

Art Lessons

Journaling my way to making and teaching art

by Jeremy Nir

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Sample: chapter one

Look



Still from “Toronto Springtime Rock and Roll” by Jeremy Nir
Watch: “Toronto Springtime Rock and Roll” at instagram.com/p/DY6FlsGt9qo

get inspiration first

I love to just hop in and make stuff.

It’s a great way to start projects quickly but I often lose steam or get distracted. A LOT of work that I do does not get finished or shared.

There’s something wise about collecting inspiration and forming a vision before hopping in.

Collect references

My mentor spends as much time collecting the perfect references as actually animating or illustrating.

1. Pinterest

So here is my Pinterest (jeremynir.com/inspo). It's just a good way to organize and keep adding stuff. Love my algorithm.

2. AI Slop

AI is unbelievably good at barfing up visuals.

I'm learning to use AI to help develop my projects. Getting a look at what it might look like can help me make style decisions earlier.

AI can also:

a) make weird mistakes that lead to new ideas

b) describe art to learn what styles I'm tapping into

c) it can blend two of my art pieces together

3. Art Books

Being an animator or illustrator can be very lonely. I find reading art books helps me feel connected with other artists as I peek into their minds and workflows.

(Art books are those giant books often released alongside a movie, TV show, video game or can document a director's entire filmography.)

You can develop a whole franchise with just a pencil and paper. The Matrix, Shrek, Twin Peaks, Avatar, NOPE, these were all just ideas someone scribbled down.



FROM ARTIST TO FILMMAKER

Just as I knew when I was being purely thematic, I was aware when I was doing generic narrative. The sketch on the left-hand page, which I did when I was around twenty or twenty-one, isn't attached to any story that I was intending to write and yet the image has a certain narrative power. You have a guy in the foreground holding a knife, and he's overlooking these other characters that are running down below. Looking at it, we create the narrative in our minds: Is he going to jump down there and rob them or kill them? Is he a bad guy? Is he a good guy? Are they the bad guys?

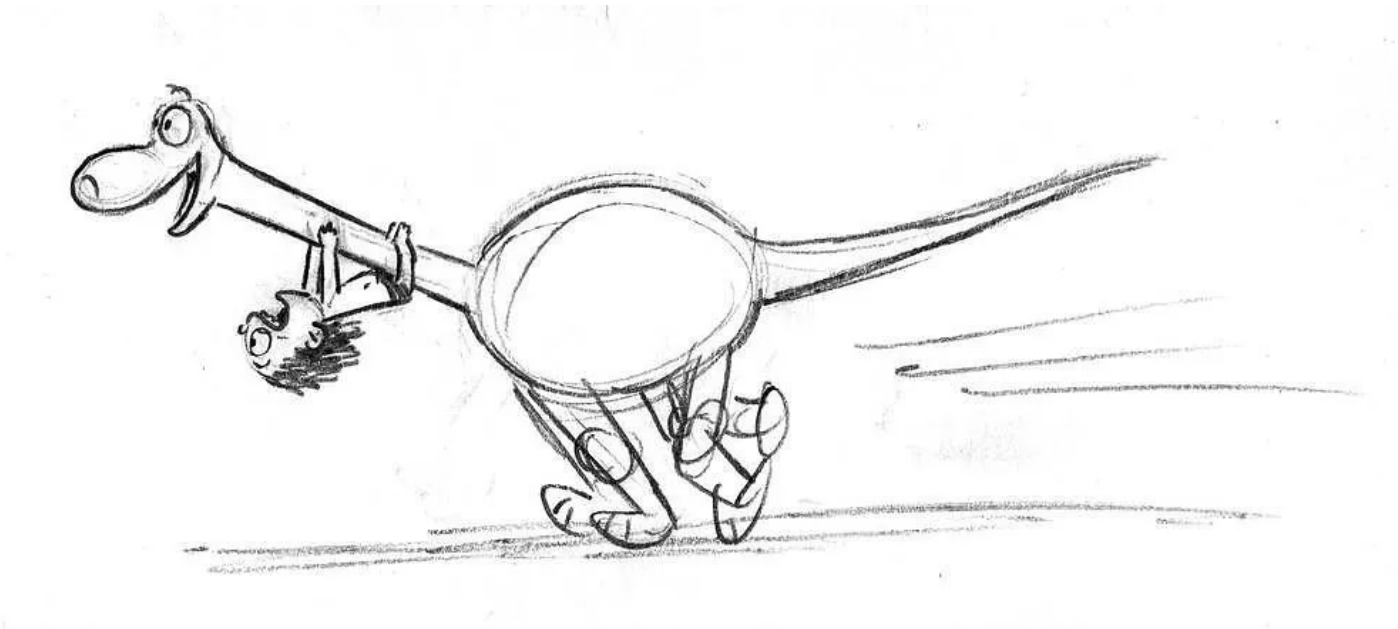
But, really, the main purpose of a piece like this was just to work the wrist and improve my skills. It's very Burne Hogarth–influenced, and you can see that in the hands and the muscles. You can also see the Marvel approach with an extreme wide angle and the distortion in the body and so on. I was playing with angles—getting off-level—and I think this is an important thing to do as a filmmaker. When composing shots we tend to think horizontally and forget to position the camera way up or way down and make the composition more interesting and unexpected. Now, bear in mind I wasn't thinking of being a filmmaker at this point. I loved film, and I was thinking in frames and in narrative, but I wasn't actively thinking of pursuing it as a career. I had dabbled with it in high school and even made an environmental film about how Niagara Falls was a city out of control. It allowed me to express that theme of the rampant destruction of nature by civilization, but I never went anywhere with it. In my mind, I could never be a filmmaker. Other people did that. Great people. It didn't occur to me I could do it. Yet.

These days you can shoot a movie on a cell phone and the tools are absolutely ubiquitous and democratized. But this stuff was all out of reach when I was in college and the idea that you could actually make a movie yourself was insane. John Carpenter hadn't come along yet and shown that you could shoot a hit movie for $80,000. So I hadn't made that cognitive leap. But I was interested in filmmaking as a consumer of movies, and I studied visual effects, wanting to know how it was done. I had no concrete plans, but I thought maybe someday I could gravitate into that world if I improved my skill set.

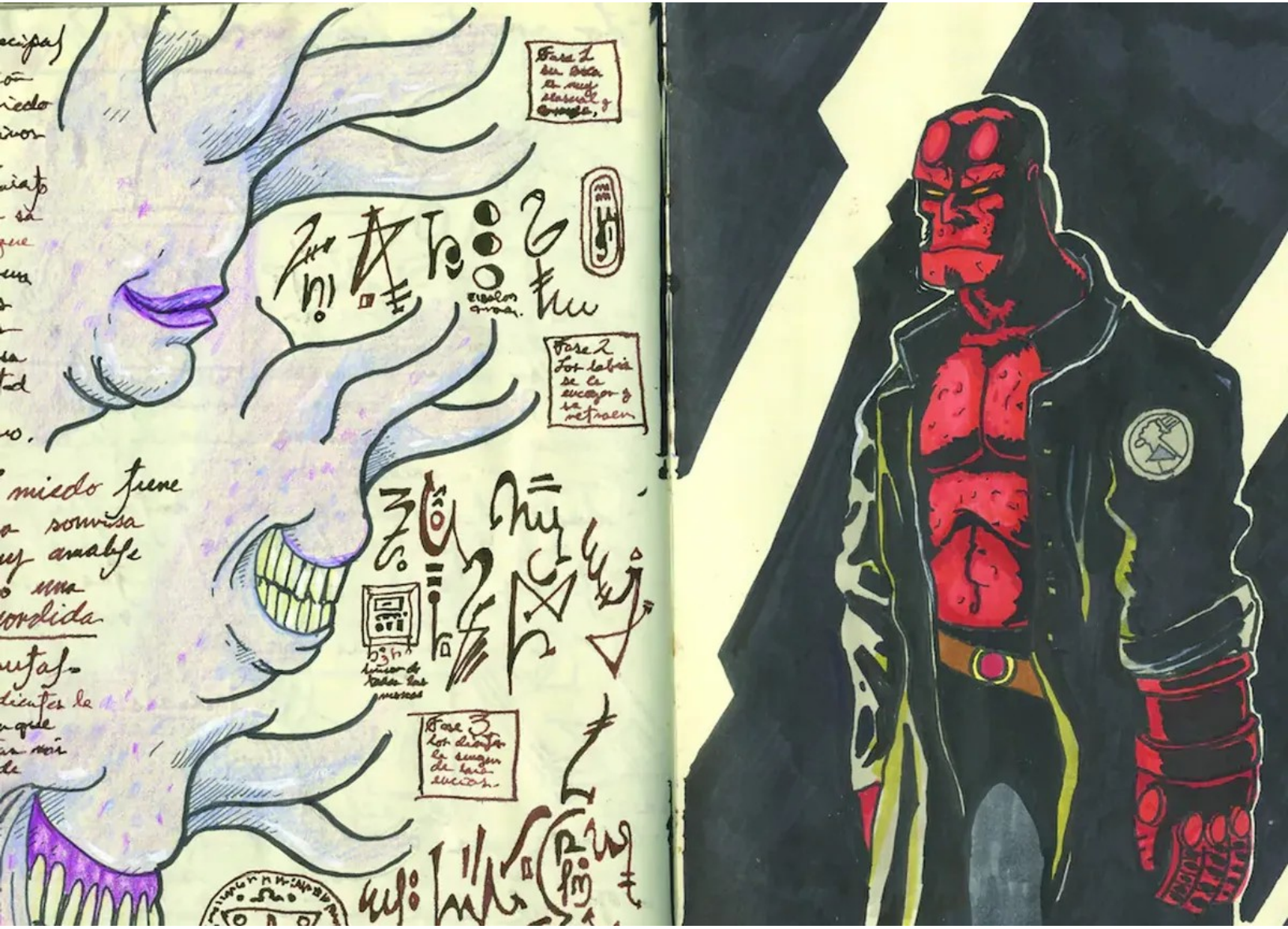
After college I worked a lot of blue-collar jobs just to survive. At one point, I had a job driving a truck. I wanted to learn as much as I could about moviemaking and film production processes, but I didn't have any money for college courses. So I would drive down to the University of Southern California in L.A. and spend what money I had on xeroxing all the papers they had on filmmaking techniques—how optical printing worked, photometrics of different types of film stocks, how every known visual effect was done, and so on. Then I put together whole binders stuffed with this material that formed a "how to do visual effects" library. So the first time I got hired to work on an actual movie—Roger Corman's *Battle Beyond the Stars*, which I started on in October 1979—I knew more about visual effects than anyone else on the production, because I had attended my own free film school for a couple of years. I went through that place like crap through a goose. I was hired as a junior model builder, and within about four weeks I was running the art department. After that, I got my own model unit and shot about a third of the visual effects for the film. Not that anybody really ran anything on *Battle Beyond the Stars*—it was kind of self-organizing. It was just a bunch of twentysomethings doing what they thought was the right thing for the movie, with whatever five quarters Roger would kick loose for the day. But we got to do a lot of in-camera effects and work with miniatures and those kinds of techniques, so it became the next stage of my film education.

> "Looking at it, we create the narrative in our minds: Is he going to jump down there and rob them or kill them? Is he a bad guy? Is he a good guy? Are they the bad guys?"

Tech Noir by James Cameron



The Good Dinosaur



Guillermo del Toro’s sketchbooks are endless.

Some good art books

TECH NOIR by James Cameron. Cameron is a freak! His movies are just a chance to show off the latest technology. Still, he's a master of cinematography and pacing. I learned about how camera placement can affect your perception.

James Cameron was just another kid scribbling in a notebook. It's kinda inspiring to see that.

THE GOOD DINOSAUR. The lowest-grossing movie in Pixar's history, but it's visually beautiful. This book shows the process behind the scenes as artists draw out characters and test different lighting situations. They iterate a lot.

TIM BURTON and GUILLERMO DEL TORO. Tim Burton makes films that reflect his own childhood experience feeling like an outcast, Guillermo makes films to honour the history of horror, fables and oddities. Two different drives but both directors make eerie worlds that draw us in.

MORE. Spielberg's art books highlight his obsession with light, while Bong Joon Ho infuses his characters with horror, comedy, and slapstick.

God of War Ragnarok is just a beautiful book. I wish it wasn't so expensive.

There are so many art books out there, look at all these art books: halcyonrealms.com/store or here's a big list: parkablogs.com

expand your reading

It's too easy to read stuff that feels easy. It's too comfortable to watch what an algorithm knows I'll like. I want to have ideas that make me feel uncomfortable, to watch movies that are from different places and times. To expand, not to dominate and gentrify these other ideas but to see myself change and see what else art can do.

I'm listening to The Moth, a podcast where people tell stories from their lives. How else can I expand? Watching movies like Fox and His Friends or Stalker that make me yearn for home. Movies like House and Deerskin that make me feel weird. History from different perspectives. Stories people made that are about something. So much of my art is more about the craft than the idea. I want to see what other artists have done to tell their truth.

I can go to different mediums beyond my phone. Not just books/movies/podcasts but live shows and poetry readings, live comedy and theatre. It can be anything, just see.

Because seeing what other people are doing reminds me that there is stuff going on. Sometimes it feels like there's absolutely nothing going on. It feels like the world is boring and I'm done. What's the point of making some cartoon for other bored people?

Well that question answers itself, it gives meaning to life. If I explore the arts and dig into myself, I can bring some of that to other people and help them feel something.

Ya, sometimes I just want to watch some nonsense and be comfortable. But I want to take in good and strange and challenging art too.



Illustration by Alexandre Nart

inspiration keeps coming

As a kid I was terrified that I would stop being myself. One day I would become normal and lose the spark that made me.

Growing older I did change. You have days where you are bored or exhausted or too much “fun” and unhealthy with drinking or joking at the wrong time.

These days can evoke a feeling of shame and loss. “I’m losing the thing that made me special” I think, or “the best is behind me.”

These thoughts feel true but then another day comes. And another. And they keep coming! I keep changing in little ways and I come to realize that there is no ideal self that I must live up to. It’s just me. No matter what I do, I remain me.

Surprisingly the moments when I tried to hold onto my past identity actually were moments of disconnection. It is ok to let go and flow. To be open and changeable is a key part of who I am (irony alert!)

Sooo it has been helpful after 101 journal entries to understand that self is impermanent. Let go of an attachment of how you should be and the fear that you will die by changing.

You will live by changing!

So just observe the world around and within you. Listen when your body is tired. Love people who give it back. Care when you can. You’ll find that the inspiration doesn’t end.

I have a great deal of gratitude for how my life has been going and lots of pride for my work. There is so much ahead!

notice beauty in your art

In a past journal entry I talked about how sketching is like carving with light.

Today I was drawing skin on a man's face and noticed there is a sculptural element. Like I'm not just carving, I'm molding clay to fit the shape of the man's face. Yes, light and shadow are still the main media you work with when sketching, but there is a subtle art to making these smooth fluid forms, much more like fabrics.

It remains that sketching is like carving, I believe the first step is placing the shapes, then establishing the light with a carving mindset. In the end you go through and sculpt the skin.

It's funny, I keep having the same realization: the movement of broad to detailed is a theme in many art practices.

Painting, sculpting, writing. The first strokes capture the shape and energy of the subject, later stages find the reality in the details and quirks. I want to zoom in on that process in this journal entry…

While drawing a person I'll suddenly see the figure as real. A wayward eyelash humanizes the eye, a twisting fold of skin on the waist is surprisingly sensual, giving the sense that you could touch the person.

This moment is a bit illusory but it's powerful. I've noticed it's pulling me out of the plateau of mediocrity: moments where I see beauty in my own art. Pursuing those moments, appreciating each one. Is that what great artists do? Appreciate deeply the work they create? Discover something wonderful using art supplies sold at Dollarama.

When I was young I feared ending up in a dead end office complex. Somewhere nothing happens, nobody is present. A passing grey building on the highway. I spent a great deal of time avoiding that til I came to see the mistake there. Obviously life is happening everywhere! Yes, there are boring Hyatt hotels where someone is lonely, bored, isolated. Those are the feelings I feared (because I felt that way stuck in the suburbs) but this act of creating, connecting ideas but above all noticing beauty is what frees you from loneliness. Not going to New York and being surrounded by noise and life. You don't have to turn up the volume, you just have to listen.

I'm realizing that in writing this journal entry I started with a rough idea and noticed the more intricate idea within. The idea that I am feeling less and less lonely. I am feeling more and more connected to myself and others through the act of stopping and sketching.

trapped shapes

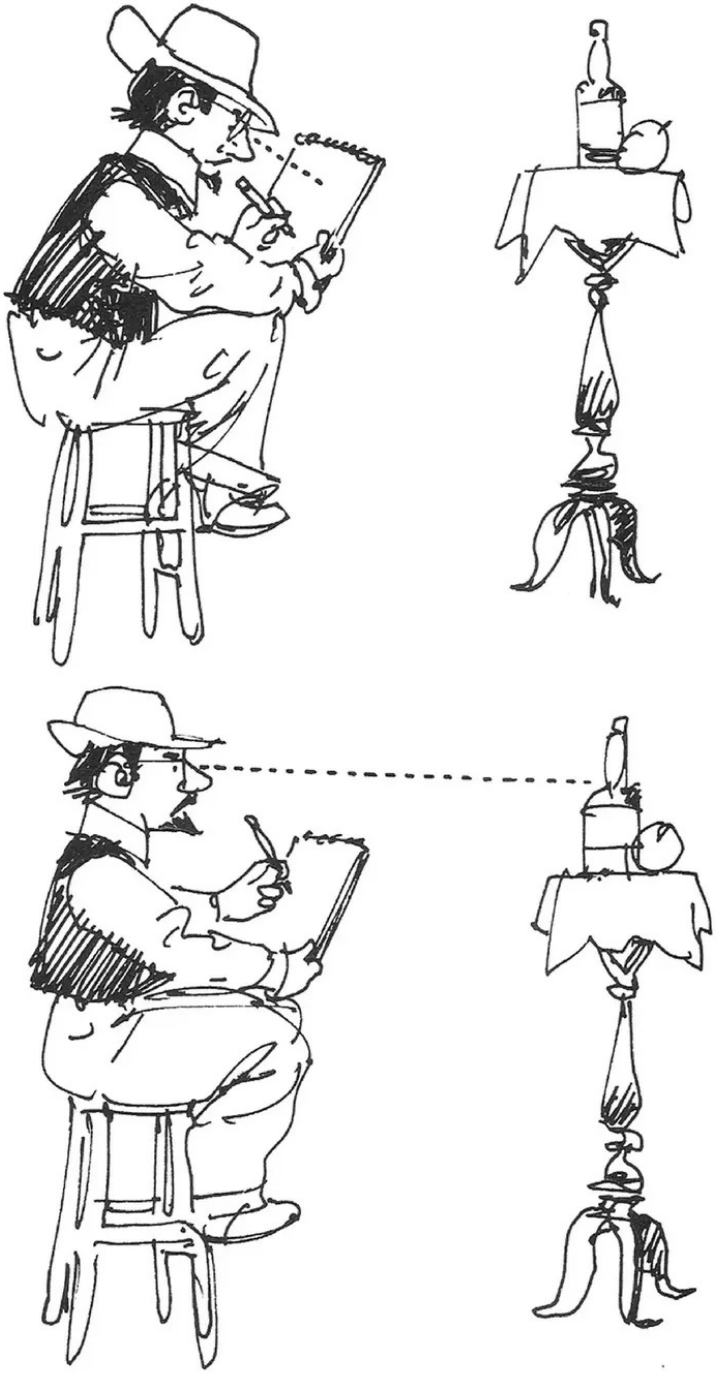
In life drawing over the past few months I've been constantly running up against the problem of my mind filling in what I see. This makes drawings look less realistic, more of an idea than a reflection of reality.

