brush sub-tools with proper pressure settings, plus a 'dehalthonizer' action. There's a lot here, and it's worth the money to explore tool creation.

<https://bit.ly/4q04CSZ>



Texturizer Pro 2 for Affinity

Artist Frankentoon Studio

Software Affinity Designer.

Affinity Photo

Brushes 90 Pr

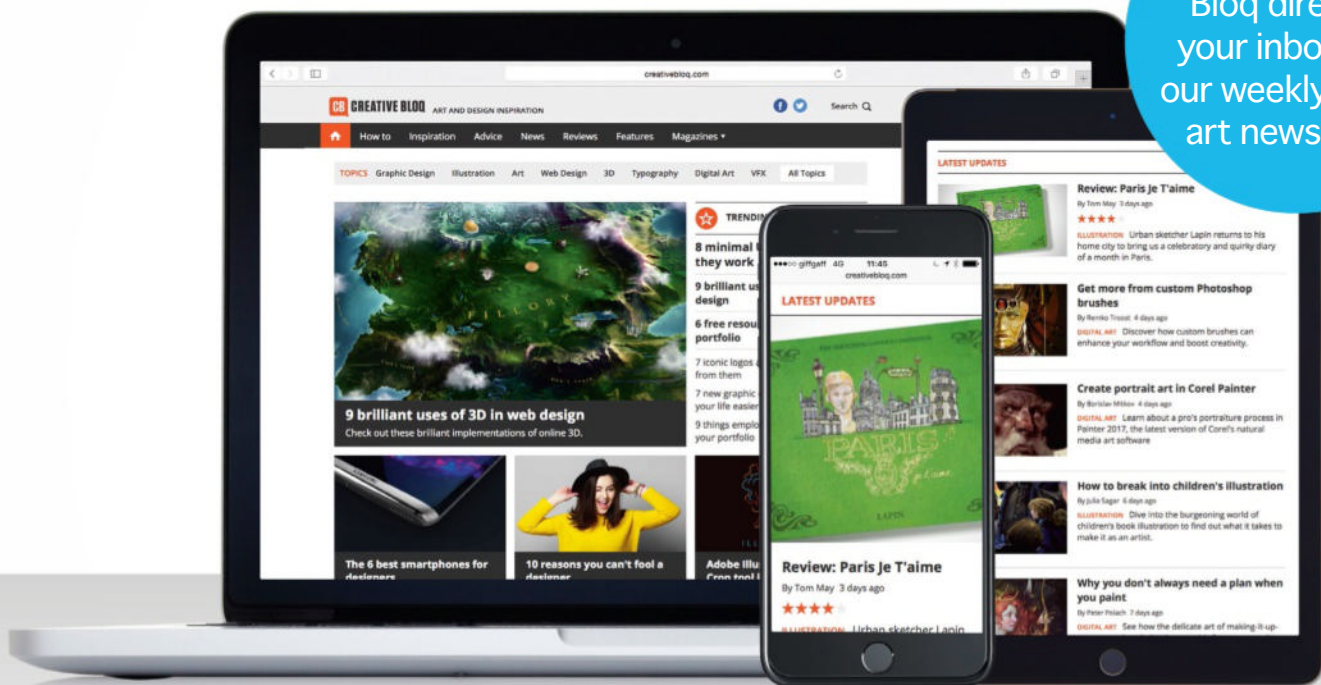
Rating ★★★★★

Ninety real-life texture brushes, lovely for adding grit and tactile surface to clean digital work, and handy for finishing characters and props. Very useful for any Affinity artist.

<https://bit.ly/4wHjP26>

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

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



Graphic design

Art

Web design

3D

Digital art

www.creativebloq.com

3D Artist

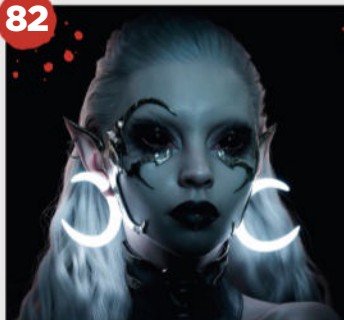
Your ultimate source for art,
inspiration and know-how

88

MAKE A DETAILED 3D LANDSCAPE

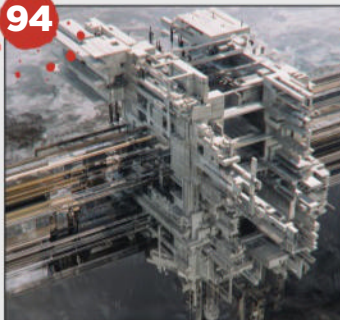
Learn to create complex and
moody dark fantasy scenes

82



The best 3D art around
Tom Newbury, Skander Mallouki and Juan Hernández show off their stunning work.

94



Draw from a library
A library of reference models can be a great starting point for creating abstract structures.

96



Back to basics
Use physics simulations for easier animation and learn how to master joint rotations.

98



Five minutes with...
Ian Vicknair reveals the influences on his career as a matte painter and director.

3D Artist Showcase

BE INSPIRED BY THE BEST DIGITAL ART AROUND

ImagineFX
ARTIST
MONTH



Tom Newbury

LOCATION: Australia **MEDIA:** Maya, ZBrush, Mari, Marvelous Designer, Blender **WEB:** www.artstation.com/tom_newbury_cg

Tom is a 3D artist who has been working commercially for 15 years and has worked across many feature films, game cinematics and series. He is passionate about realism and bringing 3D characters to life.



1 SMUG GOBLIN

"This piece was the subject for a tutorial I made for the Think Tank Training Centre. I had to choose a concept and present my workflow from start to finish. This subject is a bit more stylised than the work I usually do, but I had a vision of how it would work with my detailed style."

2 ALBINO DEMON

"I created this piece after seeing an illustration by the artist Vetarmora. When I see a design which really inspires me I begin to visualise it in my own style. Through my work I enjoy breathing a level of realism into the character."

3 ADOLESCENT CHIMP

"Inspired by the work Weta did on The Planet of the Apes series, I wanted to see how far I could push my skills to create my own realistic chimpanzee."

4 DARK ELF

"Based on a painting by Vetarmora. I just loved the use of light in this piece, the earring design being the focal point, paired with the deep dark shiny eyes."







Skander Mallouki

LOCATION: Tunisia **MEDIA:** ZBrush, 3ds Max, Substance Painter **WEB:** www.artstation.com/gaarajapanime

Skander is a 3D character and props artist who loves bouncing between vibrant stylization and detailed realism. Heavily inspired by game design and fantasy, he uses brings his storytelling to life through digital sculpting.

