Senior Project Joint Proposal
Art Department
The Honors College
4/2/01

Mitchell David Stark

Graduation date: May 5, 2001
Major: Art-Drawing
Advisors: Phil Repp, Joanne Edmonds, John Gee
Project Title: The James Dean Fantasy
Official start and end dates: June 15, 2000 – April 28, 2001

This project is a visual and literary exploration that will enhance all facets of my storytelling ability. It will improve my fine arts skills, including drawing, painting, printmaking, sculpture, and digital arts. It will improve my writing skills through journal entries, free writing, and documentation of the character evolutionary process. Also, my contact with professionals in my field will provide sound criticism for the content of my project while simultaneously opening a door to technical facility and potential job placement in multimedia.

The final presentation of my research and creative work will be documented in the following fashion:

SENIOR ART SHOW: Starting the weekend of April 22, I will be displaying my character artwork in the Honors College. There will be a closing reception on Saturday, April 28 from 2-4 p.m. The show will include a posted artist statement, showcased artwork, professional contact presentation, and during the reception a question and answer session which will give insight into my creative process.

ILM WORKSHOP: During the course of the semester, I will be coordinating a workshop through VIA that will bring Ron Woodall, Viewpainter for the George Lucas special effects house Industrial Light and Magic, to Ball State. As a supplement to the technical part of my project, Ron will answer questions about computer graphics, art, and the special effects industry—which is in direct correlation with the type of concept imagery that I am creating for my project. I will document his visit with photographs and a videotape of the seminar.

WEBSITE: As a design exercise, I will create a website of my thesis character work that will display samples of my drawing and painting, my artist statement, and contact information.

BOOKLET: This part of my presentation will include excerpts from my research journal, linear concept sketches, production illustrations, journal entries, and free writing.

Its purpose is to document my entire creative process beginning at the first stage. Here are some of the specific elements that will be present:

- Critical essay(s) on the films of James Dean, examining character traits and persona that will serve as an influence for the fantasy character I will create.
- Notes citing literature and film that has influenced visual decisions.
- Story development notes and conclusive results of my study.

DEMO REEL: On CD, I will display a sequence of my work in a multimedia presentation that includes the implementation of music. The length of the presentation will be approximately one minute and thirty seconds.
The James Dean Fantasy

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

Mitchell David Stark

Advisor: Philip C. Repp

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

April 28, 2001

Graduation May 5, 2001
"To once again ignite my imagination and fuel the creative spirit I know lies within, I have chosen an old tale by Poe, ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’—residing in my distant memory in such a way that I will live it again...for being terrified is a great exercise for the mind" (6.15.00).

The process for my thesis began not by creating from scratch, but by choosing a pre-existing piece of literature that I could study while simultaneously probing its visual possibilities. “The Tell-Tale Heart” screamed out for graphic representation, so I began to read a passage at a time—stopping frequently to ponder how I could uniquely represent the powerful words with equally powerful images.

The first of these images was the rotting, hideous eye which upsets the narrator and drives him to homicide. I began to ask myself the important question: what is the eye? What is it about an eye that would drive a man to murder? What unnatural sign of viability must it have to invoke rage? One story that I immediately thought about was Quint’s shark tale in Steven Spielberg’s 1975 film Jaws. In the story, he described the hideous eye of the shark. It was cold and lifeless, with a cloudy film over the top—enhancing its horrifying nature. Aside from generating sketches, I also delved into the writing to explore and flesh out my own vision of what the eye should look like:

This evil eye, though not described in great detail by Poe, is utterly repulsive. For reasons that we do not understand, or do not yet, there are rusty, crumbling retractor that pull the skin of the eye away so that it can remain open. Yet, everything inside us feels like it must be closed, if just for a second, for the cleansing function of the lid has apparently been absent for nearly a year. We as an audience perhaps suspect that the eye has a certain gift, though ugly as hell—it gives the old man the sense—the edge he needs or feels he needs to be a master printer. The retractor are homemade, and sorrowfully self-installed—to keep this blemish functioning though it may now be deemed purposeless—except to terrify, which it certainly does. The eye was once a gift—with mechanical function perhaps used to edit, track words, or as some kind of glorious counting device that the man once received praise for. In many ways, the eye made him a prodigy—for it was once handsome, as blue and full of depth and wonder as the ocean. Until suddenly injured, and it never healed correctly. Why you might ask? Because the old man refused to have it removed as the town medic suggested. And in his attempt to savor its power, he became delusional and “blind” to the horrific evolution of his putrid eye. As the eye grew increasingly more infected, it began to swell shut, but the man would not have this, and devised wickedly scientific ways to pry and pull the skin aside so that it could remain open. There are deep and permanent scarred grooves where the surrounding skin was pierced to anchor the retractor he built from old printer springs and parts. And as the eye itself began to die, other entities flourished within its socket. The area became a host to bacteria and decay, and the surrounding muscles spasm violently with the disruption of nerve impulses. Like lightning, the retina seems to leap unnaturally at times from one corner of the socket to the next—not with organic slowness, but with a seemingly mechanical jolt that simulates random but controlled motion. Sometimes the eye remains idle, dead in place, with pus seeping through the scratches. Because the eye has no time to blink, it is dry and the membranes flake off in areas like trees that reject the bark that has died. But
again, there is no fluid to wash this away, but occasionally there is a bit of mucous—but it quickly dries, leaving filthy, awful festering debris. The skin around the socket has begun to scale like a snake losing its skin—it is puffy and filled with a smelly fluid that at times, when the old man lays wrong on his pillow—seeping and causing a vile stench that often causes the old man to nearly gag in his sleep. Some parts of the eye have now discovered how to feast off of what would have once supplied nutrient to the cornea, retina, etc……The muscles have enveloped part of the eye, which causes it to jerk all the more violently. The eye is severely bloodshot and in parts some of the veins have even begun to rot, leaving their walls fragile and making it very uncomfortable. The old man has not bothered to clean off the crust, as in parts it has helped to adhes the foreign retractors to the lifeless skin surrounding the eye. With the skin pulled back and puffy, the eye appears much bigger, and like a blemish that seems to have a heartbeat of its own, it seems to slightly pulse—the squishing sound it makes is enough to make one vomit by itself. The film which is strewn about the eye in a cloud-like formation oozes as though a living organism—perhaps it is gravity or the microbiological array that swarms within its content. Somehow, the entire symmetry of the man’s face has been disrupted in a way that sickens all. It is splotched red and white with disease in a net-like pattern—several areas pocketed with maggots and other larvae. The hairs of the eyebrow have fallen out, but the place where they were is very noticeable. Perhaps one of the most disturbing things about the eye is that it seems to bow out, protruding like a pimple that everyone has the urge to burst—no matter what the consequence. The eye itself gives a signal for immediacy—like a time bomb that could detonate at any moment, there is an urgency when viewing it that drives the narrator to madness. Despite all of this, the old man is able to continue with his work. There are no mirrors in his printshop, making truth of his appearance available only to those who view him. Somehow though, this eye has an effect that makes whoever looks upon it feel as though they were in a room not even large enough to avoid touching the eye—to feel its movement and the only moisture the pus which seeps continually. Gouging it out seems not enough, for surely the host will grow another. All logical thought is blocked out by the power of the eye, for it seems that nothing in the world could have created such an awful thing. It seems pieced together by scraps, something grafted on top of sores and burns……(6.21.00)

In addition to my consideration of the “evil eye,” I also began to cite inanimate objects throughout the story that I could personify. I was intrigued by the lantern that was being used by the narrator to bleed light into the old man’s chambers at night. Quickly I began to design it as something that was alive—making choices such as how much light it was going to exude. I described it as a self-reliant entity that combined industrial hingework with the organic pulsation of a heart—therefore reinforcing the central motif while simultaneously giving life to something that perhaps Poe did not.

Directly following my exploration of Poe’s literary style, I used these visual exercises to launch the development of my central character, Cornelius. Although he was without a name, without a personality, and without heart, the following free write session unlocked the gateway for my new story, and eventually, “The James Dean Fantasy”:

Ah, to begin a new project and to find the right approach to character and setting, I would first like to free write. This project, at this stage, will be driving toward conceptual studies and perhaps a polished drawing that pushes my technical skills in the fine arts and allows me the liberty to approach story development from a variety of angles. My beginning, I think, will center around one character, and during the process of developing that character, others will arise. But one of
These are early conceptual sketches of experimental forms for the old man's chambers in the printshop.
senting visually what many people discover—the truth in themselves. And we all know that people fear truth—often over death (6.28.00).

