

DESIGNS WITH IMPACT!



When I originally set out to interview Daniel Mowry, digital artist and founder of Impact Media I thought it might be a little like getting in to see your congressman. He certainly makes himself available via the Internet (a real name, real address and even live web cams), but a quality interview would require some time and the right approach.

I was thrilled when he responded to my request for an interview with as much enthusiasm as I had.

My original expectation was that this would be the usual "techie" discussion about RAM, hard drives, monitors, and new gadgets. Instead, I found Daniel to be a thoughtful and insightful artist at heart. He is extremely articulate, intelligent and very passionate about art. He certainly knows his way around a computer but he doesn't let that get in the way of his artistic vision. What's more is that in discussing his favorite artists he spent as much time talking about them as he might himself. Not afraid to appreciate people who might be considered his competition (though Dan would be the first to put them on a pedestal) we also gain a glimpse into who he feels are artist's artists.

I'm extremely happy to present my complete interview with the artist – Daniel Mowry.

What is Impact Media? Where is it based? Who is the creator of that impressive website (www.impax-media.com)?

Impact Media Designs is the blanket LLC I use for all my art, music, and other business projects. I'm based in Des Moines, Iowa. For the most part I'm responsible for the entire web presence except a few nice little trinkets of code provided by a few other talented individuals. I'm glad you

like the website too! I've worked very hard on that. It's a labor of love but there were days when I wondered if it would be the end of me. I'm pleased it's come to the point where I could leave it alone (other than updates) and be happy with it.

You offer many free images in the form of wallpaper and soon screensavers. However, you must try to make money somehow. I don't see any banner ads on your site nor do I see any real link exchanges. How do you do it?

I like to give a lot of value when people visit the website. So, offering free wallpaper is always a fun thing. I also like the immediate feedback I get. I think that digital art and computer wallpaper is coming into its own as far as a valid and accepted art form.

I don't do ads and have no immediate plans to do so. I don't like banner advertising because it takes away too much from the experience of a website. I also don't appreciate the fact that you can't really control the content and you never know what a visitor is going to see in a banner on your website. Unless that changes I won't do ads. Even then it would have to be in moderation.

There are a few links that I exchange but mostly those are listed for professional courtesy because I honestly felt it was important to acknowledge a person or a company.

The art mostly generates its revenue from my online store. I have framed prints, posters, and a handful of other items that you can buy that have extremely high resolution prints of my images. I'm particularly proud of the framed prints which feature archival quality ink and paper. They are matted and look great!

Where would we go to see these things?

Either directly to my website (www.impax-media.com) which has links to the regular products as well as the custom and limited edition pieces. The company that handles my merchandise and all the fulfillment is Café Press, a San Leandro based company. The quality is great and there is no minimum order. Plus, the pieces are almost always in stock and ready to go within a day or two of your order, and you can't go wrong with a thirty-day money back guarantee either! Thanks for letting me plug that [laughing]!

I might mention that you can make arrangements with me directly for hand-signed, limited editions and numbered prints. I'll even personalize at no extra cost because I enjoy that so much! Just contact me in any of the ways I list on the website to make the arrangements.

Interesting! Anything special on the horizon for products?

I'm glad you asked! Shortly I will have a CD-ROM available featuring just about all the images that you've seen on my website as well as on the products themselves. I'll have all new ones in too, just for the CD. The CD is a professionally produced one on silver media and the packaging is high-gloss stock and really great looking. You'll be able to get it in either the jewel case with a four page insert booklet or else a slightly cheaper version with just the CD and a paper sleeve. I've even struck a deal with Tropical

Wares to include their WallMaster program. It lets you rotate all your wallpaper images and has a lot of neat features.

I'm very excited about this one because it's a perfect chance for people to enjoy a large selection of my images for about \$25 or so.

Who is doing the packaging design for it?

I did all the design for the CD itself and the entire packaging. It would seem silly to have a CD of my artwork with someone else's art on the packaging, wouldn't it? I had fun putting that together. [Laughing] Well, enough about plugging the products!

Okay then. Let me ask you where you learned to make these images I see on your website, the online store, and these products?

For the most part I'm self-taught. I never really took too many art classes per se' in high school or college. Not to sound smug but the classes were never very challenging. I was never content with spending three weeks on two point perspective because I already understood it. Then, so many art classes transformed into craft-oriented courses. I don't enjoy crafts as much as I do the graphic arts.

