NO.1 FOR DIGITAL ARTISTS

# ImagineFX

PAINT POWERFUL

# CHARACTER ART

EXPERT ADVICE FOR USING SILHOUETTE AND COLOUR FOR YOUR HEROES

**16** TIPS TO PAINT WITH PERSONALITY AND STRONG POSES



Illustration by Frunze Babakhanyan

INTERVIEW

## LISANNE KOETEEUW

Disney concept artist on her character process

FUTURE

ISSUE 271

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# Welcome to…

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While there is huge scope for playing with everything in an image – from environments to weaponry and lighting effects to monsters and more – most of the art we see will focus on one main element, which is most often a character.

Character design is an art form in its own right, so in this issue we are taking a long, hard look at how you can improve your own character designs, with insight and advice from a wide range of experts – all of whom have created some absolutely cracking heroes.

Take a look at our cover for a start. Frunze Babakhanyan designed each of these characters, and he shares his tips with us for using silhouette and colour to achieve the best possible results.

Elsewhere, we talk to a group of artists to discover how characters are created for adult cartoons (no, not that kind), and we get helpful advice on shape language from Petter Faustino, as well as a look at creating fan art for a Studio Ghibli-style 3D scene – plus a whole lot more.

Enjoy the issue!

Rob

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

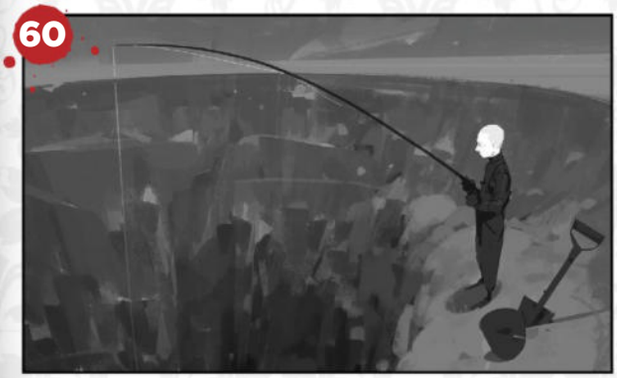
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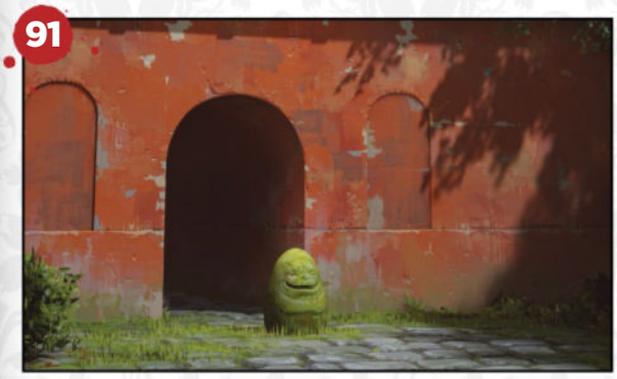
**Level up your character design**
Frunze Babakhanyan shares his tips for developing dynamic characters for your projects.

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**Master shape language**
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**3D Studio Ghibli fan art**
Learn how to create a 3D render of a classic Ghibli-style scene, all while keeping the traditional look.

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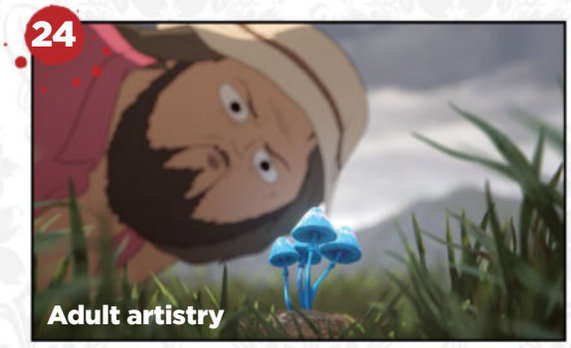
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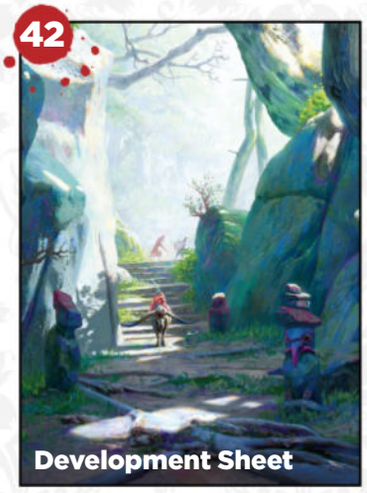



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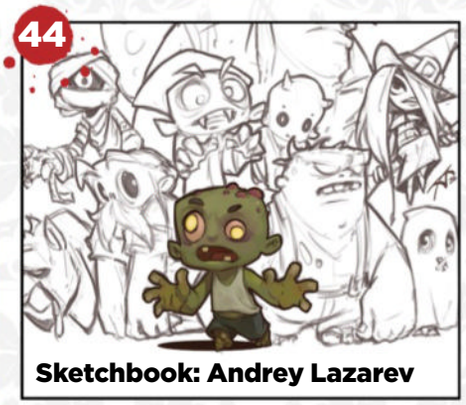
See page 8 for the best new art









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Advice and techniques from pro artists…




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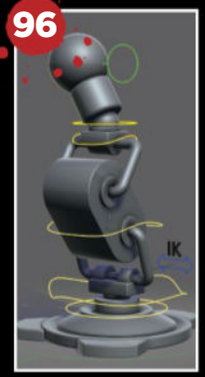


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# 3D Artist

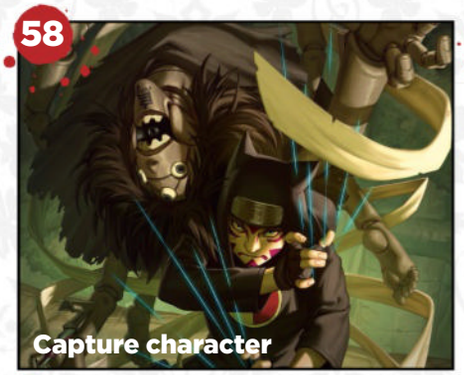
Industry experts pass on their 3D art techniques…

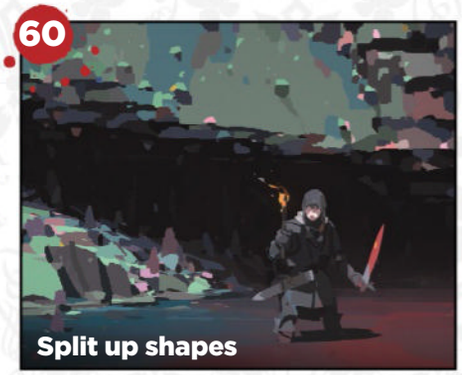






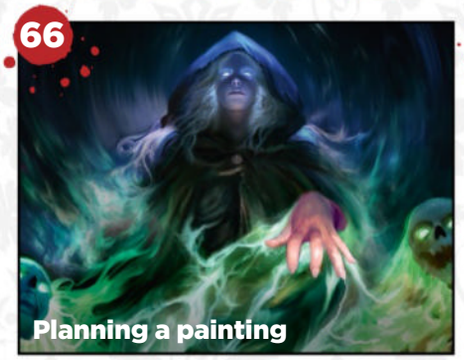
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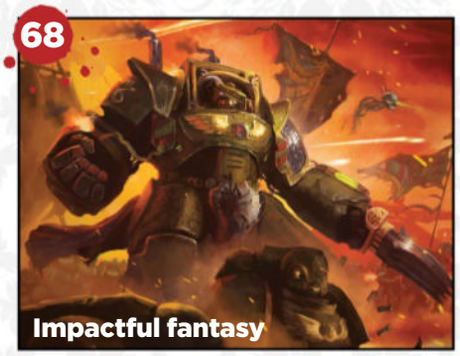













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Type this into your browser's address bar.
**https://bit.ly/designcharacters**

2 **Click the download link**
Find your files ready for download.

3 **Download what you need...**
Save the files or watch the videos.

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## Hayley A. Peterson

**LOCATION:** US **MEDIA:** Procreate, Photoshop **WEB:** https://www.kodasea.art

Hayley is a freelance illustrator, creating character concepts, album covers and TTRPG art. They're always pushing the living quality of their art, prioritising expressions, dynamic motion and atmosphere for storytelling.

1




2



**1 DUBIOUS BAIT SELLER**

"After looking through eclectic bait shacks, I approached the environmental design of my fisherman's stand like I would a character design. A place can be as alive as a person!"

**2 LAWRENCE EXPRESSIONS**

"Engaging angles, mouth shapes and action are paramount with emotions. Fine-tuned linework conveys the intensity my detective character attempts to keep a lid on."

3



**3 ELDRITCH MANTIS SHRIMP**

"A monster design with inspirations rooted in Fromsoft's Bloodborne, the Xenomorph Queen from the movie Aliens and real-life squilla mantis shrimp. Nature gives insightful design cues."



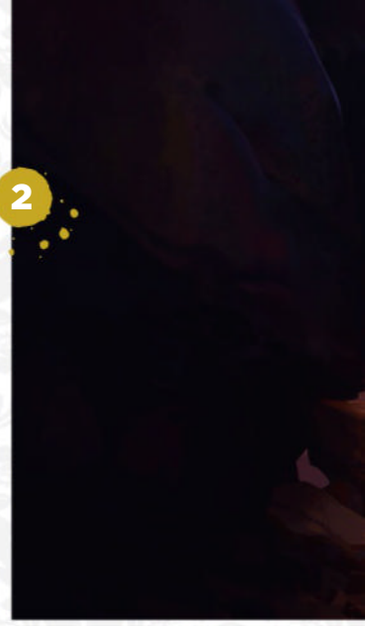
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4
4 LUCKY CATCH
"The juxtaposition of a pleasant scene with an uncanny element never goes stale for me. Incorporating punchy, saccharine colours cements the illustration's vivid stylisation."
7/22

# Guillaume Bidault

**LOCATION:** France **MEDIA:** Blender, Photoshop, Lightroom, Procreate **WEB:** https://maguibg.artstation.com

Guillaume Bidault is an artist working across the entertainment industry. He enjoys creating stylised designs with bold, playful shapes, but his favourite part of the process is visual development, where he can explore ideas.



**1 DESERT VEGETATION**
"My goal here was to show the type of vegetation found in this desert near the oasis. I wanted to create a unique identity, with cool shapes and colours!"

**2 ENCOUNTER**
"This is a keyframe showing an encounter between two characters fate has brought together. I wanted to represent it in a stylish way, with a mystical end-of-day vibe!"

**3 UNCLE'S PLACE**
"Our hero comes to work with his uncle. I wanted to showcase a striking design, featuring the hull of an old ship hidden in the dunes and embedded in a tree."





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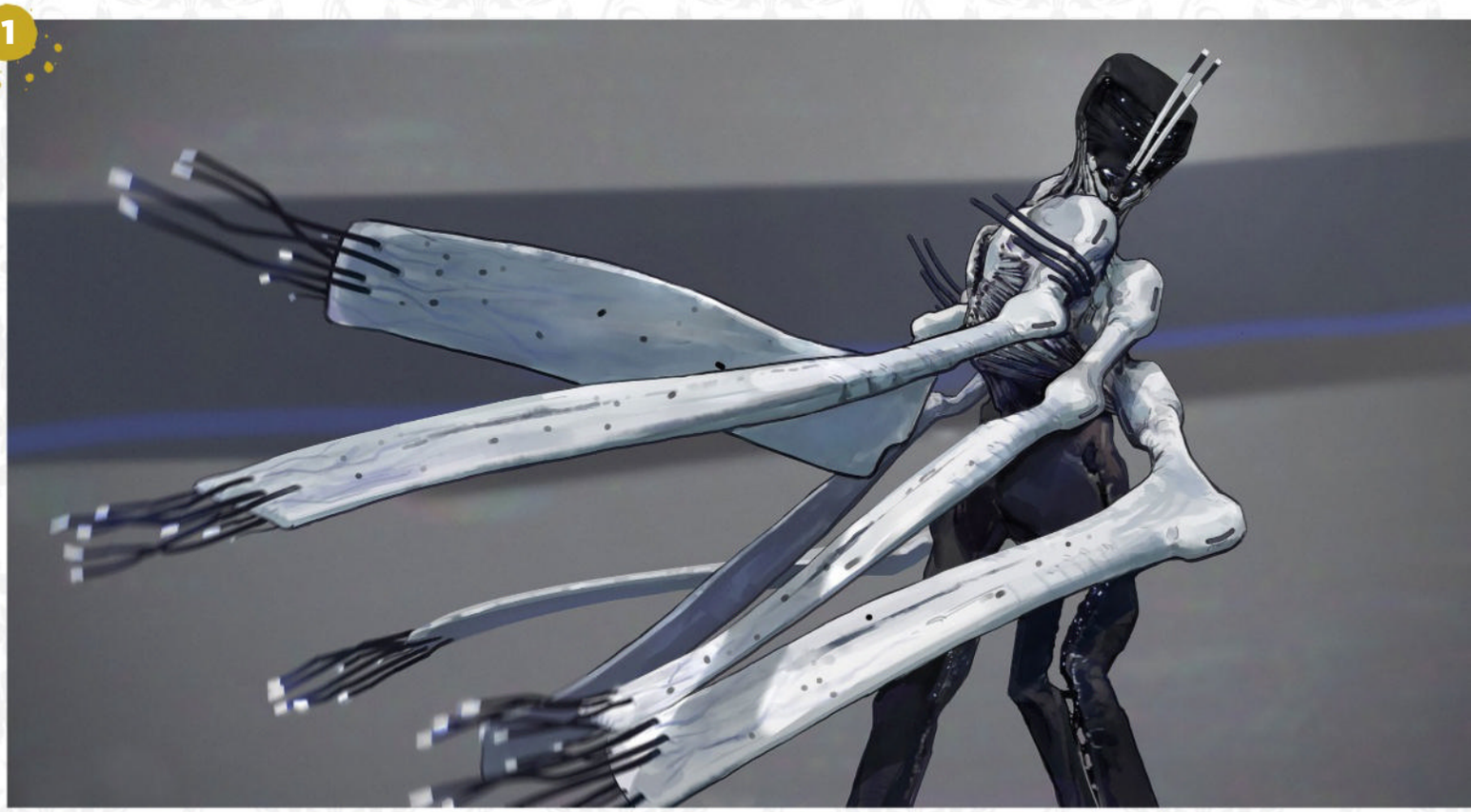




# Milan Nikolic

**LOCATION:** Serbia **MEDIA:** Clip Studio Paint, Photoshop, Blender, ZBrush, 3DCoat **WEB:** www.artstation.com/milancho

Milan is a freelance concept artist who specialises in creature and character design. He draws inspiration from music, video games, films, science fiction and cultures to create imaginative worlds and memorable characters.



**1 ONOKAI**
"This creature was designed as the kind of unpredictable boss encounter that I would love to see in a game. Its design blends subtle insectoid traits with futuristic elements, creating a menacing and mysterious presence."

**2 PRIEST**
"Zannax is a 500-year-old spiritual leader whose influence shapes the kingdom. Inspired by diverse cultural traditions, his distinctive silhouette embodies wisdom, authority and enduring power."





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3



4

**3 SCOUT**
"A border ranger entrusted with a special mission, Sowa's design blends modern military gear with the elegant silhouettes and disciplined aesthetic of traditional samurai armour."

**4 VEIN MOUNT**
"This is an intelligent creature genetically engineered by the Varkani to guide scouts across the Blood River. A fusion of bird and wolf, it is both agile and fiercely resilient."

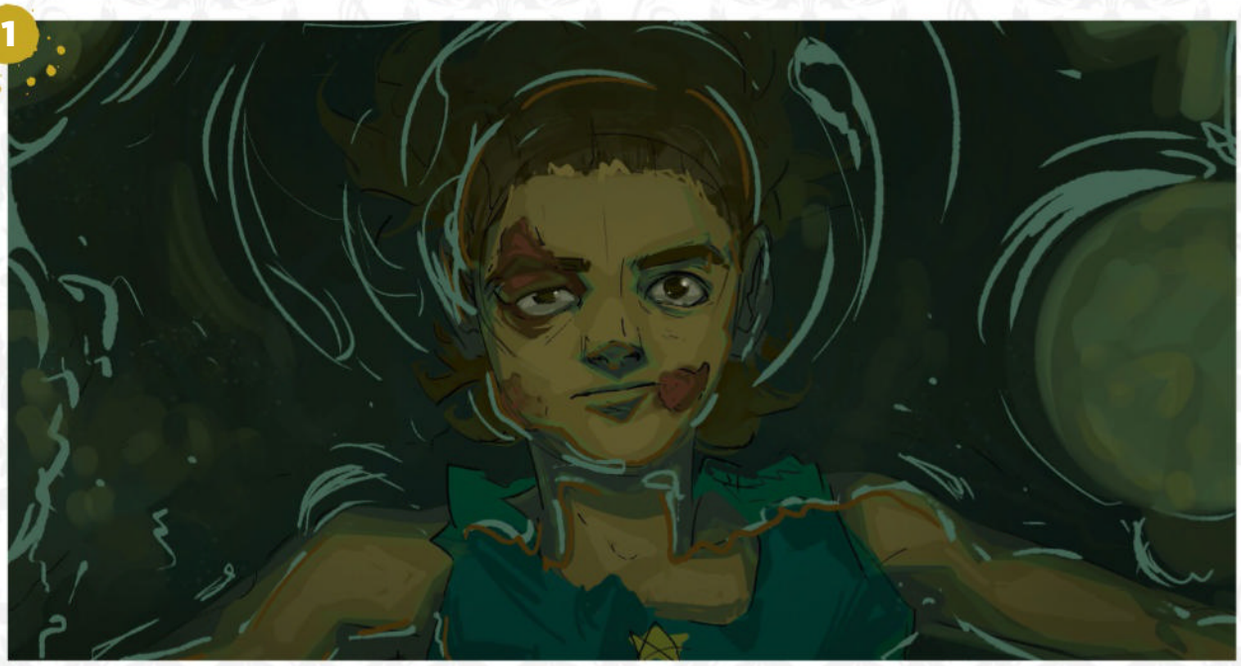


# Lucas Leão

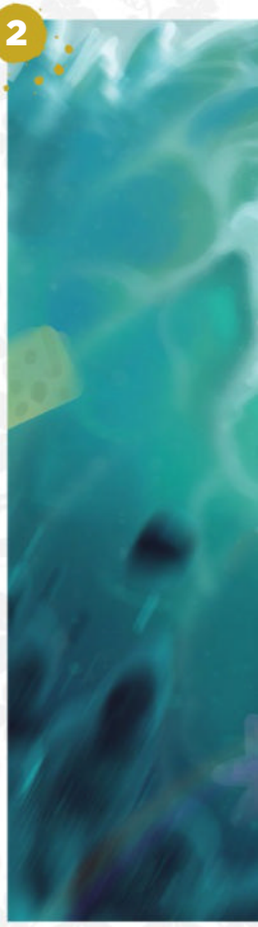
**LOCATION:** Brasil **MEDIA:** Photoshop **WEB:** www.artstation.com/oilustralucas

Lucas is an illustrator with experience ranging from commissions and trading cards to in-house studio work. Inspired by animation, films and comics, he enjoys exploring colour, storytelling and imaginative worlds.

1



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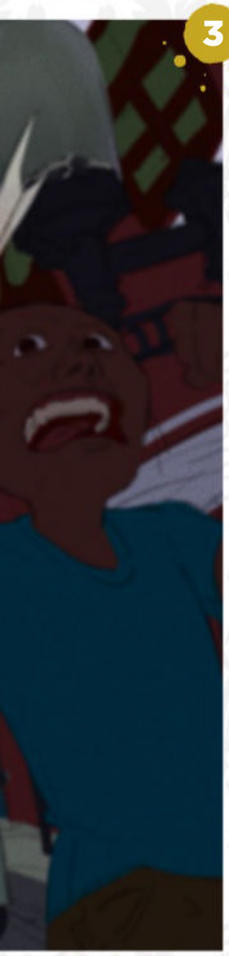







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**1 BURNOUT**
"This represents how I felt after taking on too many projects. It helped me recognise my limits and reconnect with both my well-being and passion for art."

**2 FLIGHT**
"This introduces Blue Boy, a young superhero from Pernambuco, Brazil. I wanted to attempt to capture his optimistic personality and sense of freedom."

**3 CONFRONTATION**
"I imagined a dangerous encounter in Recife, Brazil. The setting is Rua do Bom Jesus, blending in local identity with a cinematic superhero moment."

**4 ARRIVAL**
"This piece began with a colour palette that I couldn't stop thinking about. After days of searching for the right idea, I let instinct guide the painting."



# Carolina Soares

**LOCATION:** Portugal **MEDIA:** Procreate **WEB:** www.carolemellow.com

Carolina is a freelance illustrator who spends their days building magical stories. "I have a special love for emotion-filled characters and themes, and I bring them to life by using bright colours and ethereal visuals!"

1



2



**1 SWANS**

"With this piece, I had fun while creating a tranquil look into some unlikely friends crossing the stream. My favourite part was to portray a feeling that filled my heart with joy!"

**2 SUN THREADS**

"What if someone could turn sun beams into warm and golden threads? The result uses a sea of hues to create this cozy and inviting piece glowing from within."

3



**3 FORGOTTEN**

"An exploration of the feeling of being left behind, contrasted against dreamy and unnervingly moody colours and delicate elements and shapes."

**4 STEALING THE MOON**

"I imagined a character sneakily taking away the moon. Watching her through these bright and ornate window frames gave her a magical and ethereal feel."





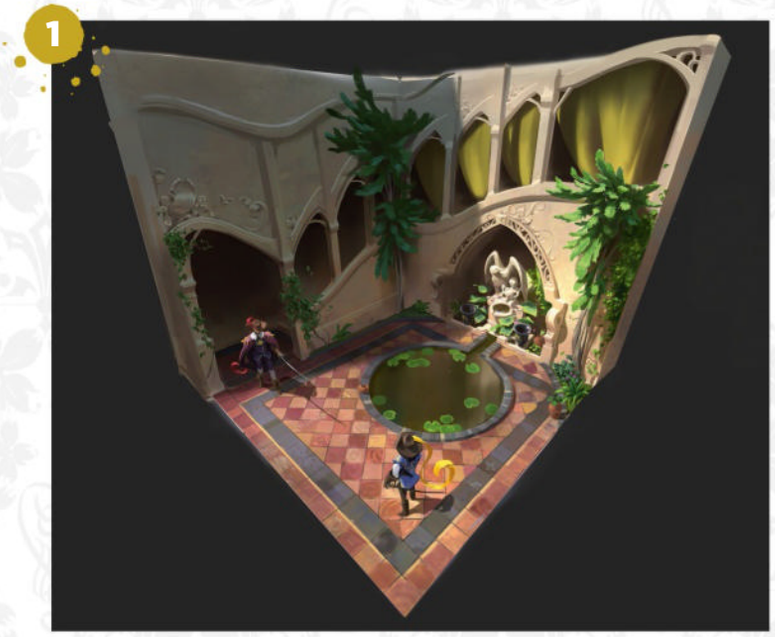
# Léo Gouvert

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

Léo is a concept artist who specialises in environments. He started drawing by copying Pokemon when he was six in the playground, and with other kids admiring his work, he never stopped.

**1 COURTYARD**
"Concept art for a personal worldbuilding project, inspired by swashbuckling novels and my city, Montpellier. I would really love to turn this universe into a video game one day."

**2 MEMENTO MORI CONCEPT ART**
"The goal with this was to capture an atmosphere that evokes the disappearance of a great civilisation, somewhere between melancholy and magic."




**3 SERRE BEAUJARDIN**
"An architectural project with Victorian and Art Nouveau influences. I tend to enjoy creating places where I would genuinely love to be; places where I would feel good."

