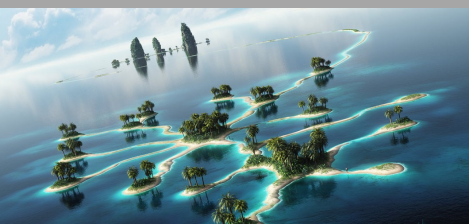SCIENCE FICTION ARTIST IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Digital Art
LIVE

THE FUTURE OCEANS ISSUE

ARTUR ROSA

SAMUEL DE CRUZ

MATT NAVA

TWENTY-EIGHT
APRIL 2018

VUE • TERRAGEN • POSER • DAZ STUDIO • REAL-TIME 3D • 2D DIGITAL PAINTING • 2D/3D COMBINATIONS
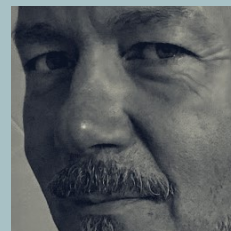
ARTUR ROSA

We visit Portugal, to talk with a master of the Vue software, **Artur Rosa**. Artur talks with *Digital Art Live* about his love of the ocean, his philosophy of beauty, and the techniques he uses to make his pictures.

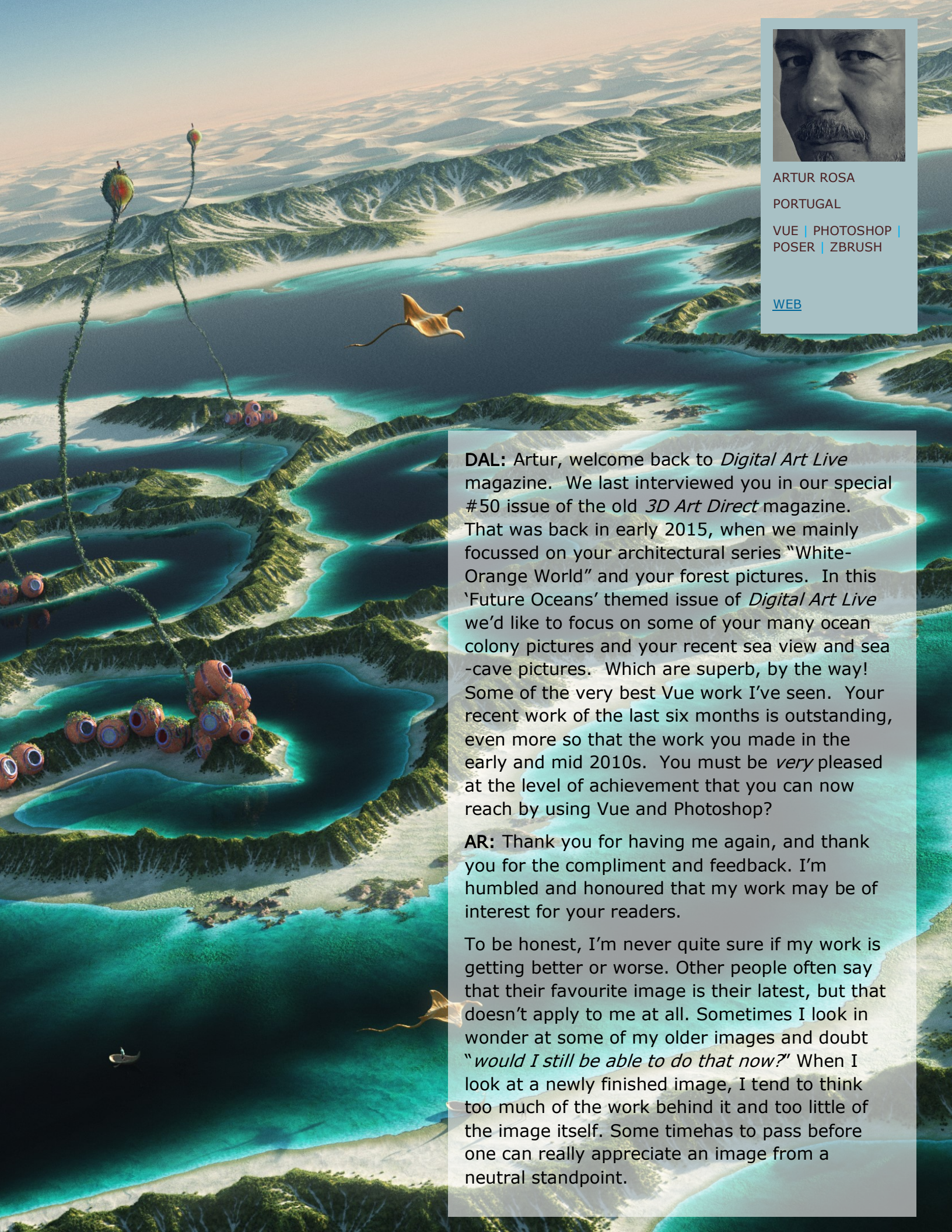artur rosa

Picture: "The Sentinels"