However, in college I took several design, photography, and visual marketing courses. Those had a lot to do with my concepts of perception, composition, structure, visual psychology, and even the business of creativity. I still find value in what I learned then and periodically keep in touch with those professors.

Beyond some small level of education I've always just learned on my own by experimenting.

When did you start making art?

I think my parents would tell you that they don't remember a time when I wasn't doing something artistic. That may be a parental bias coupled with a little hindsight (considering what I do now) or maybe it's always been the case.

I recall being in, I believe, grade school and recreating the cover art for Asia's (British pop supergroup) "Asia" album... the one with the dragon rising from the ocean holding a sphere. I'm a big fan of the music but also a huge fan of the artist - Roger Dean. My version, however, was created using a canvas-cloth that I painted hot wax on and then submerged the whole thing in various colors of fabric dye. I don't recall the name of the technique, but the wax protects the subsequent layers from absorbing the dye. It makes you really think ahead and somewhat have to work "in reverse" and concentrate on negative space. I still have that piece framed on my wall. I'm surprised it turned out so well!

Before art and Impact Media what was there?

Well, Impact Media is actually not an entirely new entity. Its progenitors were based in marketing and advertising ventures I created in the early 1990's coupled with an early graphic design company I founded called Image Studios. So, in answer to the question about what came before Impact Media there was always a hint of it along the way.

However, outside of that realm I was working (and still do to a lesser extent) in soundtrack composition. I've scored the music for some film, television, radio and quite a lot of my own album projects. As a matter of fact, I was very nearly a full-time composer trying to make his way in the world before the idea of doing my art full time really took off.

I've had a variety of unique jobs but very few that I ever thought could be careers. Going back I'd been a manager for a major movie theater company in Oregon. That was an immensely interesting job because we had seventeen separate "houses" within the theater which meant seventeen individual screens, giant theaters with stadium seating, a state-of-the-art projection booth that was enormous, and three concession stands, six box offices, and so on. I learned a lot about so many things working there. But, it gave me a chance to be exposed to the film industry in ways I never expected. I also got to be involved in a lot of promotions so my business, marketing, and artistic muscles could all get some use at the same time.

Before that I was a manager for the pro keyboard department in a music store. It was fantastic to be surrounded by the latest and greatest musical equipment and get paid to talk about it and play. It was also a thrill to be able to regularly play on the some of the finest concert grand pianos money could buy and be exposed to so many various musicians. I played a lot of gigs because of the connections we had through that business. It was like being a kid in a candy store.

The list gets more unusual before that... I spent several years as a city firefighter and EMS worker, lots of retail sales, hardware stores, there was even a major Japanese Anime' company in there somewhere, and a couple of hardworking custodial jobs. I was even a meat-cutter at a grocery store's meat department. Good times.

Tell us a little about your life outside of the business of Impact Media and art.

Mostly I spend time with my family. The whole purpose of creating a working situation where I was self-employed and worked from home was so that at least one of us could be with our child at all times. Our daughter is only eighteen months old so there's lots of cartoons, reading, playing music, toys, and games. We try to go to the amusement park and zoo as often as possible. Family comes first and I wouldn't have it any other way.

For me, personally, I enjoy going to the gym and working out or running, swimming and recently I've gotten into this thirty-foot climbing wall at the facility! It's really a great diversion from staring at the computer screen.

My wife and I just try to spend as much time together and with our daughter as we can. My wife works a "normal" day job so our time in the evenings is valuable. There's a lot to do in Des Moines and we look forward to trips to the botanical center, science center, all the parks and many lakes here in the city.

As I have done, people flip through your images with jaws hanging low, in wonder and in awe. How do you keep up with all the letters you must get. Does someone help you answer them all?

[Laughing] Well, thank you! I try to answer as many

Emails as I can, however there simply isn't enough time in the day to do all that I need. A lot of questions that come up are from aspiring young artists wanting to learn how to do what I do. I'm an ardent support of the arts, both visual and musical, and their education. So, I try to make myself available for those learning experiences, but that can be very time consuming. In my newsletter or online forum I try to always feature some kind of "how-to" article in the hopes of teaching more people that way, rather than through individual Emails.

