Exotic Earth

a comic-story

by

James E. Grant

AFA 487
Honors 499

Senior Project in Drawing
Senior Honors Thesis

John Gee - Faculty Mentor
Proposal

With this project, I intend to strengthen my skills as a cartoonist, illustrator and storyteller. To do this I propose to write and illustrate my own short comic-story. Although I feel that the storyline for the work is very important, I intend to use it as a basic framework upon which to illustrate and bring to life a science-fiction world of my own creation, peopled with strange and interesting characters.

In my previous attempts at comic-book illustration I worked, for the most part, in black-and-white. I did attempt to add color to my work using computers, but found the process to be tedious and my access to the proper equipment limited. For this project, I feel that the addition of hand-done color would add greater depth and dimension to my story-telling ability. To achieve the added dimension of color, I plan to use markers, colored pencil and watercolor alongside the traditional black India ink of the comic-book artist. I also choose to heighten the story-telling potential of the work by experimenting heavily with page layout and composition.

I propose to produce fourteen drawings, one of which, a cover drawing, will be 15” x20”. The rest will be single-page 10” x15” layouts (standard comic-book size) except for one, a double-page 15” x21” layout. The works will be completed as the culmination of my undergraduate major in drawing.
This project, and a previous comic-book project I attempted, grew directly out of my fascination with the inherent possibilities of the comics medium. This medium has probably been best defined by Scott McCloud in his book, *Understanding Comics.*¹ His definition is, as follows:

com-ics (kom’iks)n. plural in form, used with a singular verb. 1. Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.

There is much debate about when comics first began, but most sources agree that the first true comics began appearing in the United States at the beginning of this century. Since then the artform has gone through many evolutionary leaps and has spread worldwide. In parts of the world such as Europe and Japan, comics are considered an adult artform on the same level as literature or film. This is, unfortunately, still not the case in the U.S. Here, comics are still considered by many to be a juvenile medium not worthy of serious consideration. The roots of this attitude can be traced, in part, back to the fifties, when comics publishers were forced, by Congress, to self-censor their work. This measure was supposed to protect young people from “un-American” ideas, but the biggest effect it had was to ensure that comics were so watered down and juvenile that no adult would want to read them. This self-censorship remained until the mid-'80's, when many small comic-book companies bucked tradition and began producing adult work. Today, the market for adult comics, while still small, is growing all the time, and new innovations like computer-coloring and creator-ownership (in the past the publisher always assumed ownership!) are ensuring that the medium will only grow in the future.

The comics medium, while being saddled with a deceptively un-serious name, contains tremendous potential for an artist willing to explore it. From an early age I decided that was what I wanted to do.

¹ Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics, the Invisible Art*
My first realization of the potential of comics came when I was thirteen years old and, on a whim, bought a copy of a comic-book titled *Grendel*.\(^2\) It had nothing to do with the mythical monster and was, instead, a sophisticated study of aggression and violence.

*Grendel*, which was written by Matt Wagner, employed many techniques which, even today, are fairly innovative, and I have incorporated some of them into my own comics work. One such technique involved using the main character as the narrator of the story. This allowed the reader to enter the character’s mind and empathize with her without the use of the more cumbersome and archaic “thought balloon.” *Grendel* also contained an especially creative use of panel structure and bright, vivid color that drew the reader’s attention immediately.

After reading *Grendel*, I felt a need to find other comics of equal quality, and much of my teenage years were spent looking for them. To find comics of the quality I was seeking I had to look, unfortunately, beyond the borders of the U.S. While comics in the U.S. have, since the fifties, been considered primarily a children’s medium, in other parts of the world, especially Europe and Japan, sophisticated comics for adults have flourished.

One of the best examples of Japanese comic artists and a major influence on my comics work is Masamune Shirow.\(^3\) Shirow’s work displays a very Eastern sense of composition, placing highly detailed panels beside panels of utter simplicity. Shirow, like many Japanese artists, also uses a simple, cartoonish style to illustrate his characters. This allows his characters to display a greater range of emotions, thereby making their personalities more accessible to the reader. Shirow, like Wagner in *Grendel*, also uses strong female characters in his work, something which I have tried to emulate because I have noticed that American comics are generally lacking in such characters.

Since nearly all Japanese comics are produced in black-and-white, to find innovative color comics I turned to Europe. Two of the best examples I found were the Spanish artist Miquelanxo Prado\(^4\) and the French artist Enki Bilal.\(^5\)

Prado, in his graphic novel, *Streak of Chalk*, uses color in many subtle and almost subliminal ways. His most superficial use of color, upon viewing an individual page of the work, would appear to be as a compositional device to unify each page. Upon careful reading of the book, however, it becomes clear that Prado uses color as an integral part of his storytelling, adding to the emotional depth of the book.