ARTUR ROSA

PORTUGAL

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WEB

DAL: Artur, welcome back to *Digital Art Live* magazine. We last interviewed you in our special #50 issue of the old *3D Art Direct* magazine. That was back in early 2015, when we mainly focussed on your architectural series "White-Orange World" and your forest pictures. In this 'Future Oceans' themed issue of *Digital Art Live* we'd like to focus on some of your many ocean colony pictures and your recent sea view and sea-cave pictures. Which are superb, by the way! Some of the very best Vue work I've seen. Your recent work of the last six months is outstanding, even more so that the work you made in the early and mid 2010s. You must be *very* pleased at the level of achievement that you can now reach by using Vue and Photoshop?

AR: Thank you for having me again, and thank you for the compliment and feedback. I'm humbled and honoured that my work may be of interest for your readers.

To be honest, I'm never quite sure if my work is getting better or worse. Other people often say that their favourite image is their latest, but that doesn't apply to me at all. Sometimes I look in wonder at some of my older images and doubt "*would I still be able to do that now?*" When I look at a newly finished image, I tend to think too much of the work behind it and too little of the image itself. Some timehas to pass before one can really appreciate an image from a neutral standpoint.

With time, the memory of the "labour" fades and only the enchantment remains.

You mentioned Photoshop, but my images are 99.99% Vue and 0.01% Photoshop. I still use a very old version of Photoshop, which is enough for me. I basically use it to sign my name, sometimes correct small errors, tiny adjustments in colour and add a bit of glow in some highlights. I spend perhaps 10 to 15 minutes in Photoshop per image, sometimes less. I see this time more as a chore, not as a part of the creation process. The creation happens mostly in the shower — where most of my images are first born in my mind — and the rest in Vue. Where experiment and happy accidents may show me a different direction.

DAL: I see. Have you changed your workflow or tools at all, to be able to reach that level? In 2015 you were using Vue 2015 and GeoControl 2 (now World Creator) — is that still the case?

AR: I recently added WorldMachine (WM) to my toolbox. Although WM is fantastic, I actually still frequently use a very old version of GeoControl 2. For example, to create dunes or simulate rivers — it's easy to manually create rivers in WM, but you can't simulate them by planting water springs on some mountain top and just let the water flow and naturally carve the terrain, like GC2 can. I also use xFrog 3.5 for plants – it's simple, reliable and fast. And, of course, now I use Vue Infinite 2016.

DAL: Yes, Vue 2016 was quite a improvement — faster rendering and stability is always welcome — and we had had five good patches on top, to get to Vue 2016 R5 — which offers faster loading of saved scenes. It was great to see such a fine tool get a solid overhaul like that. And, of course, Vue 2016 still interfaces perfectly with Poser 11 — readers can find in-depth reviews of both in the free *Digital Art Live* back-issues. Let's just hope that the recent troubles with the E-on website are fixed soon. Luckily I only lost a couple of license-locked Cornucopia models and ecosystems. How did those events affect you?

AR: I don't even know if I lost anything, because I don't use content from Cornucopia nowadays. All the ecosystems I use are made by myself and the few Vue native plants I use are the stock ones, which ship with every Vue version. I mainly use those as fillers). The "hero" plants in my pictures are usually xFrog or some models from Evermotion. Or ivy from the old IvyGenerator. By the way, you mentioned Poser 11, but in fact I still use a rather old version of Poser, not the new one. The Poser version I use is from the time when it belonged to eFrontier.

DAL: Wow, yes that is old. Pre- Smith Micro.

AR: I just realised this is the fifth time I mentioned I use old versions of software… Photoshop, GC2, xFrog, Poser, IvyGenerator. In fact, with the exception of Vue, all of the other software I use is very old — all of the versions I have are 10 or 15 years old. They are just accessories to my workflow and they keep on working just fine, so I don't replace them.