**4 CITY OF MONTBRILLIANT**
"An architectural concept taking place in the same universe. I like making the buildings undulate to add that little unserious, fantastical touch."




**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**

3




4



THE ROOKIES

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WWW.THEROOKIES.CO

# Healing Station

**YEAR CREATED:** 2026 **MEDIA:** Photoshop, Blender

"The image captures a hidden sacred healing station, once nourished by a restorative herbal lake and cascading waterfalls, now tainted by a subtle, creeping corruption. It highlights the contrast between serene natural beauty and underlying spiritual decay, using Blender and Photoshop to build a layered, story-driven environment. The piece doubles as a practical demonstration of Jama Jurabaev's QuickTools workflow."



## Artist PROFILE

**Nikhil Verma**

**LOCATION:** India



Nikhil Verma is an environment concept artist skilled in crafting immersive landscapes, atmospheric scenes and detailed natural environments. Proficient in Blender for 3D modelling and rendering, Photoshop for digital painting and compositing, and advanced techniques that evoke mood and narrative depth, he brings game worlds and visual storytelling to life with striking realism and emotion.

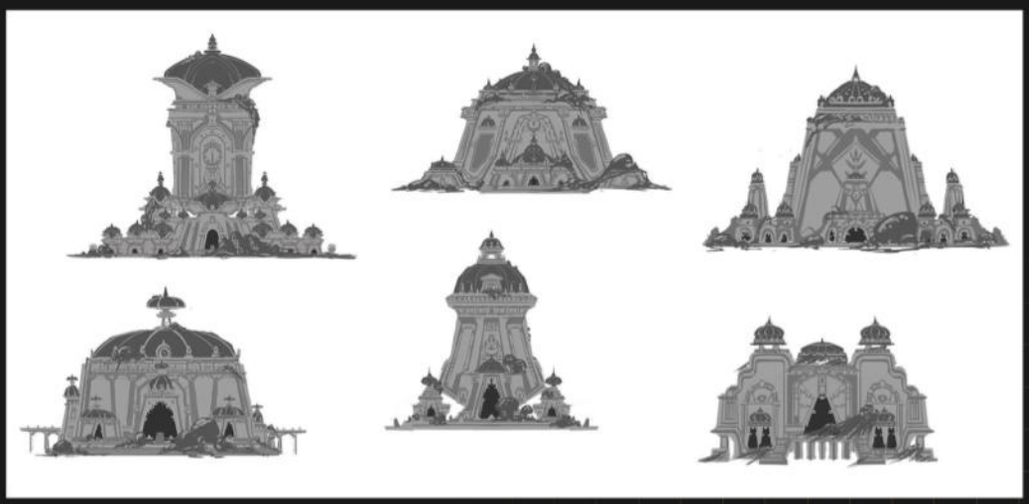
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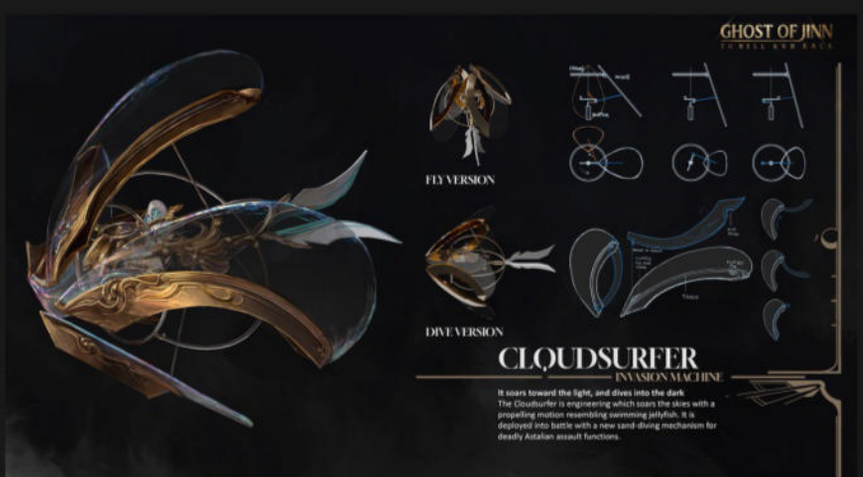




## The Last Light

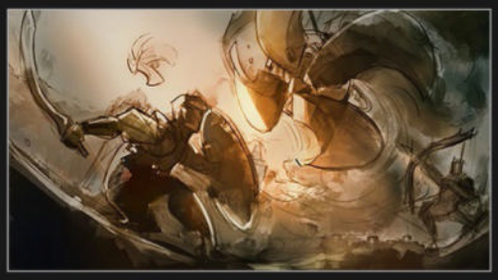
**YEAR CREATED:** 2025 **MEDIA:** Photoshop, Blender

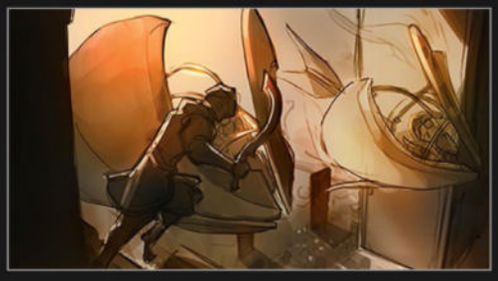
"Based on a narrative from the concept team, a scene was envisioned in which the warriors of Jahaan battle the cloudsurfer fiercely to defend their city. I was tasked to design a unique assault vehicle, the Cloudsurfer, along with the epic scene and the mechanism animation."

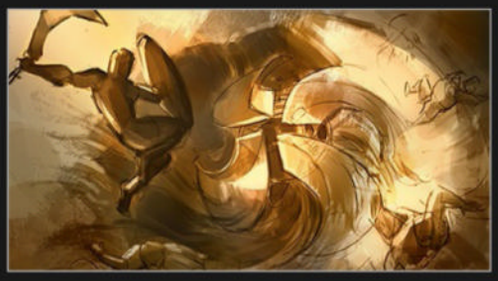


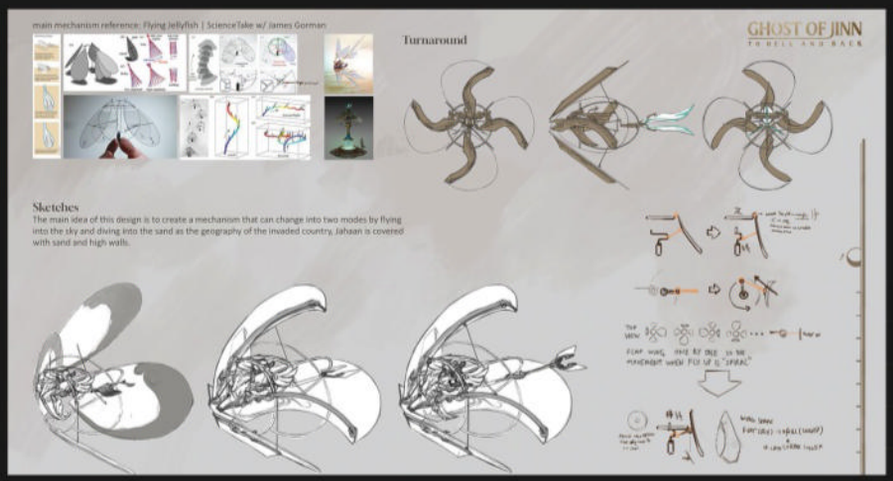













## Artist PROFILE

**Ha En Chuen**

**LOCATION:** Malaysia



Ha En Chuen is a concept artist based in Malaysia. Inspired by "life", he creates with the hope of spreading joy and inspiration to those who experience his work.

**www.therookies.co/u/enchuen**

© Amazon Studios



Kevin is an adult sitcom co-created by actors Aubrey Plaza and Joe Wengert, set in an animal shelter.

# Adult artistry

All grown up **Tanya Combrinck** talks to cartoonists about character design evolution and adult shows they've worked on

**Adult cartoons have exploded over the last few years, and as the genre has matured, art styles and character designs are pushing new frontiers.**

"I've noticed a growing trend towards maximalism," says **Vincent Tsui**, an art director and illustrator working in animation. "The level of draftsmanship has dramatically improved across the board; I'm constantly blown away by the sophistication of the designs I see around. Back when I was a student 10 years ago, styles leaned more towards minimalism and stylisation. Today I feel like we're in a maximalist era: visually dense, overly detailed and highly naturalistic styles. "I think the real goal now is to make things look effortlessly sophisticated."



Art director **Jake Reeves**, who has worked in 2D series animation for the past seven years, tells us that artists are now catering to an animation audience that's more knowledgeable than ever before.

"It's absolutely wild that folks completely outside of the industry are involved in discourse about 'bean mouth' [a somewhat controversial art style in which mouths are drawn in the shape of a bean] and other character design trends. It's forcing artists to be more thoughtful, but also requires us to put on blinders a bit."

The expressive faces of the characters in Common Side Effects are focal points in almost every shot.



© Adult Swim

Another driver of advancement is that people are consuming a broader range of material. "Artists, as well as audiences, have an unprecedented amount of globally informed taste and inspiration," says Jake. "We're seeing character styles that pull from old-school rubber hose, Japanese anime and French BD all at once.

"While studios are still often stuck on the prime-time look, I'm seeing so much exciting and novel work coming from the online indie community. Artists are eager to bring new looks and ideas to animation, and the studio system is starting to catch up."

A perfect example of the effortless sophistication that creators are striving for, says Vincent, can be found in a recent American adult animated television project he worked on – the hit Adult Swim show Common Side Effects, which premiered last year, with a second season expected in 2027. It's about the discovery of a mushroom that heals all maladies and the conspiracy to conceal it.



**ART THERAPY IN THE STUDIO**
Brazilian artist Caio Cacau explains how his studio is more than a place of work – it's almost like a form of meditation for him when he draws.
**Page 28**




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**Page 32**




**THE LATEST FEEDBACK**
Readers praise our last issue's focus on black and white art, while others were inspired by dragons and tips to master world building.
**Page 33**

"Working on a Black Panther franchise was always the dream," says Uzoma. "Going from fan art to getting paid to contribute to its lore was a full-circle moment."



© Marvel Animation

> "Artists and audiences have an unprecedented amount of globally informed taste and inspiration"



"The proportions of the characters not only set them apart from other shows, they also allow us to use very realistic and subtle acting," says Alejandra.

© Adult Swim

INDUSTRY INSIGHT

# EYES OF WAKANDA

*Uzoma Dunkwu on the character design that won him an Emmy*

**What was your starting point for developing characters for Eyes of Wakanda?**
I met with the show's creator, Todd Harris, back in August 2021 to brief me on the first concept. He wanted a pushed but physically grounded look, while referring to stylisation from artworks made by the legendary Kadir Nelson.

Eventually, characterisation from JC Leyendecker came up in character group meetings. We used that as a guiding principle to define the physiques of characters on the show.

**How was shape language used to express personality?**
At the time the story was about a group of protagonists, Dora Milaje, who are female warriors. I reduced the design language to two basic shapes for the heads while retaining their individual personalities. B'Risa, for example, was described as aggressive and combative, so I used two triangles forming a kite shape as the base head shape to emphasise that nature. I also gave her a masculine build.

**How has character design evolved over recent years?**
Stories in TV animation have become more edgy and matured, demanding more sophisticated draftsmanship. Character design in television and film are now somewhat interchangeable. This was the sensibility I had going into the very first design assignment on Eyes of Wakanda.



*Uzoma Dunkwu is an Emmy award-winning visual artist who's worked with Marvel, Disney, and Netflix.*

*www.uzomadunkwu.com*

One of the first things that you'll notice about this series is the distinctive character design that uses an unusual combination of exaggerated proportions: small hands, small faces, and large heads.

Vincent sees the contrast between the stylised characters and the more realistic background art as a reflection of the way the show tackles serious subjects "with a lot of lightness".

"The characters themselves look almost cartoony, while the world around them is painted in this beautifully naturalistic, detailed way," he says. "I love that tension between the two. I think that's what gives the show its unique tone."

The starting point for these characters was a set of sketches by the show's co-creator, Joe Bennett, which were fleshed out by Vincent and then further developed by the art team. Although the characters appear cartoonish compared to the backgrounds, they do have their own kind of subtlety and realism which might not be immediately obvious.

"Their seemingly simple designs are incredibly deceptive," says Vincent. "These characters are actually quite hard to draw and get right, especially Agent Copano! I think that's part of what makes Joe's characters so tangible; they convey very complex human emotions through design and acting, even though they look so simple on the surface."



© Amazon Studios

"This was a special project where everyone on the team really clicked with each other and it felt fun despite the late nights and long hours," says Jake.

## CREATIVE PHILOSOPHY

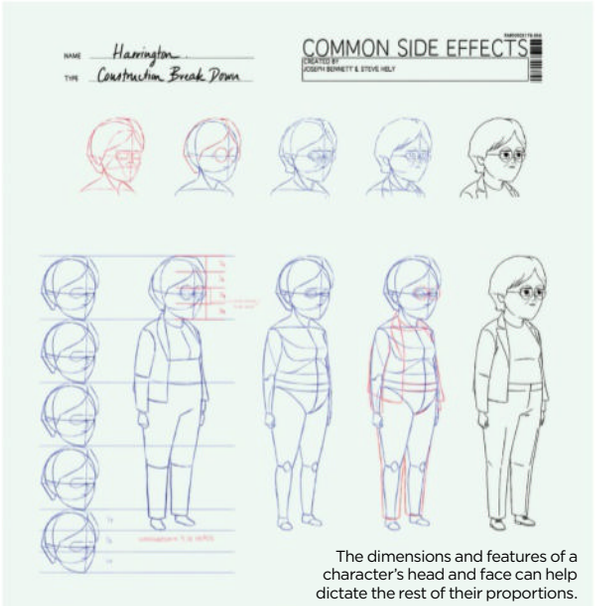
Animator **Alejandra Guevara Cervera**, who worked as lead character designer on the show, tells us that the character design process was very different from that of any other project she has worked on. It was guided by the creative philosophy at the animation studio, Green Street Pictures, which encourages artists to develop characters' idiosyncrasies by looking closely at real-world sources.



"The world in the show should feel lived-in and the characters should feel like regular people you could find in the real world," she says. "We all have features that set us apart and lives that show in our faces and bodies. Characters for us shouldn't be 'pretty' and 'harmonised', they should show their personality and their uniqueness in their poses, their anatomy and their expressions. The way we achieved that was through observation; all the artists were required to rely heavily on photo and video reference, as well as real-life inspiration. In the words of supervising director Benjy Brooke: 'The character is discovered through the reference.'"

Once these distinctive features were discovered for each character, Alejandra worked hard to make sure they didn't get lost or diluted. "There is a tendency in the design process to make the characters' features blander

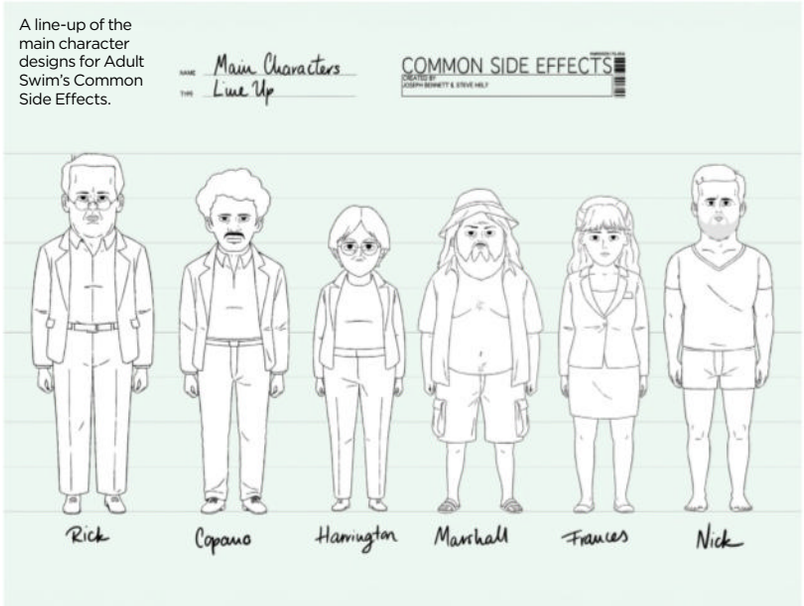
> **Character design uses an unusual combination of exaggerated proportions**




The dimensions and features of a character's head and face can help dictate the rest of their proportions.

© Adult Swim

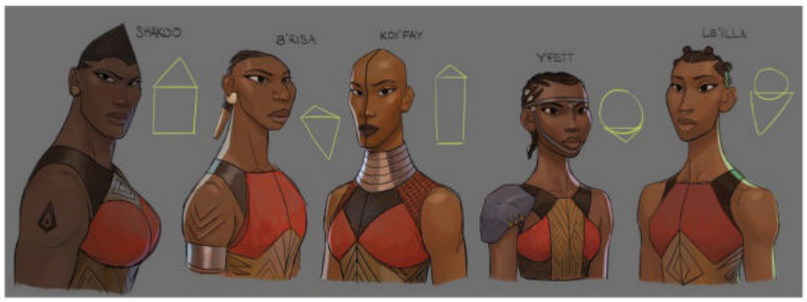
A line-up of the main character designs for Adult Swim's Common Side Effects.




© Adult Swim




© Amazon Studios




© Marvel Animation

Learn more about Uzoma's process at uzomadunkwu.gumroad.com/l/ethniccharacterdesign.




© Adult Swim

as they go through the pipeline – lines become softer, shapes get refined," she says. "As the lead, I made it a priority to work with the team so that they could identify these features and carry them on to the next step until the character sheet was ready to go to the animation team. In that way, each member of the team was encouraged not to transform, but to build from the work that came before."

A recent project for Jake was art director on the Amazon Studios show Kevin, a comedy co-created by actors Aubrey Plaza and Joe Wengert, set in an animal shelter, which came out in April of this year. "Our goal with the series was to make something that was clearly a 'prime-time comedy' look but elevated to carry with it inspiration from auteur directors like Wes Anderson and Spike Lee," he says. "The development art was done by uber-talented filmmaker Daniel C Katz – his original illustrations really nailed a sense of personality that separated characters and defined the artistic voice.

"With these characters, our first job was on the technical side – how do we transform these cool illustrations into production-ready art models. This meant smoothing out rough edges, creating a system of rules, and learning how to communicate with the rest of the character team how to create the same tonality.



© Adult Swim

"Our primary constraint was that we were designing for a rig-based show. The characters are puppets and need to move and rotate as if they were a fully formed 3D object."

Jake tells us that every possible element of the design language and character style was thoroughly tested, and rules were established to control certain visual aspects.

"We created a rule set for a dynamic line weight that changes based on the character's distance from camera," he says. "We spent time examining the size of pupils and creating a rule about how much of an eye the pupil must take up in order to read clearly on screen. It sounds so goofy, but these little choices become critical to the character acting and the story being clear and easy to follow. If the pupil is too big they look crazy, if it's too small we can't track it from a distance."

As an animator, Alejandra enjoyed combining the technical side of animation with the creative side of the designers.

Each character's evolution is also moved in some way by the individual touch of every artist who works on it. "Part of what I love about art direction is finding the unique talents and voices that each team member brings to the whole project," reveals Jake. "I may have a rough idea of what a character should look like, but what I ultimately get back from the team never ceases to amaze me."

# ARTIST IN RESIDENCE




My shelf holds childhood toys, convention plaques, and other memories from different stages of my life. Among my favourite pieces are the framed drawings my son made when he was little – I was so proud of them that I had them framed and placed them in my studio.

This is where most of my professional work happens, using a pen display with Clip Studio Paint for my digital paintings. I spend many hours here every day, moving between references, sketches and finished artwork, so I've gradually adapted the setup around the way I naturally work.

My father left this note on my desk when I was about 14, encouraging me to keep drawing and save my work because one day I would be able to show it to people in the industry. I had it put in this little frame, which I keep beside me on my desk as a daily reminder of the person who believed in my dream before I had any reason to doubt it.

I've never found a conventional chair that suited the way I work, as I'm constantly changing positions throughout the day. So I decided to try a massage recliner and even added wheels to it myself. Somehow, it became the perfect studio chair – especially during long painting sessions.

# Caio Cacau

**Comic casa** The Brazilian artist opens his doors, revealing the tools, inspirations, and stories behind his studio



**My studio is more than just a place where I work. It's where I go to focus, almost like a form of meditation. When I walk in and sit down, it's like something changes. I leave the world behind and enter a different state of mind. For me, creating art has never felt like sitting at a desk and doing a job. It requires a different kind of concentration, and when everything clicks, I can become completely absorbed in what I'm doing.**

I designed my current studio when I moved into a larger home. Before that, I worked for years in a tiny walk-in closet that I had turned into my studio. It was small but comfortable, and I learned to make the most of it. My new space finally gave me room for my drawing table,

The artwork on my walls comes from the things I loved growing up, from X-Men and Thundercats to Superman and video games. I spent hours studying these images as a kid, looking at the composition, details, and storytelling, and they still inspire me today.

I'm very proud to be Brazilian, so having my country's flag in the studio was a natural choice. It's a small reminder of where I come from, especially when most of my professional work connects me with clients and audiences around the world.

Artist and illustrator Caio has been lucky enough to work on epic Batman illustrations for DC Comics.



©DC Comics

Brazilian artist Caio says his studio is a space that has grown alongside him, full of things that he's collected during his lifetime.



books, instruments, and the collection of figures and objects I've gathered throughout my life.

My setup is entirely digital. I built my computer about three years ago with some of the best components available at the time, and it still handles even the huge illustrations I have to create with ease. I work on a 21:9 UltraWide reference monitor and a Huion Kamvas Pro 24 4K. I used Wacom products for most of my career, including a Cintiq, which is still going strong and now belongs to my son, who is becoming the next generation of illustrator in the family.

Caio's work has been featured by leading names including DC Comics, Dark Horse, Upper Deck and Marvel, Zenescope Entertainment, Renegade Game Studios, and Wizards of the Coast.

**"What I like most about the studio is that it feels very personal. Almost everything around me has a story"**

I usually start around 07:30 in the morning, right after taking my son to school. Mornings are when my mind feels freshest, and I can easily work until the evening. I also work on weekends. If I don't draw at least a little bit on a Sunday, I feel that something is missing. I usually have music or YouTube playing in the background, often rock music or videos about science, comics, UFOs, and mysteries.

What I like most about the studio is that it feels very personal. Almost everything around me has a story: things from my childhood, objects connected to my family, reminders of my career and pieces that reflect the subjects I love. It's a space that's grown alongside me rather than simply being designed as a workplace. After years working from home, I've learned that the most important thing is creating an environment that makes you want to sit down and draw. My biggest luxury isn't any particular equipment – it's being surrounded by things that inspire me, things I love, and having a space where I can completely disappear into the work.

*Caio Cacau is a Brazilian artist and illustrator with over 20 years of experience, creating cinematic paintings and visual storytelling for comics, trading cards, games, and entertainment for clients worldwide. www.caiocacau.com*








As a young boy, Caio was captivated by the artwork he saw in comics, from Batman to Superman and X-Men to Thundercats, which still inspire him today when drawing new stories.



He also enjoys playing the guitar and making music.




What Caio likes most about his art studio is that it feels very personal, filled with memories from various stages of his life.

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# Letters

## YOUR FEEDBACK & OPINIONS



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*Calder Moore's gritty render evokes a real sense of mood and feel.*

### Monochrome magic

Hello Rob. I've just read the latest issue cover to cover and loved all the black and white. Especially the 3D tutorial. I do a fair bit of 3D, and it's rare to see someone ditch the colour, but what a result. So moody. Super cool and I hope you do more of this kind of thing in future issues.