The story development continued to progress and at this point, I slanted my character away from the male and toward the female. I asked myself this question: “Why is the world she knows unfulfilling enough that she desires more, and after desiring more, what blemish does she take on that makes her untouchable, unbearable?” (6.28.00). This question is of course not an easy one, so several times during my research I shifted gears to begin thinking about visual identity:

The complexion change of the skin should be very slight, and the bluish tone that is chosen (from earlier decision to incorporate the look of dolphin skin) should convey the sadness of the character, her gentleness, and the royal stature of the truth which she has discovered/proclaimed.

My instinct tells me that all of the characters in my story should have outrageously elaborate costuming—however, very synthetic/manmade—could have an industrial slant. The raw nakedness of the character (her) should erupt after the change—and any new clothing she emerges with should have a feel of the natural world—more pure.
Even before I realized that Cornelius would be taking on the James Dean persona, there were distinct characteristics about him that I felt would convey that kind of depth, teenage confusion, and progression toward wisdom. At the same time, his design was rather unique, with respiratory function in his cheeks and a tree bark textured ribcage that would show the irony of a boy trapped in this image of decay.

After working on the design and functionality of my two characters, a temporary framework for the story suddenly became clear:

The girl lives in a world that we can interpret as being heaven. But in a way it isn't....This world is filled with wonder, with beauty; imaginative beauty that has never before been seen. One boy, and I don't know how just yet, stumbles across this, and amazed, brings the little girl back to his world...the real world...as an audience we don't know exactly who she is....is she an angel? The imagery that is seen will be unlike any that has ever been seen. Visions that will stretch the imagination further than before. The story must drive towards a completely amazing ending....one that surprises, one that refreshes, one that inspires, one that puts its viewers into action. What is the central truth though? And especially, how can it reach viewers who are believers and non-believers alike (7.20.00)?

Though seemingly vague and rather undefined, it was at this point in my story development that the evolution of the plot and the message I wanted to send were the most clear in my mind. This was to be a story of hope, and I remember this inspiration being reinforced by a viewing of Gattaca, where once again I saw the power of human perseverance and spirit. The film also has a rich visual language, which stimulated me to fabricate Cornelius's battle uniform. I now knew this to be the opening scene of the story. An illustration above shows my first try at costume design. The following texts from my journal begin to breathe life into the foundation of this epic tale:

Our main character, we know now, is a defender of country (later this develops into a post-East of Eden setting with the conflict between brothers as the primary tension), but recently engaged in civil war and perhaps discovers that his own brother is dead (or missing)....so perhaps I could interlace scenes from his memory of his brother into the story.

He has definitely searched for fulfillment, for truth in his world....like many young men, he thought a sense of country would be the answer....he was wrong...
In retrospect, he must find God….and so this is the beginning of his journey. The hero’s quest….all of his prior persistence leads toward his humbling….after he meets the girl. The soldier thinks by bringing this angelic girl back to his world, she will like it, but in fact he must lead people to her world…..when he tries the first solution he is destroying the girl.

The foundation of the story was now beginning to take form. At this point, I decided that naming my characters would be necessary since I was no longer just defining their characteristics. I was fabricating an entire world around them. I chose Cornelius for its biblical context and then moved on to the female character, searching for a creative method that would hold meaning and depth. My process for naming became rather unique and inventive. First, I brainstormed descriptive keywords about my characters. For the female I knew that she was an angelic, mystical being so I looked up the German, French, Portuguese, and Italian translations of phrases like heavenly spirit, archangel, seraph, and messenger of God. In French as well as some of the other Latin-based languages, the word “Dieu” translates to God. With some added flair Anadiev was born. Similarly, at the same time I was beginning to originate ideas regarding a possible antagonist for the story. In many ways there is an inner struggle festering inside Cornelius, but I also wanted a physical source of temptation. And so with the same language process Mr. Ombre Derteufel (Ombre being the French word for shadow and Derteufel being German for the Devil) entered my world to haunt souls and walk among the shadows. At this stage, my story was starting to become layered with rich metaphorical references and even the reality I was creating was not really what it appeared to be. I must say that some elements of the piece I cannot discuss simply because this project is ongoing and quite secretive for a variety of reasons. However, I outlined a general schematic of the plot, which I can reveal in its skeletal entirety:

I. Intro – Civil War Ruins
II. Two Mysterious Strangers in Cornelius’s Town
III. The Saloon
IV. Journey on the Open Sea (The Unknown Stowaway)
V. Anadiev and the Palace
VI. Anadiev in Cornelius’s World
VII. Cornelius Meets The Potter and the Truth of His World is Revealed
VIII. Resolution

