

Craig LaRotonda is a successful artist and illustrator. He mixes dreamlike imagery with iconoclastic visions of monkeys and saints amidst Renaissance-era compositions. Ancient symbols and archetypes float from the mouths of baby-headed humanoid blobs in his paintings. Aside from the classical painting techniques he employs, there is something ancient in his works. His works plunge deep into the visual history of the psyche, to show us the dark madness that lives there.

Craig took time out of his busy schedule to talk with us about his art, his career, and how he achieves the incredible flesh tones in his works.

You work in both acrylics and oils. This is noteworthy because artists typically grapple with both of these mediums before choosing one over the other. At times, you use them both in the same painting, which is rare. I also use both, for various expressive reasons. What are the qualities in these mediums that have you using both?

Well, acrylic paint dries very quickly so I use it for the under-painting, then I apply oil on top of this. The advantage is I can build up layers of color quickly, and not have to wait so long for it to dry before using thin layers of oil. This process has worked pretty well for me.

Your flesh tones and your use of shadow and light indicate to me that you do a lot of glazing in your paintings. Am I correct? If I am, do you glaze with both mediums? Some artists cringe when you talk to them about glazing with acrylics.

Yes, that's correct. It is one method that I use to achieve richness in flesh tones. I can use either oil or acrylic paint, but have been using acrylic in recent years. Again, this is due to the fast drying nature of acrylics. I mix-in different mediums, and apply thin layers. I alternate between layers of paint and layers of acrylic gloss medium. This creates a depth in the surface that gives a similar rich effect to oil paint. There is a distinct difference between using the two types of paint. Glazing with oil paint is a much smoother process because the oil doesn't dry fast.

The surfaces you paint on also vary between canvas and wood. You don't see many people painting on wood anymore. What has you choosing this surface? It takes a lot of preparation, doesn't it?

Ninety-five percent of my paintings are on hardboard masonite. The surface is extremely smooth so I can apply my own textures with gesso, rather than having to use pre-made surface of a canvas. In some cases, I like to preserve the smooth quality of the wood (with very little texture) so I can paint in detail more easily. Another benefit of using wood is the durability of the material. I can scrape and sand the surface, and the wood holds up really well to the treatments that I apply.

When I first saw your piece, "Ophelia's Dream," I noticed your use of burnt umber in the flesh tones. The flesh tones in general in this piece are amazing, and had me wondering

about your training as an artist. It appears that you're classically trained. Can you talk a little about your education as an artist?

As a child, I spent the majority of my time creating artwork; paintings, clay sculptures, comic book art, stop-action films, Halloween costumes, papier mache, etc. Basically, I explored different ways to make art using varied materials. After high school, I attended SUNY at Buffalo, and was fortunate to study with highly-acclaimed illustrators such as Alan Cober, Kathy Howell, and Jerry Pinkney. I had several semesters of figure drawing and painting courses, which strengthened my foundation in working with the figure. One of my painting professors, Walter Prochownik, gave me some valuable instructions when painting the figure. He explained I needed to "look closely at the different colors of the skin, in different areas of the body." He noted that some areas are cooler, some areas are warmer. This helped make my paintings of the figure more convincing.

The flesh tones that you refer to in "Ophelia's Dream" have a yellow-green cast, which makes the flesh look unhealthy, or sickly which is appropriate for Ophelia, since she had just committed suicide.

After an entire lifetime of drawing and painting, I still have to practice drawing the human form. I still have to keep my eyes and hands sharp. Do you still have to do this?

I draw all the time, and this is necessary to keep my skills sharp. The more I draw the figure, the better I get at doing it. In fact, I recently joined a group of professional illustrators in weekly figure drawing sessions. This was valuable experience because it had been a long time since I had been in such a formal setting when drawing. Being able to draw the figure live, rather than from photo references (which is what I usually do), was helpful since I could draw the same model from multiple angles.

It's a lot of work being an artist, isn't it?