***Shane, via email***

**Rob replies** *Hey Shane. I couldn't agree more. Calder's render is so full of atmosphere, and the use of (or lack of) colour suits the image perfectly. I'm always on the lookout for people making art in new and interesting ways, so keep your eyes peeled for more coming soon.*

### Comic joy

I am just reaching out to say well done. Your latest cover was amazing and it was really nice to see a breakdown of how it was made. I actually much prefer it to the colour version you showed too!

***Annie, via email***




DID YOU MISS THE PREVIOUS PACKED ISSUE?
Don't worry – you can get hold of issue 270 at **ifxm.ag/single-ifx**.




*Last month we ditched the colour on the cover in favour of this stunning comic illustration, which is full of energy and dynamism.*

**Rob replies** *Hi Annie. I'll be sure to pass along the comment to Partha, who did a fine job as our cover artist last month. I know what you mean about the black and white version too. I love the colour piece, but there's something dramatic about seeing the simpler line-art version.*

### Classic dragons!

The last couple of issues have completely won me over. I'm a really big fan of the magazine already, but it makes me happy to see you covering some classic fantasy art again. Peng Lu's dragon piece is awesome! Loved seeing his approach to what I think is the epitome of fantasy art. Thanks, you!

***Austen, via email***

**Rob replies** *Austen, you've hit the nail on the head there. There seems to be a bit of a resurgence in the more classic types of fantasy art, and I'm here for it. I'll be on the lookout for more of this for sure.*

### World building

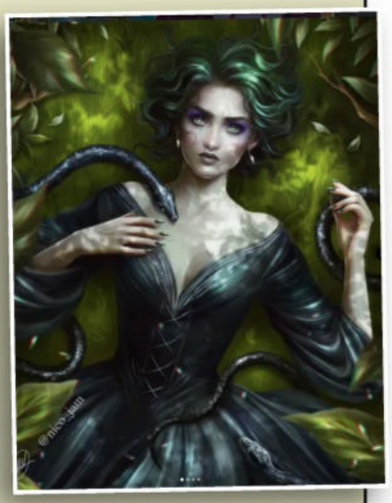
Hi. I've just read and re-read the last issue, and thanks. It's really helped me with a problem I have. I like to create worlds, but fail at getting them to look how I see in my mind. Joris Halgand has mastered this, and his tips on the subject have opened my eyes to where I was going wrong, with clear direction for me to follow in future. Please thank him for me if you can.

***Neil, via email.***

**Rob replies** *Neil, I'm sure you aren't alone in struggling to get the pictures you see in your mind onto paper. It's not easy, and Joris certainly did a stand-up job of making things that bit simpler. His tips help not just the designs, but also showed how to make a world feel cohesive and lived-in. Very glad it's helped you.*

## FRESH PAINT

New works that have grabbed our attention



**Nicolas Jamonneau**
**@nico_jam**



**JAM**
**@jamsartchannel**



**Heather Hattrick**
**@heatherhattrick**

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



**ANGRY SWIPE**
Lisanne's affinity for greyscale images adds to the kinetic clarity of this encounter.

# THE ART OF LISANNE KOETEEUW

## The in-demand concept artist talks with **James Clarke** about character design work and the creative spirit

Lisanne Koeteeuw is an artist based in the Netherlands. In recent years, she has established herself as a distinctive and in-demand character designer and concept artist. Perhaps her most widely seen work is as an artist for the Disney Lorcana trading cards. In this conversation with Imagine FX, Lisanne talks us through her working process as a character designer, her mind-set as a creative and the ways in which a young artist matures.

Working primarily in the digital space, Lisanne Koeteeuw often looks to some of the great traditions of art to inform her own use of light, shadow and colour. Images of the fantastic and of the mythological are often inspirational sources for her own original material (such as her in-development comic book). With an art school background, Lisanne recognises that intuitive creative choices are often rooted in established art and image-making traditions. In this conversation, Lisanne discusses her creative sensibility and offers valuable guidance about making images and also about promoting one's work.



Lisanne Koeteeuw

**LOST IN THE WOODS**
"A character for a personal project. I wanted to focus on the atmosphere of being lost in a dark forest."

**What was your beginning as an artist?**

My beginning started way early in my life when I used to draw Saturday morning TV cartoons as a child. I eventually applied to study animation, but was rejected. I didn't give up, though, and tried again a year later and went to art school when I was ready.

**Do you find that, whether it's your personal work or your commissioned work, artists whose work has influenced you come to mind?**

I love art history and I love learning. Art is always a sort of reflection of what is going on in a society at any given time, as a reaction to what's happening. I had my favourites, but you keep discovering new artists every day; especially now that the world has become so small: you can find ten new artists right now in your phone if you look for them.

If I'm talking art history, John William Waterhouse was a big influence. I really liked his works, but I also really liked illustrators like Edward Gorey, for example.

When you're young and you see an artist just doing something that you didn't even sort of feel was possible. It's like this man makes these weird little illustrations and all of a sudden you see where Tim Burton probably got it, you know? So, you start to see the connections everywhere. Other inspirations for me have included Art Nouveau. Alphonse Mucha's work was a big one for me and the Art Nouveau influence translates into what has made my work distinctive in the way that it has a visual flow.

## Artist PROFILE

**Lisanne Koeteeuw**



**LOCATION:** The Netherlands
**FAVOURITE ARTISTS:** Alphonse Mucha, John William Waterhouse
**MEDIA:** Photoshop
**WEB:** https://bit.ly/4xVWgCS

**Away from the desk and a deadline, do you continue to draw?**

If I'm not working on commissions for clients, and I'm just doing something for me, I want to draw something that I feel like drawing in that moment and it can be anything. The important thing is that it can be a drawing that I am doing that is free of the pressure that commissioned work brings, and working on something that's 'all for me' can be relaxing and almost meditative, because it's either working on something you don't have to think on much, or something new that you can get lost in researching/studying.

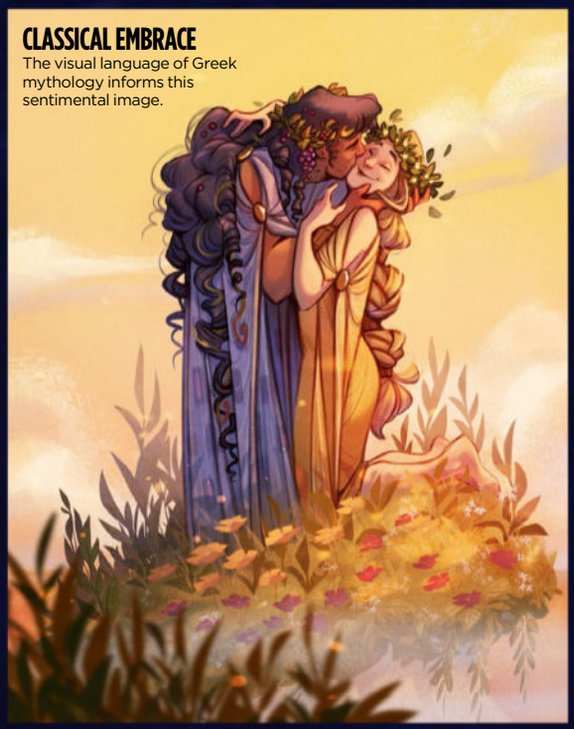
> "If you want to draw something because you enjoy it, then please do it!"



**HORNET**
"I'm a big fan of the game Silksong, and had to draw a humanoid version of its protagonist, Hornet, in my style."

I can work on a character that I have in my head, or I can work on a piece of clothing that I think is interesting, or whatever movie, TV show or book I'm obsessed with at the time. I'm a big believer in fan art. If you want to draw something because you enjoy it, then please do it!

Like a lot of students, I've done portfolio reviews myself as well, and a lot of students have this sort of fear that 'I shouldn't put fan art in my portfolio, right?' It's like, 'No, not if you don't actually enjoy the subject that you're drawing.' But, if you genuinely enjoy Lord of the Rings, draw Lord of the Rings because that joy is going to shine through in your work. It's this space where it's a subject you enjoy, so it's safe to mess



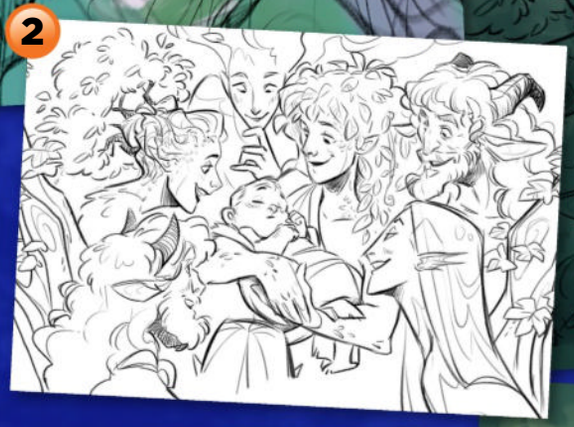
**CLASSICAL EMBRACE**
The visual language of Greek mythology informs this sentimental image.



**SLAY THE PRINCESS**
Lisanne blocks in a base colour for the characters, each on their own layer.



Thumbnail sketch; a quick idea just to get a rough composition on paper.



Working on the line art allows Lisanne to figure out the exact poses of the characters.



Lisanne works from the background to the foreground and begins by blocking in some rough colours for the background first.



Lisanne blocks in a base colour for the characters, each on their own layer.



With the use of clipping masks, Lisanne begins to paint each character, trying to keep the colour balance of the overall image. The baby is the focal point, and so lighter values make him stand out. Shadows are placed on each character.

# INTUITION AND PRECISION

**Lisanne sketches out her approach to starting an illustration**

"I want to get back into traditional art because, when I started out, I worked with pencil and paper for so long, and then, you know, digital art was sort of up and coming. So, I wanted to try it and I wanted to get better at it and now I almost exclusively work in Photoshop. I did purchase some watercolours the other day. I don't keep a paper sketchbook any more, but I do keep a PSD file and those are my sketchbooks: those are a lot of layers with sketches on it. If I have an idea or if I work on a commission for a client, that's pretty much where I start. I just draw what comes to mind and I'll worry about making it anatomically correct or in the correct perspective, or whatever, later. It's more the shorthand of working out what you want to do, and the correct way to do it will come in a later step. I need to get it out of my head because my brain works quite fast, especially when I'm so passionate about something that I'm working on. I need to get it out of my brain and into storage somewhere."



An extra little halo-like spotlight on the baby and the piece is finished.

around, to make mistakes, but you're still having a good time.

I also learned drawing by sitting in front of the TV as a child. So, I watched Pokémon and Dragon Ball and Sailor Moon, and that's how I learnt to draw. For me, that's where it started. I watched Dragon Ball and I saw that's something that I think is cool and I'm going to try and draw that myself.

Fan art can actually help you discover where your interests lie as an artist. With fan art inspired by The Lord of the Rings, for example, you may find that you really enjoy drawing armour and this might lead you into learning more about how that works in general. With your art, and definitely with your fan art, you are absolutely allowed to follow that 'like' somewhere and learn what it is about a piece of media that speaks to you, and incorporate it into your own journey/development of your artistic voice.

**How do you approach networking?**

It's really all of those clichés like 'You have to do good work and be good to work with.' You have to be sort of visible. It's all these open doors, right? But it's also difficult to do that in this day and age where everything depends on algorithms and something decides whether people see your work or not. And that will then affect how you feel about your work and about yourself.

It's very important to connect with people in real life. So, visit the events and get real-life, real-time feedback on your portfolio. Just approach an artist if they are available at one of these events… have a talk, and connect in a real way and not through a screen.



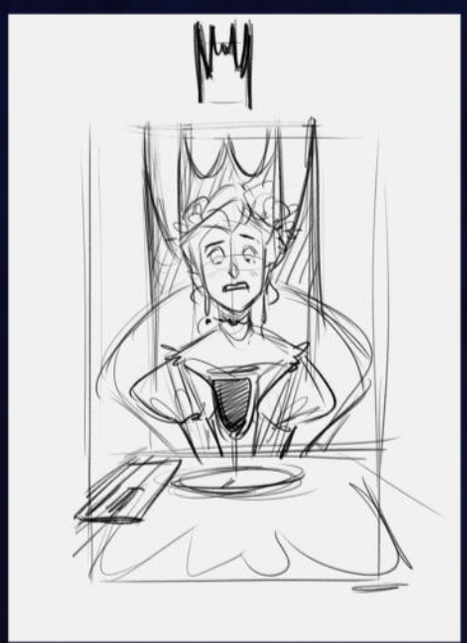
**D&D NEVER-AFTER**
Lisanne's sketch celebrates the tradition of the fairy tale genre with a line-up of classic characters.

> **Fan art can actually help you discover where your interests lie as an artist**

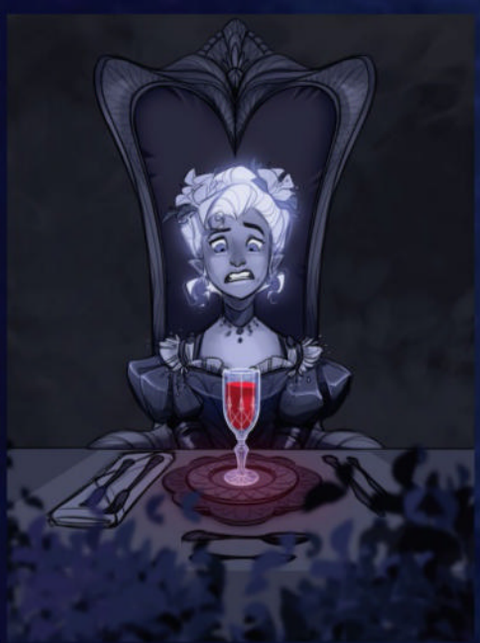
**Do you find social media is useful for your profile?**

I'm probably the wrong person to ask about it because I grew up on DeviantArt and on Tumblr as a little baby artist, and those were more focused than social media today. It was more focused on community, and not run by algorithms. Tumblr and DeviantArt always felt like hanging out with a bunch of people that you sort of knew, but you were all making drawings together and then you would exchange maybe a Skype and then you would chat with each other and have this passion for learning and for drawing and for a lot of different things.

I feel like current social media is a job in itself, really. I post maybe twice a month and then I disappear again and so the algorithm really doesn't like me, but I don't lose sleep over that. It's also important to say that posting just to please an algorithm is a really fast way to get burned out, because the rules of that game change every day. In my opinion, it's better for your health/mental health if you





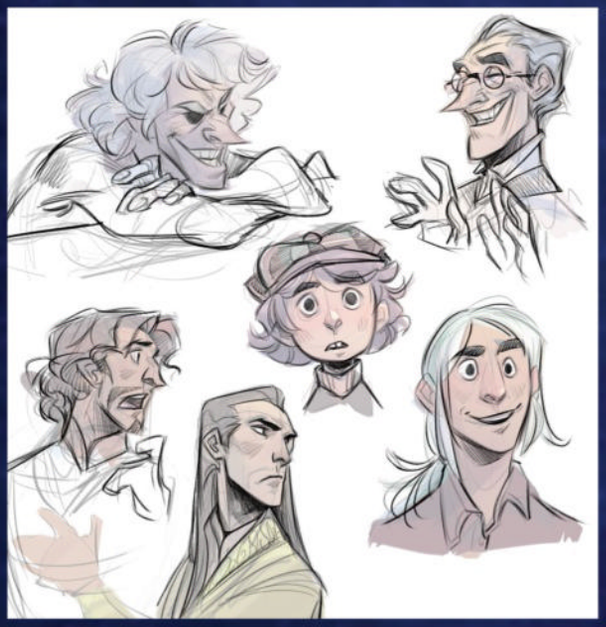


**DINNER DREAD**
Lisanne's initial digital sketch indicates the core compositional arrangement and facial expression. The next iteration defines the grimace, contrasting with a demure posture. Finally, the effect of intense light and shadow emphasises the shock in the eyes.

# Lisanne Koeteeuw



**OFFERING THE CUP**
"JW Waterhouse's Circe Invidiosa is one of my favourite artworks of all time, and I wanted to try my hand at reimagining it in my own style."



**PORTRAITS**
Lisanne's portrait sketches emphasise how caricature draws out the inner life of a character.

**MAGICAL FLOW**
The flow that Lisanne identifies as a stylistic signature of her work binds together the cascade of images conjured here.

**PIPE SMOKERS**
Character design work takes initially 'loose' sketches and begins to tighten and define proportion and expression. Pay attention to how the depiction of hair suggests so much about a given portrait.





share something when you feel like you want to."

**What other projects are you currently working on?**

I'm working on a comic-book project right now with my friend who's a writer. So, we're both doing this in our spare time. I hope to actually sit down and put some legit hours into it this fall, because it keeps being one of those things you do in the one hour a week that you have nothing else to do.

I've wanted to make a comic for so long. One of my fondest art memories is of working on a comic. I was very young, and I had no idea what I was doing at the time, but I enjoyed it so much. So now I want to do it again with the skill set that I have today. And for me, comic books are this melting pot of so many different artistic ventures. You need to have a solid story. You need to have the sequential art and you have storytelling in your images as well. There are so many things that you can throw together, and now it's very much about visualising that and all of the detail on it. Who are the characters? What do they look like? Where do they live? Who are their parents and what do they look like? What does a god look like in this universe? Stuff like that.

My friend has worked on the first chapter and we've reviewed it, going back and forth together, and we're in a good place with it. Now I need to find the time to actually make it, so that we can then ask: 'Is this where we want to go with it?' It sort of needs to grow organically as well. It's a big venture. We have ideas for two books right now.

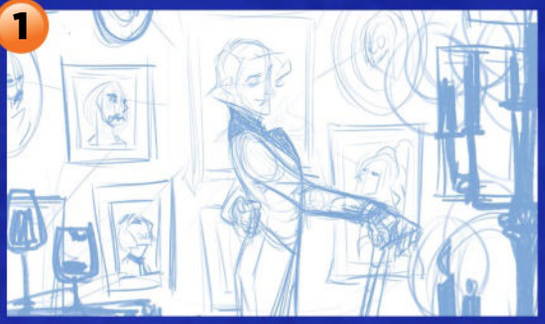
In terms of client work, I can't complain. I feel very lucky to be employed in the way that I am. I've done a lot of different things. I'm still working with Lorcana, so that's sort of a steady client. I've worked on a board game since, and I've done some character design illustration-type things here and there. In terms of projects that I'd like to find opportunities with, I'd love to get to work on book illustrations, for example.

**How do you think about visual style?**

It's quite intuitive. Colour is still a subject that I find very difficult. I'm

> **"I'm very comfortable with doing the fast sketches and doing the black and white line art"**

# Lisanne Koeteeuw



A thumbnail sketch indicates a very rough idea of what Lisanne intends. Nothing is 'correct'; it's just about getting the idea onto the page.



This was originally going to be a greyscale piece, but Lisanne wanted to do a colour thumbnail that paid special attention to where important areas of shadow and light will be.



Working on the inks here, the character, picture frames and other objects are each placed within their own layers.



Some of the shadows have been deepened where needed, as has the light. Finishing touches like dust particles have been added.

## IN THE FLOW

**Lisanne reflects on an essential aspect of her highly distinctive illustration style**

"I try to pay attention to certain type of sort of flow or a sort of elegant way of how shapes move into each other in my work. And I think that might be a sort of, yeah, I don't want to say a sort of signature thing, but I think that could help you identify something as mine. I try to maintain that and make sure that it's sort of visually pleasing for your eye to move from one point to the next. I don't even think about it any more, but when I look at it and it's not there, then I notice that it's off or that it's missing. "



**GREEK MYTHOLOGY**
Little Artemis being given her first bow by her father, Zeus. "I wanted to capture something very human: while they are gods, it's also just a father gifting his daughter something she loves."



**OLD-FASHIONED ROMANCE**
"A lot of my work ends in this sketch-but-not-quite stage; I love working on these types of illustrations."

very comfortable with doing the fast sketches and doing the black and white line art. That's sort of my comfort zone. But I've never really considered myself a painter.

Some digital artists are really good painters. I think there's a sort of fundamental difference in that with painting, with brushstrokes, it's almost like sculpting with light; you have more of a suggestion of a shape, but with line work it's more about definition and the artist saying, 'I've outlined this, this is what it is.'

You can see this in classical paintings as well. If you zoom in on a Rembrandt, for example, you see all of the brushstrokes and you realise that 'Oh, that's not a clearly defined/outlined nose, it just appears to look like a nose.' I think those two schools of thought don't mesh very well in my brain, but I'm trying to be open to learning and implementing things that seem sort of counter-intuitive into my process as well."

# Development sheet

## PROJECT TITLE: FOREST GORGE SCENE

This oriental-fantasy work by **Jonny Sun** depicts pilgrims travelling along an ancient mountain trail. Mysterious stone totems stand beside the path, and dappled woodland sunlight creates a peaceful and tranquil atmosphere

### Artist PROFILE

**Jonny Sun**

**LOCATION:** China



A senior concept artist and illustrator for film and games, Jonny focuses on real-fantasy visual development. Having worked with multiple leading studios, he draws inspiration from classical oil paintings and traditional Chinese art to create narrative-rich fantasy scenes.
**www.artstation.com/zhongjusun**



**Sketching the composition**
Line work lays out the gorge composition, defining rocks, ancient stone statues and the central figure to set scene structure.



**Adding depth with layers**
Spatial depth is established through monochrome value, separating foreground, mid-ground and background to form distinct spatial layering.





**Atmospheric base colours**
I block in flat base colours and set a cool-toned atmosphere for the environment. The warm-coloured figure acts as the primary visual focal point to draw viewers' attention.

**Adding textures and light**
Textures and soft sunlight are added. Atmospheric haze is painted to build depth within this rocky mountain passage.



**Fine-tuning the final image**
Light, texture and colour receive final adjustments. I enrich the atmosphere to finalise this mystical oriental gorge scene.



**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**

# Andrey Lazarev

Game designer Andrey takes inspiration from familiar character tropes before warping them into his own unique designs

## Artist PROFILE

**Andrey Lazarev**
**LOCATION:** Portugal



Born in Ukraine, Andrey joined Wargaming's Kyiv office in 2011. With the outbreak of the war in 2022, he left Wargaming to work remotely for three years for various gaming startups. In 2025, Andrey developed his own game and released it on CrazyGames. From late 2025 until the present, he has been working at G5 Games.
**www.artstation.com/ardenrey**

### PIRATES

"I drew these characters for one of my abandoned game projects. It was a simple Doodle Jump-style project, and I quickly abandoned it, but I had already drawn the pirates."



> Some of these characters spontaneously appeared while I was drawing



**UNDEAD DOODLES**

"Random Halloween-themed characters. Drawn in my free time to share the process on social media. Some of these are characters that I've drawn before, but others spontaneously appeared while I was drawing."



## FAIRY

"A sketch for my personal art project, Dieselpunk Edition, which I've been drawing off and on for almost 11 years. If I ever get around to finishing it, I'll have a separate section for fairies."



> Warm-up sketches help me get in the mood before drawing something specific





**DOODLES**
"Just a few random warm-up sketches I do before drawing something specific. Personally, this helps me get into the mood for drawing."



**PANZER CASTLE**
"This is a castle concept for one of my unfinished game projects. The castle is a key element in the gameplay, but far from the main focus of the story."

**GUARDIAN**
"A random character sketch, just for fun, with no original idea behind it. The pet was added after the character was drawn, but seeing how the character looks at it, its presence was necessary."



## FANTASY DOODLES

"Random character sketches that I created while searching for images for my VR project. A painted character from the elven tribe of priests. The headdress is their tradition of wearing rolled carpets on their heads."