1



1 WRATH UNLEASHED

"This creature contest entry was a specific challenge for me to switch to realism, leveraging my professional skills in texturing and dramatic, mood-driven lighting."

2 PASTEL & BONES

"I aimed for a natural flow within a highly stylised look, paying special attention to the hair shapes while maintaining a rapid, decisive sculpting process."

3 PROJECT ZERO

"This piece focuses on complex metal panelling, precise armour modeling, and glowing emissives. I wanted to balance futuristic cybernetics with an ornate, regal silhouette."

2



3





4 FRACTURED PERSONAS

"Inspired by Ev Ganin's concept, this piece explores character identity. I focused on telling a deep story while keeping my process streamlined through sculpting and hand-painting in ZBrush."



Juan Hernández

LOCATION: Czechia **MEDIA:** Blender, ZBrush, Substance 3D Painter **WEB:** www.artstation.com/donchuan3d

Juan is a 3D visual development artist. He started as a hobbyist before eventually going professional. "I am passionate about both stylised and realistic art, so I like making stuff of all sorts."

1



2



1 MERMAID REIMAGINED

"For this, I wanted to make my own mermaid design. My approach was mixing real-world references with key elements that make up a mermaid."

2 BUBBLY

"This little guy is my own design. The idea was to mix a couple of animals and come up with a 'sidekick-like' character for an animated feature."

3 METROID STYLISED

"A stylised adaptation of Samus from Metroid. I wanted to explore making a suit that fits a human body and therefore could look a bit more functional."

4 REALISTIC STITCH

"My take on one of my favourite characters of all time. It was also a great opportunity to make a complex character and push everything I'd learnt so far."

3



4



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

3D Artist Workshop

ADVICE FROM THE WORLD'S BEST 3D ARTISTS

Cinema 4D, ZBrush, Octane Render & Photoshop MAKING A DETAILED 3D LANDSCAPE

Sci-fi and fantasy artist **Calder Moore** goes in-depth while describing his process for creating a moody dark fantasy 3D landscape scene

Artist PROFILE

Calder Moore
LOCATION: Canada

Calder Moore is a sci-fi and fantasy freelance artist focusing on creating stylised moody landscapes that serve to tell stories
<https://bit.ly/4wKmS9Q>



In this tutorial, I'll be doing an overview of the basic steps I take to create a compelling and highly detailed

scene, from the basic sketch to rendering and adding post effects. I'll also go over using basic geometry with displacement to really push the scene's details and interest efficiently and quickly.

Before diving into complex scenes like this, it's a good idea to grab some

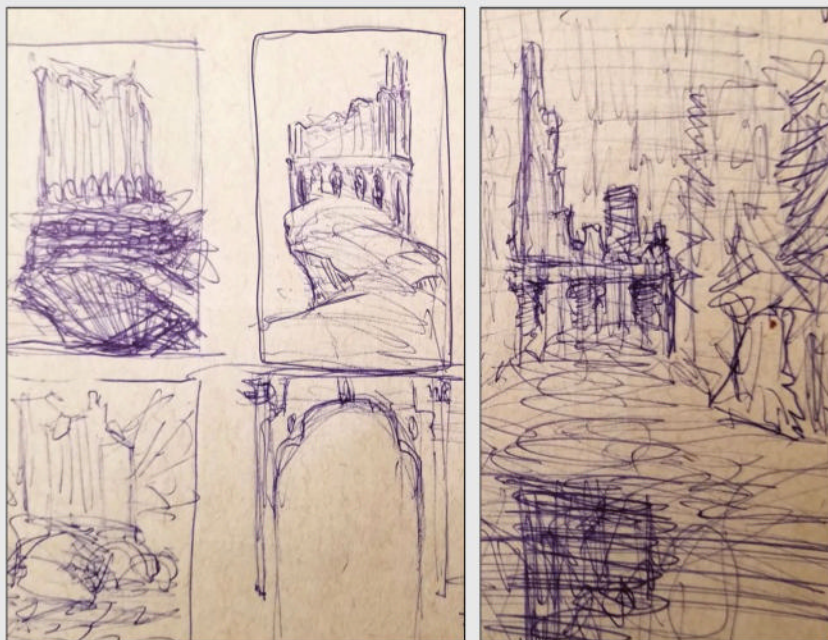
inspirational images to build your visual palette; things like the architecture, environment, lighting, composition and mood.

For these types of scenes, I like to pre-prepare in 3D a bit, building up a library of foliage scatter systems and materials. This allows me to create these complex scenes much faster and focus on the art, rather than get sidetracked with technical stuff.

A fun fact for this scene: it wasn't originally going to be greyscale. I

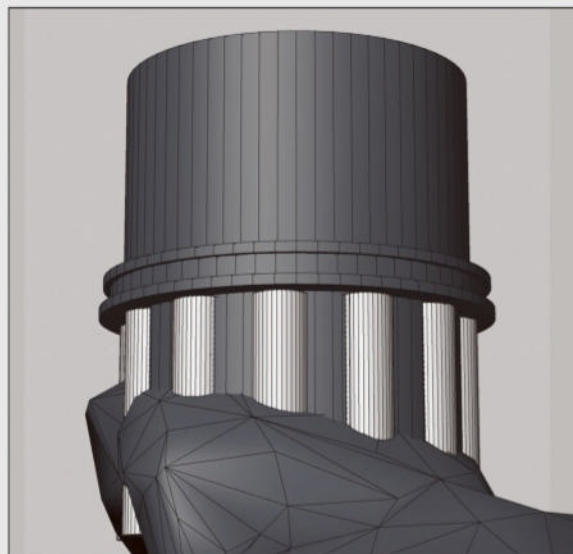
turned down the saturation during the lighting phase to check values, and immediately got inspired to keep it that way, as it helped push that video was looking for!

Lastly, these scenes can seem extremely daunting to make. I find that the best approach is to write down all your tasks that you need to do to make it: make tower, break tower, make ground, detail ground, etc, so instead of seeing a big task, you see 20 very manageable tasks.