A life drawing instructor recommended the book Keys to Drawing, it's quite good. The author Bert Dodson encourages me to break out of my mind by doing blind contour drawings, focusing more on the subject than my paper.

Bert encourages looking at the subject as a series of shapes: you're not drawing a dog but a series of dark and light shapes. Start with the outline, then add big shapes and then add "enrichment shapes." He calls this shape play and it is very fun.

He included this tool, drawing trapped shapes:

Essentially focusing on the shapes trapped by your subject is easier because they are abstract. Get those negative space drawings and the rest will be easier.



A common practice that weakens drawing effectiveness is concentrating too much on your paper and not enough on your subject.

Your drawing skills will improve dramatically if you concentrate on your **subject**, *only glancing at your paper to keep your lines on track.*

From “Keys to Drawing” by Bert Dodson



The dark shape of the blouse is a trapped shape. By drawing it, you also draw a portion of the model's profile.

From “Keys to Drawing” by Bert Dodson

Fundamental drawing exercises to study form

I’ve been carrying a notebook in my back pocket for the past couple months, just a dollar store book with a nice Blackwing pencil tucked in it and a pocket knife on my keychain to sharpen it.

My goal has been to just draw every day, have fun and learn fundamentals. Fun ones first:

Fun drawing exercises

Warm Up Doodles: Just draw whatever to get started. Don't worry about it!

Frankenstein Drawing: Sit near a busy street and draw one body part from everyone going by, all combined into a single freak! This helps you loosen up and observe shapes.

Phone Tracing: Take a picture and edit the photo to be super high contrast. Use the accessibility settings on your phone to make the touch screen lock, blast the brightness and trace outlines and major forms into your notebook! Draw it again freehand on another sheet of paper and you'll see how fast you learn.

Gesture Drawing: Quickly sketch the essence of a subject, capturing its movement and flow. This exercise is great for loosening up and improving your ability to depict motion and energy. Use it for drawing people, animals, or even abstract shapes.

Scribble Drawings: Start with a scribble and then turn it into a recognizable object or scene. This exercise boosts creativity and helps you see shapes and forms in abstract patterns.

Folding Cloth: This one is weirdly fun! Draw all the different types of folding cloth. Start by lightly sketching the shape, then adding shadows and blending it. If you can use a pencil blender it helps! This exercise helps with drawing flowing forms and smooth shading.

Flowing Magma: Similar to folding cloth but even more relaxing, just draw waves of volcano blobbing over each other.

Cliff Edge: Another fun one, just drawing horizontal lines bending over each other to create a cliffside scene!

2D Shape Practice: Draw basic geometric shapes like circles, squares, and triangles. Focus on making them symmetrical and accurate. Then combine these shapes to form more complex objects like blobby snakes.

3D Shape Practice: This is what I did in math class. Draw circles, squares and triangles and turn them into cylinders, cubes and pyramids. Then turn those simple 3D shapes into houses, ice cream cones and robots.

Crosshatching 3D Forms: In real life there are lines that follow the form. Love Life Drawing (lovelifedrawing.com) has exercises where you crosshatch 3D shapes. Experiment with blending those crosshatched lines to make smooth surfaces but don't spend 4 hours on the upper lip.

Shadowy Skull: Use a Sharpie and draw a skull using only shadows. Don't outline the bright areas, leave them blank. This will help you learn to leave bright parts of your drawing blank.

Fundamental (boring?) drawing exercises

Scales: Create a value scale from light to dark using a single pencil. Now draw a bunch of different lines that are light, dark, thick and thin. This is the most fundamental exercise because controlling a pencil is a lot of what you do as an artist.

Timed Drawings: Set a timer and draw as much of a subject as you can within that time limit. Start with 10 minutes and gradually reduce the time. This helps you draw faster and finish pieces which is surprisingly important to improving.

Thumbnail Sketches: Create small, quick sketches to plan out larger compositions. This helps you explore different ideas and layouts without committing too much time. It's a great way to experiment with composition, balance, and visual storytelling.

Draw an Egg: This is about light and shadow. You'll notice how the light wraps around the edge of the egg and where the shadow gets darkest. Details that seem obvious but need to be studied.

Light Source Exercises: Draw the same object under different lighting conditions. Change the direction, intensity, and number of light sources to see how it affects shadows and highlights.

Grid Method: Use a grid to break down a reference image into smaller, manageable sections. This helps you focus on detail and improves accuracy in your drawings.

Drawing from the right side of the brain

The following exercises are from a book that emphasizes drawing without labeling what you see. Instead, focus on observing shapes and ensuring every line is accurate. It's challenging but highly effective for improving traditional sketching skills.

Contour Drawing: Focus on drawing the outlines of objects without lifting your pen or pencil. This exercise will help you improve your observation skills and hand-eye coordination.
Blind Contour Drawing: Similar to contour drawing, but without looking at your paper while you draw. This forces you to trust your instincts and pay closer attention to the details of your subject.
Blind Shading: Similar to blind contour drawing, but focus on shading without looking at your paper. This exercise helps you develop a sense of where shadows fall naturally, enhancing your intuitive understanding of light and form.
Negative Space Drawing: Instead of drawing the object itself, draw the space around it. This technique helps you understand the relationship between positive and negative spaces and can improve your overall composition skills.
Upside-Down Drawing: Choose a reference image and draw it upside down. This helps you focus on the shapes and lines rather than the overall object, improving your observation skills.
Think Like an Alien: When you draw a person's face, look at it as if you have never seen a face before, like an alien seeing things as they are, without norms.

More challenging drawing exercises

Drawing from Life: Spend time drawing real-life subjects instead of relying solely on photographs. Drawing from life improves your observational skills and helps you capture the essence and immediacy of the subject.

Perspective Drawing: Practice drawing scenes with vanishing points: one, two and three-point perspective. Start with simple geometric shapes and move to more complex scenes. Place people in these little worlds and add details. It's actually quite fun.

Texture Studies: Draw various textures like wood, metal, fabric, and glass. Focus on capturing the unique characteristics of each texture through shading and line work. This will improve your ability to render realistic surfaces.

Proportional Studies: Practice drawing objects and subjects with accurate proportions. Use the measurement technique where you hold your pencil at arm's length to compare parts of the subject and be sure they relate correctly to each other.

Figure Drawing: Practice drawing the human figure, focusing on proportions, anatomy, and poses. I enjoy the Loomis method, though it's a bit stiff! Use reference images or live models if possible. I like to find a sneaky bench and draw people going by.

Foreshortening Practice: Draw subjects in extreme perspective, where parts of the subject appear much larger due to being closer to the viewer. This helps you understand and depict depth and perspective more effectively.

Organic Forms: Draw organic, free-form shapes and objects like fruits, vegetables, or stones. Focus on capturing their unique contours and textures.

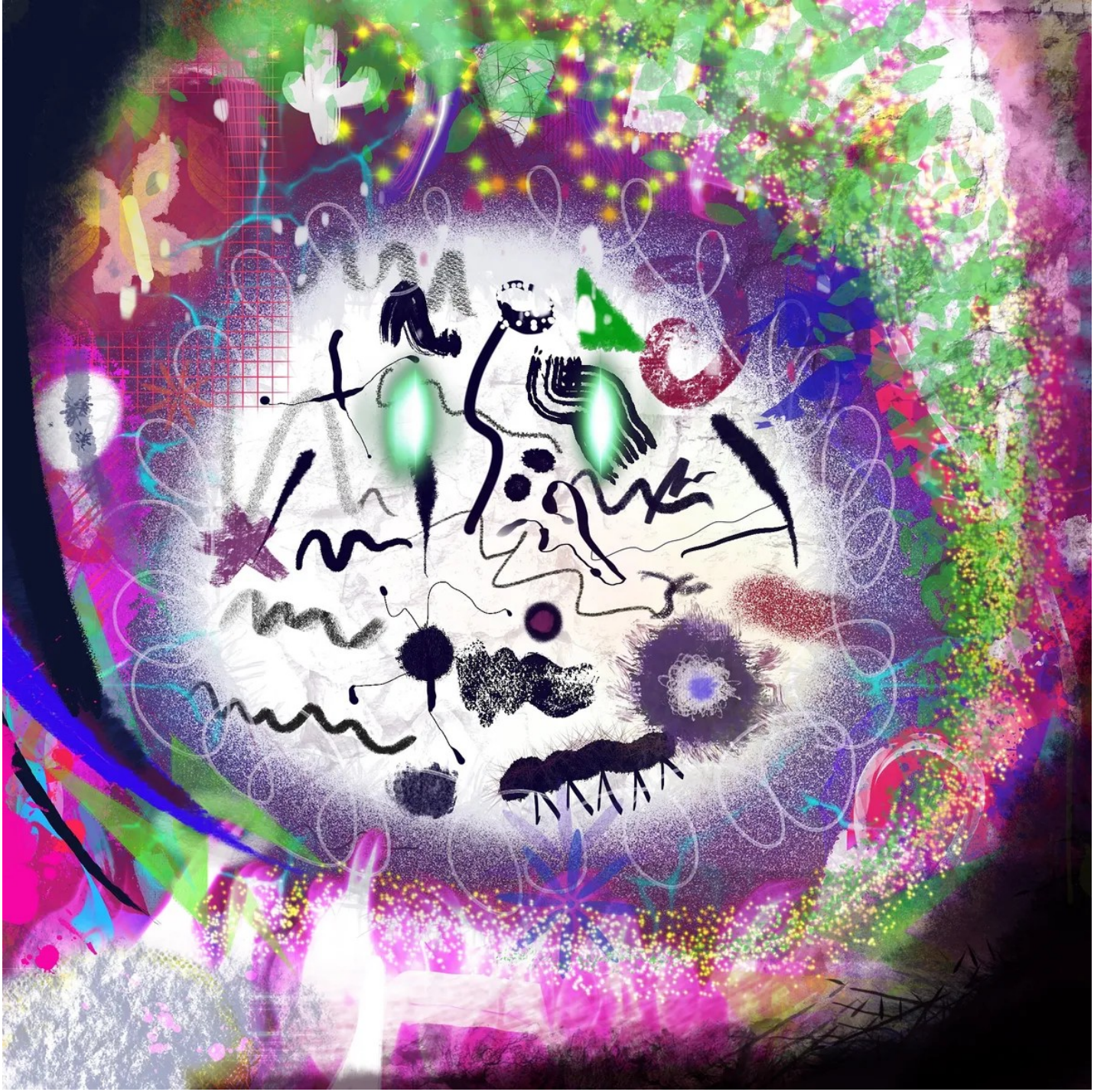
Drawing Hands and Feet: Practice drawing hands and feet from different angles and poses. These parts of the body are often challenging and require careful observation and practice.

Reflected Surfaces: Draw objects with reflective surfaces, like metal or glass. Focus on capturing the reflections and how they interact with the object's form.

Portraits: Draw your friends! You'll find most people actually don't mind being drawn. If you're struggling to make them look good, take a picture and use it for reference.

Ok, hope you have fun with this. I know it's a lot but with a notebook in your pocket it's just something fun you can do when you're bored.

Drawing, Light and Colour



Artwork by Jeremy Nir

understanding cast shadow vs form shadow

Everything we perceive with our eyes can be broken down into values of light and dark.

This is a big part of drawing and painting: trying to capture the interplay of light and shadow. When I'm using a pencil, all I can really do is darken things on a white piece of paper so I need to really focus on how shadows move across a form.

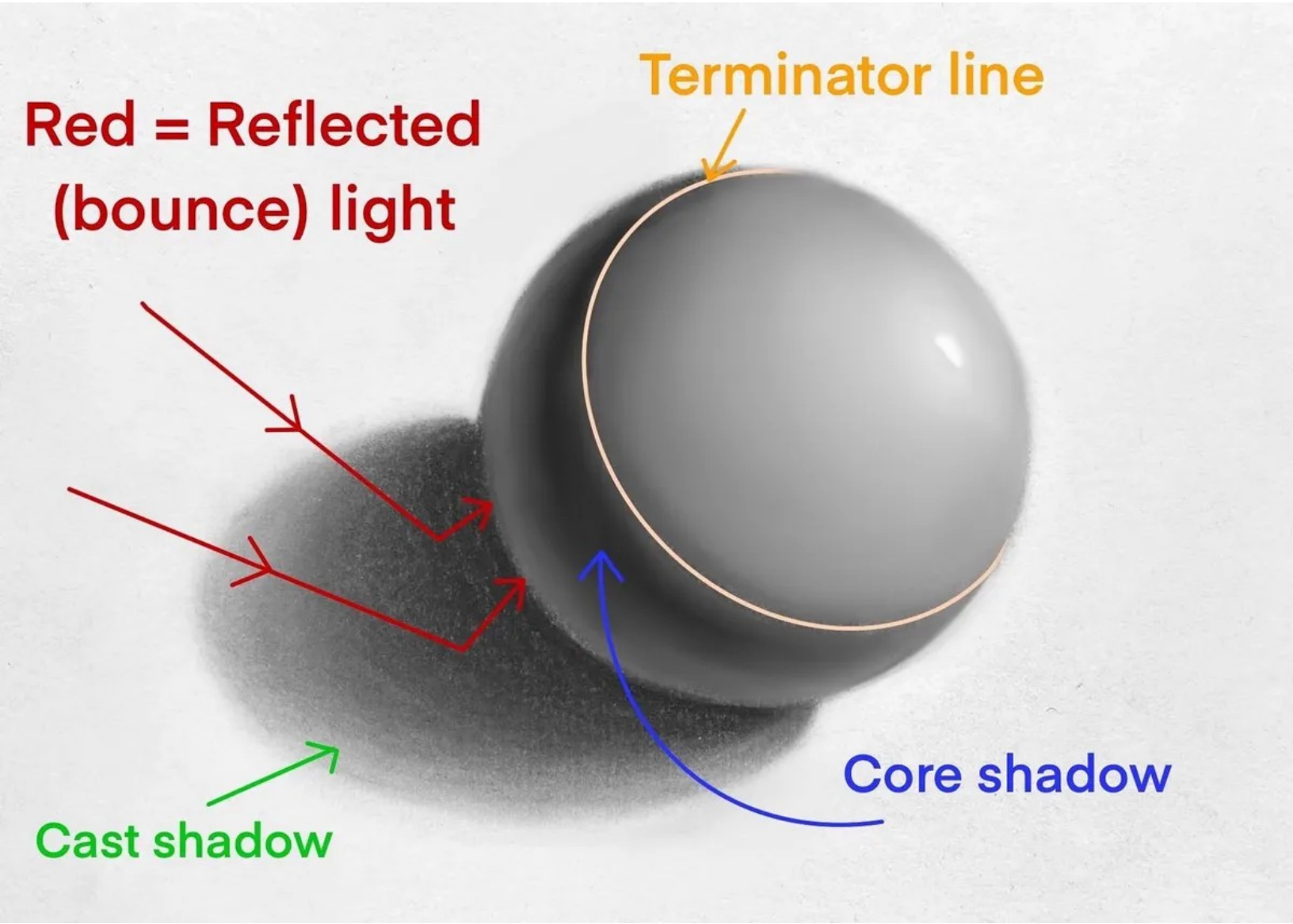
Today I was watching a video about portrait painting, and he mentioned the "form" and "cast" shadows.

Cast shadows are what you would think of as a shadow: it's the one that follows you around as you walk. When your body gets in the way of a light source, it creates a roadblock in the light's path. Like a cookie cutter, your silhouette is sliced out and a shadow is cast. Cast shadows are usually crisp and clear, especially close to the subject, like where your feet meet the ground. From here it gently fades, less clear and less dark the further it gets from your body, because other light sources cut in and reflect, fading that shadow until it dissipates.

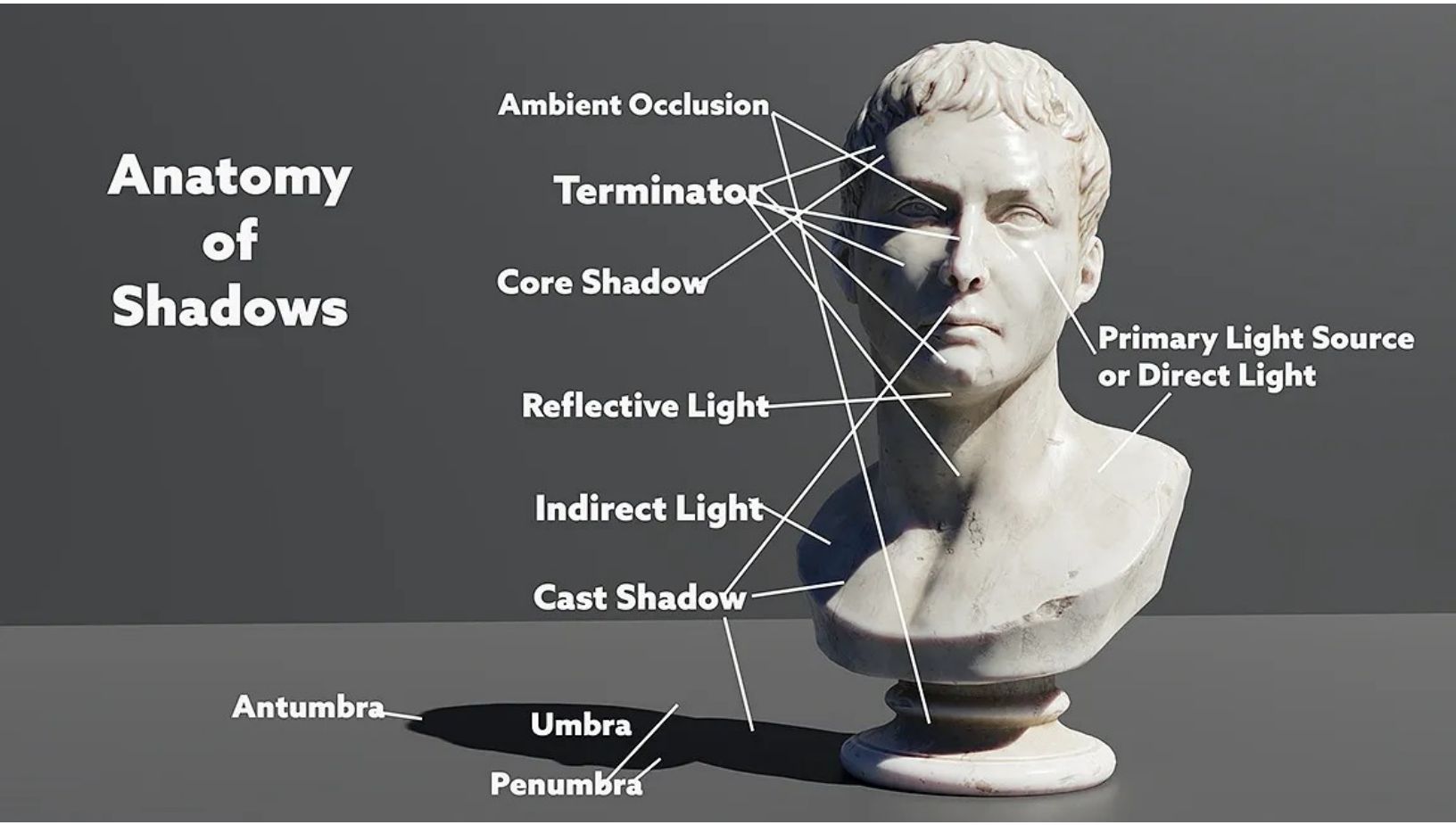
Form shadows are different: picture a basketball in the sun. As the light wraps around the sphere, it slowly fades to be darker and darker. As I've been learning to draw realistically I'm coming to realize how important these form shadows are for how we perceive shapes.