\(^2\) Matt Wagner, *Grendel #1*
\(^3\) Masamune Shirow, *Appleseed, Book One*
\(^4\) Miquelanxo Prado, *Streak of Chalk*
\(^5\) Enki Bilal, *The Hunting Party*
Enki Bilal, in his graphic novel *The Hunting Party*, is more blunt with his use of color. Bilal uses a multi-media technique to give his work a solidity and realism that few comics artists can achieve. Through color, Bilal controls exactly how he wishes a viewer to read each scene.

All of these comics artists influenced my work heavily. While working on this project I strove to take some of the best elements from each artist and blend them into something uniquely my own.

The earlier comics-story I produced contained an intricate plot with many characters, thereby limiting the illustrative and compositional freedom I wished to explore. I chose, therefore, to limit the cast of this project to two main characters. My earlier work also had a real-world setting, albeit a few years in the future. For this project, I felt that a more science-fictional setting would leave me with greater artistic license. I, therefore, placed my characters on the planet Earth of the far future, after all traces of our civilization have been wiped away. Hence, the title, *Exotic Earth*. This left me with a clean slate from which to create my own world.

When creating the characters for my story, I decided that they should be outsiders on this world, providing the reader a chance to share in their discoveries. The main character, Allisa, whose name is a play on Alice from Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, is a scout from an interplanetary colony who has returned to Earth to find its civilization mysteriously destroyed. The other character, Wim, is a robot who was created as a self-aware plaything for young children and, for some reason, survived the catastrophe that destroyed civilization. Therefore, even though he has more knowledge about the Earth than Allisa, his mechanical appearance makes him more of an outsider than she is.

Once I had my storyline and characters set up, I had to decide what surface I would work on and what media I would use. The traditional surface of the comic-book artist is 2-ply Bristol board. I chose to stick with the Bristol board because it is smooth enough to allow for very fine inked line detail and is an excellent surface for working with markers. I knew, however, that if I used a water-based medium, such as watercolor, on the Bristol board the thin paper would buckle. I decided, therefore, to spray-glue the Bristol board to stronger Crescent illustration board.

In my earlier comics work, I realized early on that when illustrating with only pen-and-ink it is crucial to make the inked lines as fluid, varied, and expressive as possible. To accomplish that in this project I worked almost exclusively with Hunt pen nibs and India ink.

---

6 Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland and Through the looking Glass*
For adding color to the figures and foregrounds after they were drawn in ink, I used mainly Design 2 markers. They had a great color range and blendability, allowing me to add dimensionality and solidity to my characters. For the backgrounds, however, especially the skies, the markers simply left too many streaks. I turned to watercolors, but regular watercolors were too chalky. Finally, I decided upon Dr. Martin’s watercolor dyes. These dyes allowed me to color in large areas of sky with bright, solid color. I found that through careful thinning and mixing of these dyes I could create very subtle effects, allowing me to control the mood of a scene, much like Prado in Streak of Chalk.
The Artwork

I produced fourteen individual drawings. Twelve were single page layouts, one was a double page layout and one was a cover drawing. I implemented a range of media and techniques to make each drawing work as an individual piece and as part of a narrative. In discussing these works I will group the individual pages together according to their visual similarity and content.

Pages 1-5 (10" x 15" each)

In pages one through five I introduced both of the main characters and established the setting. These pages all have a similar color scheme due to the fact that they take place just before sunset, giving the sky a warm, yellow-orange glow.

Page one shows the main character, Allisa, atop an abandoned and crumbling building, looking out over a desolate landscape. I used the warm glow of the sunset to symbolize the fact that this is a world in its twilight, an ancient world. I also made the page compositionally dynamic by placing two scenes within one large scene. Aside from aiding the composition, this also makes the scenes seem more simultaneous, as though the viewer is seeing almost the same moment in time from three different angles.

Page two shows Allisa leaving the city. Through her narration, the reader finds out who she is and what she is searching for; namely, the reason behind the collapse of Earth’s civilization. Also on page two, Allisa sees a group of men taunting what appears to be a small boy. In the next scene, I zoomed in on the boy and the men and the reader is able to hear what they are saying. The men mention a group called the “Sculptors,” foreshadowing later events in the story. On page three, one of the men tries to attack the boy and Allisa intervenes, shooting the knife out of his hand.

On page four I used a different compositional strategy. In the center of the page I left a panel, wherein the boy is hit by return fire from the men, completely open, creating a large white area which provides a nice contrast with the bright earth tones of the rest of the page. I also used the markers to greater effect, creating a finer sense of modeling than in the previous pages.

On page five, after having shot three of the men on the previous page, Allisa disables the final one and then slumps, exhausted, believing that the boy has died. She is shocked, however, when the boy steps up and introduces himself as Wim. She realizes,
when he uncovers his face, that he is actually a robot. On this page, as in page one, I again used a large single panel to fill the whole page and placed several smaller panels within. I also allowed the figures to protrude from the panels in several places, heightening the sense of space. Both of these techniques enhanced the overall visual dynamic of the page. In addition, to create added dramatic effect in the last panel, I used a close-up of Allisa to show her reaction to finding Wim to be a robot.