1 Making a thumbnail

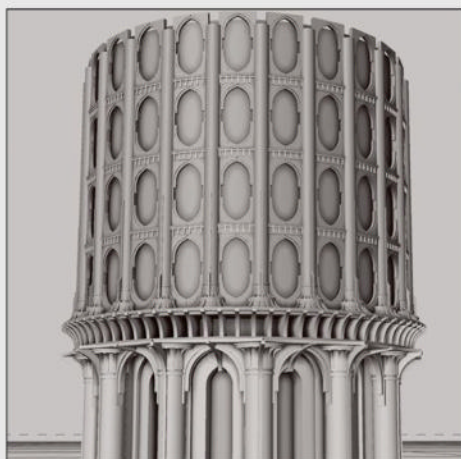
I'll almost always start with a small sketch, as this allows me to quickly iterate on a few different compositions to see if any work for the kind of vibe I want to have, and also figure out the flow of the scene in general. In this case, I wanted to have an epic tower with that feeling of lonely, forgotten ancient power.



2 Blocking the 3D scene

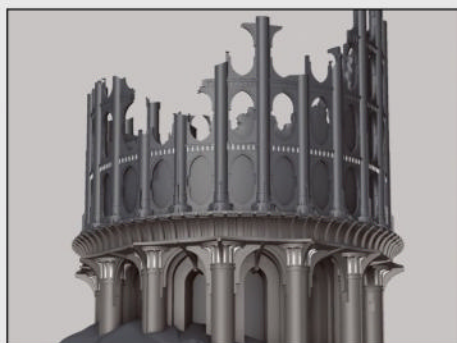
Once I have a sketch figured out for the direction, I go into Cinema 4D to establish the scene. Using basic geometry and sculpting tools, I build out the basic forms for the landscape and the silhouette for the tower. During this process, I will also quickly establish the camera position. Locking it in early is key, and lets you refine the scene to that shot. ➡➡





3 Building the tower

Now that the scene is blocked in, I can refine elements of it. For the tower, I'll use displacement textures so I can stick to basic geometry. Using symmetry for archways and radial cloners for pillars, I build up the details for the tower elements, then use radial cloning to create the tower.



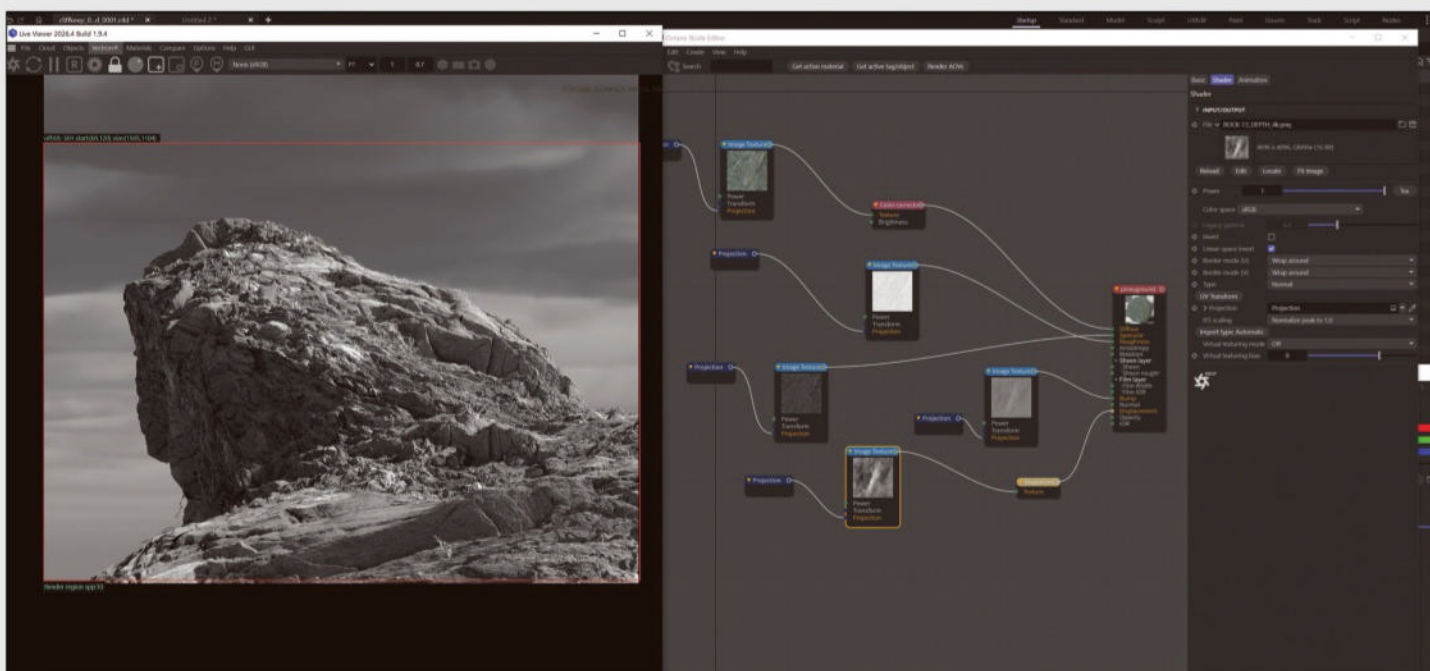
4 Destroying the tower

Now that we've built the tower, we can destroy it! Using various tools like the knife tool and voronoi fracture, I add cuts into the geometry. Loosely following the sketch, I then lasso-select portions of it and delete to remove the unwanted portions, making it look like it collapsed. It's good to spend a little bit of time on this step to make sure the damage feels natural.



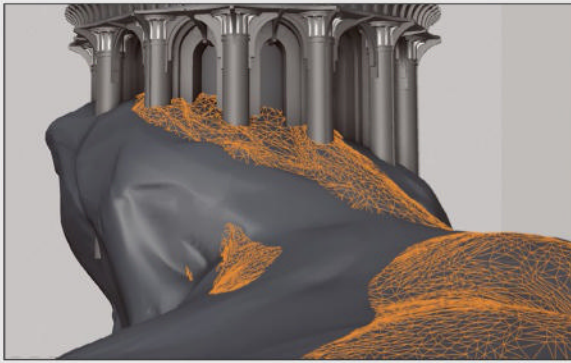
5 Sculpting the terrain

Next, I'll dive into the terrain element. Exporting that basic geo and bringing it into ZBrush, I'll then sculpt more of the basic forms, refining the big shapes more. Using displacement texture on this terrain piece, I'll keep the details light, as that will add a ton later. I then create some quick UVs for it so the materials' displacement doesn't cause too much artifacting, then export back to C4D.