DAL: Ok, let's turn to this issue's 'Future Oceans' theme. You obviously have a strong interest in the ocean, sea-caves, underwater structures and ocean-world colonies. Once can see the theme coming through strongly in your early 2007 picture "The Colony" for instance. Could you outline how these various ocean themes emerged for you, how it progressed and changed over time, and what keeps you interested in it?

AR: The ocean evokes in me a sense of wonder, beauty, mystery, power… 'What secrets does it hide? How can it be so immense and powerful?'

I often take strolls by the ocean and frequently, and somewhat surprisingly, I find myself smiling while I'm doing it, for no apparent reason. It makes me feel good, it calms me, takes my mind away from mundane things. It makes everything else look small and insignificant by comparison. It restores mundane problems to its proper scale. I guess this is why I include so many oceans in my images, it somehow brings back these feelings. After all, making images is just a hobby to take my mind away from mundane things, so it fits together perfectly.

DAL: Thanks for that. Your ocean structures sometimes offer accompanying texts, explaining what the structures are and how they would work. For instance, the picture "The Colony of Sigma Draconis" you talked about how these idyllic colony islands would be engaged in

collecting a "vast amount of mineral resources in the bottom of the ocean", and would be mining colonies as well as being floating towns. What sort of back-stories have you been writing recently for your work, or what sort of non-fiction has been inspiring your art lately?

> "I pursue beauty, not realism. The pursuit of realism is a finite road, the pursuit of beauty is an infinite freeway. When you pursue realism, once you've reached it, that's it, there's nothing beyond — end of the road."

AR: Apart from occasional scientific articles to remain updated with the latest discoveries in physics and cosmology, I don't read non-fiction. For non-fiction I have the real world, that's non-fiction enough for me. I do read lots of science-fiction, though, which provides me an escape from the real world. I can't explain this properly, but most of the times, I don't *verbalize* the back-stories of my images. A back-story pops up in my head in a few seconds, but without words behind it. It's just a concept or a sequence of concepts, but with no words or images, just pure thoughts. Sorry, I'm not that good in words to be able to verbalize a process that happens without words…

DAL: That's ok. I can understand what you mean there. I'm writing a book on Tolkien, and he talks about much the same process.

AR: In some of my recent images, I did try to verbalize a very small part of that back-story. But it's really a very small part and I simplify it when I write it. I included them in the description of those images, in DeviantArt. In other cases, that verbalisation takes the form of a poem, which is much more fitting.

Some people have called some of my images "visual poetry". Apart from being a wonderful compliment, it's also interesting because I see a poem as something between prose and image. A common saying is that an image is worth a thousand words. I think a poem is equally powerful. In just a few verses, you can leave in the minds of the reader the seeds for a whole world of concepts, very much like an image can.

DAL: "Visual poetry" is a fine description. Now, you mentioned a moment ago that you read a lot of science fiction. Have you encountered any fictional stories of the 'future ocean' that you've been especially impressed by?

AR: Not specifically about 'future oceans' but I did recently read a book by Nathan Van Coops, titled *Faster than Falling*, which takes place mostly in the air. The native alien races to that world behave in the air very much like humans behave in an ocean — they live there, they float, they travel, they take their food from there. Their cities are like islands, but in the air instead of water. It may sound strange when it's described in this simplistic way but the author did a wonderful job in making it very believable. That did impress me and inspire me a lot.

DAL: Sounds great. Do you have a 'future timeline' in mind, along which your pictures sit? Do you, for instance, think to yourself: "Ah now, that picture is in the year 3799 on my timeline"?

AR: No, I don't often verbalize my stories, much less put a number on them. I just let my mind flow, unmoored from time and space. But I do have a concept of "before" and "after".

DAL: I see. To go back to your tools for a moment. You model your original architecture in SketchUp. And then bounce the shapes back and forth between Vue and SketchUp. Could you tell us more about the workflow on that? Is there a plugin that helps with doing that?

AR: Again, I use a really old version of SketchUp, still from the times it belonged to Google. There's no plugin for transfer. SketchUp exports its shapes in OBJ format, I then import the OBJ directly into Vue, or into Zbrush, if it needs refinements). When I refresh the OBJ file from SketchUp or Zbrush, Vue 'senses' that an imported object has a new version and imports it again, to the exact same place I had it placed before. It's a great feature. So, I go back and forth like this. It's a really simple process.