Fascinatingly, the saturation of the basketball will be strongest at the point where light and shadow meet.

For more, check out this lovely video:



Cast shadow, core shadow and reflected light on a sphere
From “Where Light Meets Darkness in Painting” by Daniel Folta
Watch: youtube.com/watch?v=qKKjJPbcE1E



The anatomy of shadows on a bust
From “Where Light Meets Darkness in Painting” by Daniel Folta



Clay head by Jeremy Nir

instead of painting shadow, carve light

Shadow helps add depth to a scene. But it can be a struggle to add shadows well.

That first video says to add a dark layer and carve out where the light hits, then add detail.

Meanwhile, this video is about adding shadow lines that work with the contours of the subject. These curving lines naturally add depth.

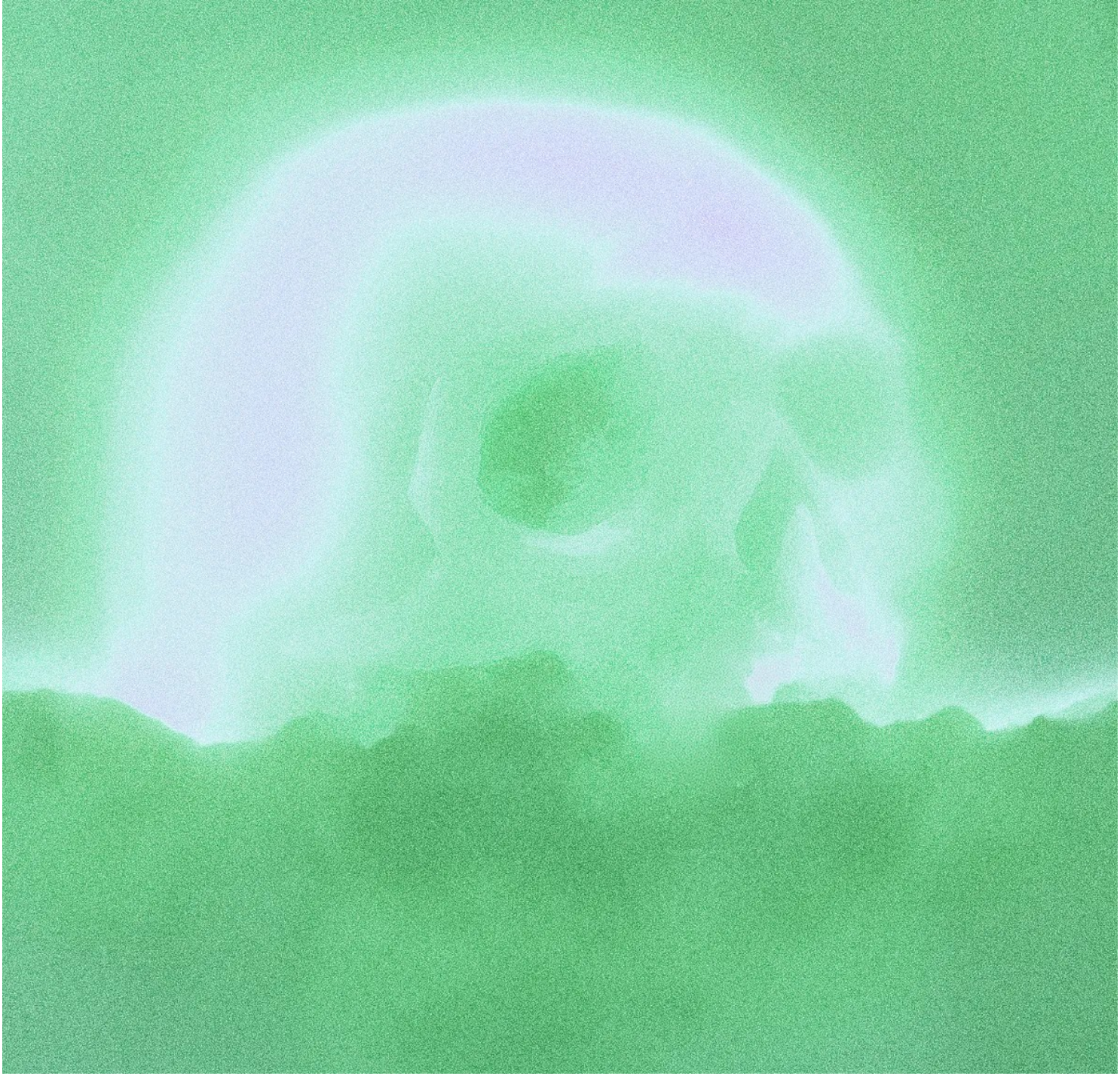
Question: which technique is better?

pencil marks follow texture lines

This helps establish volume in a drawing.

focus on form, not line

David Hockney’s iPad art is totally loose and amateur. It captures something real and honest.



Artwork by Jeremy Nir

Unexpected colours are everywhere

From a post on Reddit, a painter passing on the advice his painting teacher gave him:

I had a painting teacher that really got on me about color use. So I'll pass along the advice he gave to me and say: try to push your color use more. Like me, you see a tree, so you mix green paint and paint the pine needles green. And some of that tree is in shadow so you add black and darker green, and then some of that tree is hit with more light, so you add white and yellow.

Similar with the rocks, they "are" gray so you mix up gray paint and paint them gray. But really look at those things in real life and try to figure out what other colors make up those things, no matter how faint they may seem.

You want to avoid black, and look at using complimenting colors to create contrast and shadows. Add a deep red and purple into the shadow of a green tree. It will look darker, and more real. If you have rock coming out of water, I bet some of the color of the trees, sky, and sun are reflecting off of those rocks. Etc…

By the way, great work so far.



Open Window, Collioure by Henri Matisse

learning light and colour and cinematography

This video talks about how to practice light and colour by making colour studies.

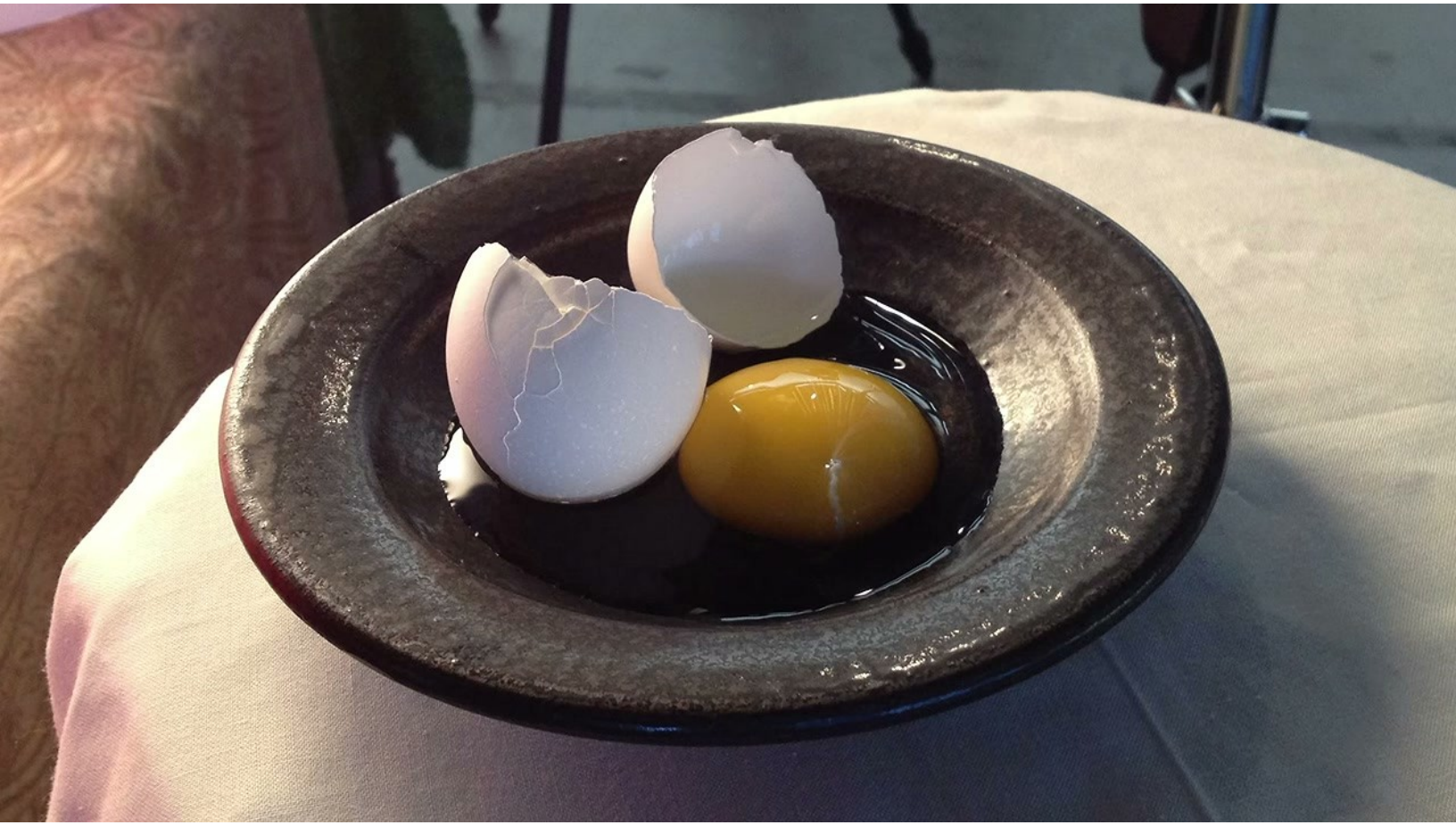
A colour study is a simple thing. You take something crazy basic like an egg or an apple and you study how light hits it. How does colour wrap around the egg? How does sunlight pour through a jar of honey?

Yesterday I saw a video about cinematography where he recommended making cinematography studies: copying famous shots and experimenting with sequences of shots.

Both of these videos had this common theme of just continuously thinking about the thing you want to learn. It reminds me of that quote “perfect practice makes perfect.” The point being, you’ll learn much faster and become better if you don’t just blindly practice but you consciously focus on the thing you want to learn. You look at what the masters do, you do quick exercises and longer projects.

I wonder how to apply this to animation: the art of a short powerful animated story. It means watch the best short animations and try to emulate what worked. Then go off and experiment.

It feels like creativity involves inputting great stuff: the stuff you make will be similar to what you have seen. Then emulating the stuff that worked to see why it did. Then experimenting means going off script and doing something new. I like that.



Why Color Studies Are So Powerful by Lighting Mentor
Watch: youtube.com/watch?v=1d577v_XBKA



HOTEL CHEVALIER (2007)
DP: ROBERT YEOMAN

look at your art in the mirror

After an hour+ working on a piece, it starts to look right. It plateaus.

When you reverse your art digitally or in a mirror, you see it through new eyes.

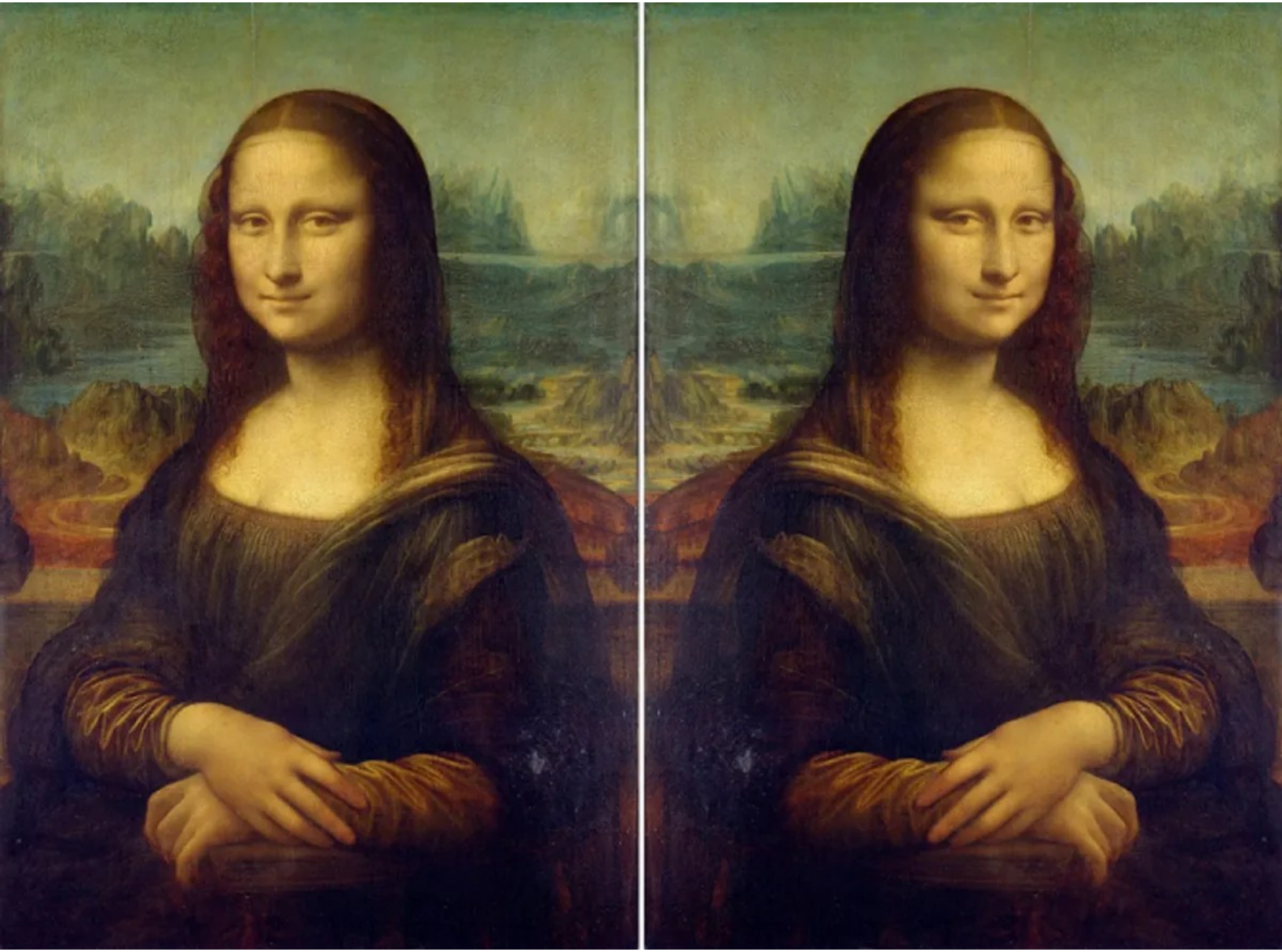
Don’t be afraid to step away, come back and redo stuff. Break it.

I was thinking of an expression… “If it ain’t fixed, break it.”

Ya so I drew this funny mushroom character and in the flipped image it looks so weird. I wonder if it’s because I’m used to it or because it looks better looking right. Does the Mona Lisa look good reversed?

Honestly it looks better reversed! Wow.

Ok so I think I’ll take my advice and come back to this mushroom character, break his head and redraw it.



Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci, and flipped

less is more

The great artist does not spend more time or put more lines down. They put the right lines down.

Focus less on nailing the details or making everything perfect. Simply sketch and explore. Get comfortable and use materials! Explore and discover your style. Push yourself to draw outside or animate using minimal lines.

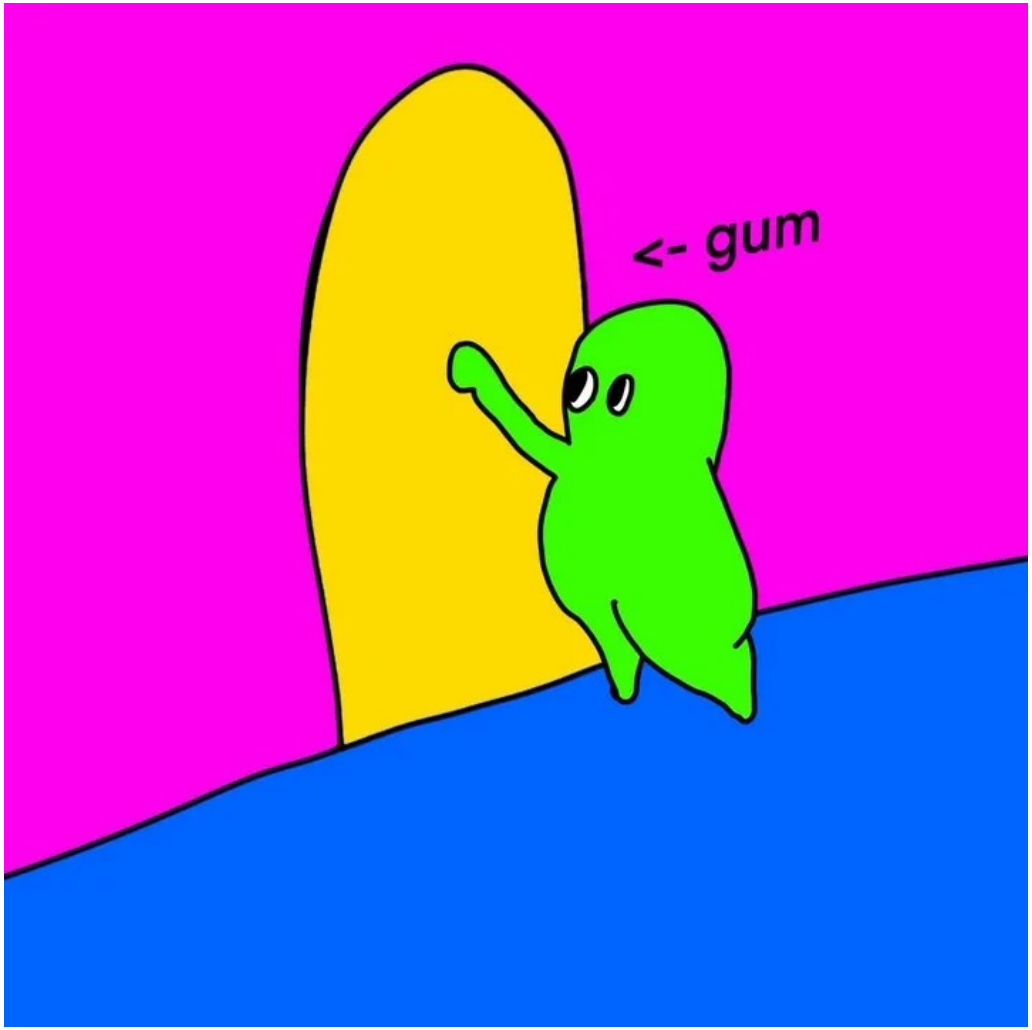
This practice prioritizes creation and style. Comfort and expressing emotions. Not just constantly shading or studying!

Animation Craft

smears are magic!

A smear, that cartoony frame where a character’s eyes are smeared. They work wonders.

I think my animation could use more smears. More anticipation and follow through too! The stuff that makes cartoons feel like cartoons.



