

Guy Mckinley

Guy Mckinley is an artist fascinated by fantasy. Bored, as most of us are, with normality, he strives to create a new breed of anime inspired characters, from ancient warrior girls reborn into modern society, brandishing jewel studded swords to humanised animals and psychedelic birds. Unrestricted by reality, Mckinley's creations seem straight out of a post-apocalyptic, dystopian Japanese empire, Akira style, with just the right amount of Powerpuff-esque bubblegum thrown in. This comes as no surprise as we learn of his childhood captivation with comic books and films, coupled with an inherent desire to draw, making him a man who we don't think will ever put his paints down. We certainly hope he doesn't!

Have you always been keen on art, did it stem from your childhood?

I would say so. I was recently asked 'when did you start drawing'? I always think the important date should be when you stopped drawing. People who grab a real solid interest, or notice any improvement in their drawing through practice, or even find a strong influence early on and stick with it, are generally the ones who end up giving art a go in some capacity.

For me it all stemmed from '2000AD'; I found a copy of it, abandoned in a desk at school. It was at the time when the first black and white Simon Bisley ABC Warriors story was being run. It blew me away when I was young, I could not stop looking at it. That lifted me from trying to draw the perfect Garfield into developing my own characters and beginning to look at the human form whilst also delving into my imagination a bit more. So yeah, I guess it stemmed from childhood, but it's more that I gained incentives, inspiration

all amazing and very patient with my resistance to the formal and I was encouraged to go down the route of fantasy. I may have lost interest earlier if it had been the other way round.

I don't think I ever really strayed too far from the fantastical inspiration of comics, though. Even though it can be hard to keep hold of; wherever I studied after GCSE level, comics/animation were still frowned upon as a cheap form of artistic expression. It's only recently that comics have been the forum for real stories, rather than just superheroes, sci-fi and fantasy. Books like 'Palestine' by Joe Sacco, Maus and Persepolis are just some examples. That's not to say I only love the serious, high-brow stuff, I love all of them, though if I don't like the art, the story alone will not make me buy a book. Great comics are like hip-hop culture when it was at its most powerful, it had to be strong in all components; graf, DJ, MC, breaking, combining to be more than the sum of its parts. If it's the

characters or is this something that has developed over time?

Yes I have always wanted to work with characters, though a lot of my personal painted work is more an experiment in texture and pattern. Originally and still to this day, the idea of being a character designer has always appealed; I don't know what the fascination is, to be honest. I read an article the other day, by a designer who said: "beware of the thrill of the new, if it is always to the detriment of exploring what you already have to the fullest, to sit back and see what is working and what is not and try to develop methodically". I ignore that like some kind of drawing crackhead and dive right in and create. It may be the wrong way to go but it's that initial spark from pencil to paper that gets me every time. When I was young it was exactly the same, I just liked creating the character, I've only ever really attempted a full sequential comic on very few occasions. My mum hates

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and enough skill early on to keep me interested. I know so many people that were great at drawing at school and just ditched it. The line between interest and passion is so slight, a lot of luck and hard work is involved in lifting it out of the realm of hobbyist.

Your art seems to be strongly rooted in fantasy, can you talk about this?

I gathered my initial inspiration from comic books and they are inherently fantastical, but as well as comics, I absolutely love film. If I am not listening to music whilst working, I will go for a film. I put a DVD on in the background and every so often I lift my head and watch something visual going on; it stimulates me. I don't even need to be keeping track of what is going on, but that too is fantasy. Music, movies, comics. It's all fantasy. So it must inform my work at a subconscious level. I never sit down and say: 'this is going to make sense' or not, it goes where it goes, of its own volition. I remember when I was young though, I hated still life sessions and it's to my own detriment I never really engaged with the reality in front of me in those situations. I was bored with the reality and wanted to imagine instead, so I always strayed away and drew what I wanted. I am grateful that when I was young my teachers were

best story in the world, but the art is bad or the inking is bad or the colour sucks, it drops down in my estimation. The purest successes are when it covers all the bases at once.