I like simple processes. They're reliable and fast.

DAL: Fascinating. And of course SketchUp also has something to offer to those who don't want to model, as the free 3D Warehouse website element of it has a vast amount of royalty-free kit-bash content that can be broken apart and recombined. Not as quick as buying "off the shelf" from DAZ or Renderosity or HiveWire etc, but a more creative and unique way of getting a sci-fi model without actually modelling at the level of making one's own shapes. Have you

artur rosa

Picture: "Colony of Virgo":

considered an "Artur Primitives Pack" containing your cool modular 3D elements and sci-fi shapes, that people could then combine into their own new models?

AR: It's a fact that the '3D Warehouse' is huge and I downloaded several things from there, but I think I never used anything. Maybe parts of one or two objects, I'm not sure. I may get *inspiration* from it, but in the end I make my own thing. It's much more rewarding.

Actually, yes, I've often thought of putting some of my assets for sale — objects, materials, even whole scenes. But then I think – would I like to see them used in other people's work? If someone included them in images containing violence, religion or some reference to certain beliefs (astrology and the like), the answer would be a clear 'no'. I would never want my things associated with these horrible concepts that diminish human-kind. The money is not worth it.

DAL: Yes, I can see that might be a danger. You mentioned that Zbrush also feature in your workflow, I think? With Poser for the figures?

AR: Yes, like I said, I use a really old version of Poser, in a very basic manner, just for quickly creating humans or animals. I spend very little time there. I may refine their clothes a bit in Zbrush. Again, I never updated it, even though the updates are free, I still use a very old version because the old one works just fine for me. I also use MarvelousDesigner (MD), for cloth simulation. Again, it's a very old version, I think version 2. In fact, most of the times, these three tools are part of a workflow — I pose the human in Poser, export it to MD as an 'avatar', dress them up there, do a cloth simulation, export it from MD into Zbrush, refine the object there and finally import it into Poser again. This can be iterated several times.

In the end, I export the whole set into Vue. I've been doing this exact same flow for years, with the exact same tools and process. Again: simple, fast and reliable.

DAL: Thanks. That all sounds very robust. And in terms of then making the scene you're a strong believer in non-realistic lighting. To those considering making an ocean picture, that may seem counter-intuitive. "Surely", they might think, "one needs hyper-realistic lighting for an ocean scene?" What are the reasons why you prefer non-realistic lighting?

AR: I pursue beauty, not realism. The pursuit of realism is a finite road, the pursuit of beauty is an infinite freeway. When you pursue realism, once you've reached it, that's it, there's nothing beyond. You've reached the end of the road. You can play a bit in the end of the road, experiment

somewhat, but you can't go much further. For me, that's boring. If you want realism, you can just take a walk on the beach and take a photo.

The pursuit of beauty is a never-ending creative freeway – there's always something more beautiful you can create and the path is much wider. You will never reach the absolute beauty, because it just doesn't exist.

Anyway, one must also realise that reality is often stranger than fiction. Imagine you live in a small English rural town in the 14th century and you've never seen or heard about *Aurora Borealis*, the "Northern Lights". Imagine you are shown a realistic painting of an *Aurora Borealis* made by a traveller from the far North. You'd say that's a figment of his imagination, that it can't possibly exist in reality…

DAL: Yes, that's true. Though it used to be, before the modern period, that tribal peoples used to judge truth by character. They had little concept of evidence as an independent 'thing'. You'd go to a village as a stranger and say: "There are lights in the sky far to the north of here", and they're reply: "Maybe... but you're a stranger so we can't believe you, even with that picture". After a few years of getting to know you, they'd go: "Now we know for sure that you're a truthful man, so we believe you — even though we doubt the evidence about this rather surprising claim." I guess science fiction 'pictures from the future' have similar hurdles to get over. /*Laughter*/

AR: Reality often surprises us. So, when we talk about "non-realistic" lighting, one must be very careful about the real meaning of "non-realistic". Lighting, and realism, are just tools in my toolbox. As with any other tool, I twist and bend them to suit my needs — the pursuit of beauty. I don't bend them too much, just enough, because a healthy dose of realism is necessary to help 'sell' an image to the viewer, to make it believable. I usually say that I search for that narrow place where real, unreal and surreal briefly meet.