Speaking of Emails I got one that I had a little trouble answering because I didn't want to open a can of worms. The person wrote me and accused me of illegally using NASA images and passing them off in my art! I didn't know where to begin considering the reality of NASA images, copyright, or the fact that my space images are so fanciful that there's no known place in the universe that looks like what I've done! I had to laugh a little wondering if this person really thought NASA somehow snapped a crystal clear photo on the surface of some watery planet with three giant moons rising above. I'd like to know how the agency pulled that one off! I did let him know that if he felt strongly about it he should contact NASA directly. Secretly I was hoping they might take a peek at my work and offer me job doing art for them!

However, If I were to get help in answering the Email I think that would take away from the response. I don't know who exactly would do it, it's not like I have an entourage of people roaming the halls of Impact Media.

“Nexus,” “Tanus Rising,” “Badlands,” “Lumina...” Can you remember that far back? Awesome stuff.

Thank you, and yes, I do remember those pieces fondly. I was so very nervous when I was creating them. They were my first attempts to create digitally what I had been doing with acrylic paints, brushes, and airbrush on canvas. I remember thinking to myself “I really hope people like these!”

Now, it's “Voices of a Distant Shore,” “Easter,” “Monoliths,” and “Voyage.” Besides the software changes that have evolved, why do you think your style has taken such a turn? Is it experience, or just a change in taste?

I think both. I've gotten more comfortable with the tools. Some of the software or even the use of a digital drawing tablet can have a pretty steep learning curve if you wish to take advantage of all the many features, which I do. Then, as you learn more you realize that additional software or new techniques will help produce better results. I think it's an endless loop too for acquiring new software (and the systems to run it). But, yes, the software improvements have opened up infinitely new possibilities. I'd also like to think I've matured in my art. New vantage points, new colors I wouldn't normally use, and even subjects that I may have previously considered too adventurous are now ones that I like to tackle.

For example?

I remember how much I used to try to create ambience within, for example, a tightly composed landscape

piece. The critical elements were softness, focus, DOF (depth of field) and even the presence of volumetric material to bring it all together. I recall a piece I did for a juried art exhibit under the “realism” category. It was a tight close-up of a dandelion with a dragonfly about to land. It was composed to appear at ground level looking straight on - at dandelion height. The focus was critical and even though I spent considerable time on the many background layers only to eventually blur them out (to bring emphasis on the plant and insect) it all represented hours of hand applied effects.

Now, even entry-level 3D graphics packages offer all of these features as part of the normal rendering process. All you do is check-mark a few boxes in the menu and render. I'm thrilled with the volumetric rendering and DOF features available these days. It can be, however, enough to incapacitate the entry-level computer system if you try to use these more sophisticated features, but they are there for anyone to try.

When Dan Mowry is staring at an empty screen, what gets the ball rolling? Where does the inspiration come from?

Oh, usually I stare at a blank piece of paper first [laughing]. Whether I begin with a sketch on paper or something on screen I think the ball really gets rolling because of an idea about an element. I may only have the idea that I want to create “something blue” or “something with a grand view of the sky with spectacular light shining through.” Well, that, of course, is vague. So, I usually think about the colors involved and what the main emphasis should be. Then go from there.

What might be an example?

“Voyage” is a good example of a piece where I wanted something with color and dramatic light but didn't put much more thought into it from there. So, I spent many hours hand “painting” the sky using a variety of brushes in Photoshop and countless layers. It was safe to assume that a good water plane would take care of the other 50% of the piece. So, the clouds, the colors, and eventually the light rays were the main emphasis. They came first. At that point it was time to put something else in it.

I always try to make the secondary and tertiary elements as carefully as the primary. I might know that the sky and water are destined to become background elements, but it's important to make them good enough to stand on their own. So, with “Voyage” I decided that a simple, silhouette of an ancient, Greek ship would sit nicely in there. I would let the sky speak for itself, and the water would bring the small vessel into the rest of the piece with its reflections. It's actually a simplistic composition.

Yet, it's is a stunning and beautiful piece. It's worthy of being displayed prominently in someone's private collection at home.

Thank you. I'm happy to say that it's done quite well. I think the framed print version of “Voyage” has certainly appreciated in value since I began offering it as a hand-signed and numbered edition, too. I've even begun to personalize them upon request because it does seem to be

so meaningful to a lot of people.

In your personal opinion, not your hit counters, what is your very best piece of work?