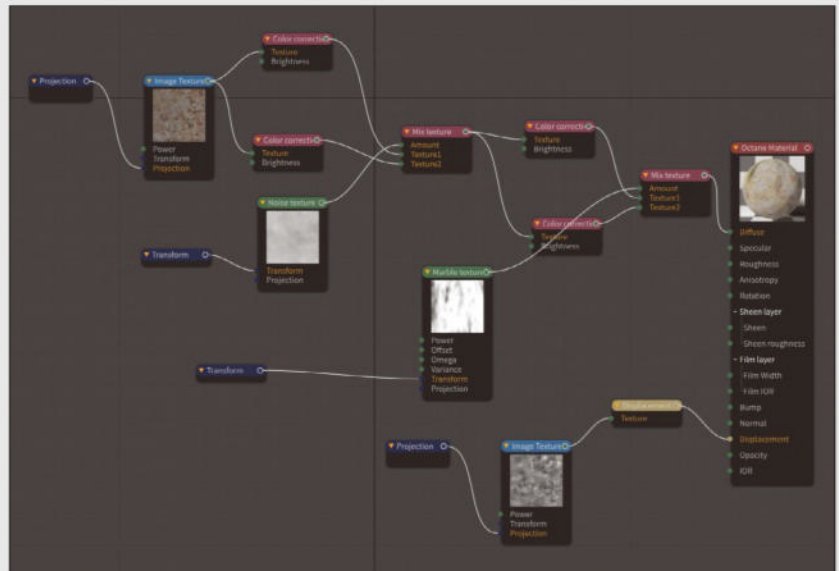
6 Texturing the terrain

Now that we have our sculpt back in C4D, I'll start building up the shader for it. Using a tileable photoscanned rock material, from RD Textures (now in Megascans), I build up a basic shader. Cranking up the displacement scale for it, I'm able to add a ton of complexity and depth to that basic sculpt. Playing with the scale and UV offset settings, I can then find an interesting silhouette.



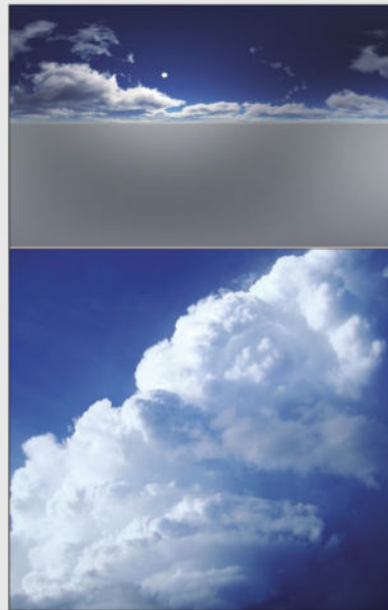
7 Adding terrain layers

We have a basic terrain now, but the ground doesn't quite feel natural, and this is where the power of displacement textures shine. I'll duplicate the terrain geo and bring it up in Y a bit and sculpt some areas back down, then assign it more of a rocky ground/photoscanned material instead of a cliff material. In the render, you can see how we start to get a nice blend between the materials!



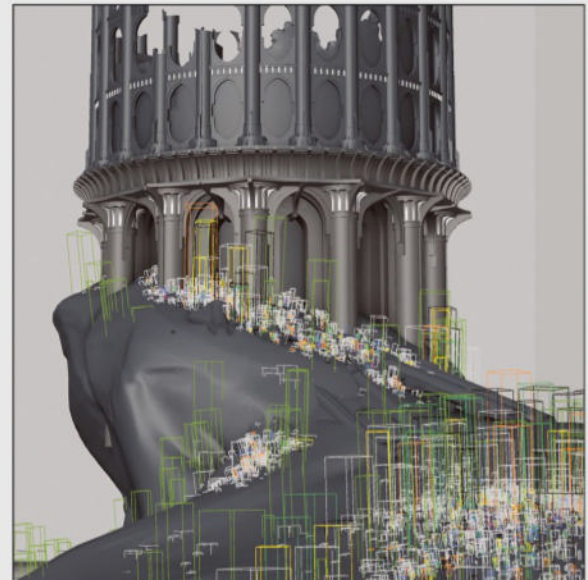
8 Texturing the tower

For the tower, I'll start by creating a basic stone wall material – also with displacement – which helps a ton to add the details that the basic geometry lacked. To help break up that tiled stone material, I'll then use a noise material that darkens areas to create some grime, and blend it into the material using the gradient marble texture so there's more grime near the bottom of the tower.



9 Including lighting and sky

This step is actually done in tandem with steps 7 and 8. For the lighting, I brought in a few HDRs to find a lighting scheme that I felt fit the vibe, and pushed the composition to be stronger, playing with light and shadow in the scene to create a stronger contrast, readability and visual interest. Lastly, I added a cloud plane with intent to help the scene's compositional flow.