On September 8 I first thought about James Dean being a reference for Cornelius both for “expressions and posturing.” I began to think about “Rebel Without A Cause” – this confused teenager who is in search for what is right, even in opposition to what he is being told by others. According to my research, the struggle that I was trying to instill in Cornelius was perfectly descriptive of the “restless American youth” of the
1950s. My reasoning is somehow amazingly encapsulated in the following passage about Dean:

There is no simple explanation for why he has come to mean so much to so many people today. Perhaps it is because, in his acting, he had the intuitive talent for expressing the hopes and fears that are a part of all young people...in some movie magic way, he managed to dramatize brilliantly the questions every young person in every generation must resolve.”

Joe Hymns, “Little Boy Lost”

My desire to create this fantasy character Cornelius with all of the genius qualities of James Dean soon became much greater. Rather than dwelling simply on the character development, I took a step back from my own story and began to compare the setting of my own tale and the three Dean films. It was then that I found exactly what I was looking for:

This fantasy tale is sort of an extension on “East of Eden” (chronologically taking place directly after Aaron leaves for war, as if to imply that Cal followed him after his father’s death.) But where Dean’s persona finds God (and then structure and truth) in his life after following his brother to war....in this civil war, Dean (Cornelius) loses his brother and begins his journey to find him....only to discover that evil lurks around every corner in these worlds that merge atmospheres of history, fantasy, science, and technology (2.15.01)

Also, here is another passage I wrote earlier in my research as James Dean began to come forward as the dominating persona for my character:

After watching a good amount of Edward Scissorhands again I’ve decided to attempt tackling some of the finer details of Cornelius—or at least try to give him some character that is going to be original. The more I think about it this is going to be quite a long process because of the imaginative needs of my story. Something that intrigues me in Scissorhands and Rebel Without A Cause that I think has a place in this story are the phony set of values that exist in society and the home. Codes, rules, and doctrines—ethics that supposedly coincide with honor and truth, but in fact combat it. Cornelius must feel the presence of this if he is to feel as though he has to escape his environment to find truth. Burton is able to do this so subtly with the suburban facade as well as characters like Alan Arkin’s “father” character—who is the typical middle class father. In so many ways, his exaggerations strike a comical nerve of truth. His behavior is both funny and horrific in its ignorance. Mr. Stark in Rebel is the same way in his lady-like weakness. In a way we laugh because he looks so silly serving Jim’s mother in an apron, but like Jim we cry out for some strength and direction. So what exactly am I trying to say with this part of the story? How is the conflict I need to create essential to the rest of the story? I don’t want to make too many points about society, because really this is about the launch of Cornelius’s quest—in fact, the only time he could possibly return home is after he cannot find his brother in battle. Perhaps his return is like an instinct. In fact, though it may be hundreds of miles away I believe the shock of war, losing friends to death and his brother to wherever, has him feeling that this blur of a walk home is taking place in minutes. This will cause us to ask the question—is what Cornelius sees in this scene a result of shell-shock or how his parents really act? His parents I think should somehow visually represent the stereotypes they embody in the mind. Perhaps they look very very scary like wardens; except with parts to them that defy honor and truth. Perhaps parts have a wax coating where they hide in a way like Ombre Dertefel hides—except he is obviously the pure form of evil (8.14.00).

Though I cannot possibility describe all of my thoughts in full, by the end of my research I had nearly one hundred drawings and about two hundred pages of notes, ideas, and original concepts. This project will continue even after my presentation April 28, 2001—venturing next into production paintings and full digital mockups of the several trial scenes. To close this booklet, I would like to display a sampling of the narrative, which gives a flavor to the start of the story and a foreshadowing of what is to become of “The James Dean Fantasy.”