[Laughing] That's one of those "picking your favorite child" questions, isn't it? I think I gravitate more toward my recent work rather than the older material. That might have something to do with the fact that my earlier work was not as mature and I made compromises either because of time constraints, equipment, or simply the desire to create another piece for those who were eagerly waiting. I've learned to slow down and just let the next piece develop at its own pace now. I honestly can't choose just one because I work in several different genres. In the category of "Space" I still like to just stare at "Theos" or "Stellar Gas" because of the colors and depth. Lately I've been very fond of "Voices of a Distant Shore," "Easter," and "Voyage." The colors, again, are a big part of what I enjoy, but also the composition and point of view are important for something to have longevity. I can't speak for others but I think there are pieces that jump out at you instantly and that is great, but there are pieces that may not really strike you as interesting until you take the time to get into them. I try to put details into many of my pieces that won't be appreciated unless you spend the time reviewing it. I try to reward the viewer for taking that time. If a piece is still interesting weeks later then it's a good thing because anyone can create something that commands attention for three seconds and then fades away.

How long does it usually take you to create a piece?

I've turned out pieces that I was quite pleased with in just a few hours. Others have taken literally dozens upon dozens of hours and I still don't know if I should have continued on them. It's not uncommon for the conceptual stage to take just a few hours and be finished in a day. I do often run tests to determine if things will work right such as textures, light sources, scale, DOF, etc. The preliminary tests can sometimes take longer than the actual piece. But, what's that carpenter's motto?... "measure twice, cut once? ..." it's good advice.

What would be your "big" project... the art piece to top them all?

It would likely be something with excessive detail [laughing]. I would surely have to have little things in there that make you wonder if it's real or not, and then to cause the person viewing it to think "what would possess a person to do this?" when looking at the minute details. I love Ting and Bailey's work on "Big Rig" and "Blues Club." They put so much detail into something that you really wonder if it wouldn't have been easier to go out and photograph the subject rather than spend hundreds of hours recreating it digitally. But, that's the art of it.

So, I think a terrestrial landscape with an other-worldly sky would be a project that I could really get into. It would have to be large (several feet wide) and ultra-high resolution because I'd want every leaf, pebble, star, and texture to be visible – if you took the time to look. I'd choose a theme such as this because, for one, it's something I'm known for, but also it gives me a chance to com-

bine genres – that of realism in a landscape but also of fantasy and space in the sky. I love the duality but also the fact that they can go together if done properly.

I know you are considering abandoning Bryce for more high end software; understandable. Do you think the new Bryce (Bryce 5 by Corel) will stave off its relegation to the back of the shelf?

Well, I certainly don't want to give the impression that Bryce isn't a quality program and that there isn't a place for it in serious digital art, because it's great and there is a place for it. I liken it to a traditional artist's desire to have more colors on his palette. Although Ansel Adams certainly taught us what can be done with minimal colors I think it's important to have as many tools as you can to help create your vision. I have yet to find a program that does clouds and skies as well as Bryce. I've opted to use Brycean skies over my own hand-painting at times because they are that good and can usually be done a lot faster.

Right now Poser (for human and animal figures) is popular, as well it should be. World Builder creates phenomenal foliage and terrain but, in my opinion, it needs to be carefully handled when creating water elements. Terragen, Vue de' Esprit, Mojoworld, etc. are all so impressive too. Some do things a little differently than others and depending on how adept you are at the software end of things, you might like one's results better because of the ease of use. I know that Photoshop, for example, is more intuitive for me because of the way I think. Paint Shop Pro is nearly as powerful, but I have to put more thought into it because I'm not as accustomed to it, so I need to slow down and think. I don't always want to do that.

So, I wouldn't ever get rid of a program to entirely replace it with another, unless it was a newer, improved version or update. I'm already accustomed to using many tools and elements to create my art so one more software program isn't a big deal for me.

Who is your favorite artist – digital or otherwise?

I've always been a fan, as I mentioned, of Roger Dean. I also love H.R. Giger's work but also because there is definitely an emotion... a reaction that goes along with viewing his work! Lately I've been enjoying the art of Gina Ferguson online. She does incredible fantasy portraits. I'm surprised she hasn't been snatched-up by some major company and hidden away as their secret-weapon. She's truly 'that' gifted and it doesn't hurt that she quotes E.A. Poe either [laughing].

Janne Pitkänen is another artist that produces breathtaking images, usually of people or creatures. He is another one of those "hired gun" freelancers that should make a lot of other corporate artists very nervous. I never tire of viewing his work.

Andy Simmons... I can't even think straight when I view his stunning fantasy art. This might be a short description but only because you really have to just see it and be entranced... it can't be described.