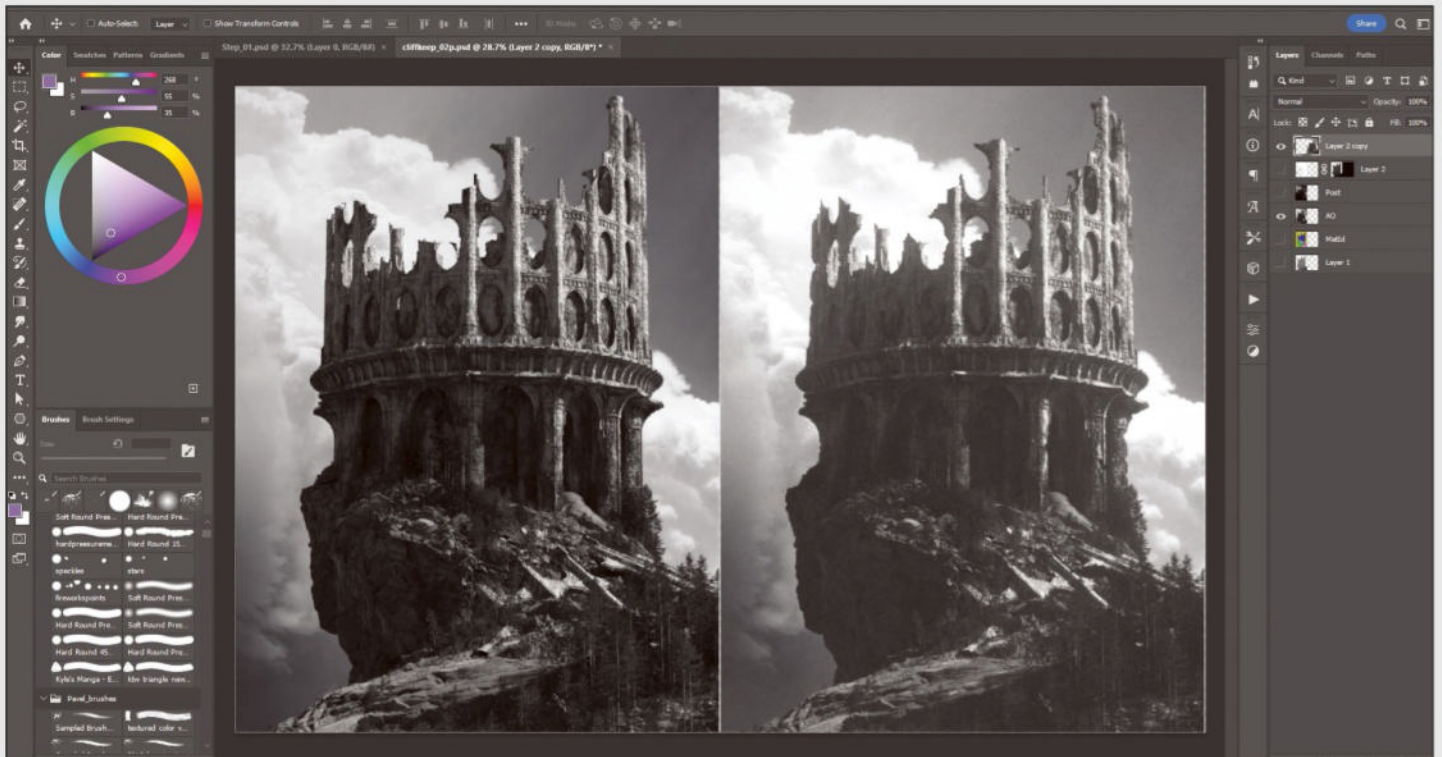
10 Adding foliage to scene

Making many of these scenes I have a bunch of Octane Scatter systems set up with different trees, shrubs, grasses and plants. With these, I'll take the terrain, and paint a vertex map to tell the scatter systems where to generate the foliage. In this case, I used my pine trees, shrubs and grass. ➡



11 Rendering the scene

The last step in C4D is rendering out the final scene. With these heavy nature scenes, I usually work in portions so that I can see the results faster. During this step, I focus on adjusting the render settings and scene optimisation so I can get a big render fast. Along with some last-minute scene tweaks, I'll also render out some passes. These include a Z Depth pass, a Bloom pass and an object ID pass.



12 Making adjustments in Photoshop

With everything rendered, I bring it all into Photoshop. First, I'll go through the scene, and using basic brushes, paint over the artifacts from displacement and weird areas that don't read nicely. For this scene, I wanted to make that 'old photo' look, so I played with the levels and exposure to bring up the blacks, adjust the BG values and add that bloom pass.



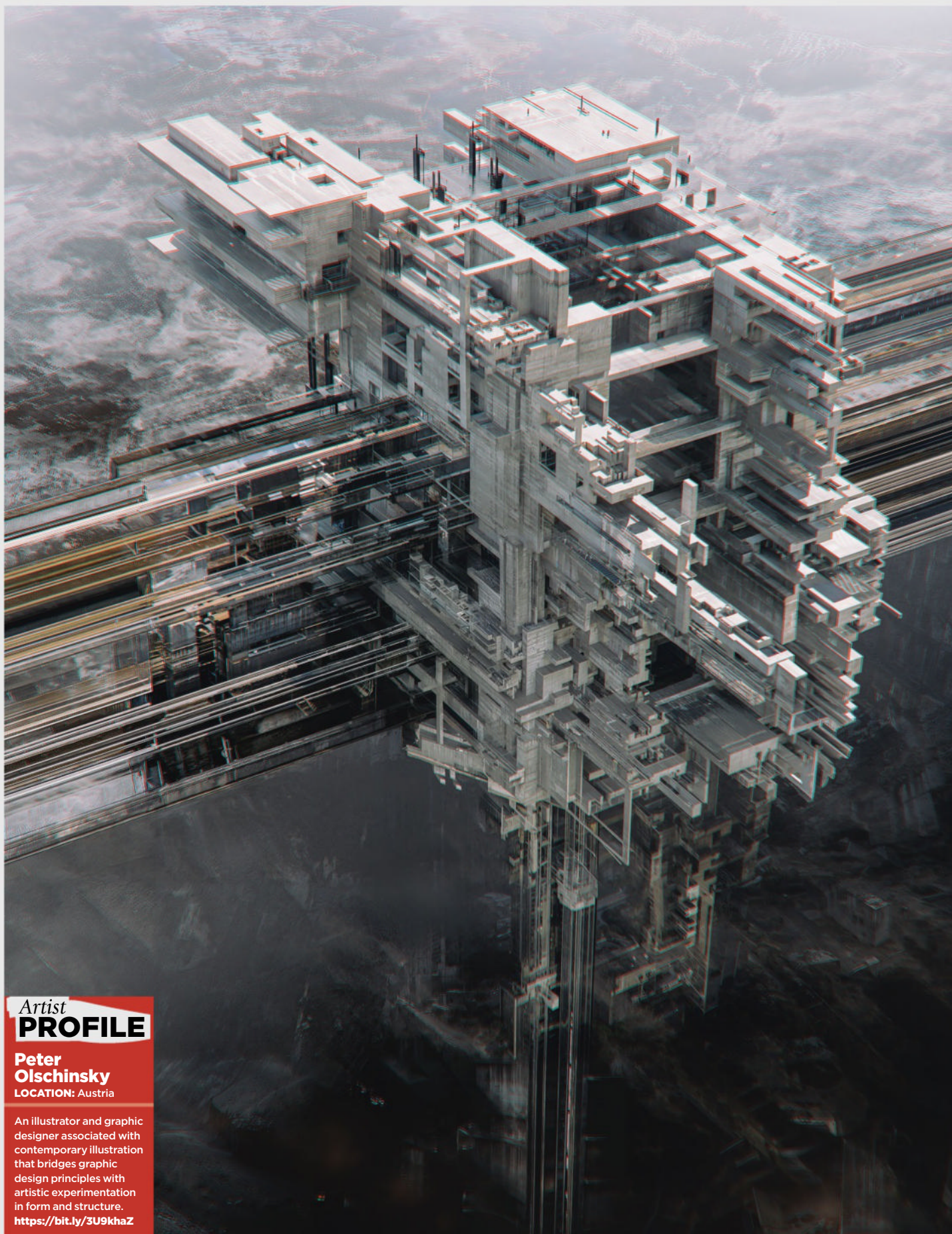
13 Painting over details

Here's a close-up of how I took the base rendered geometry and painted over it, removing those geometry artifacts, smoothing out some visual noise and adding brick details in the silhouette. You can also notice that I added a bit of blur to the BG parts of the tower. This helps the FG ones read a bit better and feel less flat.



