

Thoughts on Imagery

By Ken Gilliland ©2003

Having to write about image creation and concept is a little scary. It's like opening my head and allowing everyone to peer into my inner thoughts. Most likely, it'll probably get me locked up in an asylum or something, but here it goes...

Image creation for me starts in two different directions: planned or accidental. My planned images generally start with a grand concept. This may be an image I see, or from something I've read or a conversation I've had. A good example is a painting I did some time back called "Incommunicado". I was after a way to depict our obsession with communications. In Southern California, where I live, one almost feels naked without a pager and cell-phone attached to their waistbands.



The "idea" started while I was watching my Dad's house and noticed a photo in the trashcan. It was a somewhat unflattering photo of my Dad and friend in snorkel and trunks against a wall.

Bingo! I added a cell-phone and pager and attached it to their trunks and set them in front of the Hearst's Castle Greek-styled swimming pool. Not only did I have my commentary, but humor to boot...

Often I see an image in my head I'm simply compelled to create. The "Travel through Life" Triptych would be a good example of this. Emotions can be a powerful creative tool if handled properly. The passing of a family member at a nursing facility left me with a lot of very strong feelings. Some people bottle them up and sometimes implode under the pressure. I tend to be like Dorian Gray—I let my images do the suffering, leaving me with fewer burdens to carry and hopefully help others through theirs as well. The exploitation of that negative energy can be channeled into positive means and create an explosion of creative force if your willing to surf that tidal wave.



As far as my "accidental" images, they probably happen the most with digital work. I'll go on a spending or downloading spree and then want to play with my new toys. I'll load up a couple models, do some posing and camera angling and before I know it, there's a new image.

STARTING OUT...

I thought the best examples I could give would be to explain my thought process through the creation one of my “accidental” images. With “The Guardians of the Tomb”, I created the image simply because I want to see what a clothing model I purchased looked like rendered.

I started up by loading the Victoria 3 model. I then dressed her in my new toy, the “Moon over Saturn” clothing pack. I prefer to clothe my models before posing and placing them simply because it’s easier to keep track of who’s wearing what. Once clothed, add in the character features, such as hair and texture maps.



Of course, a pose with arms stretched out isn’t very exciting and doesn’t really test the clothing model too well, so a real



pose is necessary. I started with one of the “Moon over Saturn” poses included in the package and changed the arms around to a more aggressive stance. Once I had that pose, the “Grand Concept” came into place. The “Moon over Saturn” clothing pack was not really designed for a “Tomb Raider” styled image. It was a Sci-Fi get-up, but it sure said “Tomb Raider” to me. When looking at my newly posed tomb raider it definitely needed a dynamic composition, so I decided to place her on a staircase. This called also for a

vertical image, rather than the widely used horizontal type. It surprises me how many believe their image must fall into that 800x600 frame. Yes, it’s more monitor friendly, but some images just don’t work that way. My first painting instructor told me that canvas size was my choice. I didn’t have to make sure it fit into that premade canvas or frame. As an artist, your image will tell you what size it needs to be. Of course, she didn’t tell me following the “true artist” course would lead me down the expensive path of custom-made frames and mats. Okay, back to our image,.. I placed her in a compositionally dangerous point, a little above dead center. I felt this would be safe because I was going to force the focus to her face. The staircase and arch also help. Notice how the staircase takes your eye from the lower left corner of the page straight up to arch with frames her face. The fact that she is off center of the arch keeps the image interesting. And again, the camera, placed low, looking up that staircase adds to the dynamics.

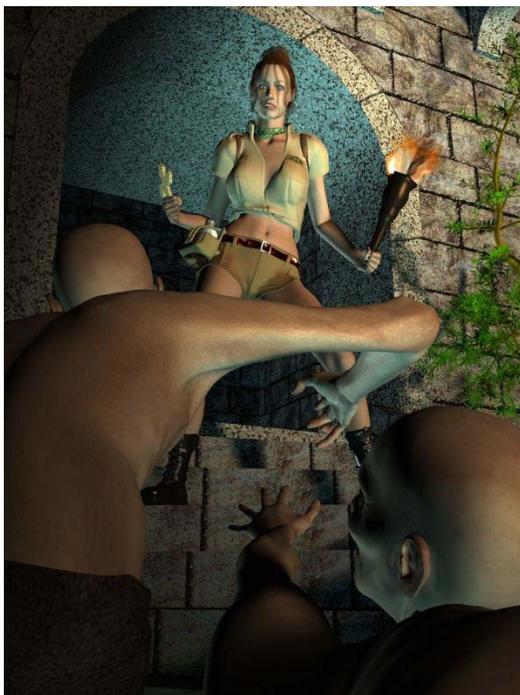
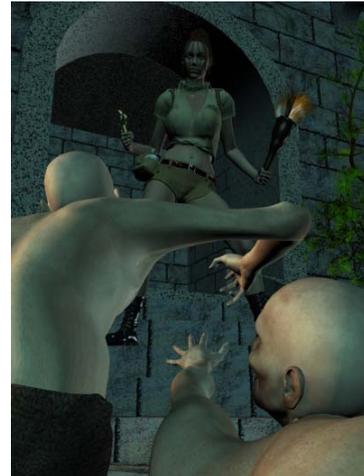


I gave her a torch, thinking I could use that lighting source to add a sharp contrast in light to the image, plus it seemed to add to the image. The left fist really didn’t work for me, but it did get me thinking. What was she ready to punch out? I then remember some time ago I had picked up DAZ’s “Grim” model. A zombie like creature I had been saving for

some Halloween images. It seemed worth a shot, so I loaded a couple of them into Poser and posed them groveling up the stairs. That further added to the dynamics of the composition by making you (the viewer) feel amongst the zombies climbing for our tomb raider. With the zombies in place, it was finally time to define our characters expressions. Our tomb raider got one of determination and disgust, while hinting pleasure on the visible zombie's face. The fist still didn't look right, so I thought our tomb raider could be holding a piece of treasure/weapon. The Cross seemed a perfect choice, adding a little humor to the scene. Crosses, well as best I can remember, work on vampires not zombies.

Compositionally, the scene looked pretty good with the exception of the right wall. While the texture map of the blocks was okay, the repetitive nature of blocks left something to be desired. I could have gone back into the texture map and altered the block shapes and colors, but that seemed like too much work. It was easier to break up the wall with a shrub.

Finally comes the task of lighting the scene. I prefer to stick with 3 to 6 lights. It keeps it simple and the render times down. I will usually use 1 to 2 lights with shadows turned on. Obviously, the default lighting (on the image to the right) didn't work. I pointed all the lights on our tomb raider. Two lights with blue-green tints to show the reflection of the stone surfaces and two lights with yellow/white tints to emulate the torch. This dramatically improved the image (as shown below).



Lighting can be a compositional tool. Notice now that our once empty staircase is obscured with the zombies, yet the dim to brightest lighting still carries our focus up the stairs to the tomb raider where the arch hooks it back to where our eyes began. This also gives the impression of many more than two zombies climbing up the stairs.

Hopefully, I've provided a few tools and suggestions to create interesting and powerful scenes. I can't stress enough that the most important tool is your imagination, your vision, your emotions. If you allow yourself (your heart, your soul) into the images you create, you can't help but succeed.

"Guardians of the Tomb" was rendered in Poser 5. Model Credits include: Victoria 3, UpDo2, Grim, "Moon over Saturn" Clothes (DAZ 3D), The Tower Extravaganza (Danie) and Poser Nature Packs - The Trees (Designfera)