Sorry I have strayed from your question a little there, soapboxing about comics. Right, well I do like to create characters and inform myself of what they may be like, or where they may be from. I always create a backstory as though I was creating them for a movie or storybook. I think it helps to keep me interested and also it helps me to come up with new situations to put them in. I do a lot of straight-up posed character pieces as the creation of a new character is something I love, but if I think they are strong enough I will want to paint/draw them over and over. It is more engaging for me to be able to have that 'behind the scenes' information to hopefully make the final works more interesting. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't; but I do do it a lot. It's entirely fantastical. It's the frustrated animator inside of me. If I could afford the time to learn how to be a great animator I would do my own stories in a heartbeat.

You mentioned never having been keen on drawing still life but have you always had a strong focus on

the fact that I still have most of these character sheets stored at her house, nearly everything I ever drew from 11 to 19. Reams of paper dating back from then and the stuff I have in my own home that is present, there are sheets and sheets of characters. One day they would make the most amazing stop frame time lapse, to see a style develop from young to old.

Where did the desire to draw them come from, are they ever inspired by real people?

The desire was always there, I don't remember ever, in my whole life, getting bored of drawing; I've been frustrated loads of times, but never bored. I've had some bad exam results in other subjects at school because of drawing, but it's all I ever wanted to do. When it was freezing outside in the winter I would stay at home and draw, sitting downstairs with my folks while they watched TV I wasn't interested in, when I was on holiday I'd be drawing, I don't remember a time when I didn't want to draw. It's still fun now; my purest thrill comes from sketching freely. I don't know if I would be saying the same thing if I had got a regular job after college as I think you need time to progress. I notice my style developing all

the time, it's still my passion. In answer to the second part of the question, no, I never aim for real likenesses. In fact I think I struggle trying to capture the essence of real people. You can look at my girls and see them as good representations of the human form, they are instantly recognisable as such, but start applying the same design rules to a normal face and it all goes wrong. The limbs are too thin, the hands and feet are too big, the eyes are way too big width-wise and they are right on the side of the face. It's been developed through hours of drawing that they look right to me, but it's so far from what we actually look like, it's odd.

Are you influenced by anime and Japanese culture? I think I am more influenced or maybe more interested in the place itself and how its culture has developed, though I do love that there is a really strong love of comics and animation that has pushed its Western contemporaries to produce stronger work. There is no shame attached to either comics or animation in Japan, you see businessmen and kids sitting side by side on the trains both reading comics. I have only ever been lucky enough to go once and it did leave an indelible influence on my work. It's an amazing, crazy place – culture clashes everywhere.

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You get that sense of a place that is like *Bladerunner* – futuristic and ancient at the same time, right next to each other in some districts. That's the bit I think is most apparent in my work. For some time now I have been obsessed with the idea of characters that are out of place and from another time, but thrust into the modern world. It started with the *Dead Japanese Ghost Girl Warriors*; they are these ancient girls who are reborn in the Tokyo of today, so they immediately try to assimilate with the girls of today, even though they are walking skeletons. They buy the latest clothes and have braces on their teeth to correct them for the modern beauty ideal of the perfect smile. I have them adorn their swords with little charms and they love new pop music and all that comes with it. I know that a lot of anime has an obsession with cutesy and overly sexualised looking characters and my girls were a reaction to that in some way. I didn't want them to be cute in the same way. I wanted them to have

personality and be tough, but also be a little on the dark side. I was pushing against my frustrations with some of my paintings at the time. I decided to look at old woodblock prints for inspiration which were all washes made in inks and simple line drawings, again trying to mix the old and new.

I know it's a touch off topic, but after mentioning animation, moving image and old/new mixed together; if you have ever seen the anime *Tekkon Kinkreet* that is my ideal combination of art and animation coming together to make something beautiful. It's very different from most traditional anime and it's just rich in every detail. The characters are anti-anime almost, they are twisted and angular, there is no real softness to any of the shapes. The background watercolours are so beautiful, every inch of it is designed to perfection. It's also Japan through the eye of a Westerner in Michael Arias, I think his view of the original Manga and that cultural cross referencing makes for a very interesting outcome. Something similar to what I am aiming for, I think.