“Gum”, an animation loop by Jeremy Nir
Watch: “Gum” at instagram.com/p/DJKo-3Ty6xg

a breakdown pose is the secret sauce

Draw your extreme poses first. Then draw a breakdown pose. Use these three poses to block out timing. Then fill in the gaps.

But HOW do we make the breakdown frame look natural and dynamic?



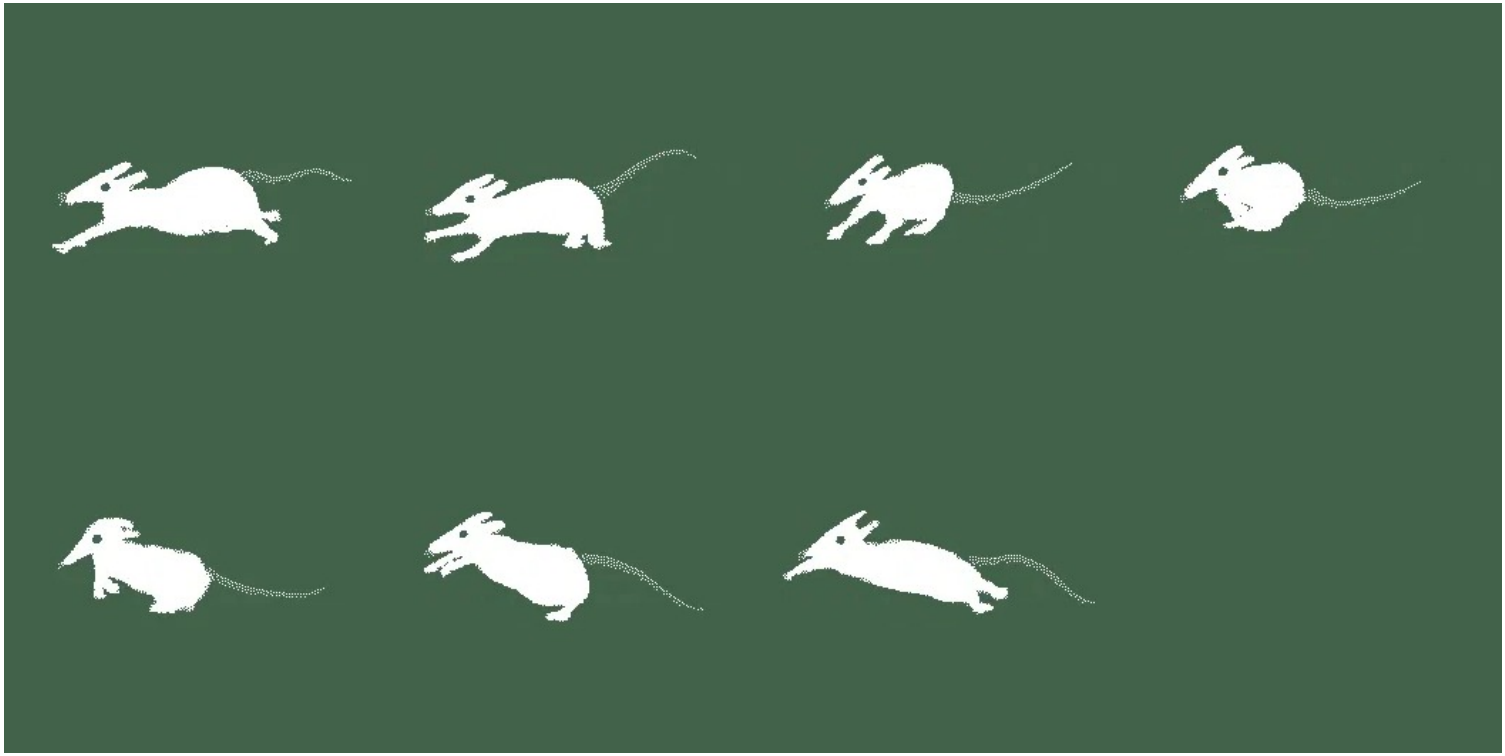
Still from “How to Keyframe in 2 Minutes”
Watch: “How to Keyframe in 2 Minutes” at youtube.com/watch?v=FskSOBnd5j4

a walk cycle passes the momentum along

The more I do walk cycles, the more I see how feet work. They are actually passing the floor from one to the other!

Same as a climber who grabs a rock and pulls it down.

Now I’m trying to learn how to do walk cycles in 3D, like walking toward the camera or away. One lesson I learned from Ivvy’s animation was to keep the character’s body the same colour: this way the animation can imply 3D without actually drawing perfect perspective.



A run cycle, frame by frame

walk cycle + moving background = illusion of motion

Just to demystify the animation process, you can just make a character doing an action and drop it on top of a scene.

The illusion will work!

The next step up is having direct interaction between person and setting but it’s cool to start simple.

This music video is a great example of simple character motion and background motion causing the illusion of interesting movement.

This video also demonstrates the power of linking multiple shots together to create a bigger story.

Again:

Make a walk cycle (even a simple one) where the camera moves around the character. Then make a setting that spins. The two will work together!

The real next step up is story but that’s another journal entry. Today I’m just trying to make my studies more focused on learning specific animation skills.



Still from “Float Away” by The Greeting Committee
Watch: “Float Away” at youtube.com/watch?v=jlZy8RFL2Uo

weight moves around

This animator Aaron Blaise demonstrates how he thinks of weight in motion. He starts animating by getting the action right.

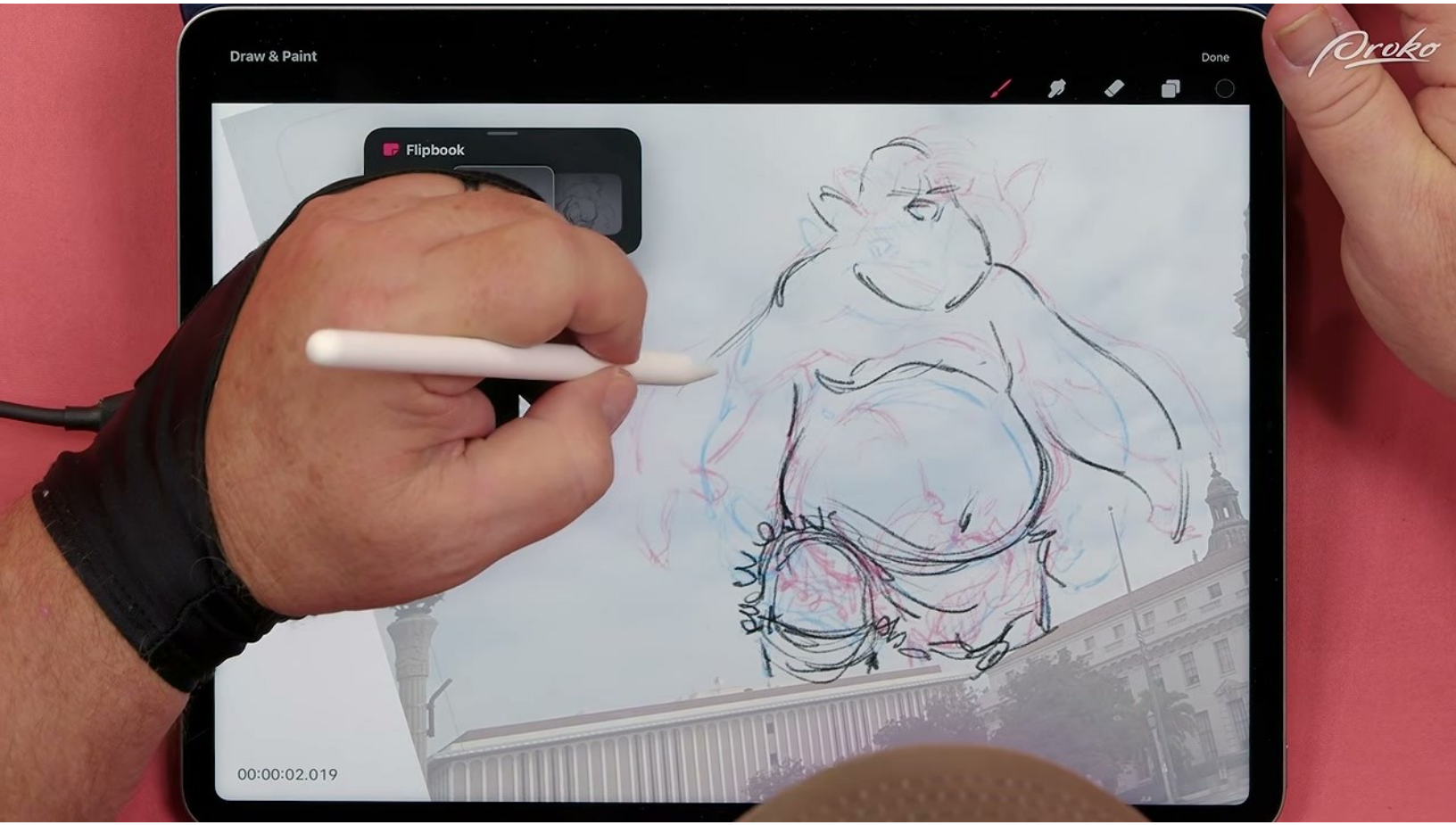
He draws loose but clear, he thinks about shapes, not lines.

“I wanna open up the silhouette.” Good advice.

“I can shoot video and animate over it.”

WOAH! I can animate some cool stuff right on the iPad! I hope my device works well enough.

“We’re gonna see an explosion of 2D animation.”



Still from “Procreate Dreams: Animation Tutorial with Aaron Blaise”
Watch: “Procreate Dreams: Animation Tutorial with Aaron Blaise” at youtube.com/watch?v=wnjet_kvkUo

lip syncing is about shifting mouth positions

I'm lip syncing a large amount of dialogue for the Joe Pera sleep animation. In my last journal entry on lip syncing I wrote that it's about rhythm: that means you want to hit the timing of when the mouth is open or closed.

In this journal entry I want to add to that idea. The most realistic mouth movement animation actually captures that motion and intention of the speaker: when we pop a "P" sound, there is a build up of momentum as the mouth prepares to POP! Same with the tongue moving through the mouth in an "L" sound, the sound rolls out.

It's not easy animating a mouth. It takes forever and is one of the least noticeable animations. I see why some people just have the mouth hidden or open and close like a beak. Or use AI, or video syncing, or using a library of mouth positions. Drawing the mouth each time is not very time effective. The other downside to doing it manually is the inconsistencies in mouth shape and position that draw attention to the mouth.

I'm looking forward to seeing this project done, it's been a ton of hours of detailed work. I was wondering how many hours I've animated in my life, have I hit 10,000? I think it's possible, I've definitely spent 100 hours on certain animations. Yet, the actual time I've spent animating are not as high. Sure, the design process and keyframing and drawing are a huge part of the pipeline but I kind of want to just **animate.** That means truly changing shapes and exploring perspective. I'm so inspired by projects like Scavenger's Reign and King of the Hill which show such subtlety and care. I'm not sure if there is work but there certainly is a lot to do.

animate in black and white, colour later

Adding colour too soon isn’t wise. It takes so much time to redraw things that the animation becomes stagnant or takes double the time.

A great process for animating is to block things out roughly and add detail later. Focus on key poses, shapes and ideas! Use an audio clip and a reference video to give the project structure.

This process is just much faster and has better results.

don’t polish a turd

In this video he says that too much art is finished prematurely. And it’s better to hold back, and focus on shape, form, composition. Work in greyscale, use only the lasso tool. Make something that works great. THEN polish it.

Working in greyscale with foreground, mid and background. Great shapes lead to iconic images.

Focusing on shape lets you better communicate.

“Its ok to just take a minute to think. Speed is cool, confidence is nice. But thinking iz the most useful thing you can do.”



Still from “Digital Shape Carving with Scott Flanders”
Watch: “Digital Shape Carving with Scott Flanders” at youtube.com/watch?v=-i-EgBilwks

when 3d animating, make it real

While animating a man slipping on a banana peel, it's tempting to use shortcuts that look good from a specific camera angle.

Avoid these shortcuts!

Instead I animate the scene "for real" which means the man actually steps on the banana peel and falls, sending the peel flying. This gives me the flexibility to move the camera freely, allowing me to explore more interesting angles. Realism in animation not only enhances visual quality but also allows for creative freedom in your shots.

I've recently embraced the power of simulation in my 3D animations which is a bit of a bonus tip. Instead of faking a wine bottle falling off a table (which involves a ton of keyframes and doesn't look amazing) I instead run a physics simulation and drop the bottle at many angles. The tradeoff here is I'm relinquishing control of the animation: it won't fall just the way I want it. Buuuut it can fall in much more interesting ways!

It's funny, the role of animator is changing. Where I would once have to draw each frame, now I control the camera and story making me more of a director, writer and actor. The sad thing is we lose the artist's hand in this process. I hope to improve my 3D animation skills so I can bring some of that back in future work.

rotoscope is magic

Is rotoscoping lazy animation? Is it cheating? Finding another artist's work or footage and tracing it.

Recently I was struggling to animate a man walking away from the camera for my Joe Pera animation and again for an upcoming animation. It's hard to animate a person walking away! I even took reference video but had trouble getting it right.

A person from the Moon Restaurant Animator discord server gave me a tip: go to turbosquid.com or sketchfab and you'll find 3D animated animals, machines and people. I was able to find many examples of characters walking and rotate them to see from behind. Comparing dozens of these walks alongside clips from anime and footage from real life, I got a sense of how a walkaway should look: how the arms sway, the head rocks back and forth as the feet and hips swing along.

It helped!

I believe rotoscoping is a shortcut that can be bad in the long run, unethical if misused. But I learned a lot and made something I've never made before.

Rotoscoping puts me in the perspective of another artist, while tracing footage connects me directly to reality.

I'm realizing rotoscoping will be one of the tools in my animator's kit. Similar to using AI to generate ideas, it's morally shady but effective.

I'll end this with a quote from Richard Williams' book, The Animator's Survival Kit, which goes:

I managed to get hold of a 35 mm print of Chuck Jones's "Broomstick Bunny" short. I traced off, frame by frame, Ken Harris's marvellous animation of the character "Witch Hazel" and some of the three drawing runs of Bugs Bunny.

I copied these runs for my two monsters in "The little island."

Chuck Jones was impressed with my film and he took me to dinner in London.

At one point Chuck said they had studied my monster runs on the Moviola editing machine at Warner Bros.

I told him, "but they were yours! I copied yours!"

So that goes to show we should learn from the best.

For comparison, here is Broomstick Bunny. You can see Bugs Bunny walking at 1:40.

In The Little Island, you see some similar walks at 3:58 but it certainly doesn't look traced from Witch Hazel. I suppose tracing is a good way to start and the animation develops with the character.



Title card from “Broom-Stick Bunny” (1956), directed by Chuck Jones
Watch: “Broom-Stick Bunny” at youtube.com/watch?v=V-NJiw4rCb4

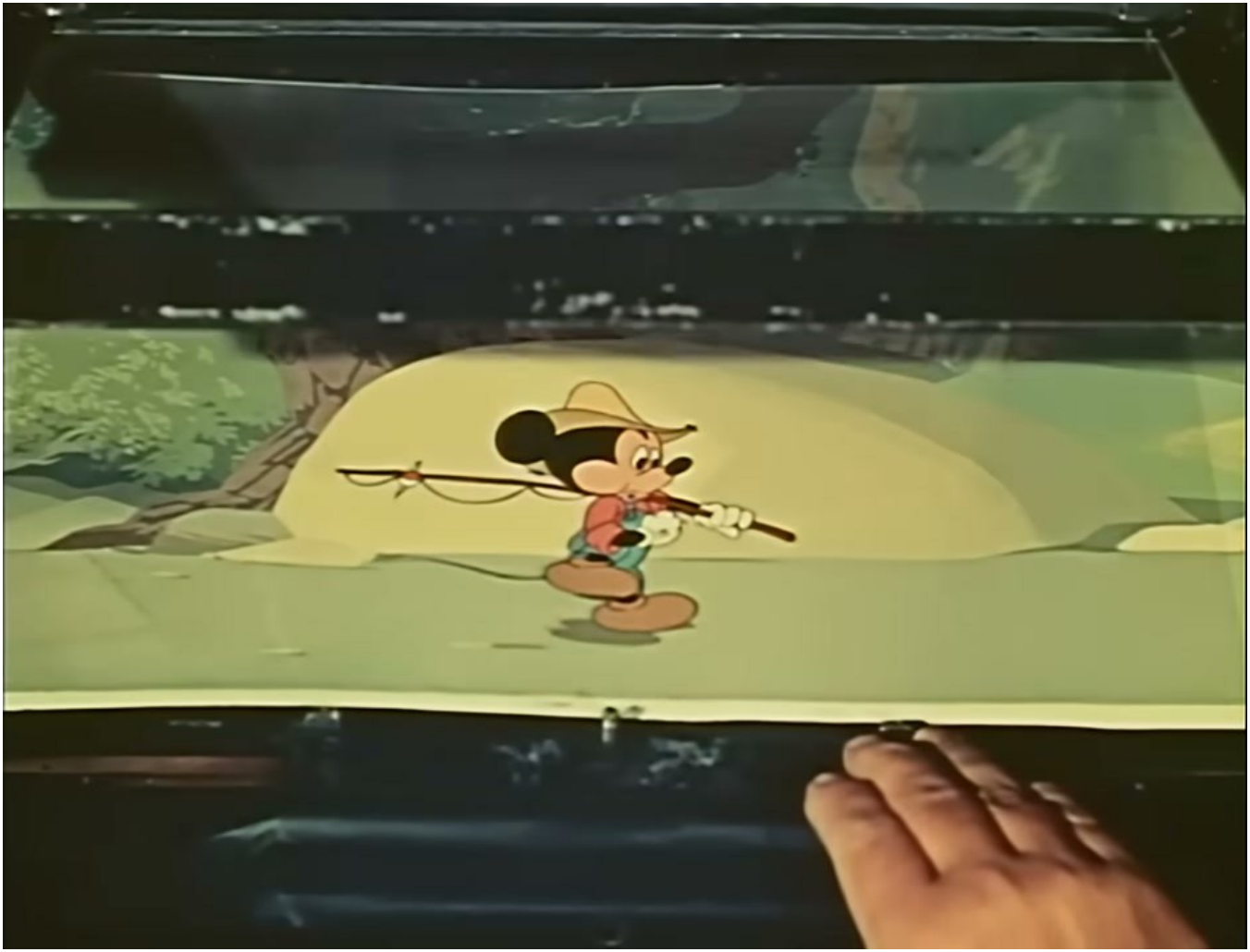


Still from “The Little Island” (1958) by Richard Williams
Watch: “The Little Island” at youtube.com/watch?v=TDcTRVUx2bA

use layers to make a 3d space

This multi-plane technique can be easily recreated in digital animation. I can make multiple PNGs in Photoshop and Procreate and combine them in Blender or After Effects to make a 3D environment with a moving camera.

It’s somewhat simple stuff but my most recent animation is just so flat! I need to separate the layers into a 3D space to make a more dynamic animation.



Still from “Walt Disney’s MultiPlane Camera” (1957)
Watch: “Walt Disney’s MultiPlane Camera” at youtube.com/watch?v=YdHTlUGN1zw

push ideas further

To “push” is a term in animation, drawing and design. The point is you go further into what makes something unique.

Why push an idea?

Pushing is the act of going further. You see it in character design a lot. A pointy nose could be LONG like a carrot. A crooked spine could be BENT. This forms memorable cartoon characters.