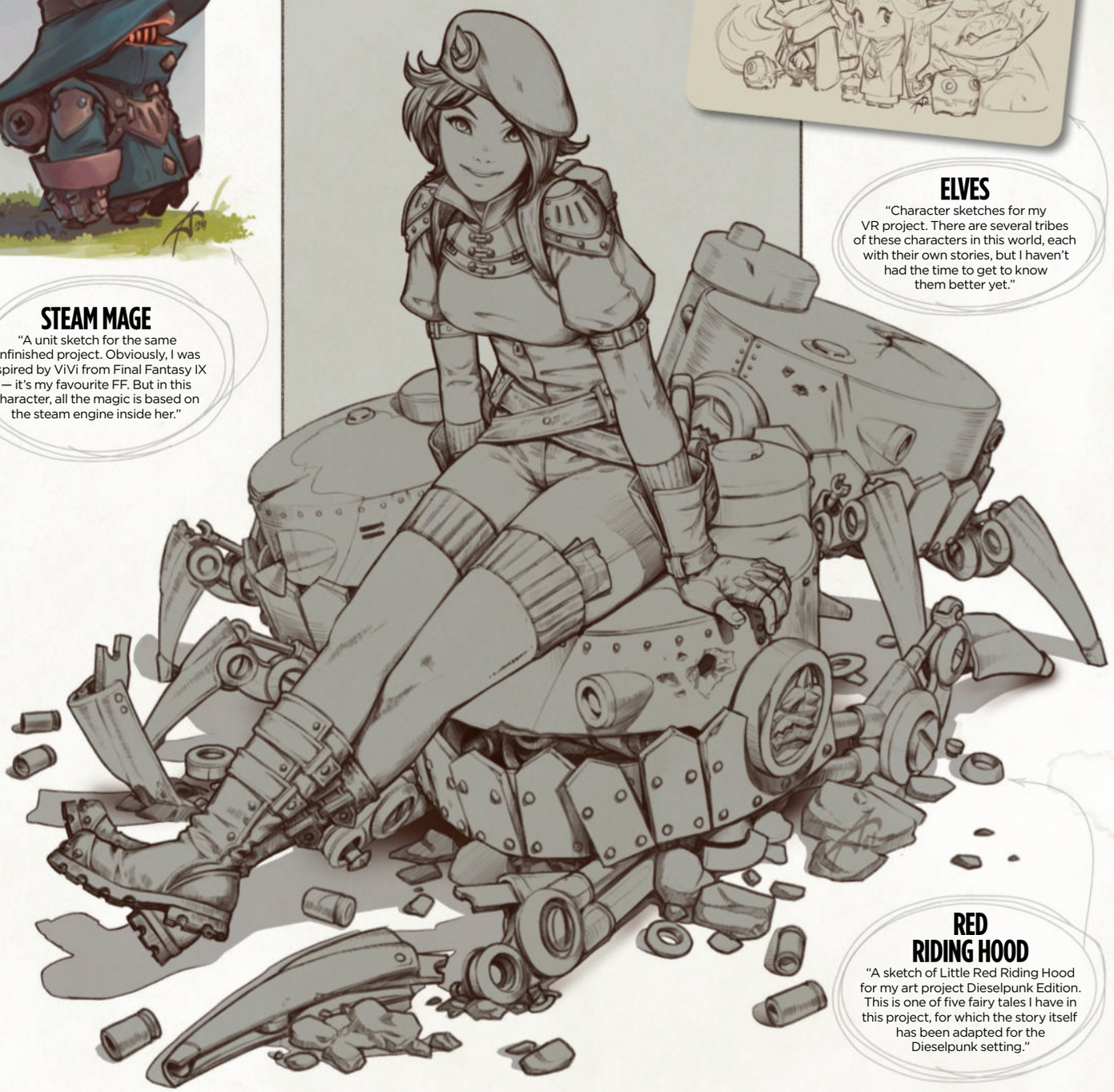


**STEAM MAGE**
"A unit sketch for the same unfinished project. Obviously, I was inspired by ViVi from Final Fantasy IX — it's my favourite FF. But in this character, all the magic is based on the steam engine inside her."

> "This sketch is of Little Red Riding Hood, but adapted for a Dieselpunk setting"



**ELVES**
"Character sketches for my VR project. There are several tribes of these characters in this world, each with their own stories, but I haven't had the time to get to know them better yet."



**RED RIDING HOOD**
"A sketch of Little Red Riding Hood for my art project Dieselpunk Edition. This is one of five fairy tales I have in this project, for which the story itself has been adapted for the Dieselpunk setting."

**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**

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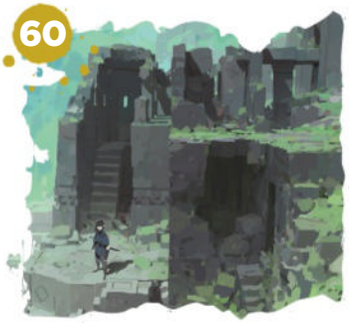



## Advice from the world's best artists



















## This issue:

**52 16 tips for better character design**
Frunze Babakhanyan turns simple ideas into cool characters, with silhouettes to colour and final presentation.

**58 Capture character**
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Andrea Tarzia shares 10 of his favourite tips and paintings to help you create believable and engaging fantasy illustrations.

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Nien Minh discusses drawing on ancient history to inspire his 3D visual constructs.

## Artist insight

# 16 TIPS FOR BETTER CHARACTER DESIGN

**Frunze Babakhanyan** shows how he turns simple ideas into cool character designs, with silhouettes to colour and final presentation.


*Artist* **PROFILE**

**Frunze Babakhanyan (Frunz B)**

**LOCATION:** Armenia

Frunze started in comics before specialising in character design to the likes of Ninja Party, Shadow Fight 4, 2XKO, Marvel Snap, Invincible: Guarding The Globe, Hawked and more. **https://bit.ly/4cboXDH**




Character design is my favourite part of concept art. I have worked in the industry for more than seven years, and over that time I have collected many small techniques that help me work more efficiently and create stronger designs.

In this article, I share 15 tips that I regularly use when I'm designing characters. I have tried to keep everything as simple and easy to understand as possible, even though each of these subjects could easily become an article of its own.

I use these techniques both in my professional work and when I design characters just for fun. I don't see each tip as an isolated piece of knowledge. Instead, I think of them as parts of a larger structure that work best when combined. Of course, you don't always need to follow every rule, and sometimes breaking one can lead to a better result. However, keeping as many of these principles in mind as possible gives me a strong foundation for creating a nice design.

Most importantly, I try to enjoy the process. When I design a character, I ask myself whether I would want to play as them, be them or learn their story. If the answer is no, I need to work until that feeling comes back. I hope this article will inspire you to create some cool characters of your own!

### 1 EXPLORE THE CORE IDEA

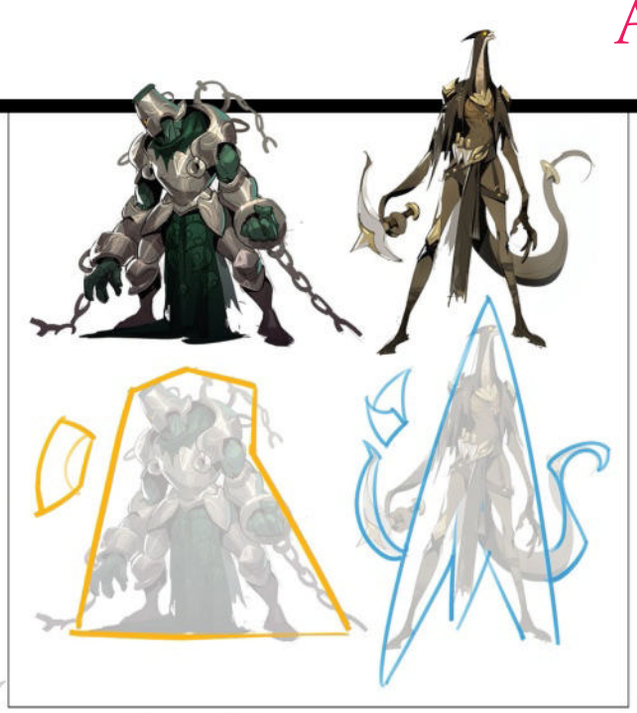
When I start with a clear character concept, I create several rough mood sketches to explore different directions. At this stage, I don't try to make anything look finished. Instead, I push myself to consider unexpected and even crazy ideas. The goal isn't simply to produce different versions of the same character, but to dig deeper into what makes the character unique. I experiment with silhouettes, proportions, poses, costumes and shapes, asking myself which choices best capture their personality and role. The more I explore at this stage, the better chance I have of finding a design that truly communicates the character's core idea.





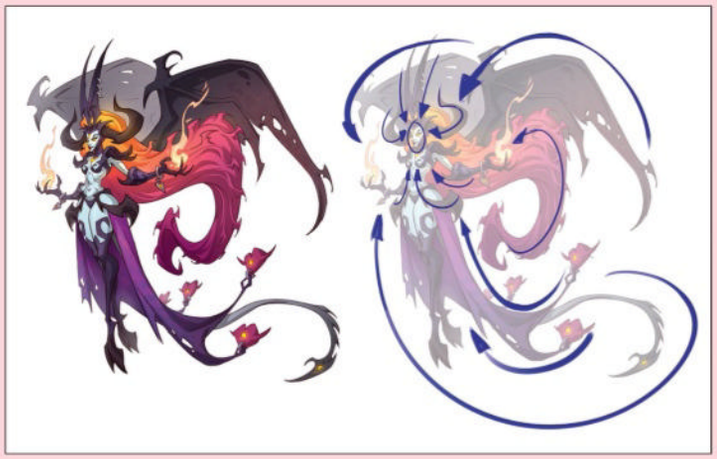

### 2 BUILD A STRONG SILHOUETTE

I look at the silhouette first when working on a character sketch. Before focusing on details, I make sure the overall shape is clear and easy to read. I keep big, medium and small shapes in mind to create a composition that feels balanced and visually interesting. This helps avoid making every part of the design equally important. I also find it useful to fill the character with a single colour from time to time. Removing the internal details makes it easier to analyse the shape and spot areas that feel unclear, repetitive or unbalanced.



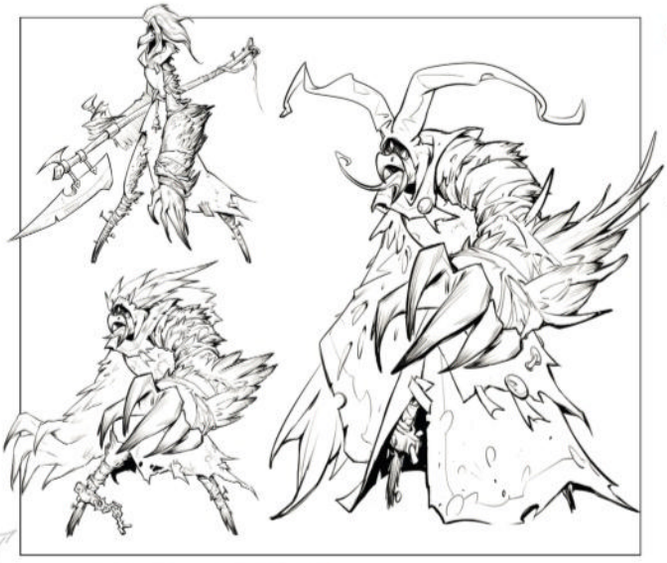
### 3 USE SHAPE LANGUAGE

Shapes have their own visual language, so I use them to communicate a character's mood and personality. For a fast and dynamic character, I often choose sharp, long and angled shapes that suggest movement and energy. For someone heavy and powerful, I use broader, square shapes to create a stronger and more solid impression. Shape language can also help to strengthen personality. Sharp forms can make a character feel dangerous or aggressive, while softer, rounded shapes often feel friendlier and more approachable. It is a simple rule, but I use it constantly to strengthen the qualities I want the viewer to notice first in my characters.



### 4 GUIDE THE EYE WITH FLOW

I love using flow lines in both my designs and silhouettes. They help me make a character easier to read and give me more control over where the viewer looks. I usually try to arrange shapes so their directions naturally lead into one another, creating a sense of visual movement through the design. Sometimes these connections are not physically drawn, but the shapes will still suggest an invisible path the viewer's brain can follow and complete. This allows me to guide the eye from one important element to the next, rather than letting the viewer's attention jump randomly around the character.



### 5 PUSH THE PROPORTIONS

Because I mainly work with stylised character design, I never feel limited by realistic proportions. Changing the proportions of the same character can create many completely different personalities and design directions, so I like to explore this early in the sketching stage. I might make the neck longer, reduce the size of the head or exaggerate the hands to give the character a stronger and more distinctive look. Of course, these choices still need to support the character and fit the overall concept, but experimenting with exaggeration is always fun and can often lead to unexpected ideas.

> **"The important thing is to create a clear visual hierarchy so the viewer's eye knows where to start and move"**



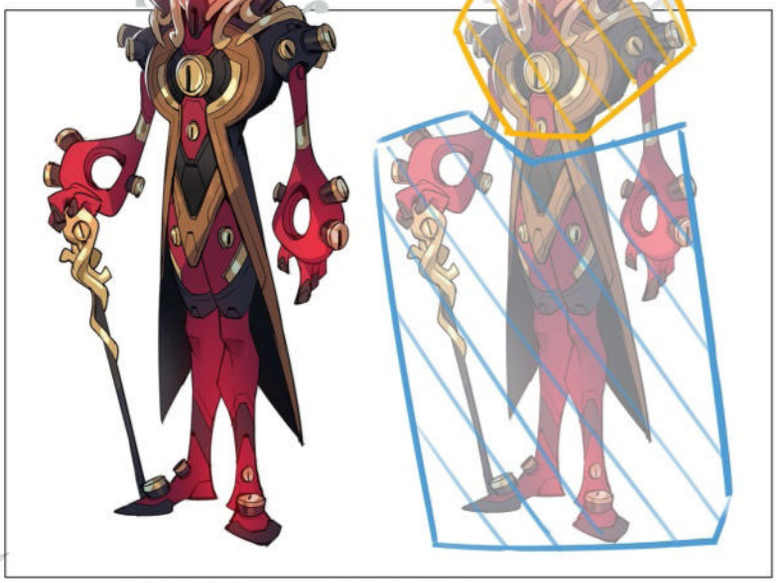

### 6 CREATE A CLEAR FOCAL POINT

I try to give my character a clear focal point; a place where the viewer looks first. There are many ways to achieve this, and I choose the approach depending on the design. I can use strong directional flow, a contrasting value, an accent colour, or simply place more detail in one area. The important thing is to create a clear visual hierarchy so the viewer's eye knows where to start and move next. For me, a successful character design is one where the details work together rather than competing for attention.



## 7 MAKE PROPS PART OF THE CHARACTER

A character's weapon or other key prop can tell us just as much about them as their costume. I try to avoid treating props as random objects I add at the end of the design process. Instead, I make them feel like a natural extension of the character. The shape of a weapon can echo the character's main shapes, while its materials and colours can connect it to the costume. I also think about what it says about the character and their story. A well-designed prop should feel like something this character would carry, use and care about.



## 8 BALANCING CHARACTER DETAILS

I try not to give every part of a character the same level of detail. A good design needs a balance between detailed areas and quieter spaces where the eye can rest. I usually place more detail around the focal point, on important elements or in areas that help tell the character's story. Simpler areas give those details more impact and prevent the design from becoming visually noisy. When I feel that a character is becoming too busy, I look for places where I can remove or simplify information. Sometimes, leaving something out is just as important as adding another detail.



## 9 KNOW WHEN TO USE REFERENCES

References are extremely important when I work on a concept, but I usually try to explore my first ideas without them. This helps me avoid locking myself into very specific shapes, costumes or existing designs too early. Of course, this depends on the project and the type of character I am creating, but I find it useful to give myself some freedom at the beginning. Once I have a stronger direction, I start looking for references to solve more specific details, such as clothing, materials, weapons or historical elements. This way, references support my design instead of defining it from the very start.

# 10 MAKING YOUR CHARACTER COME TO LIFE

Three important steps in making your character appear vivid



**A Establish the design**

I start by turning my initial idea into a clearer character sketch. At this stage, I focus on the silhouette, proportions and the main design elements rather than small details. I also look for strong shape relationships and directional flow, making sure the character already feels interesting and recognisable before moving forward.



**B Building up the character**

Once I am happy with the sketch, I begin developing the main forms with the line art. After clear line art, I choose colours and materials. I establish a limited colour palette and use it to separate shapes and create a clear hierarchy. This stage is about making sure the design works as a whole before I spend time refining smaller details.



**C Add the final touches from all angles**

Finally, I refine the design and add elements that improve its presentation, such as stronger accents, cleaner details and visual effects. The shapes behind the head reinforce the character's identity and create a stronger focal point, making it feel more alive.

### 11 USE COLOUR WITH PURPOSE

I try to use colour to solve specific design problems rather than simply choosing colours that look good together. Colour can help direct attention to the focal point, reinforce a character's personality, separate different shapes and create a specific mood. I usually work with a limited palette to keep the design cohesive. A simple rule that works well for me is roughly 60 per cent for the dominant colour, 30 per cent for a secondary colour and 10 per cent for accents. It gives me a good starting point, but I always allow myself to break this rule when the character needs something different.







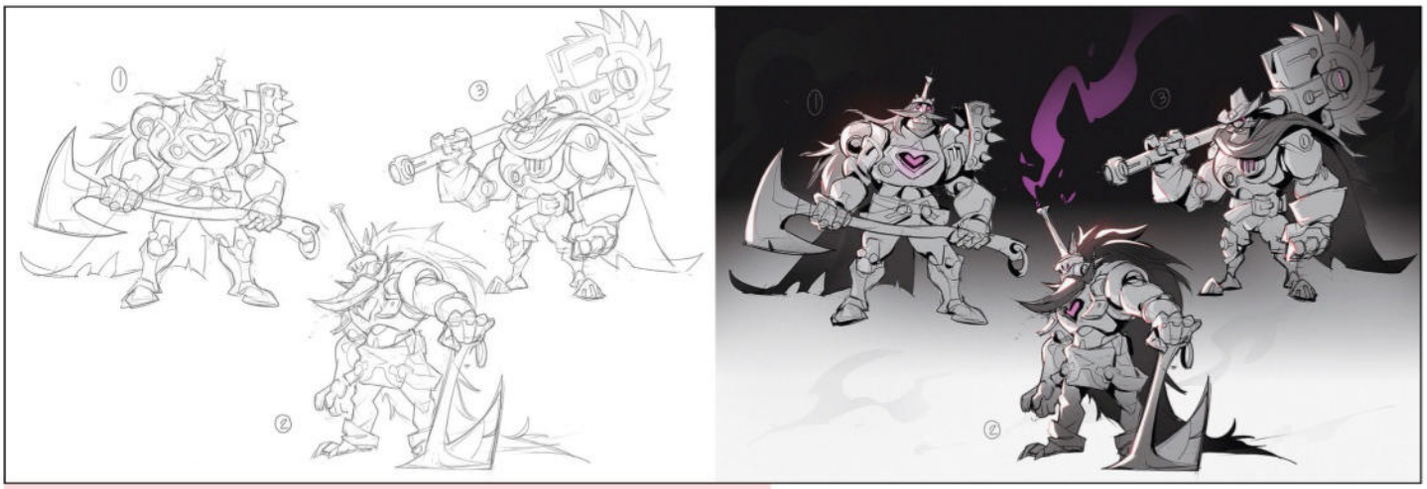
### 12 KEEP EXPLORING YOUR CHARACTER DESIGN

Even after I choose a design and develop it, I often realise that something is missing or the idea is not working. When this happens, I don't immediately start over. Instead, I make rough sketches directly over the existing design, trying different shapes, proportions or details. These let me test new ideas without investing too much time. Sometimes, a small adjustment can improve the design, while at other times I discover a different direction. I find this a useful way to develop a character without becoming too attached to the first version.



### 13 USE EFFECTS TO ENHANCE THE DESIGN

Effects can greatly improve the final presentation of a character and help reinforce their key features. I like to use things such as rim lighting, smoke, particles or other atmospheric effects to add more depth and focus to the image. These effects can also help communicate a character's abilities or personality. For example, a specific effect can suggest magic, energy or another defining trait. I try not to use effects just to make an image look more impressive. Instead, I use them with a purpose, making sure they support the character and draw attention to the elements I want the viewer to notice.



## 14 PRESENT YOUR DESIGN WELL

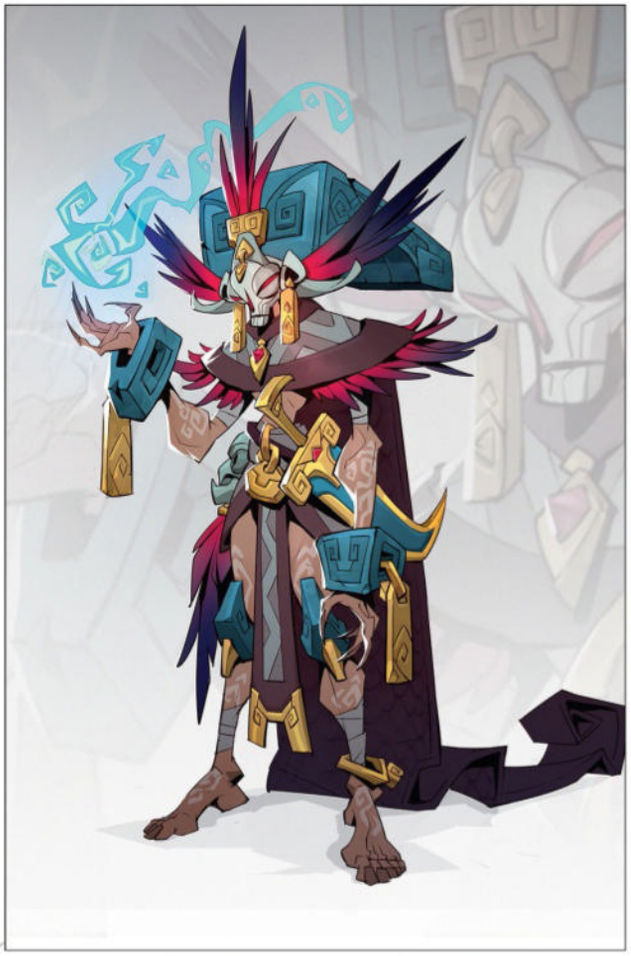
Presentation is an important part of character design, so I never ignore it. Even rough sketches can feel interesting and rich when they are presented thoughtfully. I often look for simple ways to add more information to the page without distracting from the main character. For example, I might include additional close-ups, small detail sketches or enlarged portraits placed in the background. Showing different stages of the process, such as the initial sketch, line art or other development steps, can also make the presentation feel more complete. A well-organised page helps me communicate both the character and the design process more clearly.

> **“I often look for simple ways to add more information to the page without distracting from the main character”**



## 15 STUDY WHEN INSPIRATION RUNS DRY

When I feel stuck or don't have much inspiration, I like to do studies and analyse the styles and designs of other artists. I don't always need to redraw or copy an entire piece to learn from it. Sometimes, I simply study an image and break down what makes it work, looking at the shapes, proportions, colours and composition. I might also redraw a section that catches my attention and simplify it into its basic elements to better understand the principles behind it. For me, analysing other artists' work is often enough to spark new ideas and help me approach my own designs with fresh eyes.



## 16 LET THE DESIGN SHOW PERSONALITY

This is where all the previous principles come together. A successful character design should communicate who the character is before the viewer knows anything about their story. I use silhouette, shape language, proportions, costume, weapons and colour to support the same idea and strengthen the character's personality. Every choice should feel intentional and work towards that goal. A fast and energetic character might use sharp shapes and dynamic proportions, while a powerful and imposing character could appear heavier and more solid. I want the viewer to look at the design and immediately start imagining who this character is.