14 Adding last effects

Lastly, I added a couple old photo and paper textures on vivid light and multiply (though I played with the layer styles to find a good look), and on top of everything, did some last-minute levels adjustments to balance the scene with those textures layered on. I also like to duplicate and merge everything down, then add a grain effect. This helps get rid of that 3D look. ●



Artist **PROFILE**

**Peter
Olschinsky**

LOCATION: Austria

An illustrator and graphic designer associated with contemporary illustration that bridges graphic design principles with artistic experimentation in form and structure.
<https://bit.ly/3U9khaZ>

Technique focus

BUILD AND DRAW FROM A LIBRARY

Peter Olschinsky's library of over 10,000 abstract models is a starting point for each new composition

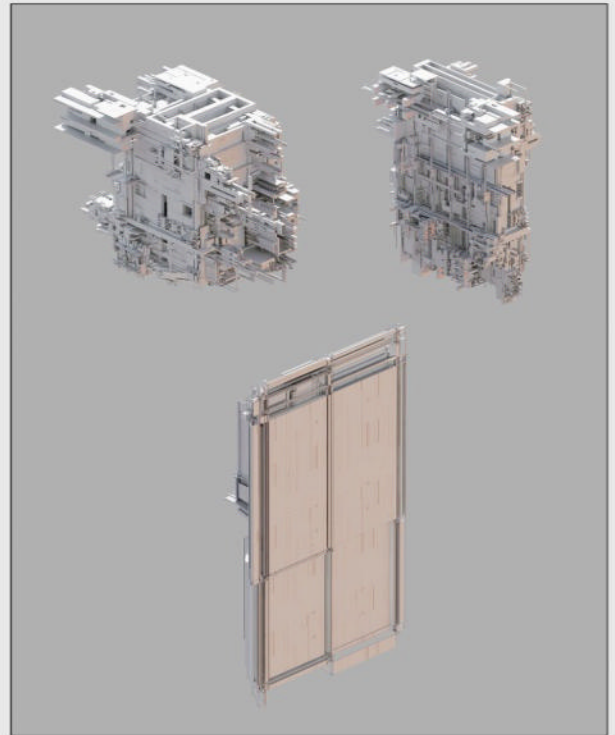


"I'm deeply interested in the relationship between architecture, technology and abstract visual

systems. My work revolves around constructing highly detailed, futuristic structures that resemble cities, industrial complexes or even digital organisms. The environments/structures often feel isolated, suspended or disconnected from any natural world due to alienation, technological dominance

and the consequences of rapid urban or digital expansion.

This image presents a massive, floating architectural structure that feels both futuristic and industrial. The composition is dominated by sharp, geometric forms, stacked platforms, exposed frameworks and interconnected corridors that create a sense of complexity and precision. The greyscale palette, enhanced with subtle red and cyan offsets, gives the image a glitch-like, digital distortion effect."



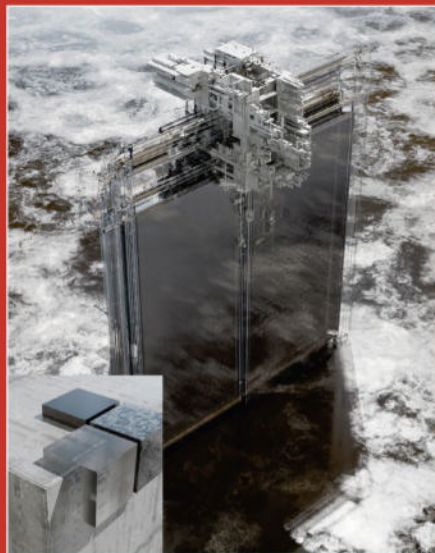
How I create...

A FUTURISTIC ABSTRACT STRUCTURE



1 Experimenting with composition

I've built up a library of over 10,000 shapes created in Mol 3D, Shapr3D or Blender. I begin by selecting a few structures from it, experimenting with scale, positioning and the relationship between positive and negative space. It's very important that the composition works without texturing and lighting. I generate dozens of camera setups to find the best one – this is crucial.



2 Adding textures and lighting effects

I experiment with various textures, letting my intuition guide me. I take a similar approach with lighting, changing the mood and atmosphere quite arbitrarily. This often takes the most time, since last-minute changes to textures and materials can still occur. The most important thing is that the mood and the structures/shapes work together to tell the final story.



3 Overpainting in Photoshop

Once I'm happy with the final composition and have added textures and lighting, it's rendered in Blender. I then further transform the artwork in Adobe Photoshop through experimental overpainting, where I incorporate abstract structures, glitch effects and vintage tones that add a sense of timelessness to my otherwise technological narrative.

3D Artist Back to basics

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

HOW DO I USE SIMULATIONS IN A 3D SCENE?

Mike Griggs explains how simulation hands the hard work of moving objects over to maths, physics and a little chaos



Animating a single metal ball bouncing down a staircase is a relatively simple animation which can be done by keyframing.

Animating 100 metal balls down a staircase is anything but relatively simple. Animating a window opening, again simple to keyframe; animating the curtains of the window blowing in the breeze, potentially complicated.

This is what simulations are for, and it's the same when animating liquid, or fire and smoke. Many 3D applications offer the ability to create at least hard (the bouncing metal balls) or soft body simulations (the curtains blowing in the wind), while some offer a full simulation suite which will include particle and fluid simulations.



The trade-off is control. A hand-keyed animation does allow the artist to have full control of every single aspect of the animation and finesse a move, artistically, every time. A simulation does what the physics decides (which admittedly the artist has control of), but this can mean an iterative workflow of experiments of allowing the simulation to calculate the moves, the artist to review, and then go again. Most 3D applications let you 'bake' a simulation once you're happy, freezing the result into ordinary keyframes you can still tweak

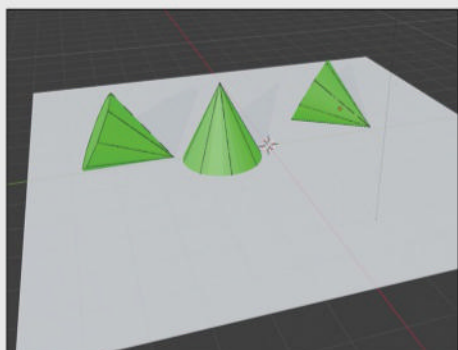
The same ball can bounce, a flag can ripple and smoke can billow – all driven by simulation.

and play back more easily, but the physics would have gone.