It is worth pushing your ideas to the extreme to see how far you have to go before it is too much.

PUSH

Camera, Composition and Cinema

Let meaning guide the design

When I'm animating there is so much to keep in mind. Camera placement, props, character design, set design, lighting, colour etc.

These can be a little overwhelming and it's easy to just launch in and see what happens, then play with everything as I work.

I'm learning to explore the meaning of a piece first and let that be the guide for all mise-en-scène decisions.

mise-en-scène

Arranging of visual elements such as:

- Sets
- Props
- Lighting
- Costumes
- Actor blocking
- Shot composition

This arrangement tells a story. For example:

In this shot from Jurassic Park the story is claustrophobic terror.

Massive jaws tear into the frame. Jeep walls offer no escape. The tiny desperate hands try desperately to hold up a sheet of glass.

There is a sense that doom is inevitable and there is no point trying to escape this monster.



Still from “Jurassic Park”

This colourful shot from Barbie tells a very different story.

In Barbieland, the White House is next to a ferris wheel and a donut shop. You get the sense that Barbie can do anything she wants, yet everything feels somehow small. Like Barbie is trapped in this perfect world where everything is easy.

It’s amazing that these two very opposite shots could offer the same feeling. Claustrophobia and a desire to escape.



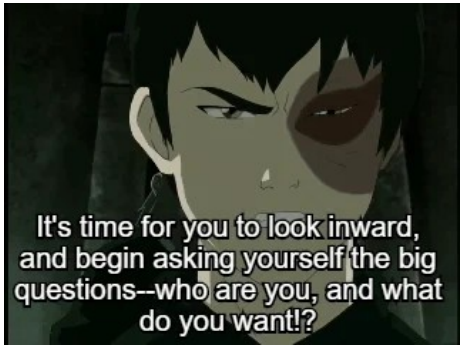
Still from “Barbie”

The struggle of telling real stories

It’s fun to make a cool animation with monsters and crazy lighting. Or some super realistic couch with water pouring on it.

But I am afraid to really be with a character and explore a relationship.

So how do I do this?



From “Avatar: The Last Airbender”

Make real characters

So often my characters don't have names. Give them a name and an emotional drive. Pour myself into the character.

Make the setting matter

Why are skeletons dancing on a barn? That's just random animation happening. Let's consider the emotion and let that drive the setting.

Watch and read

Maybe it's time to watch more emotional TV and movies and read books that are grounded in truth.

Like, the last movie I watched was The Little Mermaid reboot, which definitely didn't make me feel much. Contrast that with Mitchells vs The Machines, which is also aimed at kids but it had me holding back tears.

I can still enjoy silly media but if it's truly nonsense then it may be numbing me. The same way reading Reddit endlessly is an escape.

Just like Barbie and those kids, I need to challenge the world as it is and find happiness. And not get eaten by the T-Rex of mediocre animation.



Frame by Jeremy Nir

This frame shows a man on a bench with a massive creature in the foggy background. There is a sense of mystery but no emotion.

How can I improve this piece? Well, let's tear it apart into the elements. A man on the bench makes me think of a lonely widow. A city being destroyed by a monster makes me think of Godzilla or Cloverfield.

Perhaps the story is of a widow watching the world be destroyed. He is not sad because he is ready to die and join his wife in Heaven.

So we see this couple come to this bench every day. Then we see she is no longer with him. He is sad and lonely on their bench.

Catastrophe strikes and demons destroy the city. He watches. Is he sad? Scared? Relieved?

How would I feel as a lonely widower who is watching the world end? Now that's a good question.

The meaning of a scene guides the clear choices of lighting, decor, and camera placement.

play with camera placement

Someone went and updated the 12 principles of animation (pin.it/2Fu6FLo). It's organized more naturally.

I'm noticing my animations have boring cinematography and relationships. I'm so focused on acting and colour that I'm missing story and scene.

Also my overshoot game is weak!

make it cinematic with rhythm and camera moves

- Use blur and depth of focus,
- Use staging for storytelling
- Use rhythmic cutting/camera move on action

This level of camera and editing and cinematography makes stuff more cinematic.



Two poses by SAD-ist
Watch: youtube.com/watch?v=uCwrYiU54ZM

Next tip: use only two poses to imply animation. Aka USE LESS FRAMES.

Speed ramping camera motion can give the shots a rhythm.

Use more advanced camera moves in sync with the action, like a camera moving around the character.

use a perspective grid

I’ve been wanting to push my perspectives. More dynamic shapes and compositions. How?

Look at references of course buuut.

Take a 1, 2 or 3 point perspective grid and hit it with the warp and distort tools. This will create more surreal or extra dramatic compositions.

A distorted perspective can evoke fear, anger, power, scale.

Warped perspectives could be very interesting to experiment with.

add camera movement in post, not during animation

Moving the camera before finishing animation just makes it harder to animate the shot and it locks you into camera moves prematurely.

If it’s just pans, make a big image and animate it after.

go through the window!

I’m animating a bowling animation where a pin gets drunk and falls out a window. Initially I had the pin fall out the window while the camera stays inside but why?!

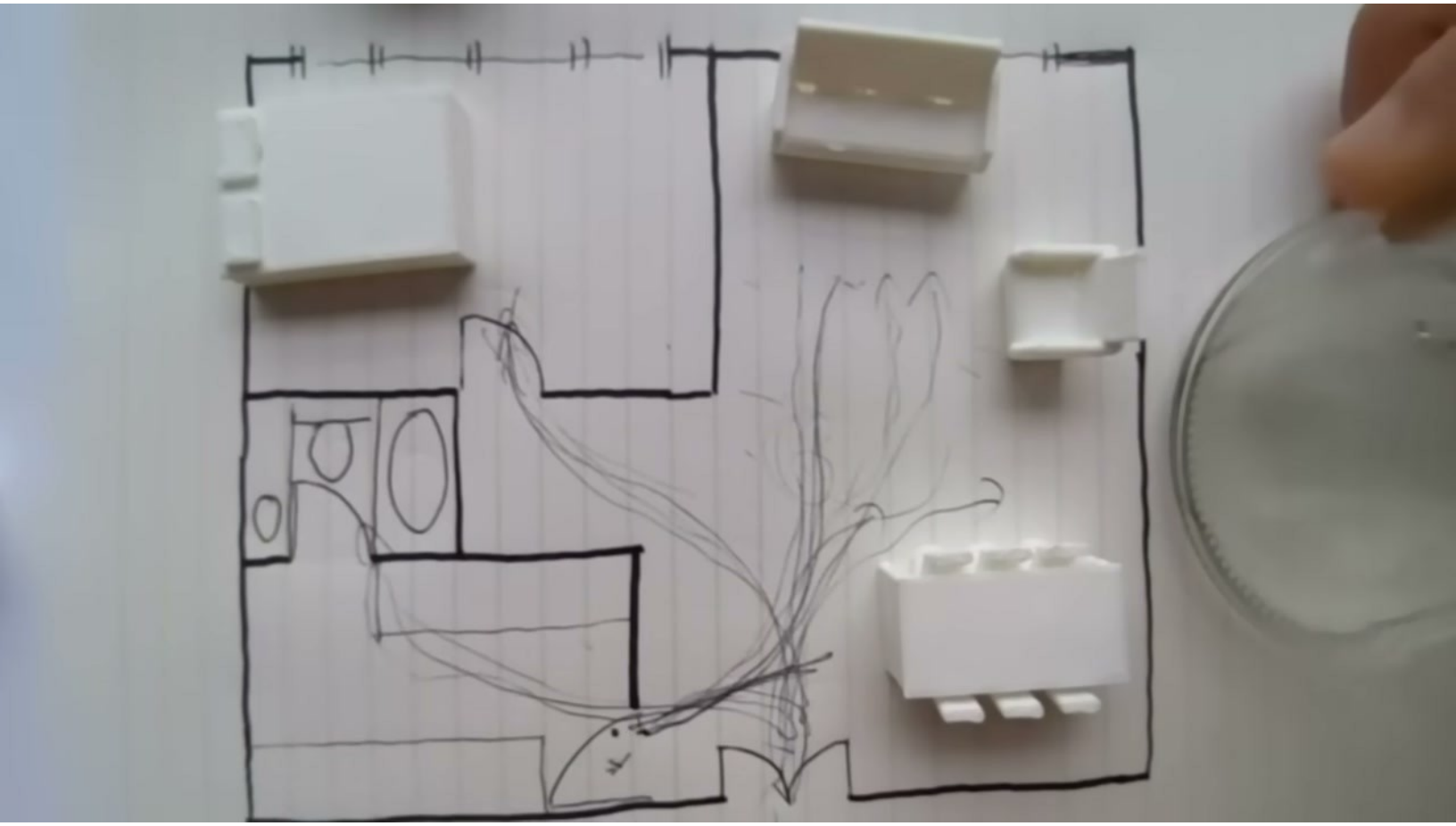
Let’s push the camera out the window and enter free fall with the pin. It’s so much more crazy and interesting to push the bounds of reality. That’s the best part of 3D animation. You make the world and you get to explore it, the only bounds being your imagination and labour.

The fact is, this doesn’t apply only to 3D animating. You’re drawing a stick man, don’t be bound by the size of your paper. Don’t be bound by your first draft.

PUSH IT BABYYYYYY

feng shui and film design

Been watching these videos by Dear Modern talking about Chi in a home. His way of thinking is so soothing and clear.



Planning a room’s energy flow, from a Dear Modern video
Watch: youtube.com/watch?v=YsBPqO3pv_Y

I have been thinking of ways to apply energy flow design into other types of design like animations and even my website.

Once I saw Feng Shui it's been hard to unsee it. Where does energy flow in a design? This is like composition but with a more holistic approach.

The difference between Feng Shui and composition is sometimes you want a bad flow of energy.

Now I need to consider how composition applies to time based media like film and animation, when the camera moves, a story is told.

We close in for a sense of intimacy or tilt up for a sense of wonder. Isn't it funny how similar those are to real life head movements? If I feel intimate with someone I lean in. If I feel wonder I look up. My energy goes forward or upward.

So moving in and up could convey a sense of wonder, like the loving relationship one has with God.

Reverse it and we are looking down and pulling back which gives a sense of… well just that! Looking down on it and pulling away from it. Like what I do when I see an ant colony.

Now we move to the side and what happens? Wes Anderson does a lot of horizontal pans and tilts which give a storybook feeling. We are exploring the scene, perhaps a bit detached if the camera is on rails.

In fact, rails and cranes always give a sense of perfection. The smooth camera gives it a smooth safe feeling versus a shaky cam which makes us feel present and vulnerable.

Then there is the Youtube camera placement on a channel like Jenny Nicholson. We look into her room and she looks right back talking. Her bed and walls give the setting a stable suburban feeling as she calmly talks about stable suburban things. But the stuffed animals give us a corporate yet childish feeling. This all ties together into a video with a very grounded energy.

What else? Blocking and movement. First, what is blocking?

“Blocking is where, when, and how subjects are placed and move within the frame. There are several possible blocking combinations. The actor is static, and the camera is fixed. The actor is static, and the camera is moving. The actor is moving, and the camera is static.”

How does blocking affect the energy of a shot?

Well break it down. If we want an isolated character we put them in a box, literally isolated. If we want a hectic scene we have people and objects moving everywhere. If we want the audience to feel lost we make the camera lost, bustling through the scene. If we want them to feel cool we pull the camera into a still place observing the world.

It’s just so obvious.

The piece of the puzzle I am missing is not the HOW but the WHAT. What story do I want to tell and why?

When I tell a story of a man trapped in a bunker I boxed him in and it worked. The outside world was chaos with movement on many dimensions. The phone world was stable and surreal.

When I showed a weird sewer world I had a fluid camera that got intimate with slime and rats. I shot low and slid through the scene. The goal was to be intimate and I did that.

Now what is the goal?

If I were decorating a bedroom I’d say clean and restful. An office is productive and bright.

If I were making a Fincher film I'd say clean and tight. A Gerwig film is playful and poetic. A Burton film is whimsical and musical. A Cameron film is powerful and sentimental.

So highlight these words!

What is a Nir film? Bathetic and surprising.

Bathos is the interplay of small and big ideas! We focus on the duck eating bread and zoom in to see the bread is being crunched in the most beautiful chaotic way. We see the risen yeast collapse in its bill. This is the surprising interplay of mundane and profound that I want to be my material.

Surprising is more than just twists, I want things to feel surprisingly intimate. To tease the audience with a tango of ideas. (A cosmic gumbo if u will.)

Anyway. I'm loving the human design way of thinking. Seeing energy and breaking stuff down into simple decisions.

This goal oriented way of thinking can be like, I wanna make a film about a foley artist who only uses celery. It's a satire of those behind the scenes featurettes with a blunt punchline. The comedy really comes from the repeater CRUNCH rhythm.

I guess that's the other thing I want my work to be, rhythmic. Like a natural thing. Something weird and alien but perfectly natural too.

I guess this kind of film gives people a sense of wonder at the weird and alien world that exists above our mundane reality and simultaneously a deeper connection with the natural world that is beneath our feet.

Like how a Walmart exists in space and atop miles of soil and stone. The irony is, once you see the profound and natural world, the Walmart reality takes on a surreal quality. That's when I'm happiest - when the world looks different.

the rule of 1, 2, 3, 4

I found this in a book on writing but I think it applies to all forms of art.

1 is whole

2 are contrasted

3 is a complete trinity

4 implies endlessness

For example:

1 tree is simple and complete. Think of a Christmas tree.

2 trees are compared and seen in relation to each other. Tall tree next to a short tree.

3 trees are a balanced trio.

4 trees or more become a grouping, a forest even!

In writing you can use this rule for the number of adjectives:

1. Tom is bored.
2. Sally is generous and lonesome.
3. Bill is itchy, hot and tired.
4. Alex is warm, intelligent, refined and skilled with a hairbrush.

Story



Title card for “How to See Someone” by Jeremy Nir

One thing leads to another (but/therefore)

A story is made up of beats. In a satisfying story, these beats are intimately connected, each leading to the next.

In Ratatouille we meet Remy, a rat who loves food and idolizes a chef. His father believes he should just eat garbage and focus on survival.

One day Remy finds a rare mushroom and fine cheese that he wants to prepare using saffron. Therefore he sneaks into the kitchen of a sleeping old woman, but he is distracted by the television, where he learns his favourite chef is dead. Therefore he makes a surprised squeak. Therefore the old woman awakens and, seeing rats in her home, grabs her shotgun and starts shooting. Therefore Remy and his friend run around the kitchen and fall onto the chandelier. Therefore the old woman shoots the chandelier, but this collapses the ceiling, revealing the hundreds of rats living in the ceiling. Therefore the rats scatter and evacuate to the river, but Remy returns to the kitchen to take the cookbook. Therefore he is late to the river, where his family are already floating away toward the sewer. Remy doesn't have a boat! But Remy is able to use the cookbook as a boat to catch up to his family, but the old woman shoots at him and he is left behind. Therefore Remy is alone, separated from his family and carried away by the rushing water.

The characters have conflicting desires and their actions stem naturally from those desires. The characters are in stark contrast to each other and their desires tap into deeper themes about life: survival vs. beauty. Is it worth dying for something beautiful? Is life worth living with nothing beautiful?

This whole intro scene is the inciting incident that kicks off the story.

But / Therefore

“We found out this really simple rule that maybe you guys heard before, but it took us a long time to learn it. We can take these beats, which are basically the beats of your outline, and if the words ‘and then’ belong between those beats, you’re fucked, basically. You’ve got something pretty boring. What should happen between every beat that you’ve written down is either the word ‘therefore’ or ‘but’. So you come up with an idea and write ‘and this happens… and then this happens…’ No, no, no. It should be ‘this happens and therefore this happens.’ ‘But this happens, therefore this happens…’”

The plot advances due to characters, not the writer.



Still from Ratatouille (Pixar)
Watch: “Ratatouille: Mouse Evacuation” at youtube.com/watch?v=d-IHMhnCOYM

Telling stories reveals you

I am afraid of writing stories.

As I reveal my character's flaws, my own flaws are revealed. When my character changes, I am sharing my own desires.

This vulnerability is an act of bravery, especially when there are skeletons in the closet. Stuff that I am not comfortable sitting with.

The thing is… those skeletons are so normal. Revealing my own flaws makes my characters real. Revealing my own desires and fears can make the reader feel seen! Showing a character break through their limitations can actually help people (and myself) grow.

Methods

So here's what I'm doing with my story writing:

Journaling with a focus on my past. Coming to terms with my own life story, including the painful stuff.

Writing more and seeing what happens. Just spending more time making stories.

Focusing on themes: when I start with a random character name in a random situation, the story slowly emerges and eventually a theme shows itself, but focusing on the theme from the start can ground the story in a meaning.

Example

I made an animation of a Goblin Pirate Captain searching a ship for a missing prisoner. But that is just some colourful noise, the characters didn't have heart. Imagine being an escaped prisoner on a ship full of monsters. Wanting to hide but with nowhere to run.

I needed to find a story from my life when I was scared and hiding, so I did some journaling and I remembered being a kid on the recess yard and feeling scared. I didn't have friends and just wanted to hide. I decided to social climb, purposefully befriending cool kids until I was friends with the coolest kid in school. He lived in a mega mansion and had everything… I remember he told me he danced with seven girls at a school dance.

As I got close to him I found out he was a pretty mean kid. Whenever he had friends over, someone would cry. I learned to be fast and funny and pay attention to the cool kid so I knew how not to be the loser.

One time I saw another kid get really upset, I forget what happened but his face was red and everyone was laughing and it just stung. I was in the cool club and I didn't like it. It hurt. I didn't go back.

I wish I could go back and tell myself not to waste my time social climbing. I didn't need to prove anything.

So perhaps the character in my story, the escapee hiding on the boat, can get caught. But then one of the other monsters stands up and says "I'm sick of this culture of fear. I'm the captain now and we're gonna make sure everyone has fun and feels safe."

I just wrote an episode of the show Our Flag Means Death! A pirate story rooted in outcasts banding together to create a found family.

Embrace the cringe

This story is a bit of an anti-bullying ad but it’s true. Good stories are full of tropes and emotional beats that have been done a trillion times before, but the truth doesn’t need to be new. It is an eternal thing emerging in new places.

Fertilizer

In summary, looking inwards and dredging up the shit from my past makes better manure for the flowers to grow.

Revealing self and exploring breakthroughs or changes in self allows the story to really blossom.

The Chore

An animated short film

Title card for “The Chore” by Jeremy Nir

Go in the hole with your audience

A few years ago my friends and I got together for our first ever game of Dungeons and Dragons.

As the Dungeon Master, I was so excited for them to get into the epic story and fight and solve puzzles! I drew maps full of characters and settings, I wrote a forbidden love story set in a warzone between Mermaids and Goblins.

The game started with the characters walking along a trail when they came upon a hole in the ground (a quick obstacle I'd thrown in at the last second to let everyone try rolling their nice new 20 sided dice).

One by one they all rolled terribly and fell into the hole. Then they rolled terribly and struggled to get out of the hole.

It was surreal, this hole wasn't supposed to be a part of the story and now it was the whole focus.

As the players looked around, I had to put my epic plans on hold and describe the hole. I described gnarled roots along the walls and a centipede darting into a hole in the mud. The players climbed on each others shoulders and emerged from the hole triumphant!

Be in the hole with the players

The world is what's in front of your eyes. That's all that exists!

If you remain present with your audience and with your characters, your world will gain more depth. The world fills with details and the story naturally unfolds when you stay present in the room.