Artist
**PROFILE**

**Guilherme Freitas**
**LOCATION:** Brazil

From beginner to Blizzard's Hearthstone illustrator, Guilherme has spent 14 years sharing his art journey, and now uses those skills in order to create drawings of his favourite anime characters.
**https://bit.ly/4x4ZPqo**

Technique focus

# CAPTURE THE CHARACTER

**Guilherme Freitas** talks us through his process for creating futuristic anime art



"This fan illustration features Kankuro, a character from Naruto. In such a large cast of unique ninjas, his special power stood out to me; he controls deadly wooden puppets with lines of energy! The creative decision of using classic Japanese puppet theatre as a long-distance fighting skill is fantastic.

"In this image, I really wanted to feature the uncanny nature of his deadly art, and I think this upside-down pose captured that the best. But I almost went with something less... weird! Finding the sketch that best communicates what's important about a character is crucial to a successful illustration."



## How I create... A NINJA PUPPET SCENE







### 1 Sketch freely at first

When I first started thumbnailing ideas for this piece, I focused on the basic composition and character posing, even if the perspective or proportions were a tad off. In this step, quickly putting ideas down is really important to get some flow; we can always tidy things up later.

### 2 Lines, flats and shadows

After considering the geometric structure of the characters and redrawing everything, I nailed down the final line art using references for hands and other details. My goal is to avoid repainting or wandering in the rendering phase. This is the time to structure and define.

### 3 Transitions and textures

Using a textured brush, I'll work on all the light-shadow transitions, making them softer. With this strong base, adding small highlights completes the 3D illusion. I balance the values to push some parts of the painting back, bringing the darkest parts forward, like the characters' heads.

## Artist insight

# SPLIT UP SHAPES TO SIMPLIFY PAINTING

Artist **Petter Faustino** reveals the key aspects he thinks about while painting a detailed environment, starting with simple shapes

*Artist* **PROFILE**

**Petter Faustino**

**LOCATION:** Norway

Petter is a digital artist working with visual development for the game and animation industry. Freelance since 2018, he loves to create worlds and stories with art.

**https://bit.ly/4hUXeut**



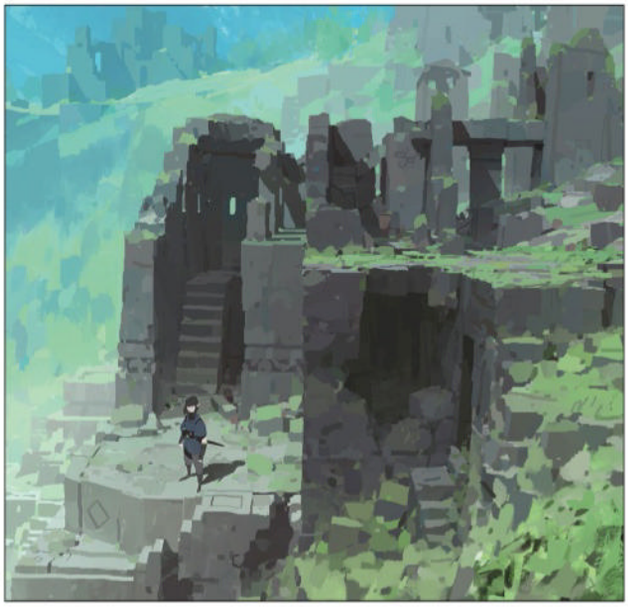
Hi, my name is Petter Faustino and I spend a lot of time painting digitally. In this workshop, I will show you a few of the ideas I like to remind myself of while I paint.

I know variations of these tips have been told many times before, but sometimes you need to hear it in a specific way from a specific person in order for it to stick. I hope it helps you to improve your workflow and results.

Painting landscapes is fun, but they usually contain a lot of stuff to keep track of and it's easy to lose control over a landscape. There are a lot of rules and principles that build on each other, and being able to recognise and find the weak links in your paintings can save a lot of time.

I like to work step by step, and I usually try to focus on a couple of things at a time. I've found that simple shapes quickly turn into complex objects, so I like to figure out the big shapes first before I move on to smaller details.

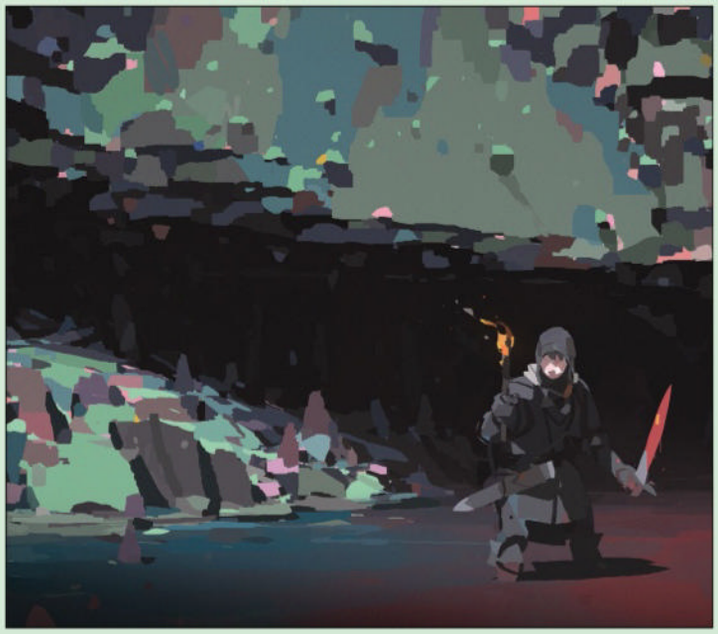
There are of course many ways in which to paint, and sometimes you just need to let loose and paint more chaotically, but for me these tips and tricks still work as an overall guide to maintain structure and readability.



### 1 HORIZONTALS VS VERTICALS!

I usually think of forms in paintings as either lying down or standing: e.g., grass lying on the ground vs stone walls that stand up. It is a simplified way of thinking about angles and light, because the ground plane is often more perpendicular to the sun/main light source, and receives more light.

Splitting between horizontals and verticals also informs so much more. For instance, most things grow on the horizontal plane, verticals often cast shadows and they create overlaps. I find that thinking this way gives me a nice start to a painting, creates a natural balance and simplifies a lot of the difficulties with light and colour.



### 2 SHADOW SHAPES

Something about big, bold shadow shapes makes the painting process feel a lot more manageable to me. Usually the shadow will play a major part in establishing form and value, but it really shines as a tool for guiding the eye and framing the composition. Dividing the image in two pushes the areas covered in shadow back and allows me to focus my attention on details in the light.



### 3 KEEPING IT SIMPLE, SPLITTING THINGS IN TWO

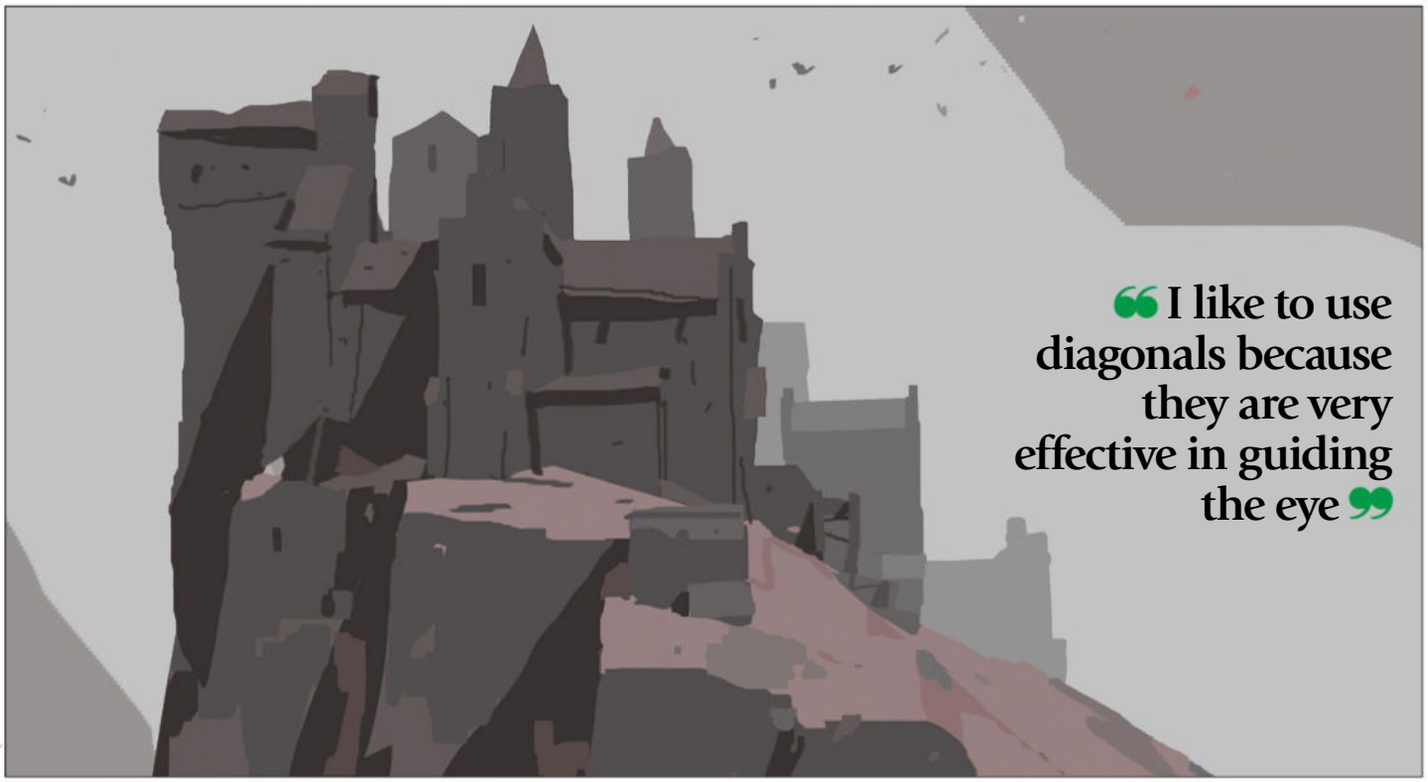
I like to keep things simple, and I usually try to build my images up slowly, bit by bit. I'll start with two or three different elements, big simple shapes in atmospheric perspective, that I split into horizontals and verticals. Then I split those shapes again into light and dark. This is usually more than enough for me to keep up with and organise early on.

Once I feel like the perspective and values are working, I start adding in details, playing with the surfaces, putting in more stuff.



### 4 READABILITY

I've done a lot of art studies focusing on limited greyscale palettes (three to five tones). This has helped me a lot in both simplifying images and understanding compositions. I think of values like a chessboard: values have to be different enough so shapes stand apart, and the shapes standing apart are contrasted with shapes blending. You push and pull to amplify and obscure. Exaggerating values and pushing a graphical read helps me to keep it simple and focus on big shapes. It also helps me to control overall readability, and allows me to push storytelling by enhancing focal points.



> "I like to use diagonals because they are very effective in guiding the eye"

### 5 DIAGONALS AND MOVEMENT

I like to use diagonals in my compositions because they are very effective in guiding the eye. Placing a focal point at the end of a diagonal shape is a very simple and effective way of presenting something. I also very much enjoy slow-rising clouds in the background to indicate some movement, which again adds a bit of life into a painting. Little birds or leaves in the wind are other small details that can make a big difference in giving a painting some life and movement.



## 6 MARKS THAT AMPLIFY VOLUME AND PERSPECTIVE

I'm very fond of brush marks that amplify the shapes they are describing, even better if the brush marks also help guide the eye.

Adding details on a flat surface is hard, but you can usually apply patches of dirt and scratches on nearly anything. If you apply marks that follow the established perspective, you are boosting the volume and structure in your paintings significantly. By using value shifts and clever placement, you can also guide the eye through the planes in your painting as you see fit.



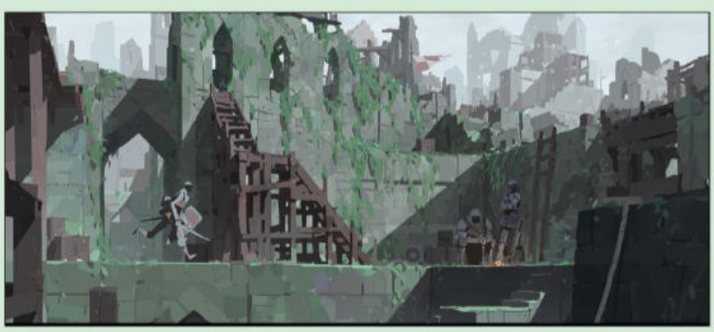
## 7 COMPRESSED VALUES

When working with value, understanding how to highlight areas with contrast is one side of the coin. The other side is understanding how to add structure and detail in areas with low contrast, outside of your areas of interest.

When working on structure and detail, in an area cast in shadow or far away in the distance, I use values that are very similar in tone. I think of these 'low interest' areas as having their own very compressed value palette.

I find that simplified marks allow the details to still be visible, but because of their compressed value range they don't conflict with the composition or areas of interest.

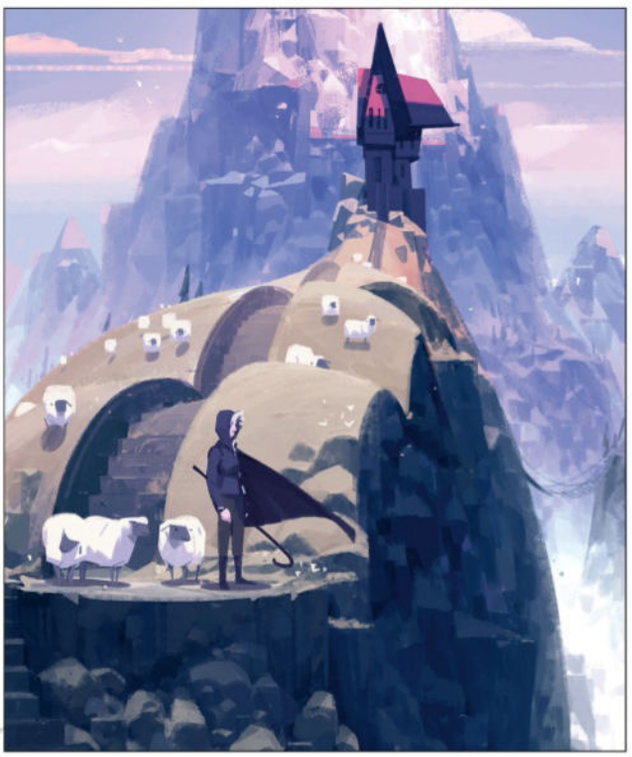
> "The longer I am looking at a painting, the more I imagine smells, sounds and music"



## 8 PATHS YOU CAN FOLLOW

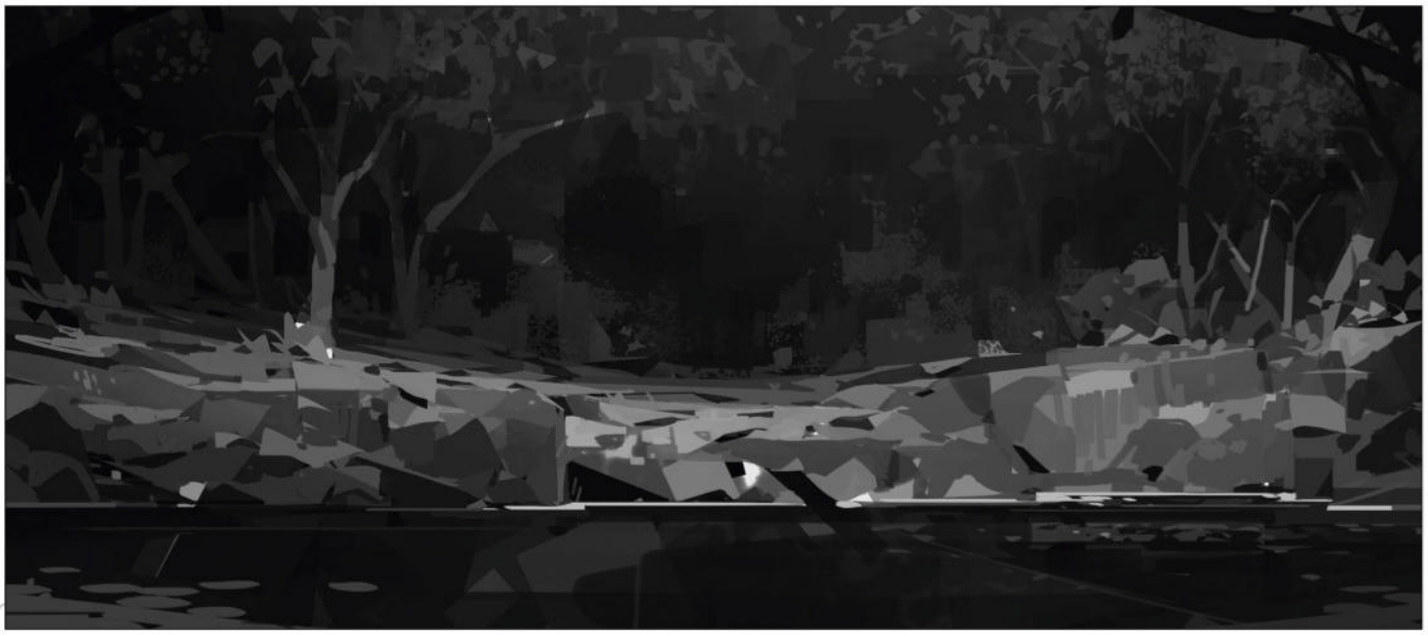
I think environments are a lot of fun when you can stare at them and imagine yourself or a character moving through them. The longer I am looking at a painting, the more I imagine smells, sounds and music.

So because I enjoy this in other people's work, I try to replicate it in my own. I try to make pathways that follow some sort of plan or logic, I add in multiple pathways that go in different directions, and I try to make long view distances so that people can stay a while and hopefully imagine little adventures while they look.



## 9 OVERLAPPING ABUNDANCE

Overlapping is the environment artist's best friend. It is as effective in primary school as it is in the world of professional illustration. It creates abundance and space, and it does so fairly cheaply, without all the requirements of other techniques. Paired together with atmospheric perspective, it is incredibly effective, and a lot of fun.



## 10 TRIANGLES AND SQUARES

To keep things simple in my head, I try to break objects down into geometric shapes when I am painting. This sometimes leads to the painting actually looking very complicated, which is a nice bonus.

The first order is to simplify the overall shapes into mixes of cylinders, pyramids, boxes and spheres. But after this, I like to break down surfaces themselves into triangles and mixes of squares. I like triangles a lot because I think they are very effective at indicating different angles in a plane, and they pair very well together. Layering surfaces in squares makes me feel like I'm making a grid, and while that can be great in certain environments, I often prefer triangles for breaking down more complicated, organic surfaces.



## 11 PINCHED/OCCLUDED SHADOWS FOR DEFINITION AND STRUCTURE

'Pinched shadows' is a phrase I use to describe shadow in corners, cracks and other tight spaces light is struggling to reach. It is more commonly referred to as 'occluded shadows', but I find that to be a very wide category so I've narrowed this down for myself, to specify something that is very handy for definition and structure.

Shadows are a sliding scale of less light, but we often think of them as something opposite of light. 'Occluded shadows' is often used to describe details in areas cast in shadow, but I apply my pinches in the light areas as well. Corners often need a little punch, particularly if the perspective is not indicating the form on its own. I'll use a slightly darker tone to pinch out intersections in corners and smaller details.

## 12 COLOUR WITH GREY

It was a big revelation to me when I learned how much grey is used in a lot of paintings I thought of as very colourful. Left with a strong impression of the colours that were built up to shine, I didn't really register all the desaturated colours surrounding them.

I find now when using this myself that the palette is a lot easier to control for me as well, because I get a wide spectrum using a small palette. I enjoy splitting things, and I often split my colour palette in two early on, but by blending in grey or applying it directly, I often feel like I have more than enough tones to structure my painting around.





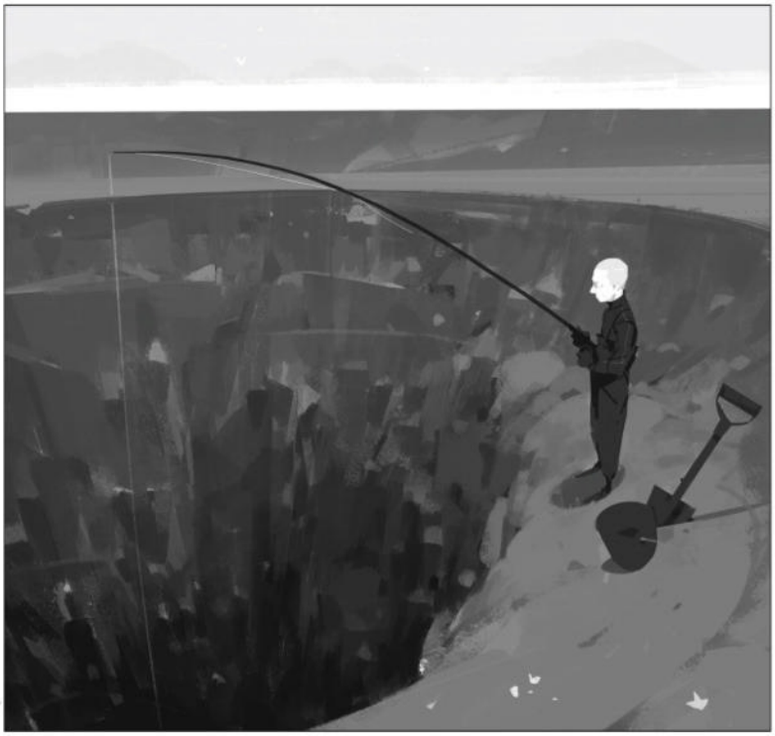


## 13 CHARACTERS, AND STORYTELLING

Characters often tell a story simply by existing in a painting, but if you can have them interact with something or someone, they very quickly bring the world in your paintings to life.

There have been a lot of jokes made on behalf of the famous stick-man and his adventures through concept art, but I do not think we should cast him aside. Just because something is simple does not mean it is any less effective, and simply by existing he does bring a certain abstract story with him. He also brings a sense of scale, which is great.

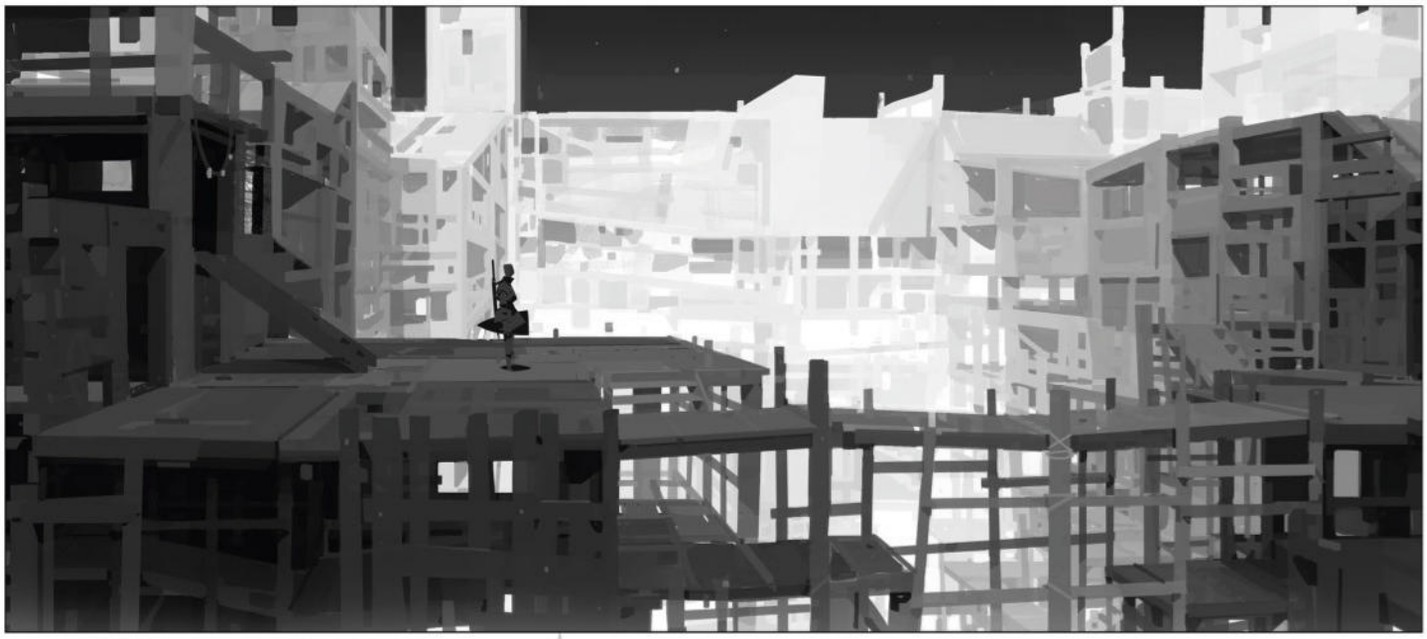
> **“By blending in grey or applying it directly, I often feel like I have more than enough tones”**



## 14 APPLIED STUDIES OVER REFERENCE

Reference is awesome and you should use it, but when slotting things into a landscape, simply using reference can be a detour through a lot of pain and suffering. I often need to familiarise myself a little with the general structure if I am painting something very new.

