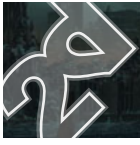




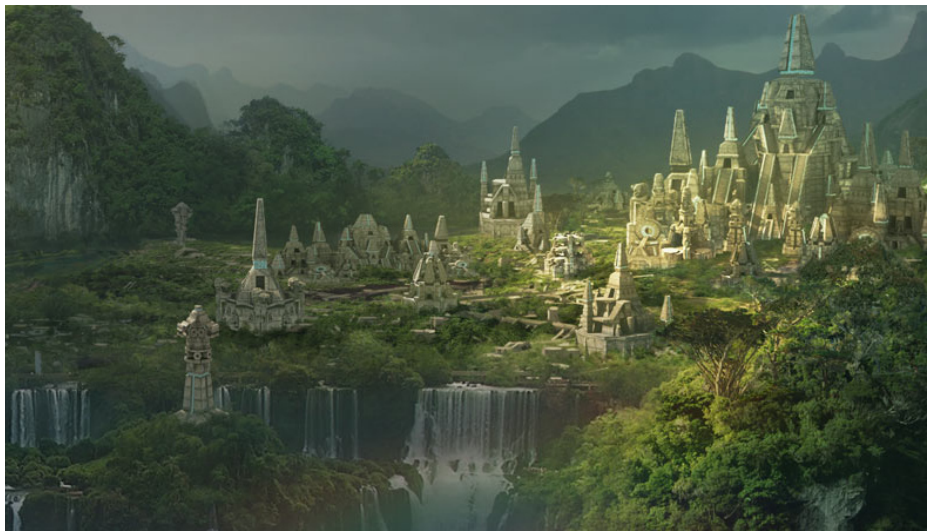
an interview with
DYLAN COLE

We chat to Dylan about matte painting and his career in creating paintings for some of the top films like *Lord of the Rings*, *Riddick* and *I, Robot*.



Could you give us a brief insight into the role of a matte painter on today's' films and explain a little about your day to day tasks?

The role of a matte painter is continuing to change as technology changes. Matte painting should probably be referred to as synthetic environments nowadays. There is a very blurry line between matte painting and 3D environments. A matte painter will essentially do whatever it takes to create a virtual environment. His or her role is to create an environment that does not exist or would be too expensive to film. Usually that is a 2D painting created in Photoshop, but more and more often that also includes projecting a painting onto the 3D geometry to achieve a 2.5D solution. I personally draw the line at doing full modeling, texturing, and lighting of a scene. To me, that is just typical 3D work and not matte painting. There is nothing to say you cannot incorporate renders into your painting, but I definitely like controlling all the lighting in the painting. My day to day tasks include a lot of painting (surprise!) Often at times it is not just creating large scenes, it is doing endless tweaks and working with compositors and TDs to make sure everyone has the elements they





need. A lot of my work consists of breaking up my painting into the specific layers that others need. A haze element here, a special alpha channel there.

Could you tell us a little about the different types of matte paintings often required and the ways in which they are related to both 2d and 3d?

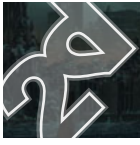
I answered some of this above, but there are three basic kinds of matte painting. There is the straight 2D painting that is composited with live action. This is the simplest kind because it just involves a 2D painting created in Photoshop. The next kind is camera projection or 2.5D. This consists of projecting a 2D painting onto 3D geometry that approximates the features in the painting. You are then able to do a slight camera move. If you reveal areas of the area that are stretching you then just apply a patch with an alpha channel. You can do quite large camera moves in this fashion and still retain the control and ease of working



in 2D. The third is full 3D which I am not even sure you can call matte painting. I guess the difference is that it is a matte painter doing the full 3D with modeling, texturing and lighting.

Can you talk us through the process of producing a matte and describe the importance of research and photography?