Believe the world exists

Tolkien didn't write silly stories about dragons and hobbits, he wrote The Lord of the Rings.

Middle Earth is grounded in truth. Gollum and Gandalf and Gimli are so unforgettable because they are real.

Just take a leap of faith. Believe in your world and watch. If I'm making a 3D bedroom for an animation, it will be fine. But if I make a bedroom for Bridget Jones it will be full of details and life. I know that she would have a few cups by her bedside table. Why is her alarm clock unplugged on the floor? Oh, she's in bed sleeping late. Instantly the story emerges from the setting and the character. Now the phone is ringing. Work is calling and this woman is asleep!

It's not even more work for me to model this bedroom but there is 1000 times more interest when I'm watching someone sleep late vs looking at a sterile bedroom.

Now imagine the smell of the room. Is that the smell of pancakes? Oh my god, she peeks out from under the covers. Did she bring someone home last night and is he making breakfast? She wants to be annoyed but it smells so good. Lines of steamy pancakes drift into the room.

Why was this so hard to figure out?

This is a huge breakthrough for me.

I've been so hesitant to take this leap into the world of story. I think it's a dangerous mix of confusing and scary. I sit down to write a story and I'm thinking about themes and big ideas. No, just start with a setting or a character. Add a little conflict and a little desire and baby, you got a stew goin!



The hole in the ground, with a wizard hat in it



Still from Seinfeld

Contrast

People view the world through contrast.

To show Aladdin is poor, put him outside of a golden mansion. Have him go to bed hungry while the Sultan throws extra food away.

Spongebob is even more annoyingly naive when he's standing next to the curmudgeonly Squidward.

Now that we have characters with opposing worldviews, the story becomes a wrestling match:

How do Aladdin and the Sultan view love differently? How do Spongebob and Squidward respond differently to working a dead-end job?

This wrestling match becomes even more interesting when the two characters have a lot in common but come to different conclusions:

Peter Pan and Captain Hook both fear growing old and dying but in the end Hook gives in to despair while Pan realizes "To live would be an awfully big adventure."

Frodo and Gollum both desire the One Ring, but while Gollum seeks to kill Frodo, Frodo clings to hope and redemption. He sees himself in Gollum and refuses to view him as a monster.

In the end, both characters give in to their addiction to the ring as they fight on the edge of Mount Doom, but Gollum wins and gets the ring. As he falls into the lava below we see that greed and corruption are self-destructive. Frodo is saved by his friendship and mercy.

See, these are not just characters, they are the embodiment of conflicting ideas.

When Professor X and Magneto play chess, it is a philosophical debate about how we respond to persecution. Magneto is willing to sacrifice his pawns to go on the attack, Xavier plays defensively. This reflects their ideas about the oppression of mutants: non-violence vs. armed resistance.

Batman fighting The Joker is a reflection of how we deal with living in a chaotic world: seeking justice, control and hope vs. nihilism and destroying of broken systems.

These stories really strike a chord when the two ideas being contrasted are both valid. In life we all have to decide where we stand on these moral questions and it is the power of storytellers to make these ideas real through characters.

I believe a powerful ending involves neither side “winning” but a new reality being established. The villain is vanquished but the hero is forever changed.

PS: Contrast is one of the principles of visual design, I’m curious about how the others could be applied to writing and animation.



Still from Aladdin (Disney)



Still from SpongeBob SquarePants (Nickelodeon)

using improv to write for animation

Animation is much more isolated and planned than improv. Sometimes it feels a bit lifeless. I'm working on this dungeon animation and I literally don't know what to do with the story. I just had an idea to make a short in the style of a retro 1980s video game. But I need to breathe life into the scene! After a night of watching improv comedy, I want to learn some of the techniques that make everything so alive.

I spoke to my dad who has spent a lot of time in improv classes and on stage, he helped make this list:

Guidelines of improvisation

1. Yes, and
2. Be present in the space
3. Don't go for the laugh
4. Trust your partner
5. Make it relatable
6. Day of days
7. Justify behaviour
8. React naturally

Say yes, and

Sometimes when I'm writing I start editing all my ideas too much. Saying YES! lets me stop editing and just accept the premise of the scene. Saying AND then lets me start building the scene, seeing what comes.

Be present in the space

When you're writing a scene, don't be in your bedroom at your computer. Be IN the scene. Feel your five senses. Feel your emotions. Being present makes the setting, props and characters become real.

Don't go for the laugh

Many improv scenes get ruined when someone goes for a joke. It's actually funnier to establish the reality of the scene and see where the comedy naturally forms. Similarly in writing for animation, don't force it. I want to make a funny story set in a dungeon video game, but I need to make the game as honestly as possible. See where the comedy comes up (and if it becomes a sad or scary scene, go with it).

Trust your partner

Working together is key to improvising. I know that as an animator I am resisting working with teams. It will improve my work! I know this because I've already seen it happen when I worked with collaborators in the past. Even if it's just a friend watching me work and contributing ideas. Trust your team and their skills, and be open to collaboration. It's more fun and somehow more magic happens.

Make it relatable

In improv you don't always make it wacky. It's often more fun to see a couple meeting their doctor than to see all the characters pull off masks and reveal they're alien wolves here to claim Earth.

This advice seems to run counter to some animation advice I read that said: have a reason this is an animation. Basically saying that an animation should portray something that isn't better served by live-action. I'm not sure I agree with that, but there is truth to it. In animation, visual gags can be bigger and characters can be more exaggerated.

How can I blend these seemingly conflicting pieces of advice? If a scene is more cartoonish, can it still have characters and stories that hit home? In a story like Over the Garden Wall or Adventure Time, animation portrays a crazy fictional world but it is grounded in emotion too. Just look at Pixar films that open my eyes to these huge insights. The characters are exploring surreal places but the emotion is relatable.

Day of days

Don't just show a random day, look for those moments in life when everything changes, that leave an impact and shape the story. In animation I tend to portray vignettes that are sort of static. If I embrace change for characters, my stories might feel bigger.

Justify behaviour

Characters act in a way that makes sense. In improv one character said: "Why is there so much paperwork?" and the other replied, "Because it's Oakville."

This justification doesn't make sense, yet we the audience believe it for the scene. It fuels the scene.

How can I apply this to writing for animation? In an animation script there is a lot of absurd action. Why is the Coyote tying himself to a bomb? Why is Homer on the roof during a storm? Why is Pim spending his day with an evil man? Because they are motivated.

Maybe the character motivation is nearly nonsense, but it doesn't have to be good. Stuff happens all the time in the real world and the human brain is great at accepting the first justification it hears. It helps us sleep at night.

Animated characters should be true to their personalities and the story. But they can also just do stuff.

React naturally

Lastly, keep it real. Improv is actually quite fun and easy if you just react naturally to what happens. Authentic reactions give animated characters life, making them relatable.

PS: I find myself spending more time writing than animating now. I wonder if I should work in education or writing instead of being an animator… I still love to make my own stuff but it's so fun to share the things I learn and organize thoughts, connecting ideas from all over the place.

Be your own editor

This could really be seven journal entries but they all came from one 1982 sci-fi magazine on writer's block. Robert Sheckley describes a few tricks:

Return to simplicity: When he started writing it was easy, as he got sophisticated it became difficult. Return to the basics to get back into creativity.

Lock yourself in: Figure out the idea in your head, then lock yourself in a tiny room with just the basic tools and come out when it's done.

Get a buddy: Someone to show your rough work to and hold each other to daily goals.

Just write. A lot.: Robert set a 5000 word goal which exhausted him but did break through the block.

Make a chart: Chart out your idea as a mind map and look for gaps, connections between the bubbles.

Write a simulation: Oh, this isn't a real story I'm writing, it's a simulation! Yes, it has all the features of a story but it isn't real. It doesn't have to be good. (The funny thing is, pretending to write is a lot like writing.)

Listen to your inner critic: Read what you wrote. Your inner critic will say "this sucks!" "Ok," you reply. "How come?" "It's too slow, I'm bored." "How could I improve it?" "I guess delete the lengthy description of a sunset." By listening to your inner critic, you can actually improve your work.

Applying this to animation

Return to simplicity: Animation gets complex. Instead of minute details, revisit the basics. An appealing design, satisfying motion, fun idea.

Lock yourself in: It's easy to get distracted, just set a daily time with the basic tools.

Get a buddy: This is the part I've been missing, it's hard to stay productive without sharing daily updates with a fellow animator. I wish I were in animation school.

Just animate: Quantity!

Storyboard: Visualize your animation with a storyboard instead of a mind map. Focus on the best shots!

Animate a simulation: Treat your animation as a simulation, not a finished product. This means you can cheat and go fassst.

Listen to your inner critic: If you don't like something about your piece, fix it up.

make art/comedy/write about real things

Went to a pretty brutal comedy show. The comedians were mostly unfocused and babbling. I realised a good story, a good art piece is about something. A noun. A snowman, a waterfall, a broken car. Just give me something tangible to imagine and engage with.

Even better, make us take a lesson. Hit an emotion and hit it again. Open it up!

put faces and voices in animations

This one is simple. People connect to faces and voices, characters! The more that is present, the more audiences will pay attention.

Story and world keep people invested.

Relationships get people REALLY hot n bothered.

So write steamy relationships between characters in a world. Seems simple but it’s easy to forget.

Process

razzle dazzle em’

Animation takes a lot of time. I’ve learned the hard way that people don’t always notice the suuuper subtle stuff.

See these tiny pictures? Each took me around 40 to 150 hours to make. I’m a bit embarrassed to admit that but also proud. I had to take that time to learn the tools and as an aspiring animator I wanted everything just right. Subtle and loop perfectly. That level of perfection is fun but it isn’t a good use of time. I can **make more pieces that are more memorable in less time.**

The five principles of razzling and dazzling

1. Make the motion BIG and clear

Here are my favourite animation principles to give characters life.

- Exaggerate movements
- Squash and stretch for weight and flexibility
- Perfect timing
- Anticipation gives some build up
- Secondary action gives more truth to the scene

2. Style

Develop a style that is distinct and appealing. Pay attention to character design, colour schemes, composition, and art direction. Collect references, scribble rough drawings and look at the principles of design.

I really recommend the Little Red Riding Hood principles and composition slideshow for learning about composition. It's just really great.

3. Story: simple and true

The character wants something. Uh oh, there is conflict. Uh oh, an ironic twist? Yay, a resolution!

4. Sound

Sound effects, music, and voice acting enhance the watching experience. When the sounds sync up with the footage, people are pleased and feel immersed.

5. The missing ingredient

I think there's something missing from the list. That certain je ne sais quoi that just makes an animation feel special. It's the sparkle and wonder. I think the movie The Fabelmans was about this (Spielberg's indulgent movie about growing up and learning the power of film).

When he popped holes in the film and made it look like the guns were really firing it brought the scene some pizazz.

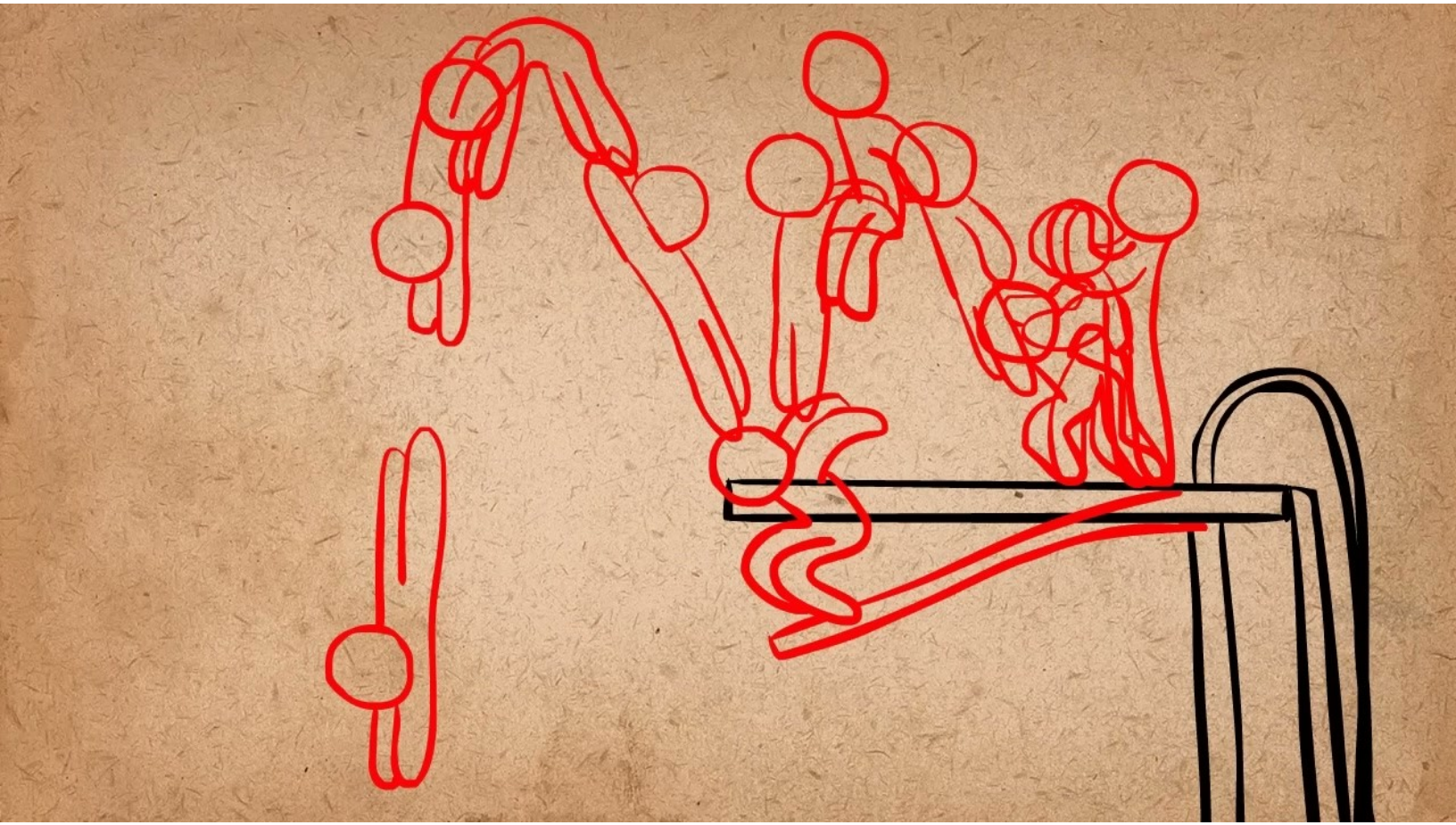
When the young actor actually felt emotional during the scene it brought a different kind of pizzazz that comes from emotional honesty.

Sparkles and heart. That's when filmmaking is actually worth watching. All that stuff on the list above is good but they work together.

So save time, make more memorable pieces and make them sparkle.



Still from “Razzle Dazzle”, Chicago (2002)
Watch: “Razzle Dazzle” at youtube.com/watch?v=YW3MIixEps4



“12 Principles of Animation” by Alan Becker
Watch: “12 Principles of Animation” at youtube.com/watch?v=uDqjIdI4bF4



Still from “The Fabelmans” (2022)

movies are just crafts

Movies seem sort of impossible to make, right? There's so much to do and 10 million dollars is a tiny budget.

But movies are a craft, just like literal craft. Like the stuff kids do.

It doesn't have to be fancy or perfect, no stunts or anything. Just a good script will carry it. A camera.

I just saw Asteroid City and it was just very crafted. It was fun and you could easily see the work of the set designers and actors and musicians and director. It's not so complicated!

So how do you do crafts? Well if I were making a silly art drawing I'd get all the art supplies out and have fun, just use paste and markers and paint and mess up the paper, keep slapping more stuff on and then grab more paper.

In film it should be the same. Grab the camera (even a phone) and actors (even just myself) and add tons of sound effects and music and whatever! Have fun with it and then throw it away. Throw it into the garby.

The beautiful thing about arts and crafts time is it's fun and honest. It doesn't really matter what you make, it goes up on the fridge. If I can bring that attitude into my practice of making animations and writing stories and filming them, it will be a happy one.

just make something!! finish it!

Seriously, it doesn't have to be so good. Just finish it and move on!!

More small pieces is a great goal between larger projects.

How can I finish pieces that feel too big? Shrink it down. Make it 5 seconds long. If you love it, expand it or make it a series.

Go SHORTER and make animation BIGGER so there is more flow of art coming out of me and less wasted work.

hit record

Stop starting from scratch! Stop overplanning and overstudying and overbrainstorming. Just GO!

Record a song and make a music video for it! Draw a comic book story. Write a short story. Film an educational TikTok for artists.

There is some resistance here! What if my song is bad? Shouldn't I be studying animation? What if my animation is bad? What if I fail? What if I suck?

You do suck! That's part of this whole thing. You aren't perfect. Just use your voice and throw yourself into a project and finish it. That's how you move forward.

set a goal

When I sit down to make art I often feel drifty. I have my coffee, I have a couple hours set aside. But I don't know what to do with myself.

Set a goal.

With a finish line I can focus.

Right now I'm going to spend one hour making an animation and then I'll take half an hour to make a song to go with it. Go!

plant a flag

Take a single action that gives you a win and establishes your determination to do something.

To be more creative, just put a single brush of paint on paper.

To be healthier, just run a single block.

It’s a small thing but that’s the point. You get a win and feel the satisfaction of having done something.

write it down

Overwhelmed by ideas? Write them all down!

Get it out of your head.

Use a pencil and paper to prevent tunnel vision

I see so many designers get wrapped up in executing a specific idea. Once you've put hours in, it's impossible to see it objectively. We get tunnel vision.

Using paper and pencil to roughly sketch out ideas first frees you to start fresh, to move things around, to delete things and to imagine things before you start making them. It allows for feedback and lets your imagination run free!

start simple, add detail

Starting simple applies to every art form.

Identifying big shapes in drawing, big plot points and themes in writing, clear characters in animation, key physics attributes in puzzle-making.

It’s always tempting to add detail too early. But like Proko says in “Keep it simple”, it’s important to start simple so you can move things around. Doing everything at once results in unfixed mistakes and a worse drawing.

practice creative minimalism

Creating an animation can be a big undertaking. It is easy to lose focus.

Remove the noise and focus on the core idea. Only creating what is essential.

This allows for more satisfying and complete work.

the new iPad effect

Walking through Best Buy, I was salivating at all the pretty gizmos and gadgets. Yes I have an iPad and an iPhone but that iPad Mini would be perfect. It's so mini! I could bring it to a cozy little coffee shop where I could write the next great novel (ooh, I'll need a new bluetooth keyboard (and I should grab the new Apple Pencil (and a Kindle?))).

STOP!!!

I had to leave the store and take a breath. There is so much stuff that promises creativity and productivity. The thing is, I could write the next great novel with a piece of lead and a scrap of paper. I don't need any of these things. I'm hiding in the store where there is all this potential because potential seems less scary than reality.

Have you ever sat down with a new iPad with the latest Apple Pencil and opened Procreate? It's wild: you're just looking at a white screen. There's nothing there. It's just empty.

You draw and write but soon realize that you have less to say on a $1000 device than you did when you were a kid scribbling on loose printer paper. You quickly return to the store to purchase a better case and a wireless charger.

The new iPad effect is a very cold reminder that no matter what gizmo you buy, you are still you. An iPad Mini makes a very poor existential shield.

That said…

There are tools that allow you to make new forms of art or get organized. How can you distinguish a useful tool from a toy that distracts from the uncomfortable feelings that come with creating art? This is an amazing question!