Say you want to put a giant pit next to the character in your painting, but you are unfamiliar with painting pits. Painting straight from reference, unless you are very comfortable with perspective and volume, can feel very clunky. Controlling the light and value so that they match the scene you already have can be very difficult. In these cases, I highly recommend painting a couple of quick studies and then coming back to the painting and reference after.

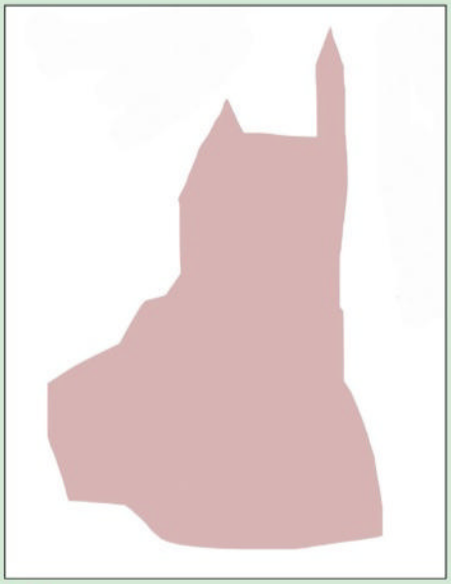


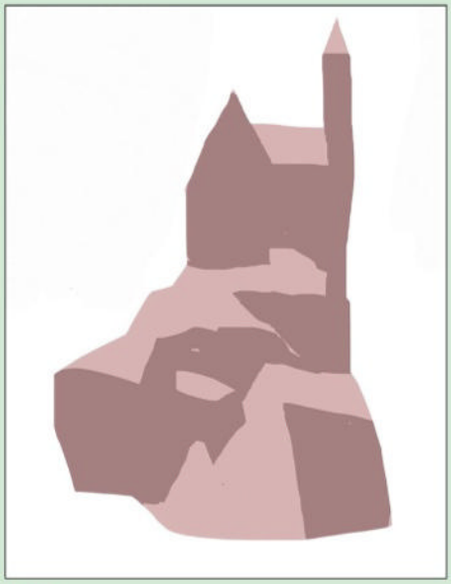
## 15 PAINT A BIT OF EVERYTHING

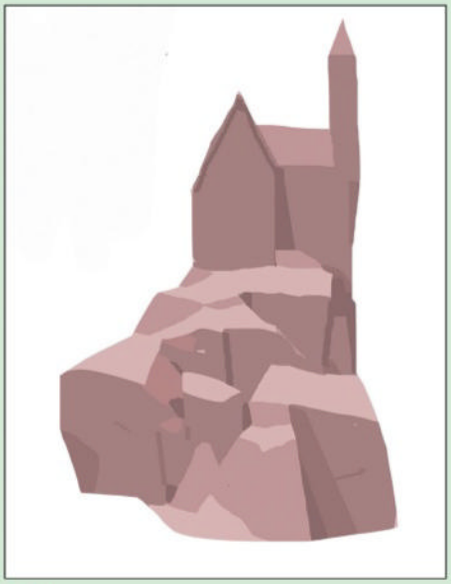
Even if you are specialising in environments, I think you should try to study some anatomy as well. I think the more different stuff you paint, the easier it is to build an overall understanding for forms in general, and there are some unexpected crossovers between anatomy and environments. Ears, for example, can be a great shape for designing unique canyons or spooky sci-fi worlds. They are relatively unique, however, and unless you have that shape catalogued in the back of your mind from previous studies, you might be missing out on a pretty interesting volume structure.

## 16 BIG SHAPE BUILD-UP FOR A SOLID STRUCTURE

Starting with a basic shape, add details, separation and shadows







**A Lasso tool**

For a big shape, I prefer the lasso tool initially, but a flat hard-edged brush is nice for touch-ups after the initial fill-in. Sometimes it's nice to have a rough sketch to base the shape on, but you can also add lines over the shape after it is placed, and let the shape influence and limit the sketch.

**B Big shapes defined**

Here we separate the verticals from horizontals. You can work dark to light, or light to dark, but the trick is to get a good separation between surfaces. You also have to think big and simple: this isn't super-strict, particularly if it's an organic shape. Organise your landscape into these two categories.

**C Shadow and diagonals**

To solidify the structure, we indicate a light direction and punch out intersections and corners with pinched shadows. We also introduce diagonal surfaces between the horizontals and verticals. At this point, the structure is starting to take form. Smaller details added will follow the same rules.

Technique focus

# PLANNING BEFORE PAINTING

**Fredrik Löfgren Eriksson** on being inspired by Magic: The Gathering when devising his work



"My dream is to work for Magic: The Gathering some day. So I decided to paint something that would fit into one of their cards. After a little reference searching, I found a spell that could be really eye catching: the Disintegrate spell.

"I decided that the composition of the image would follow a triangle shape with three characters. The powers would seem chaotic but flow up around the magic caster in a circle to create harmony. The main focus is the caster, a beautiful and powerful sorceress. With the plan finished, I started sketching in Procreate."



Artist **PROFILE**

**Fredrik Löfgren Eriksson**
**LOCATION:** Sweden

Fredrik is an art teacher and freelance illustrator who loves painting creatures and characters. He has worked as a freelancer for several years on many different projects.
**https://bit.ly/3SyQDvz**

## How I create...
# A MYSTICAL SORCERESS



### 1 Basic sketch
First, I make a basic sketch with a flat brush. The sketch's main goal is to make sure that the proportions and composition work. Then I make a layer and start painting in the base colours. The spell's green magic energy looks best complemented by a blue background. I paint in the colours with a medium flat brush.



### 2 Contrast
By using high contrast in the foreground and softer contrast in the background, I can create depth in the image. I paint with flat brushes with low opacity, making lots of thin lines to create the shapes and forms. I don't erase mistakes; I paint over them. Because of the low opacity, everything helps create depth.



### 3 Technique
I paint then smudge and smear them together to get smooth edges and transitions. This is a common oil painting technique. I also paint in the layer beneath the main layer to create depth in the image without sabotaging it. When the image is finished, I use the noise filter on low effect. It gives the image a flash art feeling.

## Artist insight

# CREATE ENGAGING FANTASY ARTWORK

Illustrator **Andrea Tarzia** shares his favourite tips and examples of own work to help you create believable and impactful fantasy art


*Artist* **PROFILE**

**Andrea Tarzia**

**LOCATION:** Italy

An illustrator and colourist, Andrea's been working professionally since 2021. Clients include Games Workshop, Cubicle7, and Black Book Editions.

**https://bit.ly/4qUKFli**




Painting an image from scratch can be a highly complex task, made up of many, many smaller tasks, and each one of these requires its own technique and tool.

From larger than life creatures, characters travelling through harrowing forests to scorching deserts, in this guide I open my toolbox for you, sharing my top 10 tips and techniques, as well as 10 of my paintings, that will help you in your artistic journey.

I'll talk about composition, types of contrasts, different ways to colour your painting, and more specific techniques that I use to enhance the mood of a painting and establish a connection with my viewers. I'm always trying to apply as many as possible in my paintings, as you will see, but that does not mean that they have to be used all the time. You will need to decide what's useful and what's not. A quick side note: while I'm not mentioning the use of references in these tips, remember that we don't create in a vacuum. Reference material is essential for everything we are about to see. So buckle up and let's go!



### 1 KEEP IT SIMPLE

Easier said than done! When painting a battle fought on an alien planet with explosions, flying vehicles and an army all in one frame, it's easy to feel overwhelmed. However, I don't need to reinvent the wheel for every new painting. When planning a new composition, I ask myself "What is this piece really about?" Here the commander is the undisputed leader and main focal point, so I made him the biggest element in the frame, using the soldiers in the foreground as compositional devices to support the main one, keeping the army in the back as simple as possible to avoid unnecessary distractions.

> "I use specific techniques to enhance the mood of a painting and establish a connection with my viewers"

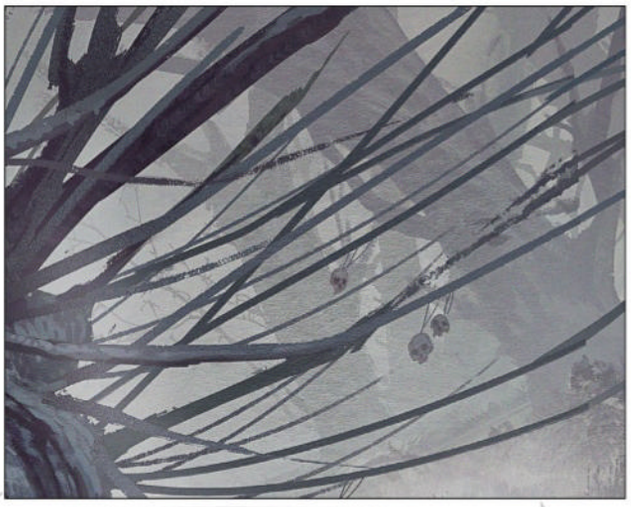


### 2 THE POWER OF SILHOUETTES

This is something I learned from studying Old Masters and from a lot of lessons: our brain processes almost instantly contrasts of values and shapes. What does it mean in art? It means that well-placed values and readable silhouettes do most of the heavy lifting. In more practical terms, as you can see in this illustration, the main focal point are the clouds so they're very detailed, but for the forest, the cows, the tower and the mountains, I relied heavily on clean and readable shapes enriched by small flashes of light, letting the brain complete what's missing.







### 3 CONTRASTS: THEY COME IN ALL SIZES AND FORMS

One of the most crucial aspects of this illustration is the contrast between the big shape of the tree trunk and the multiple smaller forms of the branches directly above it. These twigs have a natural purpose on a tree, but in this case they are accomplishing another task: they are concentrating different types of contrasts on them, because of the contrast in lines, shapes, colours and lights. I also painted a bunch of hanging skulls to add even smaller forms. I see them as a lightning rod for the viewer. While I hid the rest of the elements with fog, creating resting areas.

### 4 LARGER THAN LIFE

Giant creatures, huge buildings and massive mountain ranges are always awesome to paint, but they come with a trap: the 'huge toy' effect. To avoid this I used the atmospheric perspective to lose contrast, and fading the colours in the distance. Then I used massive cast shadows to hide parts of the dragon, giving the impression that it's so colossal it's being partially shaded by passing clouds, just like the mountains below. Another key rule is detail management: I did not paint every single scale or fang. A few well-placed brushstrokes are more than enough to imply the rest.





## 5 GOD RAYS

One of the most cinematic ways to build atmosphere is using volumetric light – aka God Rays. They usually occur when the light hits dust, water drops in the air or fog. To create them I set a new layer to Screen mode and then, with a darker and saturated tint of the light source's colour, I paint with a soft brush the glow coming from the window, silhouetting the focal point and creating that light-bleeding effect. Screen mode, in fact, acts like a wash of colour, compressing the mid-tones and highlights together while keeping the effect natural.

### 6 LIFE FINDS A WAY

Sometimes a landscape we've finished still feels dead. The painting misses something that makes it feel alive. To fix this we don't need to explore the flora and fauna of every environment we paint, but just imply natural forces. For this image I "painted the wind". The blowing sand consists of simple shapes treated with a subtle motion blur, the shifting clouds cast their shadows across the land, and the sails react to the gusting breeze. By showing how these elements interact with the atmosphere, the entire scene ties together organically, transforming a static desert into a living, believable environment.

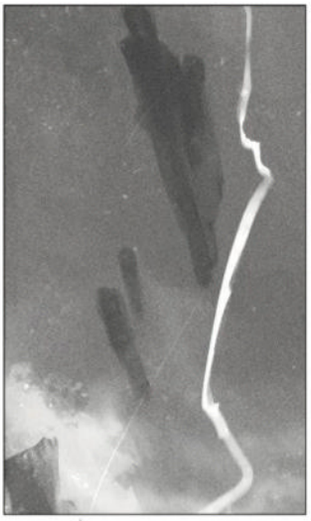






> "Element repetition can reinforce scale and perspective, and tie in the environment"





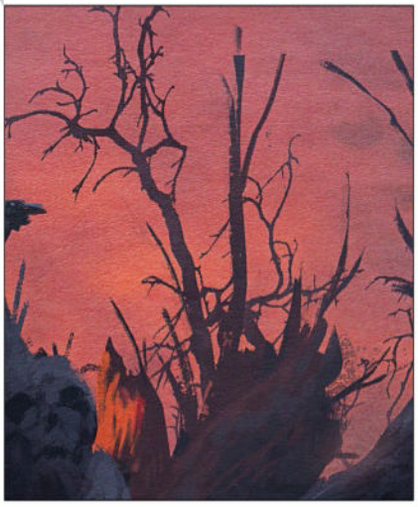
### 7 POWER IN NUMBERS

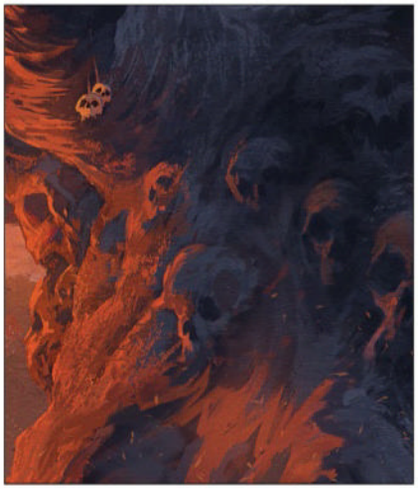
A powerful design principle that makes illustrations feel cohesive is element repetition. In this painting, as you can see, the skeletons in the foreground appear multiple times in different places, as well as the rock pillars framing the top of the image and the floating stones. Element repetition, in fact, can reinforce scale and perspective, gives visual rhythm and ties the environment together in a natural way.

Next time, when you are planning an illustration, try to think which elements can be repeated (and how) to transform disparate objects into a believable world.

### 8 WHICH BRUSH SHOULD I USE?

A question as old as time from artists: "How should I lay my brushwork?" The simpler answer could be, use whatever brush feels comfortable to you, but always try to let your brushstrokes follow the form of subjects, building up three-dimensional volume from flat shapes. In this illustration I used hard-edged brushes in the lit areas, layering crisp textures for the bark, and soft-edged brushes to keep subtle details from becoming overly distracting. For the distant branches, I used a brush with a Colour Dynamic to introduce textural and colour variations, without having to render every single twig.







**"Use a brush that feels comfortable, but always try to let your brushstrokes follow the form"**

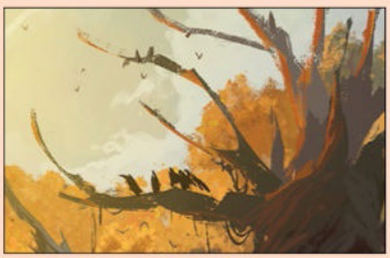


## 9 STAY A WHILE AND WATCH

This tip is dedicated to storytelling, because one of the main goals of an illustration is, indeed, to tell a story. Beyond the use of light and colour, the mood, the composition, you can enrich your painting with small, secondary focal points. These subtle details might not catch the viewer's eye immediately, but discovering them deepens the story. The skulls and the ravens above – classic memento mori – are hinting at the ancient and foreboding nature of this tree. These small details can be everything, and they add layers to the visual narrative.

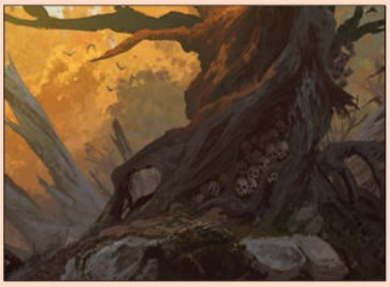
## 10 BRUSHWORK

Learn how to master subtle brush strokes



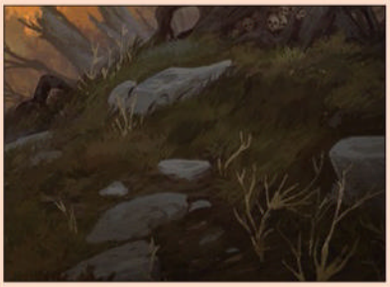
### A Background work

Now I will go deeper into the brushwork tips in a three-step process, showing you how I painted this illustration. In the first stage I focused on the background, using a mix of soft and texture brushes, treating the trees as a mass of spherical objects.



### B Main focal point

Here I started to work on the main focal point, slowly building up volume from the flat shapes, introducing value variations within the light and shadow areas. It's really important to follow the perspective and volume of the subject to give it a solid three-dimensional form.



### C Finish with foreground

I photobashed the foreground to have some planes and volume to build upon. Next, with a soft bristle brush I painted the grass following the lay of the land, while I treated the rocks like simple 'boxes', using a mix of hard-edged and soft-edged brushes.



Artist
**PROFILE**

**Nien Minh**
**LOCATION:** Vietnam

Nien Minh loves exploring themes of humanity, nature, and Vietnamese culture, often combined with fantasy elements. His work focuses on illustration and concept art for games and films.
**https://bit.ly/4xY97ED**

Technique focus

# RESEARCH SOLID FOUNDATIONS

**Nien Minh** discusses drawing on ancient history to inspire his 3D visual constructs



"This piece is part of a personal project. I drew inspiration from various sources and really wanted to create something featuring a dragon. Additionally, the decorative patterns were inspired by Vietnam's Dong Son civilisation.

"I started with a rough sketch on paper, then gathered reference images and created simple 3D models to help visualise the lighting. I believe that a solid foundation built on good references is essential for creating high-quality artwork. Throughout the process, I primarily used texture brushes and mixer brushes in Photoshop, as they helped me to achieve better results with textures, flow and colour dynamics."



## How I create...

# A DRAGON ON THE ATTACK



### 1 Laying the foundations

I use grayscale to establish the composition to begin with. Value is the most important element, so I need to get everything clear right from the start; it serves as the foundation for everything that follows.



### 2 Pushing the colours

I apply colour based on the initial value plan. This is where references are crucial, as they are key to achieving natural-looking colours and lighting. I then refine the shapes and add details, particularly in areas that were not clearly defined in the initial sketch.



### 3 Polishing the final details

Finally, I render the details to completion. I pay close attention to visual elements, such as the detail density, scale, colour and texture. Then I arrange and adjust them based on the sketch to ensure harmony while focusing primarily on the focal points such as the character and the dragon. I also add dragons in the background in order to enhance visual interest and the narrative quality of the piece.

# The Gallery

## SHOWCASING THE FINEST TRADITIONAL ARTISTS

1





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# Lisa Lennon

**LOCATION:** Isle of Man **MEDIA:** Watercolours **WEB:** www.lisalennonart.com

Lisa was born on the Isle of Man, a place steeped in myth and folklore. She defines her style as magical realism with a focus on classical portraiture. She works with watercolours, building up many layers, all while adding details.

**1 THE MORNING SHORE**
"This science fiction piece was dreamed up while walking by the sea. Her headpiece is inspired by the pebbles there. I love wide-open spaces; they give me a lot of scope to play with atmospheric scenes."

**2 THE PLAIN OF TOWERS**
"This is where fantasy meets science fiction. I was working with local folklore and became obsessed with goblins and elves. I developed a collection called 'Space Goblins'."

**3 THE AIR FIELDS**
"Another in the 'Space Goblins' series. How did Tudor clothes end up in outer space? We can only speculate, but I do love a good riff, and it's always a large technical challenge to get it right."










**4 GOBLINA**
"One of my classic goblins. I so enjoy painting these rather cantankerous, sassy personalities. My focus here – technique-wise – was to have a vintage look to the colour and quality, all while retaining a contemporary, whimsical feel. I love this one."

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



# Lavera Grace

**LOCATION:** Australia **MEDIA:** Ink, watercolours **WEB:** www.youtube.com/@laveragrace/videos

Grace has always felt drawn to magical stories and the natural world. She says that inky lines and layered watercolours feel the most natural, allowing ideas to flow onto the paper.

### 1 THE FAERIE FROG PRINCE

"Inspired by the fairy tale, The Frog Prince, I had an idea to tell the story in the faerie kingdom. I wanted to depict this encounter as a moment of enchantment between two characters."

### 2 THE GLOAMING

"The Twilight films inspired the atmosphere and colour palette of this painting. I wanted it to feel cold, at that magical time of evening right before dark, beneath a bright full moon."




### 3 SPELLBOUND

"I created this artwork during a phase of obsessive reading. After struggling to find inspiration and wishing to be back in my books, the concept for this piece emerged organically."

### 4 KELP HARVEST

"I used my subject matter to create a border for the scene. I've recently been inspired to experiment more with shape and design; to not always have my compositions so confined within borders."







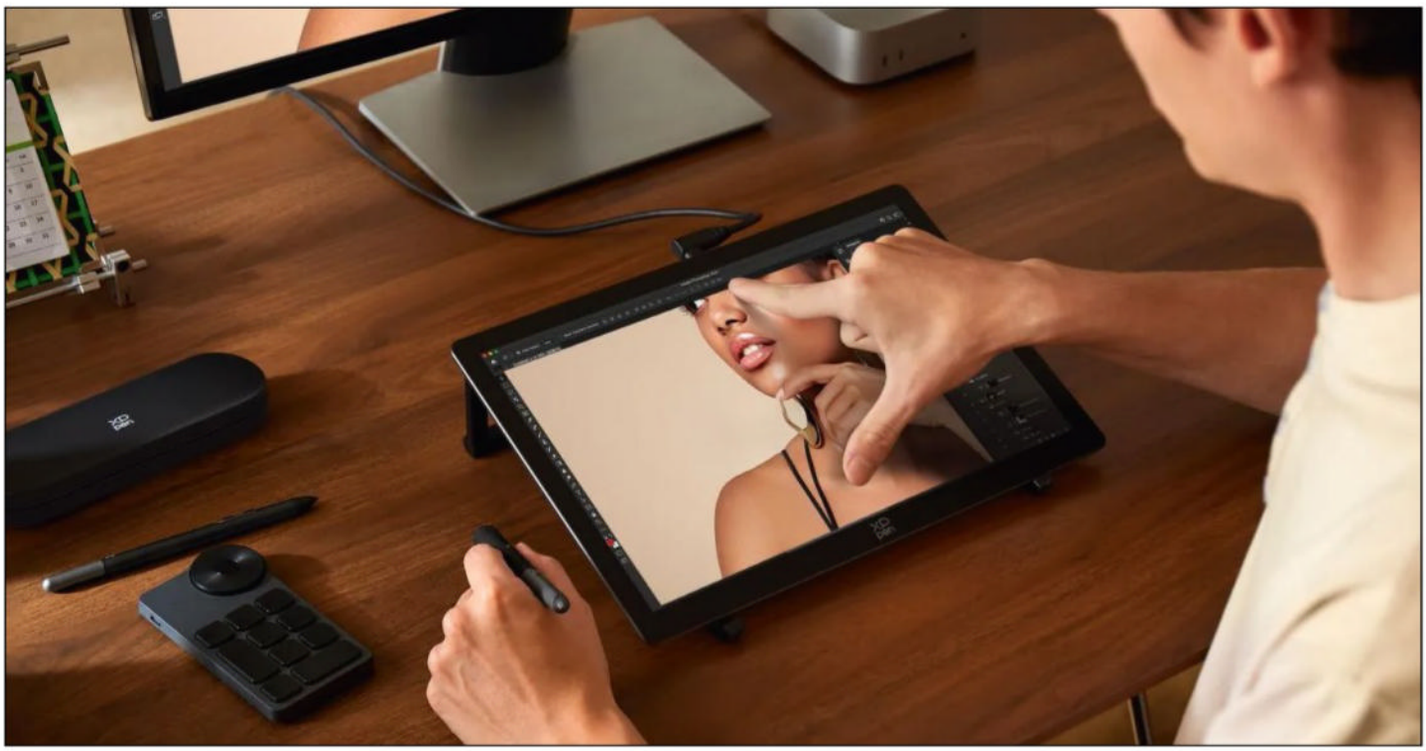
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# Reviews

## 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!



© XPPen

The Artist Ultra 14 offers a lot for the money and not just the specs list, but also the bundled accessories.