What about the animals with human characteristics and vice versa that are present in your work? Animals are just great, form-wise, they have such strange shapes within their structure

that it's nice to play around with them. Plus they are beautiful, inherently – all animals have a brilliant design to them. Even in the UK, the wildlife is stunning, be it a fox, kingfisher, red admiral butterfly or ladybird, it's like a designer got a brief to make something beautiful and out they popped. What I love about birds is the shape, their silhouette; I've painted them for years. You can recognise a bird's shape from a distance, more than most other creatures. So with such an easily definable shape, you can go mad within that and add so many details and colours, but it still looks like a bird. It's like therapy when I paint them, they are so nice to paint as there is no pressure once the shape is defined; you can just play with paint and see where it goes. The newer, more humanised animals are being put towards a book/series I have been working on for myself.

What is your biggest challenge as an artist? Paint. If my hands could paint what my mind sees, I would be

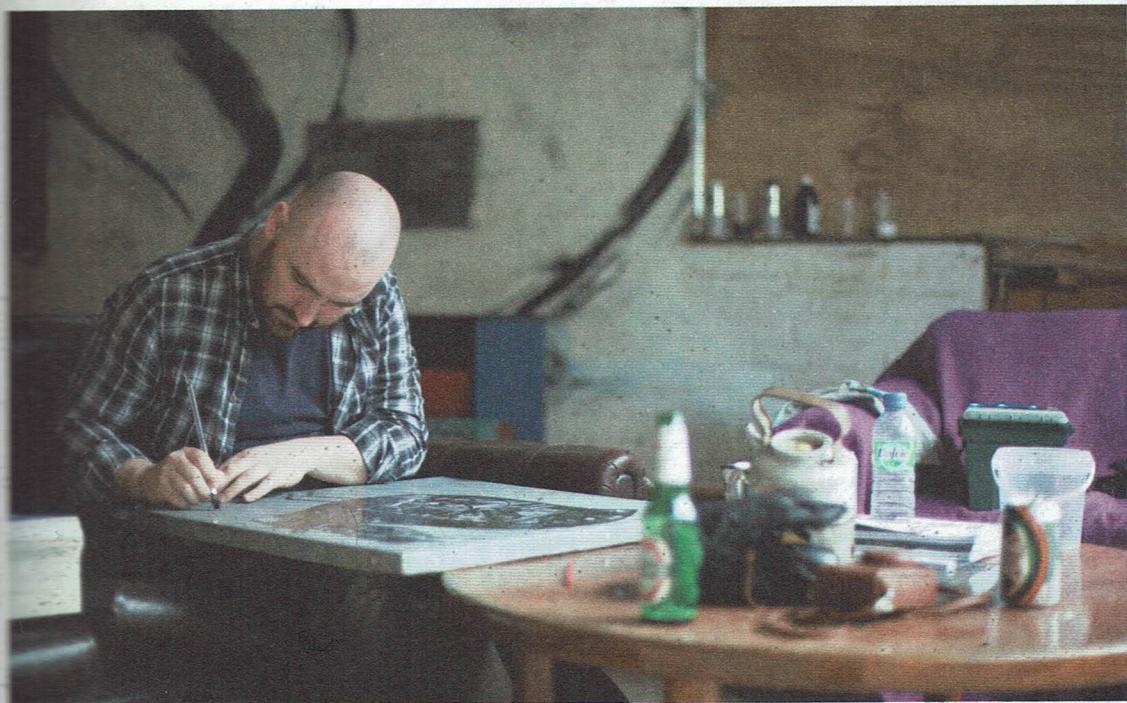
a happy man. I love seeing beautiful painted works. When I look at James Jean's work I think that he is someone who is similar to me, in that he comes from a figurative comic-book-inspired background, or interest at least and he has this pure craft to his line and pencil work – it's mind-blowing and he can back it up with a flawless painting technique. It's staggering. If I could paint and draw as well as him I would die a happy man. I think in the graffiti world I see a lot of similarities with him and Arys, I love how he paints and the scale he's working at on the streets recently is ridiculous. I love his colour and characters too, if I could use cans I would want to be able to do it in a similar way to him.