Yes, it is. As you know, there are so many facets to being an artist. Creating artwork is just one of the jobs. Then there's promoting, research for projects and assignments, dealing with contracts, organizing shows, making contacts and keeping those relationships, preparing work surfaces and framing, artwork installation, and hanging. Promoting alone involves so much work – updating my website, sending out portfolios to gallerists and art directors, and maintaining and keeping a current mailing list. Many of these tasks are done daily and are part of the business of art. Those who are not artists may not realize all of the different jobs an artist must do to be successful. It's a business like any other.

This doesn't get enough attention in art literature in general. I always warn younger artists about the work involved in this business.

A lot of your work is very reminiscent of the religious angst and symbolism of the Renaissance. "Tempted," and "The Meat Eaters," have this quality to them. Yet they're also very dreamlike, as in your piece, "Only Us," where's there these cute little humanoid meat clusters. It's like Hieronymus Bosch meets Eraserhead. Can you talk about your influences?

I am inspired by artists of all disciplines. Some of my favorite visual artists are: Odd Nerdrum, Joel Peter Witkin, Carravagio, Adolphe-William Bouguereau , Leonardo DaVinci, Egon Sheile, Lucian Freud, Gothfried Helnwein, Paul Gauguin, and Hieronymus Bosch.

I always listen to music while I paint. Music is an important factor in helping me get into the right frame of mind for working. Sometimes I get ideas from song lyrics. Right now I'm listening to Nick Cave, The Verve, Dead Skeletons, Tom Waits, Koolaid Electric Company, Joseph Arthur, The Brian Jonestown Massacre and Black Rebel Motorcycle Club.

Film also inspires me. I love music videos. That's something I could see myself getting involved in. I think my favorite music video is "Closer" by Nine Inch Nails directed by Mark Romanek. It's a sublime piece of work. I once worked as art director and set designer on a film called "Left for Dead." It was a great experience, and is something I would do again.

The humanoid blobs of meat are wonderful. At times, they have baby heads. These are great. My guess is that these flow straight out of your imagination. Am I right?

Yes, they are out of my imagination. I am fascinated by stages of growth – like how embryos and fetuses look. I was using an image of an embryo in a painting but the lack of a face was problematic so I added a head to it and it worked. These entities have appeared many times in my work. Sometimes they are mischievous creatures, and other times they are angelic, like little saints.

I'm a huge fan of the symbols that surround your subjects. You also use mechanical bits and pieces, like gears and circuits. Can you explain the role these play in your paintings?

Diagrams, maps, schematics, instructions, blue prints, astrological charts, and mechanical drawings inspire me. They are instructions....human created answers on how to understand the universe. We see them everywhere. What I like about these "instructions" is how their graphic qualities contrast well with my organic subjects/figures. They function as a design embellishment in my work, but also carry a lot of symbolic weight.

You and I are both from Buffalo, and we've shown in some of the same galleries there. I found Buffalo to be an amazing place to develop as a young artist, especially the west side. How was it for you?

I spent some of my younger years here, and then had moved away. When I was an artist in my early twenties, I started showing my artwork at galleries in Buffalo. I hung around with a

lot of talented artists and grew quite a bit. There were lots of opportunities and great support in the art community.

I agree. The art scene there is very closely knit and supportive. I've never found the cutthroat competitiveness that exists in so many other cities in the Buffalo art scene. I also never had to explain my work there.

Your website states that your painting, "In Posterum Aevum," was stolen from a gallery in San Francisco. This is awful! Has it turned up yet?

No. It hasn't. And it was an incredibly unpleasant experience dealing with that gallery. The curator would not get back to me, was not giving me truthful answers concerning the stolen painting, and she would not uphold our contract that protects the artwork. In the end, weeks later, the gallery paid for the painting, but did so kicking and screaming. I don't know where the artwork ended up. I wouldn't recommend for any artist to work with this gallery. They were extremely unprofessional.

So sorry to hear this! You'd think any gallery owner would be apologetic and get moving on something like this immediately, but it doesn't sound like it was a priority for them.

Thanks for taking the time to talk with us! What is next for you as far as new works or events?

As a fine artist, this year is a very busy year for me. With one solo show, fourteen group exhibits, two art festivals, and commissioned paintings, I am working constantly. I am starting work on a solo show that I will have in 2014. On the illustration end, I am currently working on a large-scale project for a publication in St. Louis.