DAL: It certainly works. And it combines well with the fact that you're a superb colourist in your pictures, as well. What inspires you in terms of colour?
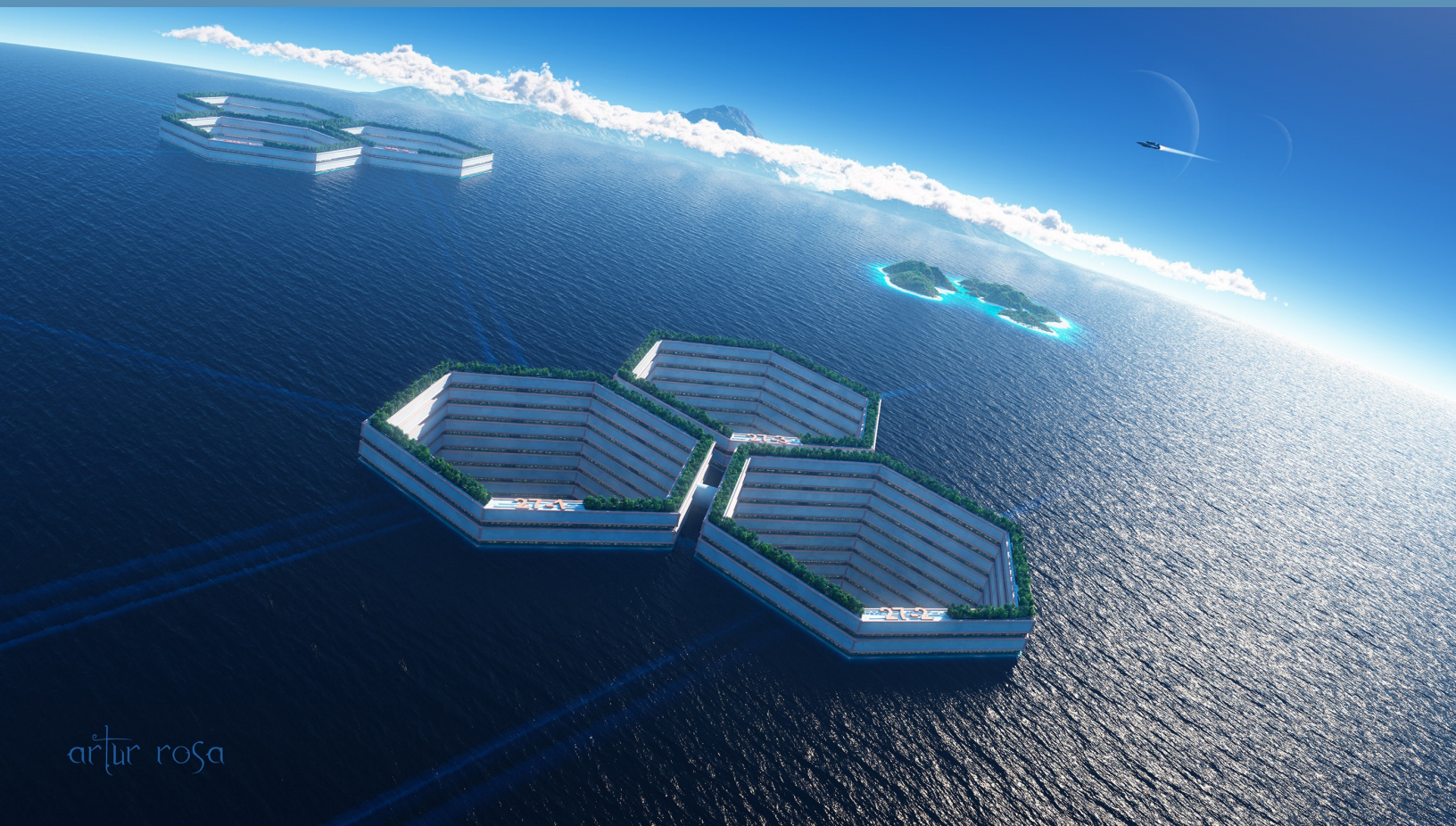
Pictures: "The colony of Sigma Draconis"; and "Archipelago 27". **Overleaf:** "Three Degrees of Freedom".

In our last interview you mentioned the white and orange traditional style of rural buildings in Portugal. Have you since found other colour schemes that may inspire your work in the future?