Understanding what can be done with a simulation and how it can make one's life as an artist easier, whilst at the same time exploding your animation potential, is one of the many superpowers of a 3D artist.

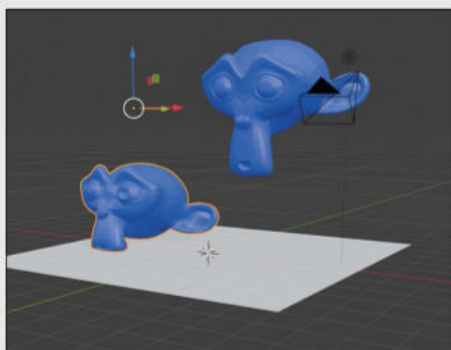
Mike Griggs is the founder of Creative Bloke and has experience in content creation, workflow design and emerging creative technology. www.creativebloke.com.

How to create various physics simulations



1 Colliding solid objects

In Blender, to create simple rigid body simulations in the Physics tab, add a Rigid Body set to Active for the object you wish to react to: wind or gravity. If you want an object to be nothing but a reactive surface, set the Rigid Body to Passive. Then press Play to create the simulation.



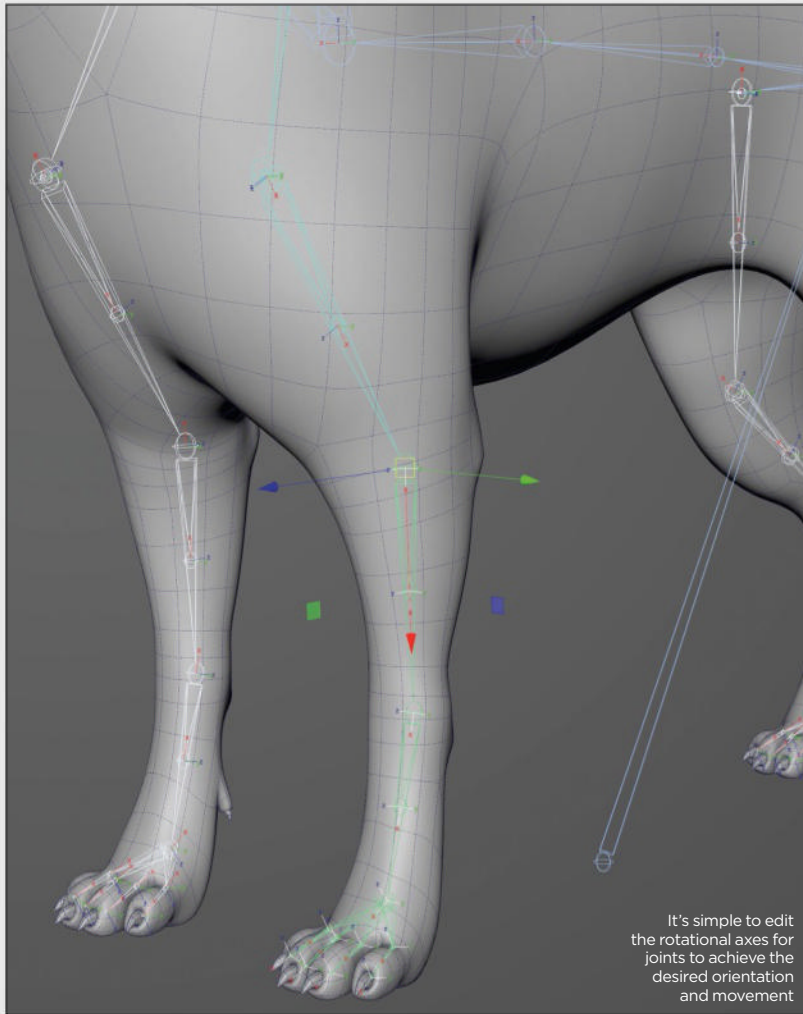
2 Flexing soft bodies/cloth

In Blender, to make an object a soft body, there are options, of which the Cloth modifier is the easiest to apply. Make sure that any rigid bodies that you wish the cloth body to react to have the Collider modifier applied as well as the Rigid Body modifier. Again, press Play to create the simulation.



3 Fire and water

Fluid simulations are used to create water, and also fire and smoke. Usually these work differently to other simulations, in that a 'volume' needs to be created that marks the boundaries. In Blender, even for fire, use the Fluid modifier in Physics to make objects part of these kinds of simulations.



JOINT ORIENTATIONS AND ROTATIONAL AXES

Looking deeper into the subject of joints, this time **Antony Ward** investigates their rotational axes



Usually, upon creation, a joint's orientation is set so that it automatically points to its parent in the hierarchy. So, for example, X will be the primary axis and aim at the next joint in the chain.

This is to make animation more predictable, meaning you get a better twist around the joint. Imagine rotating your upper arm while keeping your elbow in place; this works because, in theory, the axis you're rotating around runs down the humerus bone.

There will be times, however, when you may need a different primary axis. This could depend on a number of things, like the game engine you are

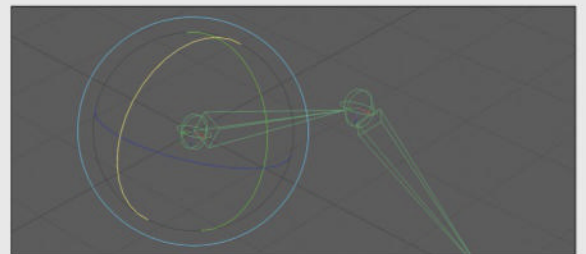
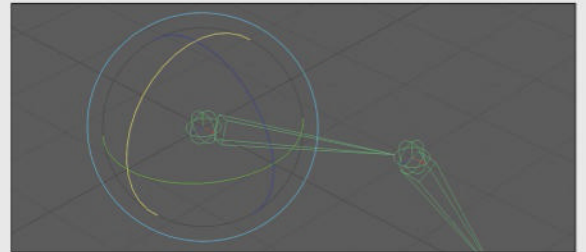
working on for example, or to help reduce gimbal lock, something we discussed in last month's issue.

