Eric Cunha on making art with computers

April 28, 2017 - Eric Cunha is an animator and 3D artist based in New York City.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2017 words.

Tags: Art, Process, Production, Anxiety.

When people ask you what it is exactly that you do, what do you tell them?

I think it kind of depends on who's asking, actually. When I'm at a family event or something, when they're all doctors and lawyers and no one else is really in a creative field, I feel like my answer is a little different. I'm just like, "You know Pixar movies?" And obviously they instantly know that and I'm like, "I do that, but mostly for commercials." I don't really go into the whole thing unless people are *really* interested, but if it's like a friend or someone that I know is at least a little more in line with the field or has a similar background, I'll take a little more time to explain… but the explanation can get dragged out pretty long. It still ends up being, "It's like Pixar, but for commercials… kind of."

You work at an animation and design studio. What is a typical day like for you? Are you always juggling a variety of projects?

Most of the time. I'll often lend myself to various parts of ongoing projects, usually more in the early stages. I'm usually heavily involved in the pitching phase. We usually have to pitch to get work in the first place. Sometimes, anyway. We generally only have small window of time to get something to an agency. I'm usually working with an art director or creative director and working up images or something to send to an ad agency.

When we actually have big animation jobs, my work can be a range of things. Sometimes I'm doing modeling for a character or lighting a scene or shading objects. It's sort of crazy, every day is a little different. Right now we're working on this thing for Crayola and building this whole little interior set with another artist. Sometimes it's more hands-on little stuff and sometimes it's bigger picture. People have this idea that if you do computer animation, you basically do *everything*. In reality, most of the time the work is very specialized. You might create a character and render it in 3D, but someone else makes it move, another person creates the environment that it moves through, another person lights the whole thing. Very often you are focused on just one little part of a much bigger thing.





Eleven from Stranger Things in the ashes of the Demogorgon!

What do you think of as being the most creative aspect of your job?

There’s a lot of creative decision making to be done. When a client says something like, “We want this underground cave scene,” they usually have a very vague idea of what they want. There’s a lot of creative processing that needs to happen in order to bring something like that to life. It’s usually an illustrator or designer that comes up with an idea to guide the concept into the 3D part of it. 3D is really expensive to make, so generally you go into it with a lot of development work up front and then we’re translating the development work from a 2D image

to a 3D rendering of some kind.

Often you're taking some kind of drawing and then adding to it in some way. Each part of the process is generally trying to add to the part that came before it and make that piece of the whole better. Doing pitch work is fun because we're generally working without much feedback yet, it's just about generating ideas. That's when you have the most creative freedom.

It's complicated to be doing creative work that's also about making a client happy. I'm assuming there is a certain amount of compromise you need to be comfortable with.

At times it's easy to get frustrated with pushing an idea forward that you think works incredibly well and then—for whatever reason—the client or agency just doesn't like it. It can be really defeating to go back to the drawing board after you feel like you've figured something out. Sometimes it's hard to pick the pieces up and come back with something new that is better. At the same time, it's kind of a fun challenge in some ways. Some days it's definitely a little defeating. It's like, "How can you not love this beautiful thing I made for you?"

Your own personal work is very figurative—these exaggerated 3D characters that have a certain kind of sweetness and grossness about them. Is there one style of working that you prefer?

I still feel like I'm slowly figuring it out. In my own work, I really like pushing for things that I don't really get to do in my advertising work. Advertising work is a lot of, "Oh, we want this to be really clean," and the references are generally Pixar and Disney stuff. That kind of mainstream commercial animation basically defines what people expect of most animation and 3D work. So when I do my own things I try to veer away from that, at least in some respects.

There's a reason why Pixar and Disney are very successful: they have very beautiful designs. But it's a little bit too perfect, a little too clean, for me. I really like imperfections which sometimes aren't the most appealing. I like things that are a little grotesque at times.



Liz. This was a personal project for my girlfriend's birthday based off of a doodle she did of herself.

How much or how little your work involves analog skills, like being able to draw by hand?