# XPPen Artist Ultra 14

**SMALL BUT MIGHTY** This pen display convinced me that screen quality matters more than 16K pressure sensitivity

**Price** £599/$699 **Company** XPPen **Web** www.xp-pen.com

**While I'm not particularly bothered about 16K pressure sensitivity anymore on pen displays, new tablets like XPPen's Artist Ultra 14 make a play of the spec. We've reached the point where manufacturers can keep doubling the numbers on the box, but 8,192 versus 16,384 pressure levels isn't going to make your brush strokes twice as good, and I'd much rather see that attention paid to the screen, the pen feel and how the tablet is going to be used**

That's what makes the new XPPen Artist Ultra 14 interesting, because after using it for two weeks I think XPPen has got the balance about right. It's a $699/£599 drawing display with a 14-inch 2.8K OLED, a 90Hz refresh rate, and a 720g body that's genuinely easy to pick up and slim into your bag or backpack.

It's also refreshingly straightforward to get going. The Artist Ultra 14 is essentially plug-and-play, so while drivers are available if you want to configure the tablet and make the most of its controls, you can connect it and start drawing – without turning the tablet set up into a stress test. That's exactly what I want from a portable pen display, particularly one that's likely to be pulled out and used in different places, rather than permanently installed on a desk. Although if you have a small desk or are a student looking for a neat tablet; the Artist Ultra 14's smaller size will feel like a good option.



© XPPen

You get two styluses in the box. One slim, the other thicker, so finding your best fit is easy.

## DESIGN CHOICES

The design makes the Artist Ultra 14 an easy-to-use, portable tablet that's slim and light enough to hold comfortably in one hand. It has hard-edged, angular sloping corners on the rear that give it a little more character than the usual flat, curved slab, and it feels like XPPen considered that you



© XPPen

Design and screen quality are both excellent, making a compelling addition to your shopping cart.


© XPPen

Both pens, plus accessories live in a nice hard shell case.

might actually carry this around. There's a folding stand in the box as well, so you don't immediately have to start adding accessories just to get a sensible drawing angle, and like the tablet, the stand will fit in a small bag.

XPPen has gone down the familiar route of giving you a fairly generous collection of extras, including USB-C and USB cables, power adapters, the Quick Key remote and two X3 Pro styluses. I ended up favouring the slimmer pen design because it sits more naturally in my hand, particularly when I'm drawing for longer periods, although having the 'fat' option is useful if you need more buttons.

The display is where the Artist Ultra 14 really earns its keep, and like its larger Artist Ultra 16 brother, it delivers a bright, smooth screen. That 2.8K resolution on a 14-inch panel works out at roughly 243ppi, so lines and small details look very clean, while the 16:10 aspect ratio gives you a little more vertical room than the 16:9 screens used on many similar-sized displays.

It's also a fully laminated display, and XPPen quotes ±0.4mm centre accuracy for the pen, which goes some way towards explaining why the drawing experience feels so direct.

## DISPLAY QUALITY

The OLED panel itself is lovely. Colours are bright and punchy without feeling cartoonishly overcooked, blacks are properly deep, and the 100,000:1 contrast gives the whole display a bit more depth than you're used to getting from an IPS pen display. XPPen uses a True RGB Stripe pixel arrangement too, and while that's hardly something you'll think about while drawing, I never did until I glanced at the spec sheet; it helps keep fine detail and text looking clean on a screen you sit very close to, because it's a smaller 14-inch screen.

The 90Hz refresh rate also makes sense in practice, because it's so smooth and responsive. Moving around the canvas, zooming, panning or using my finger to tap menus all feels very fluid, and the pen has that lovely sense of simply keeping up with what I'm doing. Touch can be switched on and off using a physical control at the top right of the display, alongside the brightness controls, which is much nicer than having to disappear into a settings menu every time you don't want your palm triggering something.

That's probably the biggest difference between reading the specs and actually using the Artist Ultra 14. The numbers are impressive, certainly, but the display just feels easy to work on. Small details can be scrawled and sketched with precision, the surface glides nicely under the pen, and the combination of the OLED and 90Hz refresh gives everything an effortless smooth appearance that makes me want to keep drawing.

There is an obvious compromise: the 14-inch display size. Some artists will want a bigger canvas, particularly if you're working on detailed illustration, 3D modelling or animation where toolbars and timelines can quickly eat into your available space. XPPen has the Artist Ultra 16 for that, or there are larger recommended OLED alternatives like the Xencelabs Pen Display 16, but I think the smaller screen makes sense here because portability is clearly part of the point.

What I like most about the XPPen is that it doesn't feel like I've bought a portable version of a desktop drawing display and then had to accept a long list of compromises.

At this price, XPPen has managed to cram in the sort of display technology I'd expect from a $1,000-plus pen display, and it's light and sturdy. For the combination of screen quality, drawing experience, and portability, the Artist Ultra 14 is one of the most convincing pen displays I've used around this price range.

**Ian Dean**




Shortcuts can be set up and allocated to buttons for efficiency.

> **"The Artist Ultra 14 is an easy-to-use, portable tablet that's slim and light enough to hold in one hand"**

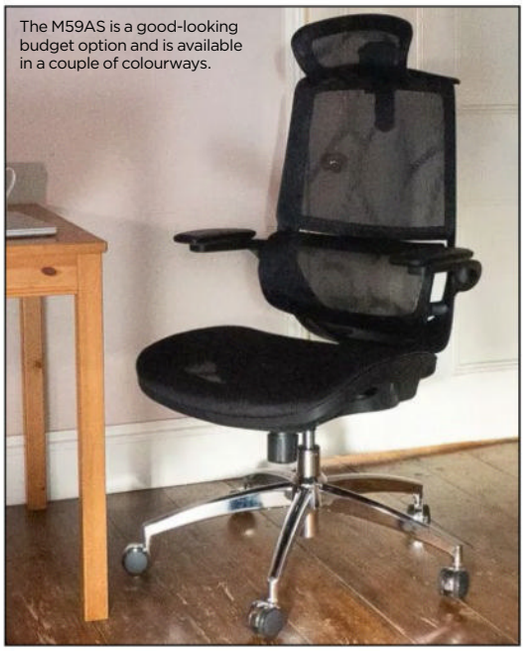
### VERDICT

The new Artist Ultra 14 is a perfectly portable OLED tablet that feels great to use and is incredible value. It's a new market leader for mobile art.

**Pros**
- Bright, smooth OLED pen display
- Slim and lightweight design
- Comes every accessory you need

**Cons**
- At 14-inches, too small for some

**Rating**
★★★★½



The M59AS is a good-looking budget option and is available in a couple of colourways.

The weave is a little rough on bare skin but 'give' is more than comfortable enough to sit on. Supportive and breathable.





Although lacking some adjustability it's there in key areas.

# Sihoo M59AS

**BUDGET SUPPORT** Sihoo's M59AS boasts a springy construction that adapts to your body, delivering decent comfort at a low price

**Price** £180/$240 **Company** Sihoo **Web** https://uk.sihoo.com

**Sihoo has fast become one of our top recommendations for office chairs for the simple fact that it makes ergonomic and good-looking chairs that cost a fraction of the price of high-end units.**

Rather than trying to create a solid and premium office chair, Sihoo has leaned into its low-cost business model and delivered a more springy and lightweight perch that doesn't feature much adjustability, but makes up for it in conforming to your posture and position. The lumbar support and backrest can't be tuned to your exact preferences, but it could make our list of the best office chairs for back pain, thanks to its effortless comfort.



The M59AS office chair has five legs with wheels, providing a large footprint for more stability.

From the moment you sit in the Sihoo M59AS, the chair conforms to your body. Lean back and the armrests go with you, stick your bum out and the lumbar support gently engages with the small of your back.

While adjustability is minimal, there's enough here to ensure comfort. As you'd expect, the gas lift goes up and down, and round and round, and you can change the angle and height of the headrest.

The armrests rotate horizontally and move backwards and forwards, but they can't be moved up and down, so if your desk is lower or higher than average you might find your forearms aren't perfectly level, which is less than ideal if you're resting your hands on a desk, or laptop keyboard.

However, the armrests flip up and out of the way completely, so you can push the chair right up to your desk when not in use.

At this price point, the M59AS is about as good as it gets — closer inspection may reveal where Sihoo has cut corners, but the overall chair works well in both home studio and office environments.

**Henry Winchester**

## VERDICT

The £180/$240 Sihoo M59AS is ideal for agile multitaskers who prefer a light, fluid perch over a rigid office chair, offering a surprising amount of mesh support at a budget price point. It might lack armrest adjustments and feel slightly flexy, but the springy suspension, breathable build, and flip-up arms justify the low cost. If you can look past its budget plastic accents, it's a remarkably comfortable and affordable seat.

**Pros**

- Affordable price
- Supportive in the right places
- Good for taller or long-legged people
- Overall looks are pretty decent

**Cons**

- Cheap build
- Lacks adjustability
- A little creaky

**Rating** ★★★½☆

Massive capacity but small in form factor, the Seagate One Touch is smaller than a laptop.



# Seagate One Touch 24TB

**SAFE STORE** Huge storage without the desktop clutter

**Price** £670/$780
**Company** Seagate
**Web** www.seagate.com

**RATING** ★★★★½

**There's no escaping it; file sizes are getting larger, and finding room for everything from new projects and final artwork, to the hundreds of reference images and photos, as well as video work, is becoming more of a problem.**

That's where something like the Seagate One Touch 24TB external hard drive comes in (an 8TB model is also available).

You get a lot of storage, wrapped up in a simple desktop drive that doesn't need its own larger power brick – and that's probably the thing I like most about the One Touch. Traditional desktop hard drives sit on your desk, connected to a power socket. The One Touch takes a different approach. It runs through USB-C, so it's one cable from drive to computer. That's it.

With 24TB you're more likely to run out of ideas than disk space. But be aware though: this is still a traditional hard drive, so it's not going to compete with an NVMe SSD for speed.

At £670/$780, the 24TB model isn't an impulse buy, but it's surprisingly good value and worth it to keep your files safely organised. When you break it down, you're getting around $38 per terabyte.

**Ian Dean**



Walking the line between science-fiction and futuristic, Rafael Sarmento's illustrations transport you to fantasy worlds.

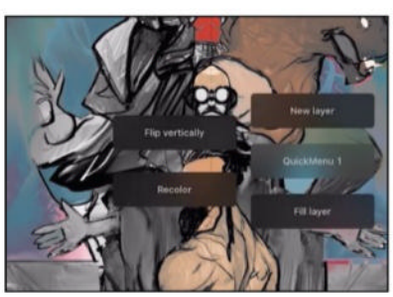
# Sci-fi and Fantasy Illustration in Procreate

**DOMESTIKA COURSE** Rafael Sarmento shows how he creates professional illustrations on his iPad

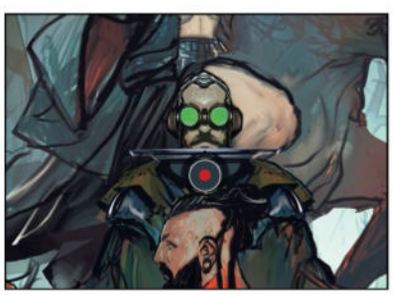
**Publisher** Domestika **Price** £15.90 **Format** Online video course **Length** 13 lessons (1h 27m)
**Web** https://bit.ly/4gesFxh

**Rafael Sarmento is a Brazilian illustrator whose extensive client list — Wizards of the Coast, Universal, Dark Horse and DC Comics — even includes ImagineFX, so we know he is great. This Domestika course follows him building a single illustration, with a focus that splits across technique and thought process.**

The course looks at the creation of a science-fiction retelling of the legend of King Arthur. Rafael works on separating two genres — one built on fantasy, the other more science-fiction based — which he then merges into a cohesive whole. The course starts off looking into how Rafael uses Procreate to organise his references, and uses those as the basis for his initial sketches.




A basic knowledge of Procreate is essential for this course, and you'll need an iPad and Apple Pencil.



Rafael reveals his process to give life to a sci-fi remake of the story of King Arthur.

The colour lesson also focuses on iPad use, which in a course this short is good to see as it helps with focus, splitting warm, earthy fantasy tones from cooler metallic sci-fi ones. The course is well resourced and includes a Procreate brush and the semantic reference panel shown in the course.

This course is a real showcase of what can be achieved with Procreate, and to his credit Rafael is modest. Note: even though he supplies his custom brush, he does point out that Procreate's own 6B Pencil is near-identical, which enables you to grow your own style.

**Mike Griggs**

## VERDICT

A Procreate powerhouse of a course, with a good study of how a professional artist can get from A-Z only using Procreate (and an iPad). The shortness of the course may put some off, and affects the score, but as an intro it's hard to beat.

**Pros**
- The course is short, ideal as a quick intro
- Focuses on a pure Procreate workflow
- Shows how to mix various genres

**Cons**
- The course is short, so may not be deep enough for all
- Best bought with a Domestika credit rather than paid for

**Rating** ★★★☆☆

# Brushing up…

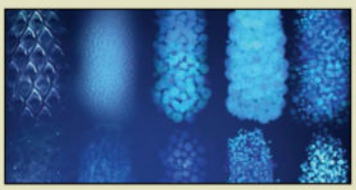
We put three packs through their paces to find out whether they're worth downloading



## Fur & Fluff Brushes for Procreate

**Artist** Lisa Bardot
**Software** Procreate
**Brushes** 17 **Price** Free
**Rating** ★★★★

Lisa Bardot's free fur set is a lovely bit of kit: 17 brushes covering feathered, combed, short, shaggy and fluff textures, plus a shaper brush for form beneath and a shadow brush for depth.
**https://bit.ly/4cdvWft**



## Animal Scales & Feathers Pattern

**Artist** Procreate Brush Studio
**Software** Procreate
**Brushes** 80+ **Price** £3.71
**Rating** ★★★

Over eighty scale and feather brushes covering snake, dragon and fish scales, lizard skin and layered plumage. Handy for creature textures of any sort and hard to beat at the price.
**https://theonlio.gumroad.com/l/frtty**



## Krita Brushes for Illustrators and Concept Artists

**Artist** GDQuest
**Software** Krita
**Brushes** 100+ **Price** Free
**Rating** ★★★★

A range of brushes collated from various artists, with over 100 presets in 14 colour-coded categories spanning wet and dry media, blending, inking and painting. Certainly worth a look.
**https://bit.ly/4hzlt1j**

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# State of the Art

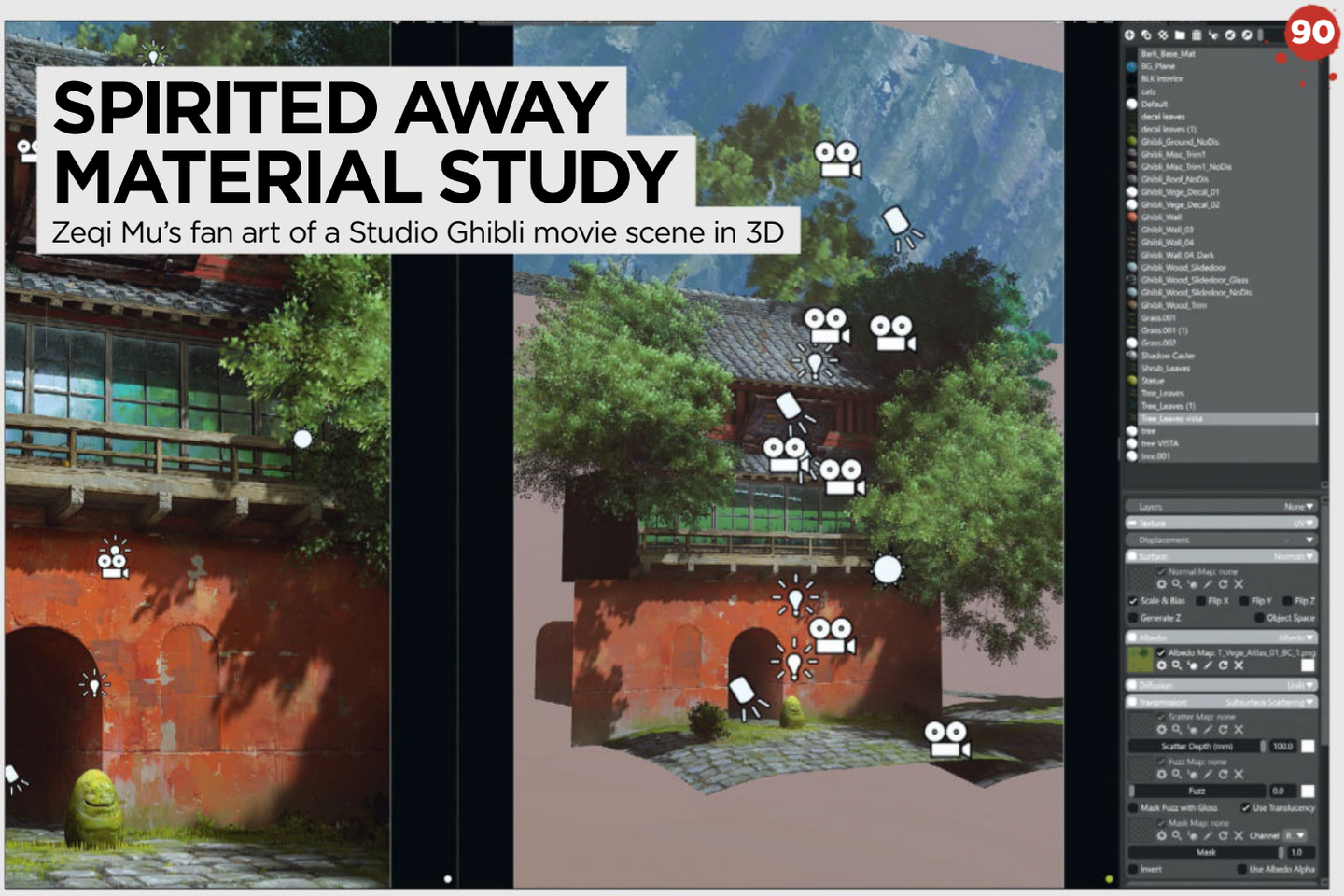
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# 3D Artist

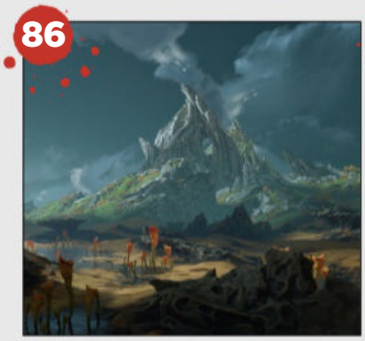
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90

**SPIRITED AWAY MATERIAL STUDY**

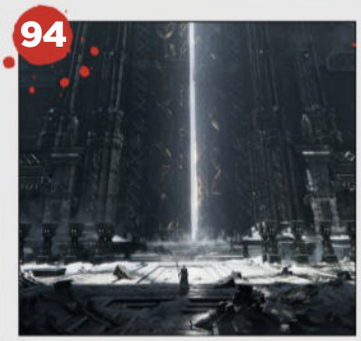
Zeqi Mu's fan art of a Studio Ghibli movie scene in 3D


86

**The best 3D art around**

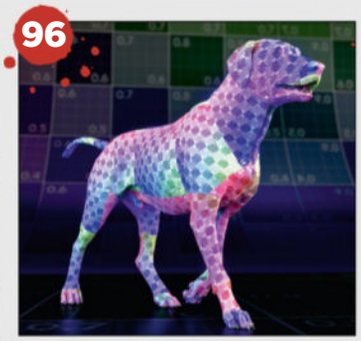
The stylised worlds of artist Ian Zepp and Alexandre Mougenot's 3D characters.


94

**Create cinematic scale**

Borisut Chamnan uses cinematic lighting to enhance scale and atmosphere.


96

**Back to basics**

Use UV mapping to combine 2D and 3D and learn how to fully utilise an animation rig.





98

**Five minutes with...**

Andrej Troha, a chemical engineer turned 3D artist, on his portfolio.

# 3D Artist Showcase

BE INSPIRED BY THE BEST DIGITAL ART AROUND



## Ian Zepp

**LOCATION:** England **MEDIA:** Zbrush, Unreal Engine, Gaea, Blender, Photoshop, Substance Painter, Designer, Maya **WEB:** www.artstation.com/janzepp

Ian started his career in the games industry five years ago as an environment artist. Studying environment concept art and practicing sketching inspired him to explore stylised worlds.

**1 TERRAIN**
"The landscape shader combines Global Albedo Maps, Nanite Tessellation, RVT blending, height blending and cell bombing. This reduces texture repetition across all of the large surfaces."

**2 IOMALL**
"My latest stylised project, Iomall, inspired by Yehliu Geopark and Seceda Mountain. Built in Unreal Engine 5, it combines Lumen and Nanite Foliage to create a stylised environment."







# Alexandre Mougenot

**LOCATION:** France **MEDIA:** Zbrush, Maya, Substance Painter, Houdini, Marvelous Designer, Arnold, Marmoset Toolbag, Photoshop
**WEB:** www.artstation.com/alexmougenot

Alexandre is a 3D character artist who works on animated films, video games and trailers. He has mainly worked at TAT Productions on several feature films, as well as on the series Asterix: The Big Fight for Netflix.

**1 VELDRAK**
"Veldrak is based on the fantastic work of Kian Kiani. I absolutely love sculpting scales, so I've set myself another challenge to make them one by one by hand."

**2 LION**
"I've wanted to create a realistic lion for quite some time now. I challenged myself to push the boundaries as far as possible, and above all, to create a believable, realistic fur with Houdini."

**3 DR STRANGE**
"I've been a fan of Benedict Cumberbatch since the start of the Sherlock series. I'm also a big Marvel fan, so I have been itching to depict his likeness again and improve my sense of realism."












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**4 AQUATIEN**
"I wanted to try my hand at creating a realistic portrait, and I drew a lot of inspiration from various tribes. Julie Bijjou was in charge of the grooming, and she did a fantastic job on it."