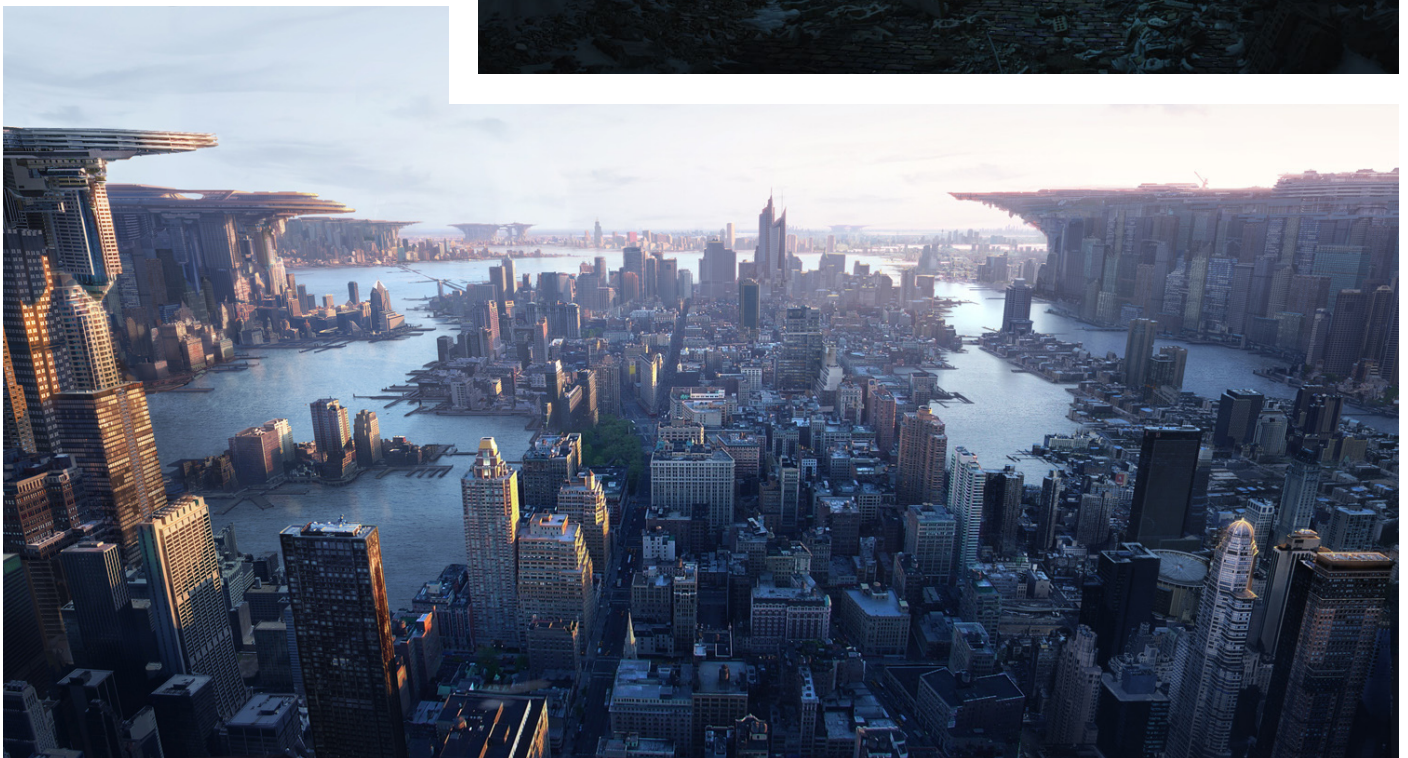
My basic process is this: I first get a brief from the client, whether it be a sketch or verbal description with a lot of arm waving. I then go and do my own sketch to figure out color and composition. Usually no photos are used at this stage, just quick painting in Photoshop. I don't spend more than a few hours on this. I want to work out all of the design issues with the client in this stage so that I know when I go to detail it, I will not have to do a lot of changes. While it rarely works out that



perfectly it is good procedure. Once the sketch is approved I like to spend as much time as possible gathering reference material. This usually involves going through my digital reference library and then my real library of books. If I can, I will go out and shoot elements that I need or build little miniatures for myself. I find that it is always good to have something photographic because you get a lot of things for free when you shoot something. Even if you think you know what something looks like, it is always good to look at a reference of it. Even if it is as mundane as a telephone pole, there is a lot of little detail in a telephone pole that you may not think of.

What do you think are the key skills necessary to being a successful matte artist?

I think it is a very wide skill set. You have to have a good understanding of photography and how objects look when photographed. Creating a matte painting is very different than painting from life. We are mimicking photography, not what our eyes see. You must have a good understanding of color



and composition so that you can lead the viewer's eye around the image and create an image with proper color harmony. You must also know how to draw and paint. There are always parts of the painting you have to create from scratch and you have to know how to do this. One of the biggest deficiencies that I see in beginner matte painters is a knowledge of perspective. Perspective is key to selling space and depth. Artists rely on 3D too



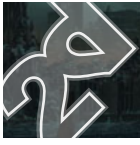
much for perspective guides. Always learn how to do it yourself.

What advice would you give to someone wishing to build a portfolio and establish a career in this field?

Well having a good portfolio is the first thing necessary. Try to have a wide variety in your work so you aren't pigeon holed as the "desert dude" or "greenery girl" or whatever. Be critical of yourself. Just because your mom loves it doesn't mean it should be in your portfolio. A portfolio of five strong pieces is always better than a portfolio of five strong pieces and two okay ones. The two okay pieces will bring down the strong ones. Send out as many portfolios as possible. Even better is to have a website and email links to anyone you can think of. And a word on websites, don't have some convoluted flash site that you need sit through intros and push 5 buttons before you can see a piece of art. A simple HTML site will do just fine. Be active on the forums, anything that will get your name and work noticed. If you have the talent it can happen.

How did your career lead to a job in film and in what ways do you think matte painting utilises your artistic talents?