I grew up drawing and that's still very much a part of my process. When I was in school, they don't really teach that side of it. I wish they did. You have your foundation classes, very normal art classes—drawing and all that stuff—but after that it's really very focused on the technology and learning the tools. You could be the greatest technician in the world, a computer genius, but at the end of day these things are just tools. It's just like learning how to use pastels or oil paints. You still need to be an artist controlling those tools.

Some of them are incredibly technical—like if you are doing effects simulations, simulating an explosion or water or something like that, but even that kind of work requires a certain amount of artistry. It's very easy to make things look bad on the computer. It's really easy to get a generic explosion and a lot harder to get a very specific art-directed explosion. With every part of it, technical or not, there's some foundational creative aspect to it that you really need. If you don't really have that, you can only go so far with just the computer. It does a lot of things, a lot of nice and convenient things, but it does not make you an artist in any way.

Because you use a computer as your primary tool, do people tend to not think of you as an artist? Maybe a better question is, do you think of yourself as an artist?

Yeah, for sure. Making art and doing stuff with computers has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember, but I never imagined having a career in it when I was younger. It just didn't seem feasible. It's very hard to be successful as a traditional artist; it's a lot harder to make it. I feel very lucky that I'm working in a field that, as far as I'm concerned, is full of artists that are all successful. If this is your medium, it's a great time to be an artist.

A lot of kids grow up now wanting to do computer animation or design video games. What would you tell young people who are interested in doing this kind of work?

Start young. Start right now. If you know what it's all about *before* you get to college, you might never want to go to college for it. It's a little unfortunate for some people. They find out after they get into school what this kind of work actually entails and are maybe less thrilled by it, but they're already invested, literally, in school. So I feel like if you're curious, you should explore your curiosity before you make a large financial investment in your future. For me it worked out great because I had no idea what I was getting into and, to be honest, I didn't even really want to get into it, but then I fell in love with it. I know other people who were not as lucky.

It's tricky because it's not something like graphic design where there are plenty of classes you can take in high school to get your feet wet. At least when I was in high school, there was absolutely nothing you could take in the way of 3D, except maybe CAD classes if you're trying to be an architect or something. But as far as entertainment 3D animation goes, there were really no offerings.

If you are curious, there are plenty of resources online. Some artists are completely self-taught and successful, so if you do want to learn and you're curious, it's definitely more possible than ever.



Self portrait

Given that so much of your job involves using computers and looking at screens, do you still have other kinds of art-making practices? Something you can just do with your hands that doesn't involve the computer at all?

I unfortunately don’t really draw anymore. That’s not something I’m particularly proud of. I’ve always found, as much as I did draw as a kid, I also got really frustrated with it. Now I’d rather focus on the craft I’m using every single day. Not that drawing couldn’t make that craft better, but it’s a hard thing to force yourself to do. I still want to do things with my hands, even like slowly trying to get into traditional sculpting, which is a very different world. Things like photography play a big role in understanding lighting and how a camera works. That’s a big part of what we do in 3D, faking that stuff.

When you’re using these very sophisticated computer programs as the tool for very meticulous animation work, how do you keep from getting totally bogged down in the details?

That definitely happens. Especially when it’s one single image you’re making over the course of weeks. I definitely need to step away sometimes, whether it’s for an hour or even a day or two, and come back to it later. You instantly see things that you were staring at for days and never realized were terrible. I don’t have many tricks beyond that. You have to walk away and come back. That’s why sometimes creating these images takes so long, because it’s hard to work on them day in and day out for hours without losing your mind. Or your eyesight.

To that point, I feel like that was a problem I had a lot in the beginning—getting stuck at a certain point but feeling like you’ve already committed so many hours to trying to finish this thing that you can’t just stop or throw it away. In the beginning, I was really bad about powering through that and figuring out a way to turn things around and make them into something I liked. I did end up abandoning a lot of work. Only recently have I gotten better at seeing it through to the end, even in those moments when you’re not liking it. Sometimes instead of dropping the image entirely, you just need to get up and go for a walk. That’s all it takes.

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Fact

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