There will also be times when the axes are reset or even changed by accident, so they need to be corrected. Fortunately, editing rotational axes is very easy to do and you have full freedom to configure them any way you like, and at any angle too.

Let's take a look at how you would approach this in a simple, three-joint arm setup.

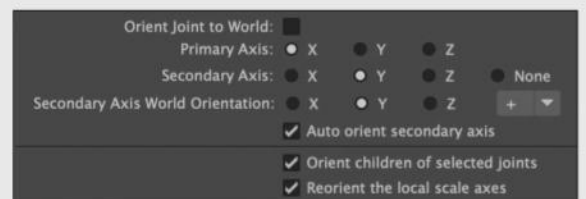
Antony Ward, aka antCGI, has been creating digital content for over three decades. Be it game development, rigging or recording in-depth courses for his YouTube channel, he boasts experience in most areas of 3D. <https://bit.ly/49BhX1n>

Three steps to fix an unnatural joint rotation



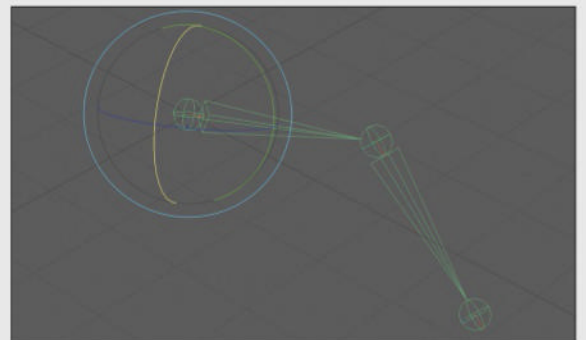
1 Broken rotations

The joints in this simple arm setup have been reset to match the world orientation. The issue is, as you rotate the shoulder, the elbow joint moves away from its original location, meaning this isn't a natural movement and would prove difficult for an animator to work with.



2 Set up your orientations

What we need to do is reset the orientations, and in most applications there is a simple tool to help do this. Usually there are three options: Primary Axis is the axis that points down the joint, with Secondary Axis pointing away from the joint. Secondary Axis World Orientation is which direction the secondary axis points in.



3 Reset your orientations

If we use X as the Primary Axis, and Y as both the Secondary Axis and Secondary Axis World Orientation, our axes are now fixed with X now pointing down the joints and Y pointing up. Now, when we rotate the shoulder, the elbow remains in place. The same goes for the forearm and the wrist.

FIVE MINUTES WITH IAN VICKNAIR

Artworks from classic films inspired this matte painter and director



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

Growing up was chaotic; I moved from country to country every few years. In a family of teachers, international schools were our lives – living in places like Ethiopia, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Lithuania, Russia. This contributed a lot to my art, especially as a matte painter creating wild environments and as a young art director bringing worlds and stories together.

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

Truthfully... people. Friends, family, intimate relationships have really added meaning to my work because it's allowed me to learn and explore who I am and what the world is.

Is there a painting you saw that changed everything?

Three specific paintings changed me. The first was the aerial reveal of Neverland in Hook (1991), painted by Yusei Uesugi. Second was the Eloi temple from The Time Machine

AMBER CASTLE

"Contributed to the MattePaint Challenge using Michaela Maria Wartbichler's base 3D render. It was a fun challenge to really push the details and realism of this environment. This was my take on Game of Thrones but in a fantasy setting."



(1960), painted by Bill Brace. And finally, the Underground Sea from Journey to the Centre of the Earth (1959), painted by Emil Kosa Jr.

Can you tell us about your first paid commission?

It was for an advertisement firm. I had to digitally paint a farm landscape from the future. It had lots of flying tractors and cities in the sky. This is where I learned the

“It's been a constant pursuit to matte-paint as much as I can and where I can”

MAGIC BEANS

"The CGI plate was provided by Tamas Gyerman. This was fun to paint on top of as it reminded me of a childhood story: Jack and the Beanstalk. This concept art matte painting is my twist on the old tale."

term 'matte painting' and fell in love. Since then, it's been a constant pursuit to matte-paint as much as I can and where I can.

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

It was for the Backrooms movie directed by Kane Parsons. There is a huge difference between these paintings and my very first one. The first had masking issues, colour grade issues, file cleanliness, depth of field problems, stitching errors, noise variations... the list goes on.

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

Mostly yes. The biggest issue is how volatile the industry is. I'm thankful I'm one of those people who can say their job is what they love. It's made me a stronger person and continues to allow growth.

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

PAINT MORE! A younger me didn't manage life too well. I was very busy figuring out who and what I was and where I belonged. I just wish I had stopped a bit and painted more.

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

Without a doubt. I adore digital work, especially photorealism because you study how pixels work and fluctuate. It's made me a stronger painter and VFX artist, and now that I'm into directing, it's given me a stronger eye.

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

Halo! I had to paint a HALO jump of Master Chief leaping out of a ship and skydiving down onto the surface of this alien world. It was loads of fun learning how to make planets at that level of detail.

What is your next step in art or life?

Currently, I'm working on a few IP projects and short films. I'd like to get more into art direction and leading teams and making my own stories. I'll still be painting, though, as that's my core.

Ian is a digital matte painter and art director in the visual effects and game industry. With over ten years of experience, he has contributed to major projects like Justice League, Suicide Squad, Witcher, and Splitgate. Shaped by living globally, he always brings highly detailed environments to life.

www.artstation.com/ianvicknairs





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

 **recycle**

The possibilities are endless.

www.recyclenow.com

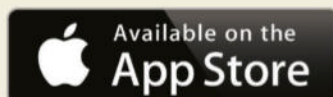
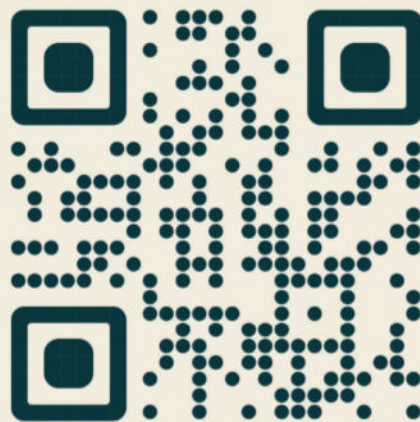
Advertisement



Everything you insure. All right here.

A mobile app for your world insured.

Download the app now.



"Love this app. It helps
me stay organised"



"Great app. A godsend
when renewals are due!"