Well my career started in film and it began with an obsession in high school and college with traditional matte painting. I always enjoyed painting in acrylics and a little in oils and I



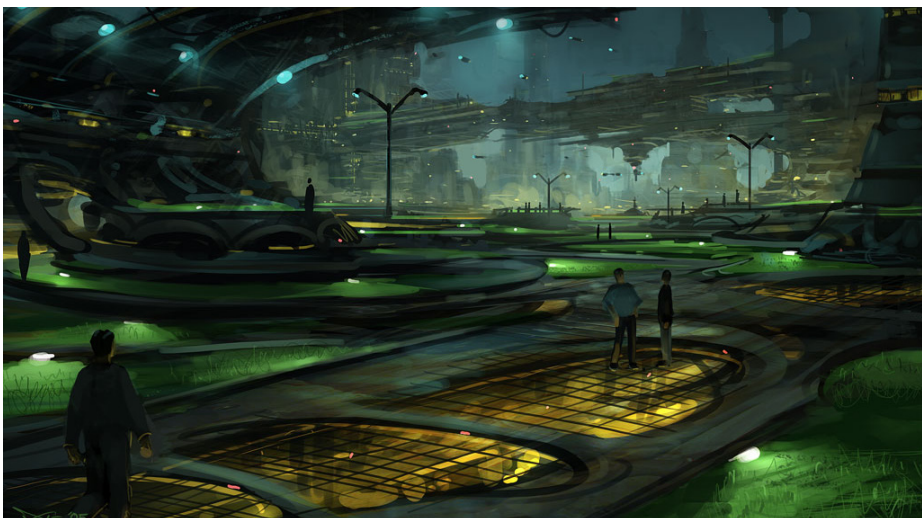
was always doing sci-fi and fantasy pieces. I was first exposed to matte paintings in the art of Star Wars books, where I fell in love with Michael Pangrazio's work, as well as that of Chris Evans and Frank Ordaz. I became obsessed with being a matte painter and then I was quickly disappointed when I found out it was all being done digitally. Being a traditional, fine art guy, the whole computer thing was something new. I got an internship at ILM and I had barely touched Photoshop before I got there. I learned more that summer than I did in 4 years of school. Afterwards, I just worked on my portfolio endlessly until I thought it was of a certain standard. I began sending it out and 9 times out of 10 didn't hear back. Syd Dutton of Illusion Arts was the first to give me a chance and I am eternally grateful for that. It then kind of snowballed after that. I think matte painting utilizes all of my artistic talents and has developed ones I didn't know I had. You have to be disciplined in so many different techniques that it is always a challenge.

You have an impressive resume that spans numerous film projects. Which would you say have been the most challenging projects to date and why?





Return of the King was the most challenging, just because the bar was set so high. We had to top the first two films and then there was the sheer volume of work. It was also the longest I have been on a project, so there was some definite fatigue. It was really difficult to nail down the look of Mordor; that process went on for months before everyone was happy. Since then there have been challenging moments, but not one big challenging project. There are always challenging paintings for some reason or another, but usually it is because some weird restriction has been imposed, such as only being allowed to have a green sky, or to cheat lighting



Which paintings have you particularly enjoyed producing?

I really enjoyed the paintings I did for I, Robot and the shot I did for the Aviator of period Beverly Hills. I like working on invisible matte paintings as well as the big epic ones. The Aviator shot was a good example of a matte painting that does not call attention to itself and tells a story. I also





had a lot of fun with the alien landscapes I did for Riddick.

What interests or activities do you pursue outside of your job and do you feel they enhance your abilities as an artist in any way?

I play guitar and I have been at that since I was twelve. It is a great release. I also enjoy fly-fishing, skiing, and bodysurfing. I am also learning how to play the cello. Basically the way these activities enhance my artistic abilities is that they give me a break from art! I need time away to recharge my creative batteries.

What are the things that excite you most about your job and help keep you motivated?

I just love creating something out of nothing. Those first few strokes of a painting are very powerful. I like to create worlds that do not exist, it is kind of like playing god. I also get a big rush when I am sitting in a theater and a shot that I am proud of comes up on screen.

What subject matter do you enjoy exploring in your personal work?

I am a sci-fi junky. I can paint futuristic cities and alien landscapes all day long. I never tire of it; I guess I am just a big kid. I enjoy architecture that is integrated into the landscape in an interesting way.

How have you enjoyed the teaching aspects in

your career with regard to the Gnomon Training and have they taught you anything about yourself?

I have really enjoyed teaching, whether it be the DVDs or the workshops that I have done. I really enjoy the workshops because I can interact and feed off of the audience. Whenever you teach you are forced to formalize what you do every day. It is actually quite hard when you have to ask yourself, "Why do I do it this specific way?" Some things you do instinctively and you learn a lot when you are forced to answer that question of "why?"

What are the kinds of projects or films you would love to work on in the future ?

I would love to work on big sci-fi as usual, but

I think I would also enjoy some period dramas. Some more invisible work would be fun. I also think it would be great to art direct a CG feature. I am also looking for a window in my schedule to work on some book projects of my own.

Thank you for taking the time to talk to us.

Thank you very much, it was my pleasure.

To see more of Dylan's work, please visit his website:

www.dylancolestudio.com/
dylan@dylancolestudio.com

Interview by :

Richard Tilbury