**Pages 6 and 7 (10” x 15” each)**

The first scene on page six leaps forward a few hours in time, showing Allisa and Wim traveling on as the sky turns to a dusky violet. I broke this scene into three separate panels to indicate the passage of time. In the next scene, as Wim and Allisa sit talking around a tiny lamp, I used the markers to create stark lighting effects, indicating some tension in the conversation. I also used much more cross-hatching in the linework to create deep shadows.

On page seven, I again used a single large panel to fill the page. I placed several other panels within the large one and used a tree in the foreground of the large panel as a compositional device, connecting all the other panels together. On this page, I initially painted the night sky a deep shade of blue. I later used various shades of violet colored pencils to lighten the sky and make it more similar to that of page six.

**Pages 8 to 10 (10” x 15” each)**

On page eight I used several “silent panels,” telling the story without the use of dialogue or narration. I’ve found that these silent panels can be very effective because they require the reader to pay more attention to what is going on in the scene rather than just reading the dialogue.

The scenes on this page show Wim inspecting a hole in the ground with strange flying creatures coming out of it. To his surprise, the ground beneath him begins to rise, as though something were pushing its way out. Only in the last scene is there any dialogue, as Wim cries out for help. On this page I also increased my use of subtle cross-hatching for modeling and used the flying creatures as a compositional device to unify the page.

On page nine I again left a large white area to contrast with the colored areas. In contrast with pages 1-5, however, I used rather muted colors. The only bright color on the page is the purple of the strange creature that breaks out of the ground beneath Wim’s feet, ensuring that is the central area of interest on the page.
On page ten Allisa and Wim, after deciding that the creature may have something to do with the aforementioned Sculptors, begin to follow it. To indicate the passage of time on this page, the characters are shown going from bright sunlight, to sunset, to dusk, and back to sunlight and a new day. I also made the page more visually dynamic by altering the angle from which the characters are shown. Some scenes show the characters from above, some show them from a great distance, and some show them in close-up.

**Pages 11 and 12 (10” x 15” each)**

On page eleven I continued my use of varying angles, this time using it to dramatic effect as Wim and Allisa are shocked to see a hot-air balloon floating above them, the crew of which opens fire on the creature. Also, I used the watercolor dyes to paint in the ground on this page, indicating, by varying brushstrokes, waves of grass. I then used markers over top of the watercolor to cast a shadow from the balloon onto the ground, creating a believable sense of dimensionality in the page.

On page twelve, Allisa and Wim find the crew of the balloon to be friendly and join them on their journey to a nearby city. On this page I again indicate the passage of time by having the panels move from daylight to sunset.

**Pages 13 and 14 (15” x 21”)**

I executed pages thirteen and fourteen as a double-page spread on a single piece of Bristol Board. On these pages, Wim and Allisa land in a strange city called Shaliis. As the story draws to a close, Allisa wonders if they will come any closer to learning the secret of the group called the Sculptors and the reason for the collapse of civilization. Essentially, the reader learns that this is the end of the beginning of a potentially much larger story. This is in keeping with a tradition in comics story-telling of starting a series of comic-book novels with a humble opening story, then expanding upon it, adding layer upon layer to the narrative till it reaches epic lengths.

**Cover Page (15” x 20”)**

Unlike the other pages, I executed the cover drawing on a piece of cold-press illustration board. I used mainly the same media as the other drawings with the exception of the greater use of colored pencil to create dimensionality. I found that the cold-press board provided greater blendability to the markers with a small reduction in their vividness. The cover drawing consisted of a single image showing Allisa and Wim in the basket of the balloon as it comes in to land in Shaliis. I chose the image because I felt that it adequately captured the overall sense of wonder and excitement that I felt was central to the story.
Conclusion

As a whole, the body of work does function successfully to tell the story I wished to tell and to introduce the characters I had invented. On an individual basis, each work also functions successfully as a separate work of art.

The major accomplishments of this project were in the knowledge I gained through experimentation with different media to produce color and in the knowledge I gained through experimenting with different ways to tell a story through the comics medium. I was able to use markers and watercolor dyes to add a heightened sense of place and time to my work, adding to the story’s believability. I also was able to use different panel arrangements and different points-of-view to add to my array of story-telling techniques.

Upon completion of this project, I feel that the comics medium holds tremendous potential for further experimentation. I intend to explore further the use of color to create mood and setting, and to experiment with different ways to tell different stories. I will also consider re-working or continuing with the narrative begun in the project.
Bibliography


Resume

James E. Grant
2512 E. Raintree Dr.
New Castle, IN 47362
(317) 529-9333

Education
Ball State University, BFA Drawing

Employment
1990 to 1995 laborer supervisor, Summit Lake State Park
1989 to present, freelance illustrator and mural painter

Exhibitions
Juried
1993 58th Annual Student Show, Ball State University

Invitational
1995 Silent Liquidity, Ball State University

Awards
1990 Second place Project XL

Collections
Howard and Mabeth Schuyler, Orlando, FL
Aarron Nall, Marion, IN
Ed and Angela Grant, New Castle, IN
Martha Rude, Liberty, IN