**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**



## Substance 3D Designer & Marmoset

# SPIRITED AWAY MATERIAL STUDY

**Zeqi Mu** shares his process for creating fan art of a Studio Ghibli movie scene in 3D with procedural textures

For this Spirited Away material study, I chose the gate scene from the film's opening: Chihiro's father drives the family along a forest road in a 4WD sedan, pushes through overgrown branches and stops in front of a tunnel-like gateway that marks the boundary between the everyday world and the spirit realm. After they step out of the car, the camera holds on what they see – a weathered red facade, a dark arch, mossy stone, aged wood, and bright summer foliage. That moment is what I rebuilt.

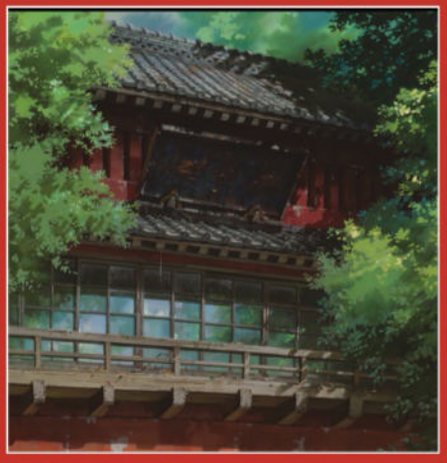
*Artist* **PROFILE**

**Zeqi Mu**
**LOCATION:** Japan

Zeqi is also known by the nickname Constantine Mountain. He's been in the gaming industry for eight years, currently working as a 3D environment artist. He was principle material artist on Infinity Nikki and Silver Palace.
**https://bit.ly/4hcIZAI**



## How I create... SPIRITED AWAY IN 3D







### 1 Lock the reference and plan the textures

I start with a film still of the gate and treat it as the brief. Then I break the shot into texture elements – plaster, wood, tiles, stone, glass, moss – and plan how they will sit on the model. This means sorting trim UVs into a clear texture layout and deciding which textures I actually need before I open Substance Designer.

### 2 Build textures, variants, and the mesh

Next, I author the textures and a few variants so that wear and colour can shift without rebuilding everything. I refine the mesh with height displacement and clean up the trim pieces so the UVs match the plan. Finally, I drop in decals for chips, stains, and small story details that make the gate feel lived in.

### 3 Light in Marmoset and finish the render

I bring the textures and models into Marmoset Toolbag and light the scene to echo the film still, encompassing warm daylight, soft shadows and that dark arch in the process. The last pass involves grading and small post tweaks so that the image stays close to the reference without losing any material clarity.

# THE FINAL TOUCHES



## Matching hand-drawn art

It's a challenge to recreate this movie scene into 3D; perspectives are hand-drawn by Ghibli's artists, so they're not necessarily accurate in a 3D sense. I indeed used some tricks to better fit models so they almost match the movie scene. This process for me is important to recreate the awesome composition of the movie scene.

## Fixing the roof

Roof tile material with a heightmap for displacing the mesh. Notice the colour patches in some of the tiles; their final position within the texture is decided while I'm tweaking the final look of the scene in Marmoset Toolbag to better mimic the feeling of the original movie scene.

## Doing some damage

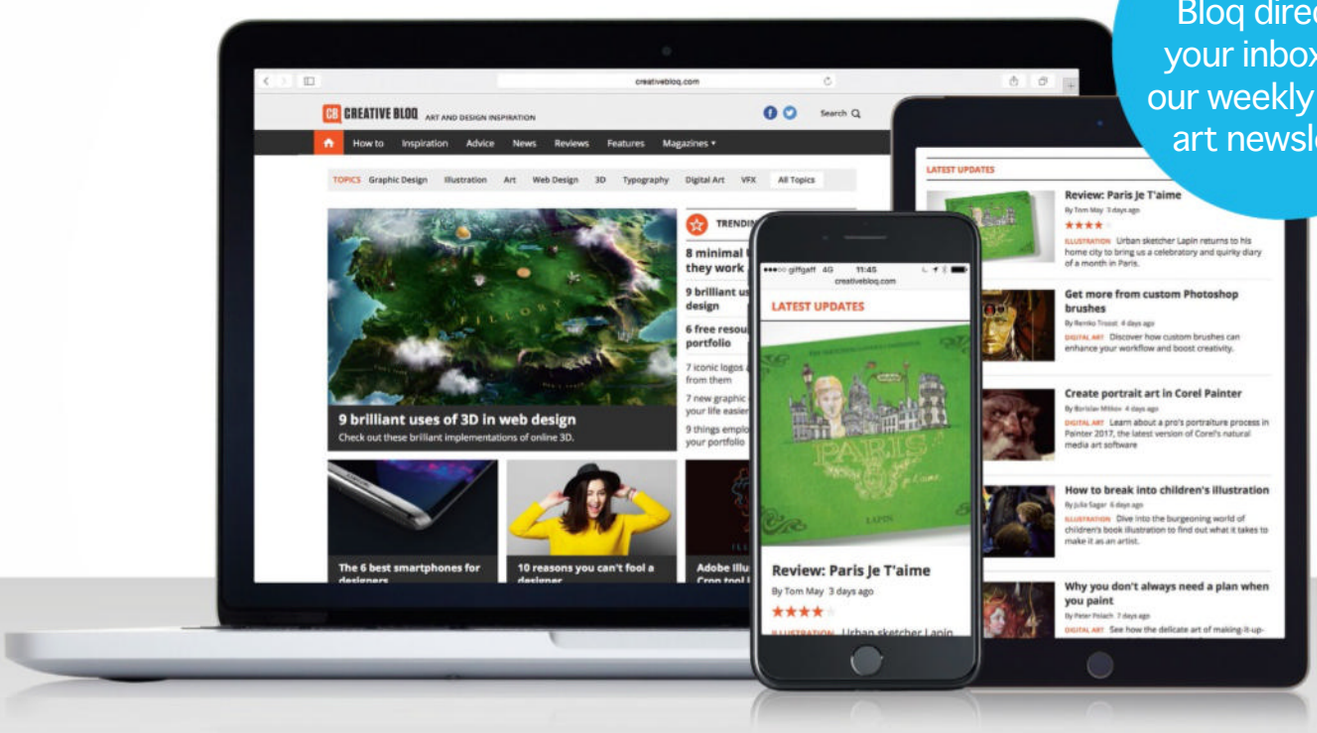
For the wall component on the ground floor, I made one material with gate hole on it to catch a subtle damage look on the rim of the hole and a variant of that material that tiles horizontally to fill the rest of the wall. This process can be replaced by just using one wall material with decals to do the damage work.

## Building the wall

Decals are also fully procedurally generated. I made much of the wall damage into atlas material, because it's much easier for me to manually place wall damage decals on the wall to match the original movie scene.

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Artist PROFILE

**Borisut Chamnan**
**LOCATION:** Thailand

A 3D indie artist who loves to create imaginary worlds inspired by ancient ruins. Borisut feels there's something magical about building places that feel like they have a story to tell.
**https://bit.ly/4zg4WFW**



Technique focus

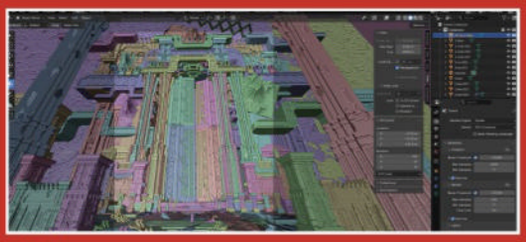
# CREATING A BIG SENSE OF SCALE

**Borisut Chamnan** uses a tiny figure and cinematic lighting to really enhance the scale and atmosphere



"'The Gate of Vanaheimr' is a 3D-environment artwork created with the idea of building a fictional world that I want to see and experience. The majority of my inspiration comes from Norse mythology. I focus on creating atmosphere through light, shadow, and composition, allowing viewers to feel as if they have stepped into a world of freezing temperatures and overwhelming grandeur. Creating artwork that can make viewers feel amazed requires what I call 'epic scale', which is a technique I specialize in. It focuses on placing a tiny figure in front of enormous architecture, emphasizing the contrast between the small figure and the vastness of the environment. The software I use for my entire 3D workflow is Blender, with additional adjustments and post-processing done in Photopea."

## How I create...
## AN EPIC SCALE ENVIRONMENT



### 1 Models and composition

First I arrange pre-made models to establish the composition, setting up the camera and gradually adding surrounding details. The enjoyable part is experimentation. If something doesn't fit, you will immediately notice. Most of the textures came from Poly Haven and photos I'd captured. I use Ambient Occlusion, Bevel and Fake Bump Nodes to add depth and dimension.



### 2 Lighting

I prefer creating the lighting while working on the composition, which allows me to observe the direction of light interacting with the entire scene. Lighting can hide many imperfections, even when models aren't perfect. I'm usually searching for the lighting angle that makes the image look its best. I often use Sky Texture, Spot Lights, and Environment Texture, sometimes combining them to achieve the desired atmosphere.



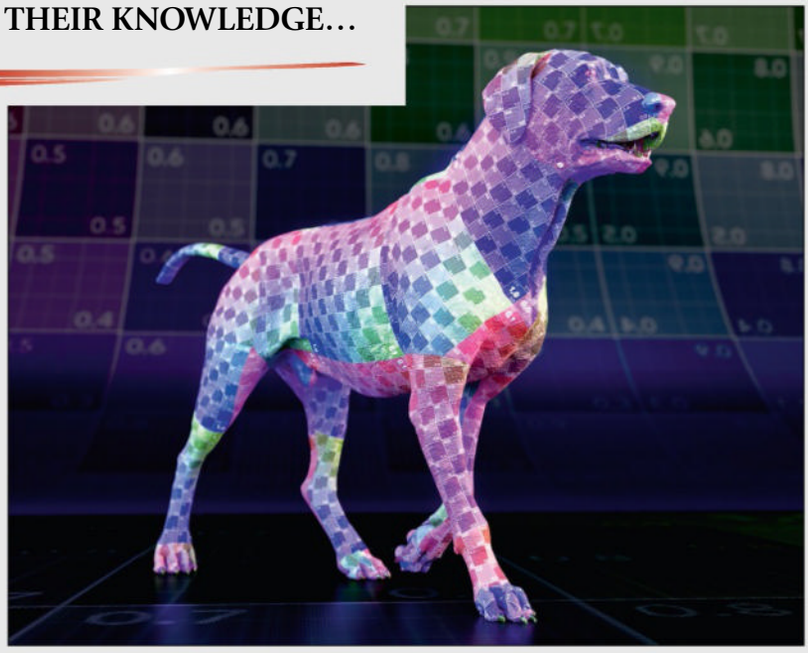
### 3 Post-processing

The final step after rendering the raw image from Blender is additional editing in Photopea (which has a similar workflow to Photoshop). I add fog, smoke and dust, making small lighting adjustments to enhance the overall mood. However, I don't usually rely heavily on colour grading, because I'm generally satisfied with the colours and atmosphere already achieved through compositing in Blender.

OUR 3D EXPERTS ARE HERE TO SHARE THEIR KNOWLEDGE…

# HOW TO MAKE 2D IMAGES WORK WITH 3D MODELS

**Mike Griggs** explains the method of UV mapping – the flattening process where the worlds of 2D and 3D collide



UV mapping flattens the surface into a 2D pattern, making it easy to work with.



Have you ever wondered how a 3D model can have such amazing textures that seem to flow exactly as they should around an object? Often, the natural assumption would be that an artist painted those in three dimensions, just as if it were a real-life model.

While that is technically possible, the case for CG models is usually that a 2D process has happened first – a process is called UV mapping.

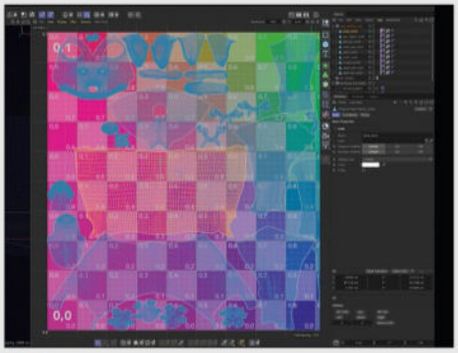
If you are at all familiar with designing and creating clothes, this is a great analogy for what a UV map does – it essentially takes the entire 3D surface of an object and then flattens it out into patterns. In case you are wondering, U and V are simply the letters used for the two axes of the flat texture, because X, Y and Z were already taken by the 3D scene.

A good UV map will account for the bending and curving of a surface, so that when a label is put on a wine bottle, for example, it will 'wrap' onto the model in the correct way, as would, say, the scales of a lizard's skin.

UV maps can appear weird and counter-intuitive. Thankfully, most 3D applications have a good UV workflow, and usually a solid array of UV unwrapping tools which do a lot of the heavy lifting. Applications such as Adobe's Substance Painter can take things further still, acting as a one-stop shop for adding texture, and for using UV-enabled textures to add 3D detail to your models and scenes with textures alone.

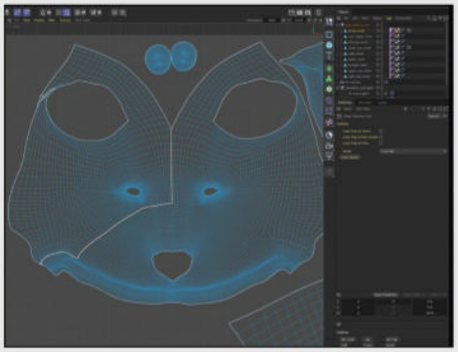
*Mike Griggs is the founder of Creative Bloke and has experience in content creation, workflow design and emerging creative technology. www.creativebloke.com.*

## How UV maps can help your 3D model



### 1 What is a UV map?

Effectively, a UV map is a cutting pattern of the surface of a 3D mesh, laid out much like a sewing pattern. Most meshes have a single UV map made up of 'islands' of polygons, because trying to unwrap a whole complex mesh as one single island will almost always create distortion when the texture is applied.



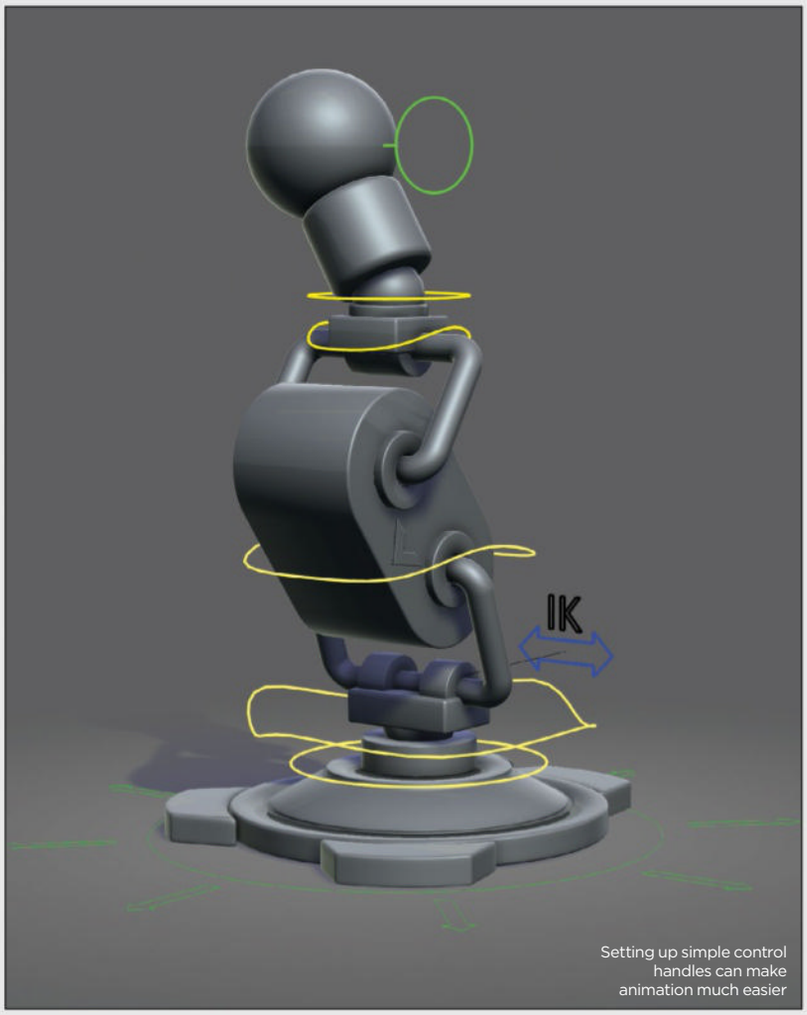
### 2 Cutting the patterns

Most 3D software, such as Maxon's Cinema 4D, has a range of UV cutting tools, where the artist can create custom seams along a model which follow the contours of its polygons. Like in fashion, knowing where to cut the seams can make the obvious invisible, and allow textures to flow. Place them badly and the join will show.



### 3 Do I need UVs?

UV maps aren't always necessary when creating 3D models, but they can help. Tiling scales, for example, need a UV map to flow correctly, and having one means texture painting software such as Substance Painter can be used. They also make it easier to move a model between 3D applications, as the UV coordinates travel with the mesh.



Setting up simple control handles can make animation much easier

# LEARN TO CONTROL YOUR ANIMATION RIG

**Antony Ward** explains how a rig can help make animating model joints less painful



There are a number of issues with using joints as a deformer – the main one being that they usually maintain their positional values, meaning the transform and rotation values are not zero, which is not ideal when animating them directly.

There are ways around this depending on the application you are using, but when working with a skeleton to be used in a game engine, those values are an essential part of the animation data.

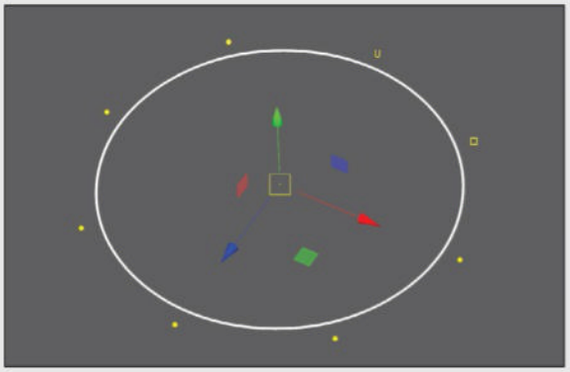
Another problem with animating joints directly is that they can often be hidden inside of the model, making them difficult to find and select. On top of this, a joint hierarchy doesn't lend itself to create poses easily because you have to work from the parent first, down to the child joints, which can be frustrating.

This is where a rig comes into play. A rig is an extra layer of controls and systems that lie on top of the joints, allowing for more user-friendly, natural animation while keeping the animator away from the base skeleton.

Over the next few issues we will look at the basics of rigging, so let us begin by looking at control.

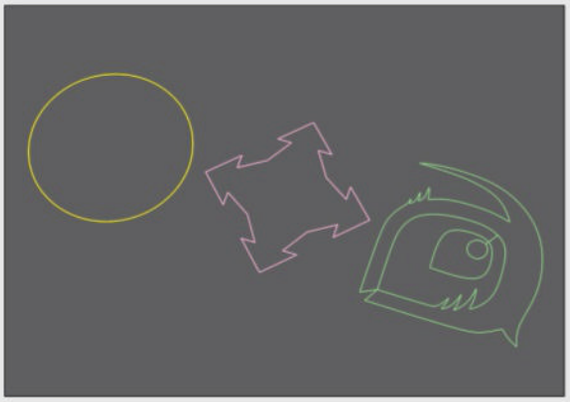
*Antony Ward, aka antCGi, has been creating digital content for over three decades. Be it game development, rigging or recording in-depth courses for his YouTube channel, he boasts experience in most areas of 3D. https://bit.ly/49BhX1n*

## Setup a simple control system for your joints



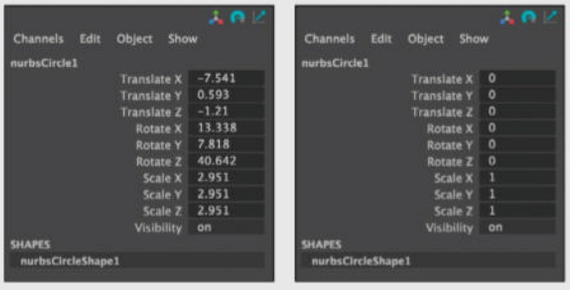
### 1 Create a base shape

Pretty much anything can be used as a control so long as it is clearly visible and easily selectable. Traditionally, NURBS shapes are used because they are easy to create and fully customisable, so you can shape them to better match the area that control will influence.



### 2 Edit and position

The quickest and easiest control to create is a NURBS circle. It can fit around a limb, for example, and be easily selected from any angle, but a character full of circles can make the rig confusing. What we can do is edit the Control Vertices (CVs) to reshape each to make each control more unique.




### 3 Freeze the transforms

Once the control is created and put into position, the translate and rotate attributes can be "frozen", meaning they maintain their position but the values are reset to zero. This gives the animators a clean slate to begin with, while maintaining the all-important values on the joints.

FIVE MINUTES WITH

# ANDREJ TROHA

The chemical engineer-turned-3D artist on his extensive portfolio




**POBEDA 357**
The Pobeda 357 was produced as a model kit based on fictional soviet military hardware.



**What's the aim of your art? What is it that you're trying to achieve?**
Phew, that's the hardest question of all! What is the point of my art? Well, one aim is certainly improving and honing my skills. My personal projects are a way for me to learn new tools, materials, shaders and modelling techniques, and then I apply that gained knowledge to my client-oriented professional projects.

**Has the industry as you know it changed at all over the years?**
I've worked within advertising for almost 30 years now, and one thing I've noticed is that clients don't care much about creativity anymore. In the 90s, creative ads were all the rage and agencies, popping up everywhere like daisies in summer, competed in creating fresh and memorable campaigns.

**Where do you draw inspiration from? Are there artists that are particularly influential to you?**
Art must have a social meaning, just being beautiful isn't enough. Banksy's work, for example, is technically, deliberately naive. The production value is close to zero, but they're as disruptive as few contemporary works. I love disruptive artists, from the simplicity of Kazimir Malevich and Edward Hopper to the total mess of Zdzisław Beksinski, the uneasiness of Uno Moralez, and the meatiness of Mark Powell's dioramas.

**You have a great variation of themes in your work. What has been your favourite project that you have worked on?**
I'm a huge dieselpunk fan and basically in love with the post-World War II period until 1960. That obsession of mine caught the eye of one of the world's largest model kit manufacturers.

So, back in 2018, they reached out to me to create the concept for their new line of experimental models. More specifically, secret Soviet projects that are so out of this world that they would look credible. I came up with this beast of a flying machine called Pobeda (Victory) 357. It was a jet-powered ekranoplan that could also fly due to the implementation of an anti-gravity system that was developed by a fictitious gravity control propulsion research centre in Moscow, and powered by enormous 15,500 hp Kuznetsov NK-12 engines. There's a much longer back story that was there to sell the narrative.

> "Art must have a social meaning, just being beautiful isn't enough"

**MOGRAPH CRYSTALS**
Exploring the volumetric materials, light and controlled chaos of Cinema 4D's MoGraph toolset.







**What advice do you have for new artists eager to produce work as good as yours?**
I know it might sound cliche, but try thinking outside the box. Try thinking about things and concepts nobody has ever thought about, imagine worlds that have never been created. Be creative in using available tools, too. Of course, most importantly, be yourself.

**In your career as a 3D artist, what would you say has been your greatest achievement so far?**
Probably working with 3 Arts Entertainment on a US TV series called Baskets. I was tasked with creating a dieselpunk-ish set for a few of the episodes. Working with Hollywood is a special experience as it is fast-paced, no-BS on one hand and gives you total creative freedom on the other.

*Andrej Troha is a talented 3D artist who holds bachelor's degrees in both chemical technology and graphic design. He worked as an art and creative director at major ad agencies including McCann and Ogilvy, before co-founding his own ad agency, Klicaj, where he is currently art director. bit.ly/49CDwMZ*




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Jasper, age 11

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