I'm coming to realize the tools are not inherently helpful or distracting. They are extensions of ourselves, so check in with yourself. I'm realizing this is a mindfulness journal entry.

Excerpt

Merlin Mann wrote about this years ago, on taking ownership of your creative life:

"Sigh. I wish I could finally start writing My Novel… Oooooh, if only I had a slightly nicer pen… and Zeus loved me more…"

"Run straight into your shitstorm, my friends. Reject the impulse to think about work, rather than finishing it. And open your heart to the remote possibility that any mythology of personal failure that involves messiahs periodically arriving to make everything "easy" for you might not really be helping your work or your mental health or your long-standing addiction to using tools solely to ship new excuses."

"Learn your real math, and any slide rule will suffice. Try, make, and do until you quit noticing the tools, and if you still think you need new tools, go try, make, and do more."

"If you can pull off this deceptively simple and millennia-old pattern, you'll eventually find that any partial truth that's supported your treasured excuses for not working will be replaced by a no-faith-required knowledge that you're really, actually, finally getting better at something you care about."

"Which is just sublimely un-distracting."

Concluding

It is scary being creative. Being vulnerable, delving into emotions and trying skills that you initially suck at. Honestly it's scary just being a person, so don't blame yourself for reaching for a soother. Just try not to let the iPad become more important than the art that is created on it.



Still from “I hate my toys I want new toys” by Jeremy Nir
Watch: “I hate my toys I want new toys” at instagram.com/p/CIHLcHKAeCQ

there’s always one more dish

You finish washing the dishes and wipe the counter. That’s when you inevitably find a dirty spatula. So you have to get your hands wet again or leave it at 99%.

Soooo, this is true for animation. It’s not finished until it’s finished.

The best thing to do is get those hands wet and push the 99% up as close to 100% as possible. There will be something at the end: a tiny shadow that bugs you. But sometimes you gotta live with that, otherwise you’ll be exhaustedly fixing shadows instead of having a blast starting your next big project.

What to do about perfection

Maybe I need to tell myself that flaws are good. They show personality and perfection is impossible.

Really it’s just about sanity. After a while you gotta leave things and move on.

With this Joe Pera animation my work is done! But it isn’t… I have to do like 7 things. So be it. After this I am hopefully done.

The Inner Game

Art is a relationship with yourself

Being dedicated to a project and seeking excellence is great but there is more.

There is a deeper form of artistic creation where the piece is part of me. It mirrors my internal world, revealing my flaws and beautiful traits.

In this state, creation becomes a relationship.

For example, when I made that sewer animation I was exploring a secret internal part of myself that even I didn't know about. Where death, slime and monsters are a soothing part of the soundscape.

In this world, rats jump on skulls to get cheese but I am sitting on the edge of the sewer river, part of the sludge, playing banjo.

Now comes the hard part. I wanted to make light refractions on the ceiling. That ended up being very challenging. I had to learn some difficult stuff. It took two weeks to finish this stupid detail but it worked. I did it.

Why? Why the hell did it matter?

Because this sewer was not just some animation but a part of me! To skip this detail would be to dishonour myself.

So I did it and made a cute thingy. It didn't win me an award or earn me any money, but when I die I can show God that and say, see? I can make stuff too.

Also it helped me grow as a person and built my confidence or whatever.

I'm being silly and sarcastic here because it's too genuine and it scares me to say it for real. But here goes:

I don’t care about animation or Dungeons and Dragons or piano. I am using these things as a shovel to dig my way towards emotional catharsis.

Different forms of art

Animation lets me share my inner visions. I’ve always had intense dreams and animation lets me share that frustratingly secret internal world. This is cathartic to me as it lets me open myself up and have others see what I see.

D&D is similar but more collaborative! I’m not just sharing MY world but welcoming friends in. They look around, rearrange the furniture and start expressing themselves. It’s beautiful to see each other through this creativity and again, cathartic!

Music is funny. Years of practice and I still kinda suck, which means I don’t have so much control. When I strum or play piano, I don’t really know what will happen and it taps an unconscious part of my psyche, which is again, cathartic.

What if my art sucks?

Sometimes it does. What does that mean for my relationship with myself?

It’s worth exploring why some of my art sucks. In my case it’s because I don’t like it. It doesn’t mean anything to me. Or worse, it means something bad.

It reflects my flaws. I am distant and not present and my drawing becomes pointless doodles. I am desperate for approval and my art becomes grovelling and pathetic. I am unskilled and my banjo becomes annoying twanging. I am mean and my art becomes cruel punching down.

So what does it mean if my art sucks? It means I am flawed!

That’s okay. I am flawed.

The individual piece of work is not my art project. My project is this whole life. Everything I do evolves, I just have to pour myself into it.

making art to not go in the void

Sometimes my brain is a toilet hole that goes towards swirling a black hole of death and anxiety.

Making and enjoying art helps. Listening to music, audiobooks, podcasts while I draw, write or play piano. Part of me makes art to feel seen and to make a career but the deeper purpose is to heal and soothe my troubled mind. And maybe to help other people find some humour and meaning too.

It’s just good to acknowledge that this art I do helps.

Creating and connecting with people is the opposite of death, you see? It’s life.

don’t run away, run towards

Running away from my fears only makes them remain in my life.

Like making animations just so I don’t get caught in a boring job. That mindset puts a ton of pressure on me and injects fear into every decision I make. It makes it harder to take risks because if I fail, I might go broke and end up working in a boring office job again or sweating as a barista again.

Instead of running away from the fear of poverty and a terrible job, STOP.

Stand still. Right now be here. It’s scary to stop but there is nothing here to fear. Take a breath.

If you’ve got the energy to run, run towards something.

Run towards an idea that is exciting. Run towards a friend you love. Run to it and arrive at it and explore it. Stop and smell the roses there. Enjoy it.

Pain is inevitable, I think fear is too. But those feelings can be embraced as part of the practice of being alive.

Applying this to animation

I love animation. Especially 3D environments that evoke feelings. I love to get lost in them and I love to create them. I feel safe and excited in those worlds. It feels like in real life I have trouble connecting with reality but in an imaginary space I feel more immersed. Not sure what that is about.

In this headspace there is no need for my animation to be groundbreaking or hilarious. It can just be a peaceful cabin in the snow or a raft floating through lava. It feels fun.

That’s because it’s coming from love, not fear.

this is hard

I just want to acknowledge that this is hard. Doing art and trying to make a career. It's hard. It's scary.

Trying to be creative while facing money uncertainty. Trying to build a future while making space for art.

Hell, just being creative is hard. Be vulnerable and focused. Make space for real feelings and provide escapism.

It's hard. I do love the art side. I have a very deep feeling of fear and despair. It's helpful to express emotions in art and writing. It's helpful to meditate and be here.

I will someday find my place. For now I am happy and in love. Making a career in art while growing as an artist and a man is hard. Making room for other voices in my life while taking the stage.

I suspect I should be in a social position. I'm not really an animator. I'm a comic and writer. I'm an artist and thinker. I hope the art I make leads me to a career because I don't want to buy into an office job.

I had some very painful experiences in offices. I felt trapped. I felt unseen and forced to put my messy emotions away. But no, I am an emotional person. I hope I can find a place to thrive.

For now I'll just keep giving myself space to create and emote. When the money runs low I'll find work.

let go of “productivity”

Letting go of the idea that I must be constantly producing something.

It was suffocating me.

Instead, having a joy for the process of creating and learning.

And discovering the greater “thing” that I want to create.

This new way of thinking is very peaceful and actually produces more and better work! Because the other way of thinking pours so much of my focus into proving myself that it doesn’t leave me space to just be.

let authenticity be a ramp, not a wall

I've started projects and put a lot of passion and work into them. Until one day, I realize "this project isn't authentic to me. It's not what I truly want to do." So I shut it down and walk away.

This inner radar I have that detects bullshit is good! It keeps me on the path of being an artist. But it's also destructive at times.

Handsome & Popular (my project where I sold pins and merch) was pretty successful. I made all kinds of cool pieces and actually sold a bunch. Slowly I lost my passion for it, realizing that my pins were low-quality and were probably unethically made in factories in China. I felt bored with the merch I had to sell. I lost interest and felt disconnected from the project.

My authenticity became a wall and I got the ick. I stopped making stuff on Handsome & Popular and moved toward animation.

I was making an income and it felt like a waste to throw that website and brand away. But I didn't feel the passion. Here's a question: should I have kept the name H&P?

The fact is, I outgrew the project. I made the tough decision to close that merch website down and begin my new project as an artist.

There are times that my authenticity radar is a wall, but that's only when I let it stop me from using my voice. If my radar warns me about doing a specific project, I can listen to it.

Authenticity is a ramp. A guide. Let it lead me toward creative expression and make my voice more clear and true.

failure is part of the recipe

Spent about 10 hours making these 3D dungeon animations. I just got lost and stopped working on them, it felt bad. I felt like I failed. Or like I have this loose thread that I ought to get back to.

This harsh judgement is so… harsh!

“Failure” is part of the recipe. I’m a creative person and that doesn’t mean everything I do will pan out. Sooooo relax and make stuff, expect some of it to be experimentation that doesn’t lead to a finished piece.

If everything I do creatively must lead to a finished piece, I’ll waste a lot of time finishing experiments.

Let go. Just make.

“The seed of your next art work lies embedded in the imperfections of your current piece. Such imperfections (or mistakes, if you’re feeling particularly depressed about them today) are your guides: valuable, reliable, objective, non-judgemental guides, to matters you need to reconsider or develop further.”

David Bayles and Ted Orland, Art and Fear

I admit there is a payoff

I have a desire to create art as quickly as possible, make it awesome and immediately get a ton of positive feedback.

I'm realizing this is a problem.

Chasing that dopamine hit, I rush into creation with a desire to snag something good. Then, seeking external validation, I lose touch with my inner voice. I become fixated on the final product and what it means about me.

These addictive behaviours come from a place of fear that I will fail and shame that I suck.

The truth is, I want to express myself through my creative work and be nourished by that. I've been eating sugar cubes and now I want some real food. Something that takes study and planning. It comes from within and it takes time to express. It can be silly and fun, but I want to create work that is more honest and layered.

This may be music, puzzles or animations. Regardless, I want it to be me. So I'm embracing the creation process and slowing down. Maybe risking more vulnerability in my work. Maybe maybe maybe trying to stop this.

"Your work is a reflection of who you are. When you internalize this, you'll stop looking for external validation."

"Your need for acceptance can make you invisible in this world. Don't let anything stand in the way of the light that shines through this form. Risk being seen in all of your glory."

Jim Carrey

ask yourself, “what if it were easy?”

I tend to make certain things really hard in my mind. I tell myself “I’m not good with money” and “I’m not good enough at anything to make a career” and “I’m confused about my career” and these become true. These are my limiting beliefs.

The thing is, what feels impossible for you is easy for other people, and what other people find difficult is easy for you. Some people are terrified of socializing or struggle to throw stuff away. I don’t have those beliefs about myself.

How can I let go of my limiting beliefs?

1. What if it were easy?

What if it were easy to manage money? The answer becomes obvious: I’d be comfortable looking at my bank info and making plans to save and earn more money. Thinking about money would be a source of calm as I take inventory, set goals and look for opportunities.

I like this method because it’s so simple.

I saw it today flipping through a book called “You Can’t Screw This Up” which is about changing your diet without the impossible goals and constant shame. The idea came from Tim Ferriss who is all about this kinda stuff. I should probably check him out.

Method 2. Redefine your relationship

I went to a money management class where the teacher asked us to define our relationship with money as if it were a dating relationship. Soon after I went to a class about making schedules that had the same exercise. Many people related their relationships with time and money to toxic relationships: avoidant, distant, abusive and nagging.

Both of the people teaching these courses encouraged us to redefine the relationship. Consider how to be more loving and creative and positive: basically how to stop feeding this negative cycle.

“You are all animators,” said the teacher, “that means you are probably patient, creative and look at references. So bring that energy into your relationship with money. Define the relationship on your own terms. Not your parents or your boss or your partner! Come up with a relationship that works for you.”

Method 3. Flip the words around and see if that’s true

This exercise is called The Work, from Byron Katie’s book Loving What Is.

It asks you to reverse the statement and question if it’s true. The human brain gets very stuck on certain ideas. By slowly chewing on it in different ways we are able to loosen our thoughts and see different perspectives.

“I am confused about my career” is a limiting belief I’ve been struggling with.

Is it true?

Sorta, yeah. I feel like I want to be happy as a creator but I don’t know if there is money in this path. I don’t know if I’m okay settling into another path like barista or even video editor for some big company. I don’t want to let go of this dream.

Can you absolutely know it’s true?

Well, I think it’s not quite true. I’m not confused about my career, I’m quite clear on what I want to do. I’m just not confident I can earn a living doing it. The confusion comes from a mess of thoughts about what value matters most to me.

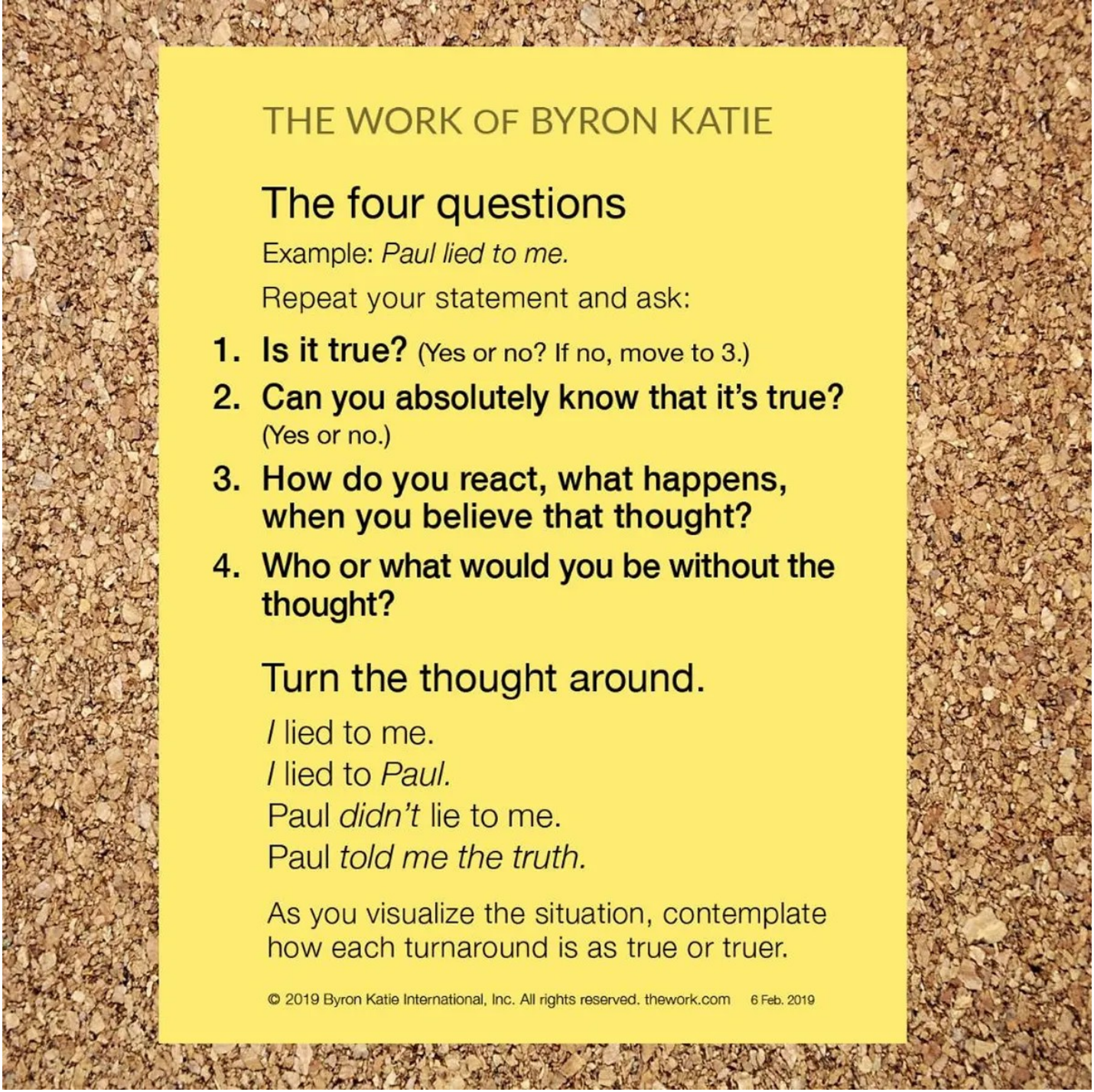
How does it feel to let go of this thought?

Extremely relieving. I feel a strength rising as I let go of the feeling like I'm a failure or the world is unfair. I feel positivity that even if it's not earning me enough money yet, this path feels right. Animation, music, comedy and writing are not four confused paths, it is one clear path that is finding its form.

Who or what would you be without the thought?

Without the confusion I would be clear. I would be effective with my time and excited to launch projects out into the world. I'd let go of small distractions and have less bad days. I'd be clear on who I am and what I have to do.

Damn this helps.



The Work of Byron Katie (thework.com)

be ok being bad at stuff

Being ok being bad at stuff allows you to try, and not care about the immediate work being good. Funny enough, that amateur work can be great.

pour emotion into your art

I tend to hold back and focus on technical skills until some random day I get tipsy and pour my heart out.

Just do that! Let loose. Open yourself up and open your heart up because life is too short and this is all that we have and you're dying. Well, not yet.

I want to not just learn and work. I want to make stuff and put it out. It's been too long!

Yes there will be haters. That's just how it is. There are a lot of people who love it or don't care much either way.