Cornelius raised his head for a second, then let it fall to the ground once more. His head felt heavy, confused, as though his blood were swirling and boiling within. The eastern plains were covered in dense fog, and the Braya trees suffered the winds of the coming storm. My how his head ached! And then he saw the bodies as the ground smoke began to clear. They were lifeless and twitching, some with eyelids peeled back, reflecting the battle that had torn through his land. This
was the last battle of course. For that is what they had told Cornelius and the young brigade two years earlier. The 142nd Siccan brigade—the best soldiers in the land of Rutinia. He and his brother had...where is my brother? His mind raced. And he lifted his head once more. This time a wave of nauseousness motivated him to his feet. Other than the dull, numb feeling in his leg, most of the discomfort was simply soreness. Where is my brother? He whipped his head back and forth, surveying the ruins. But there were only dead bodies—for all who had lived must have left this terrible place. Cornelius fell once again and began to weep. For the first time in months, his senses returned...and he felt empty (2.15.01)

Closing Remarks

This project has witnessed the dawn of many changes in myself and the way I tell stories. It has suffered my frequently shifting interests and frustrations in artistic inadequacies. It has also seen my joy. The supernatural speed of my pen racing down my notebook at the birth of a new concept. At times, illegible to all but myself. It has watched as I skip (nearly run) from the offices of Joanne Edmonds and Phil Repp so energized and bursting with ideas that I can barely contain myself. It has also come to understand my passions—my love for movies and the characters that drive them—my family and friends, who keep me sharp, focused, determined, and always laughing—and God, who has loved me enough to make these hands “artist hands.” They are hands that mold and create. May I always serve Him with every breath of life He has given me, and always staying grounded in His story—the one that changes hearts (4.17.01).

Here are a few people I have the honor to know and to thank:

Kendall McKinnis
Phil Repp
Joanne Edmonds
John Gee
Jon, Pat and Matt Stark
Brandon Luhring
Ron Woodall
Doug Chiang
Rick Grandy
Matt Stafford
Stephen Gardner
Dick and Pat McKinnis
I like to think of myself as a storyteller. A storyteller who loves to imagine, laugh, and draw. But above all things, I love God with all my heart. The love He gave the world when He sent his only son to die on the cross breathes life into my work. I create to glorify Him. The worlds I draw and paint serve to tell stories that will inspire the hope, mystery, and joy of the Lord. I think this is why I like drawing characters so much. Each character is a soul crying out—with passions rooted deep in many experiences, and all needing love. I have a great vision for the power and direction of art and film. I invite you to share with me this vision of hope.

"He is the source from which all reasoning power comes."—C.S. Lewis
Bibliography


Elfman, Danny. *Edward Scissorhands: The Original Motion Picture Soundtrack.*


*Giant.* Warner Bros., 1956.


The Bible: New International Version.


My interaction with Doug has been tremendously exciting. I first contacted him in the fall of 2000, in a movement to enhance the website I was co-designing for the animation program at Ball State University. I’m excited to say that the website earned International acclaim, and we thank Doug for his willingness to help. Since then, I have been in touch with him regarding my artwork and career path, and cherish all of the wisdom he sends my way. Thank you Doug for being a source of energy and enthusiasm in my journey.

Biography

Doug Chiang studied film at the University of California, at Los Angeles, and industrial design at the Center of Creative Studies, College of Art and Design. Chiang got his start as a Stop Motion animator on the Pee Wee’s Playhouse television series. He soon rose to become a Clio Award winning commercial director and designer for Rhythm and Hues, Digital Productions, and Robert Abel and Associates.

In 1989, Chiang joined Industrial, Light, and Magic and became the Creative Director in 1993. During this time, he worked as Visual Effects Art Director for films including Ghost, Back to the Future II, The Doors, Terminator 2, Death Becomes Her, Forrest Gump, Jumanji, and The Mask. He has earned both an Academy Award and a British Academy Award for Death Becomes Her and another British Academy Award for Forrest Gump.

In 1995 Chiang left ILM to head up the Art Department as Design Director for Star Wars: Episode I The Phantom Menace. Currently, Chiang is working on Episode II and his personal film / book project Robota. As an independent film director, Chiang has received numerous awards, including First Place in the FOCUS Awards for his film Mental Block. Chiang’s personal paintings have appeared nationwide in various publications as well as limited edition prints and posters. Chiang lives in Northern California with his wife and two children.
Ron has been my greatest source of inspiration and encouragement in this industry. I met Ron in high school, when I first became eager about working in film and visual effects. Since then, we have kindled a professional work relationship that is as much about art and stories as the technical aspects of our field. At times, I have shown Ron my work on a weekly basis, and he never has to reach far for enlightening words. It is a great honor to call Ron one of my mentors. He is a good friend of faith and great determination. Thanks Ron, for everything.


AN AFTERNOON WITH RON WOODALL
Visual Effects Artist from Industrial Light and Magic
Saturday, March 24
1-5 p.m.
ILM Introduction, Question and Answer Session,
CG Workshop