Then there's "Rob" who goes by the moniker "mindsiphon" online. This lad is talented as all get out, but he also has a painfully funny sense of humor... just view his "Insane Santa" piece. It's fantastic.

There are so many that I certainly can't do justice

to all of them off the top of my head. I think many of us in the fantasy genre have been influenced by Boris Vallejo and Julie Bell and we come back to them as continuing sources of inspiration. I know I do even though I don't necessarily produce the same kind of art, but, to be inspired doesn't mean one has to emulate. Inspiration can stand on its own – in and of itself.

What does Daniel Mowry do when he's not reading emails, frequenting forums or creating art?

Lots of family oriented things as I mentioned earlier. I sometimes have to make myself (or my wife makes me) go out and play. It's hard to convince the left-brainers that right-brain activities are just as fun as playing in the sun [laughing]! I have a friend that would play paintball with me twenty four hours a day and another that would do the same with a couple of computer strategy games if given the chance.

It's always nice to go out and swim, run, lift weights, climb a rock wall, or just ride a bike.

But, the nature of being self-employed means I have to be driven. I also have to prioritize. So, I'm fortunate that I also enjoy developing my product line, the website, interacting with other artists, online usually, and otherwise growing the business-end of things.

For the techies, describe your system.

Ah, well, the big-daddy rendering system is a custom-built PIV, 2.66 gig, 40 gig HD, and only 512 megs of RAM, believe it or not. But, since I don't do animation-intensive work it's just fine. I have a Wacom Intuos 2 tablet that is a 12x18 and it's a lifesaver.

However, working from home does provide some degree of latitude in how I work. So, I find myself taking the lesser equipped but far more portable laptop outside on the deck or out next to the pool to work. I just hook up my little Graphire 2 tablet and have at it. It is a Dell Inspiron 7500 with a mere 128 megs of RAM and a 12 gig HD. It does have a 15.4 inch LCD display which is nice and a keyboard that is the most comfortable I've ever used. So, it's getting a lot of mileage because I can enjoy inspiration and art outside of the office.

Wallpaper sites come and go, artists lose interest, or time, or can't keep up with the software. Where do you go from here? Is I.M. a career? Where do you see yourself in 5 years?

Hmmm... one of those guidance-counselor questions, huh? Art and music have certainly been common threads running through my life at all times. Software, well, that's another story because very few people can afford to really keep up with all the many programs or updates. So, that comes in stages but is never ending. My goals are based on my desires and those have been to continue to work from home where I can be here for our daughter while my wife is gone at her sane daytime job. I'd like to get to the point where IM grows and can sustain itself for longer periods so I can take the time to enjoy life more, maybe even travel. I didn't set out to create a job for myself... I set out to create a business that was an outlet for my art. I think it's safe to say that will continue in some form or an-

other.

We have many readers of Digital Esquire who would like to learn more about creating their own computer art. What advice would you offer someone starting out in this area?

Be patient. Learn from any source you can. Don't be afraid to spend time figuring out who you are as an artist. A lot of artists identify with their heroes but forget to develop their own style which is so much more gratifying. I went for years enjoying airbrushing and playing piano. It wasn't until I discovered the realm of digital art and digital music did I realize that this was what I was waiting for all the while. Now, I am ecstatic over it! I would never have known had I not experimented with different media and tools.

Another important part... don't be afraid to get a proper education in art. I have seen too many musicians and artists diminish the value of a formal education because, as they claimed, it would interfere with their natural talent. I cringe every time I hear that because I am of the opinion it's a dodge. Some people are afraid to learn proper technique, proper terminology. I understand, to a degree, that it can be humbling to be an accomplished musician, for example, who never had any training to begin the process by having to become a student again. I know it can be a challenge to go from playing an instrument like it was a part of your own body and mind to having to sit with an instructor who will ask you to play rudimentary scales and learn the names of the notes so you can sight-read. However, if you are truly serious then you'll go through that and emerge out the other side an even more impressive artist and probably a more well rounded individual. Don't let fear keep you down.

Well Dan, I can't begin to tell you how elated I was when you accepted my offer for this interview. Imagine me, with "Tanus Rising" on my desktop, interviewing it's creator, who would have thought!

You're too kind... the pleasure has been all mine. I've enjoyed feeling like a king for a day!

From Digital Esquire and the entire 3D community, Thank you very much !!!

**-Melissa Atenbridge
-Digital Esquire Magazine**

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