One other challenge is when your work enters the galleries. I wonder if I have what it takes in this environment. I consider a lot of my work to be style over substance and I don't take that as an insult. I am not a conceptual artist with an undercurrent of sneer. My work is what it is, just striving for simple beauty, I think. I like the aesthetic to be clean, simple and striking, with good use of colour but it's basically a traditional illustrative look. There is no groundbreaking to be had in my work, it's just about making beautiful images. Well, beautiful to me at least which may

be my undoing in the gallery side of things. To get to that point where you are selling your work for large sums and living off that solely. Maybe I should be exploring these things, rallying against it, making stuff ugly. I see works that are technically very out there, and may have an interesting viewpoint or highlight an interesting topic for discussion, but it all leaves me cold if there is no beauty in it. It may be the way to grow and I do think about it, but then I just want to sit and draw a girl flying through the air with a huge sword and it all falls apart.

You just mentioned Arys and the graffiti side of things, do you ever take your work to the streets?

Nope. It's weird. It might be my need to want to sit down and draw something just how I want it. I can't imagine you get the time to luxuriate on anything you do on the street. I imagine with one eye over your shoulder it's difficult. Maybe I am just too lazy. I have had a crack with spray paint and I have never been able



to master control. If I had, maybe I would feel the urge.

You've done work for clients including Disney and Coca-Cola, do you prefer this directional work or producing your own free-thinking images? In truth I am split fifty-fifty between work for others and work for myself. I think that it's nice to have that. I am not lucky enough at present to rely solely on commissions or gallery show sales. They are great to be involved with and you can paint whatever you like and that's sometimes a blessing and a curse. But I have always been a commercial illustrator, I suppose. I started my career straight out of college doing concept work and illustrations for others. I have no problems with it, though I am sure other artists may see it as a problem. Like it's selling out, but I was an illustrator first and I enjoy a lot of what I do. I still don't think the term 'artist' instead of 'illustrator' is appropriate to me. I think I draw with paint rather than paint with paint, if you know what I mean. Obviously you can get jobs you hate working commercially, but it's still me drawing for a living and I still gain immense satisfaction from that. Plus there is plenty of overlap in projects where the company has sought you out specifically, the trust is higher and you aren't given as many restraints. I am also getting paid by people to develop my own skills and characters too, lots of

preliminary sketch work I have produced for companies has been knocked back for being a bit too out-there. I will use it for myself later and I like that, if it's not right for the middle-of-the-road-side of commercial work, it has got a little bit more about it, that's always worth exploring. Most of my strongest personal work has come from rejected development on other jobs. I love that.

You're involved in the latest installment of Supremebeing's White Canvas Project. What's that been like for you? A joy. I was a little bit trepidatious when I was asked initially, I did a bit of research on the project's previous installments and thought that the standard of work and artists involved were amazing (read 'intimidating') so much so that I started thinking: 'why have they asked me?' In the end it was Dave, the guy who runs things, who convinced me. I spoke with him on the phone for half an hour and just thought he sounded like a lovely, straight-talking, passionate guy. 'Come and join a load of really respected artists whose work you like, in a lovely part of the country, painting on anything you find, while being fed and watered.' It was such a laugh in the end too and I met some great guys. All those nerves turned into good vibes. It was great and I would do it again in a shot. I can't wait to see the film that was made and the people I made friends

with again in October when the exhibition is launched. The whole thing was, like I say, a joy.

How do you see your art progressing? Hopefully I can better my painting technique, experiment a little more, start nailing things I have struggled with, plus I really want to get something animated. Whether it be a short or work on a full feature, I'm game. I have been looking at some traditional animation techniques to start having a dabble. The problem is it's SO time consuming, but the results can be well worth it – if you have never checked David O'Reilly's work I urge you to do so. He takes something that may look unrefined and uses it till it becomes the style and it's so good. Like animation Chris Morris would write for. Maybe I will go that route.

What's next after The White Canvas Project? This is a bit of a secret, so I won't go into the details, but I am trying my hand at writing for the first time. I am trying to write a series for an animation idea I have had for a while, whether I manage that is another matter. I am involved in a couple of local Manchester projects and have had some show invites from the States come through recently, an interior paint job for a new venue in London, some record sleeves and a few other fingers in pies. Let's hope it stays busy.