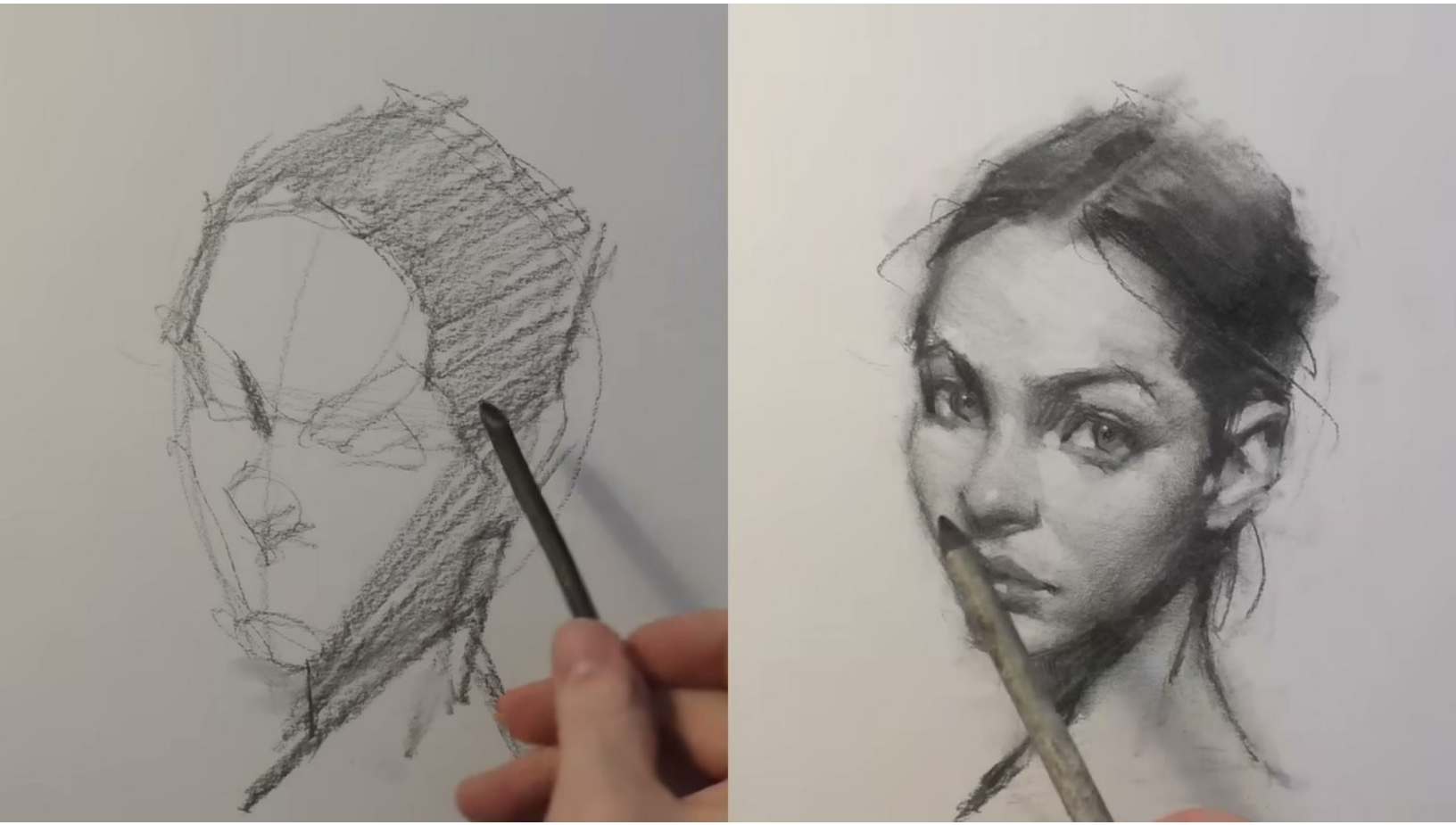
How do I deal with someone who sees me being creative as a controlling annoying energy? Do I listen? Try to be a better listener and more collaborative. Ya! But also just giverrr.

a healthy dissatisfaction

Balancing the love for my work with the criticism I have for it is important.

This video on improving as a portrait artist encourages me to have a healthy dissatisfaction with my work to this point. I feel proud of the moments of brilliance in my art to date and an equal measure of frustration at the limits I am bumping up against.

Embrace that.



Still from “How to Get Better at Drawing Portraits” by Jeff Haines
Watch: youtube.com/watch?v=NoYl6sFd0Qc

work backwards from perfection

This is a thought I'm still chewing on. What if instead of creating art and seeing where it goes, I find perfection first and just make that?

Using AI has influenced this way of thinking. The end product seems more important than the journey of making it.

Why spend countless hours on a portfolio piece when AI can generate beautiful art in seconds?

Of course, this is a toxic mindset. Creating art is a deeply personal and emotionally fulfilling journey into myself and the world, something AI prompts can't replicate. But honestly, my portfolio would look a lot more professional if I started by referencing other artists and AI art, then "worked backwards" to achieve similar styles.

This is the artist's struggle for balance, especially when trying to make a living. I feel pressure to meet industry standards while holding onto artistic purity. It's impossible because neither side truly feels like artistic integrity.

I want to make things that are beautiful and beyond my ability and I wanna make things that are deeply personal and me.

So just do both. Don’t worry about impressing an imaginary audience of artists or corporate execs. Right now, it’s all about growth, both technically and personally. Don’t judge each piece individually, enjoy the process.

Cheat when you want, obsess over details for hours when you want. Just keep creating and putting your work out there.

delete your art

You take a pencil and draw a person, looks pretty good! Now you have two options:

Being precious means tweaking details, making everything polished and perfect.

Delete your art is the opposite: it means killing your darlings to see what else you can make. Maybe you cut the drawing in half and redraw both sides differently. Maybe you look at it in a mirror to see the flaws. Maybe just throw it away and start fresh with a new drawing.

The phrase comes from Drawfee, and I think it's very wise. Just a bitter pill to swallow. Because HOW do you delete something that you love?

1. Accept that being precious doesn't always improve the piece.
2. Let go of any one piece of art and focus on your path as an artist. The value is not the art you create but the lessons you learn.
3. Be brave! Don't fixate!

"Don't be precious with your art!"

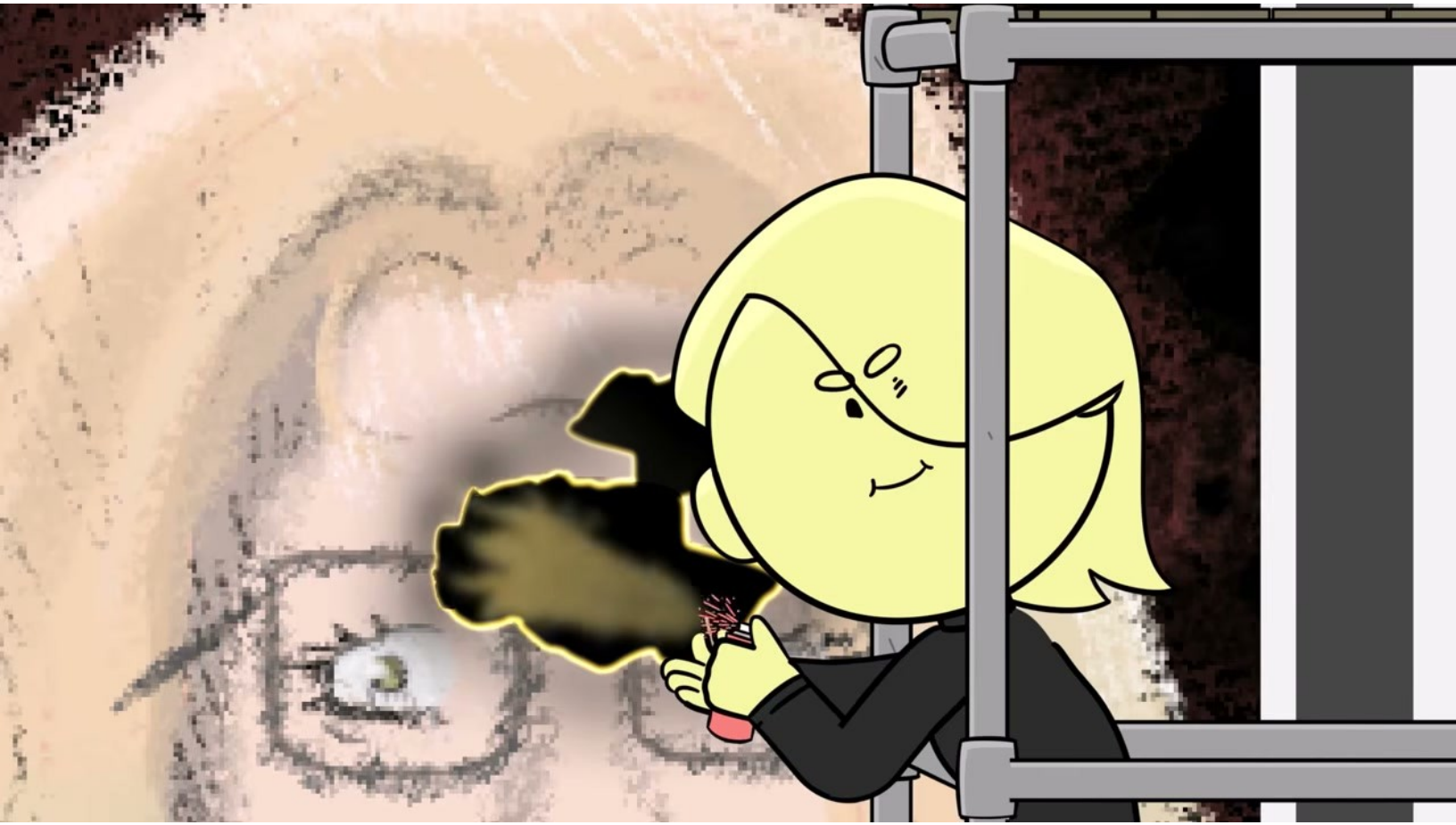
"You don't get to choose which art pushes you forward, you just gotta keep drawing. Have fun with it."

"Sometimes refining a piece kills the personality."

Here are two videos where this is practiced:

Drawing Movie Posters in Different Genres: youtube.com/watch?v=egOxw53wmSY

4 Artists Design Characters from the Same Description: youtube.com/watch?v=WTr1lObW5Z8



Still from “Julia Burns Her Art” by DeepBlueInk
Watch: youtube.com/watch?v=hX6GhxyvuSI



Still from “Throwing all of this good food into the trash can” by Jeremy Nir
Watch: instagram.com/p/CtdMmrEt1-z

UNPLUG

The most difficult advice by far. Unplug. Focus on the animation.



Still from “UNPLUG!” by Eduardo Quintana
Watch: youtube.com/watch?v=KEdcOR179_Q

Art in the World

attention matters

Now that artificial intelligence can generate content instantly and in infinite quantities, human attention is becoming the rare commodity.

The viewer feels the art, connects with it and inhabits it.

An AI can mash up all the swamp monsters ever seen, make weird mistakes and design decisions and spit something out that is really impressive, and it only takes a few seconds. Which monster do you like best?

A computer can make trillions of monsters and never get tired. What it can't do is feel scared and disgusted, yet fall in love with one of these bog monsters.

Right now there is a snowflake landing on a pebble beside a river. There are sunsets and sunrises happening simultaneously on trillions of planets right now. Are these moments beautiful? I think beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Someone must come along and appreciate a thing to make it beautiful or scary or gross.

So why make? ChatGPT writes faster and better than me, so why bother writing this journal?

The expression. I'm writing this at 5 am lying in bed, squinting at a screen and feeling the strain in my wrist. I write because I am learning and this helps me document that path. I write because I'm documenting my path and that path is unique! I have a voice that is developing. It doesn't matter if I have infinite clones or if nobody reads it. I am experiencing writing this and you are experiencing reading it.

AI art is impressive, but its value truly comes from being loved by a viewer. It's the emotional connection and response from humans that make art meaningful.

Even if robots someday learn to feel, this truth will still hold. Art is a feeling, not a commodity.



Still from “I hereby donate this NFT to the CFL” by Jeremy Nir
Watch: “I hereby donate this NFT to the CFL” at instagram.com/p/CUgQpYJA-AG

consider your art's context

Being away from art school, I forget that my work exists in a context of art movements. Hell, I forget that I am an artist!

Every piece of art you make can be examined through the lens of a movement of some place and time. Another artist pioneered that movement and has followers in tow
who experimented.

Why study the context of your art? It could limit your work! Sure, but it can also give you perspective and inspiration. It can help you connect with contemporaries and community. It can make me feel less like a lone explorer.

In a broad sense, thinking about artists reminds me I'm part of a big world of people making stuff. It makes me feel like the work I've been doing is toward something.

Being a commercial animator who isn't getting paid much feels like flopping. Being a new media artist who is exploring feels like succeeding.

Funny, labeling myself an artist again also comes with baggage. Artists are arrogant lazy self promoters! Leeches! Yaya, never mind that. Self love.

OK, let's see some relevant art movements:

Finish Fetish: polished but surreal objects and images

Funk art: silly, highly personal abstractions

Hairy Who: busted little drawings

rethink how you make an animation reel

I am finally getting connected with the animation community, thank God. I met with artist gbpooky, who is making effects for a kids show. I learned the animation industry is a lot more like a restaurant or factory, where they really need to hire people to do the job.

Then I attended a reel viewing. 13 animators submitted their reels and got feedback from three professionals.

Here are highlights:

- Show your love for animation! That's a breath of fresh air.
- Squint at it: if you used contrast (in timing and ideas) it will still work.
- Start your reel with your best work! Polish it.
- A reel can be very short and sweet.
- Show life and character!
- Highlight dynamic timing and rhythm in your animation.
- Don't include music in your reel unless it's an integral part of the animation, but do use sound effects to enhance the experience.
- Keep your reel concise and to the point.
- Your reel reveals your personality, skills, and loves.
- Highlight your skill: e.g. emotional connection, comedy, acting, physicality, drawing.
- Ensure every frame demonstrates intention and execution.
- Convey believable physics and expressions.

Focus on hitting two or three emotional beats.

Take risks and make it stand out with bold animation.

The person doing the hiring is so busy, you have seconds to impress them.

All of this advice is great, but it's a bit overwhelming! The thing about a great reel is it looks easy.

With all this in mind, I see my current reel is polished but doesn't show a love for animation. It's unfocused. It has solid design, but an animation reel should have more animation!



From the 2021 animation reel by Jeremy Nir
Watch: the 2021 reel at youtube.com/watch?v=D9jCktBpiXQ

people aren’t patient

People aren’t patient. I used to make long videos that slowly reach a crescendo. This still works at festivals, where the audience is trapped, but not on TikTok or portfolios. You have to put the action right up front.

Right now I’m upgrading this portfolio, and that means taking all my YouTube videos and turning them into short, digestible looping gifs.

I used to resent this! Sometimes I still do. Can’t you just WAIT 5 SECONDS for the video to start??? But have some empathy for the TikTok user. There is so much crap on there, and you can quickly tell if something is good or not. What is so precious about delaying the good part? Why do I want my viewers to wait 5 minutes?

Just get to it, and don’t waste their time.

a portfolio is for “S-Tier” work

When you look at an animator’s portfolio, you can very quickly tell if they’re good, great or bleh. So it’s important to put your A++++++ work up front! This means killing some darlings.

Today I’ve been slashing away at my portfolio and turning videos into gifs for an easier watching experience. Doing this focuses me: my new work must be top notch, planned and designed to look amazing.

Oh, I’ll still be making longer and more experimental work, but the stuff on the portfolio has got to cut through the noise and say “I’m a star!”



Still from “Paige Machine” by PACKS, official visualizer by Jeremy Nir
Watch: “Paige Machine” at youtube.com/watch?v=f55OZjMQHVk

networking takes patience

I spent $320 on a ticket to TAAFI and it was good, but also... I felt alienated sometimes.

People would read me as not helpful toward their goals and I'd feel like a pest. Sometimes I met a friend or a peer or a mentor. That was kinda amazing.

I took notes. I learned there are many wild paths in the industry, from pitching to pipeline to journalism, advertising and founding a studio.

So many people! I also learned the industry is currently crashing as animation companies lose work and turn to kids content for stability. They say the industry will return, but it may be back to its old bullshit, with underpaid studios undercutting each other for opportunities.

Here are my notes from the conference:

Mike Valiquette: A booster, Cartoon North, Roblox. "Keep maturing your model. Grants and social media are not dependent on broadcasters."

Denver Jackson: "Shorts get you grants." "Say yes to every meeting."

Jam Filled, House of Cool: "Make cool shit." "Become lean and make cool shit." "It's great to specialize, but versatility."

Rick: "It's a bloodbath. But strikes are ending and people are optimistic. My advice is it's going to be relatively short lived." "There are funds for web series." "Don't focus on funding, focus on getting things done."

Tabitha Fisher: Read the grant info of other films. Companies give some support, like Toon Boom. "Why am I the only person in the world who can pull this off?"

Tina Nawrocki: “People are visual.” Get letters of support from people like professors and foreign media groups. For crowdfunding, do not give pins for people who give $5.
Stay digital.

Get your film into film festivals! Get used to rejection. A producer helps figure things out: talk to a producer.

Why do this? Why make your own film? To create your own opportunities. Tell your own story. Invest in yourself. Test what you can do.

To get beyond social media, into festivals: start with local events. TAIS, the Toronto Animated Image Society. Fantasia in Montreal. Local animation festivals.

Network, go to events, ask questions, volunteer and follow the breadcrumbs.

There’s an awkward, difficult push moment when you leap into the industry. Fake it, keep pushing, lean on colleagues.

Do late nights and free work to build a portfolio. You’ll get turned down. Don’t feel bad. You’re just starting.

Perfectionism

We believe perfection will save us, but it’s actually keeping us from being seen and taking flight. We have unhealthy expectations. Afraid to fail. Not good enough.

The clay study: one group was graded on how many pots they made, the other group was graded on the quality. The best quality came from the quantity.

Stop motion: work with nature and embrace imperfections. In the age of AI and CG, people want to see the handmade stuff. Time lapses.

Yes, and. Get it done and accept what you have. Go into the unknown. Relinquish control. Let go, get it done and move on.

General lessons

Make a pitch deck, storyboards, make a script!

Network and enter festivals.

Don’t go with your first design.

Take feedback.

link up with a creator

Link up with a creator, and their launch.

do it for/with others

I’ve started hosting events for animators: life drawing, silly meetups, chances to actually hang out in person. And I realized: I want to be part of a community.

Animators spend so much time alone, grinding. I do.

I want to make spaces where we can draw together, talk shop, laugh, and feel human again.

Costumed models. Sketch jams. Weird prompts. Just showing up with paper and having fun.

I want to lead with light. Share what I know. Help others feel proud of their work and excited to grow.

I want to build something generous, open, alive.

Do it for others.

And yeah, for me too. Because this is something I needed all my life, and I see a community here who needs it!

To have their work seen and acknowledged. Gentle guidance, and sharing work outside of a corporate or social media environment.



Animators IRL workshop poster by Jeremy Nir



Animators IRL, drawing together at TAIS

make bigger pictures!

Just went to TAIS Film Fest (Toronto Animated Image Society). It was so GREAT. And inspiring, and omg affordable.

The main things I learned are:

- I found my people as an indie filmmaker and experimental animator!
- Making a film for screen involves embracing a bigger canvas. STORY and SOUND.

So this Monday at 7 there's an artist's talk. I want to get involved with TAIS! I met such cool people and saw such cool films.

- Sound design is crucial: focus on creating a compelling audio experience.
- Embrace messiness with real materials: don't shy away from using tangible, real-world materials for a unique and authentic touch.
- Plan for big screens: consider the impact of your animation on a large screen, ensuring your visuals translate effectively to a broader audience.
- Tracing and scanning techniques: explore the creative possibilities of tracing and scanning in your animation process.
- Mixed media exploration: experiment with combining various mediums for a dynamic and engaging animated film.
- Utilize real vocals: incorporate authentic vocal elements into your animation to enhance its realism.
- Explore perspective shifts: play with perspective shifts to add depth and interest to your storytelling.

Craft a story: tell a narrative, balancing randomness with authenticity, and consider incorporating unconventional elements like weird doors.

Stop motion impact: explore the cool potential of stop-motion techniques in your animated film.

Take your films seriously: approach your projects with a serious mindset, recognizing their potential to reach theater stages.

Remember the power of water and glass sound effects. Utilize super close-ups. Storyboard weird ideas, but feel free to go off script. Infuse humor through funny, contrasting characters and ridiculous cause-and-effect scenarios.

Explore the advice from artists. Don’t forget the importance of writing in animation.

Lastly, dare to be expressive. Don’t just imitate life, but dance with your animations, and aim to create something big and impactful.

People I met:

A stop motion guy who loves story beats, @wallymation.

An indie artist animator who feels like I do, shunny, @seayawn.

Constant, an organizer of the community, @yawnstant.

An organizer and design focused animator, @gustavo_c.



Still from “Gardenia” by Jeremy Nir
Watch: “Gardenia” at youtube.com/watch?v=DtVFAO1PQ3Q