AR: Interesting you should mention that. My approach to colours has somewhat changed in the last year or so. I've studied colour theories, colour harmony and concepts like 'split complementary', 'triadic', 'tetradic', etc.

depending on what I'm after. Now I choose colours consciously for the image theme, whereas before I just went along with pure instinct. I still have a lot to learn though and instinct still plays the major part.

DAL: Could you step through the "making of" process for a recent masterpiece "Three Degrees of Freedom" [seen below, Ed.], please?

AR: It may not seem so, but such an image in a 3D environment is fairly complex to produce.

So, I usually 'cut the elephant into slices'. I slice it in several sub-projects and then tie them together with the composition. This particular image has perhaps eleven or twelve sub-projects in it. Each sub-project requires a specific workflow of its own, specific tools, etc. For example, this image has a sub-project for the water, another for the cave, another for the vegetation, the woman, the bird, the flocks of birds, the pathway, the rocks in the distance, the water, the planet, the atmosphere. Each of these elements is made separately.

And some of these even have sub-sub-projects! For example, the water has three distinct sub-projects: the water in the cave, the one immediately outside it, and the one in the distance. Each one is made separately, with different methods. The water in the cave was manually modelled, the one outside was a mix of procedural noise and modelling, the one in the distance was just procedural.

The woman has the pose, the skin, the hair and the clothes. The elevated pathway has four distinct parts: the curvature itself, the main element, the reddish border, and the supporting elements. Again, all made separately.

Finally, all of it is part of a composition, a concept, that ties it all together.

Nothing is random in the composition. For example, the curvature of the pathway is designed to go through all of the main elements of the image, so that when the eye follows it, it will go through all the image. It's no accident that the pathway starts in the cave, occupies on the left an otherwise empty quadrant of the image, passing very near the left flock of birds, goes through the woman, the planet, and it's positioned in a precise way to give a good feeling how it's positioned relative to the rocky elements — notice that one supporting element is between the two rocky structures, the second one is after the distant one (this is to provide a sense of scale and relative position of everything).

The pose of the woman is precisely rotated in a way that the light hitting her back will bring out the musculature in the best possible way. I tried many variations. Even the legs are positioned in a way such that both legs are illuminated, even though the light comes from the right — which could cast a shadow on the left leg, if I wasn't careful about it.

Even the camera angle is positioned so that, combined with her pose and skirt, the front side of her skirt is visible. That, again, is not an accident.

The light hitting the left cave wall is there to so as to have some light bouncing off of it and to provide a secondary illumination to the left arm and leg of the woman, and to the left side of the rocks in the centre, all of which would otherwise be in shade — which wouldn't be very interesting. The rocky structures in the distance have a slight curvature, so that it transitions from shade to light as you go right to left, the exact opposite to the light hitting the woman. Contrasts are important. The light hitting the cave wall on the top right corner is made in a way that enhances the rim of each "wrinkle" in the rock, to contrast with the rock cavities. Again, contrasts.

The ivy on the walls is not growing so heavily that it hides the rock details, and is not sparse enough to become uninteresting. I tried many variations, until I found one that highlights the rocks, making them interesting, but doesn't hide them.

DAL: Thanks, that's a wonderfully detailed explaination.

AR: I think deeply about all these things. When I'm making an image, I spend much more time thinking than doing. If you were to sit by my side while I was doing this image, you'd die of boredom! Because most of the time, you'd just see me watching and thinking…

DAL: Which neatly brings me to where you live. You're in coastal Portugal, where the strong sunlight is often very wonderful and inspiring. A great place to just sit and ponder. In contrast to here, in the British Isles — where we have to make do with being inspired by ever-changing weather effects which usually preclude sunlight. How are things there in Portugal, these days? I get the hazy impression that the country had an especially bad time in the Great Recession and

that compounded by some bad choices about how to deal with it. But we don't hear much from Portugal these days. Has the nation's digital art and animation scene survived and come through those bad times?

AR: The country is now recuperating very well from the recession. The economy is now growing at a good pace, our deficit is decreasing, exports are on a steady rise, tourism is booming like never before. In fact, millions of your fellow countrymen come here every year, although the currency exchange-rate isn't helping. Our country was recently awarded the third most peaceful country in the world — after Iceland and New Zealand. The World Travel Awards recently recognized Portugal as the best touristic destination in the world. I'm very optimistic about the country now.

DAL: Ah, that's *very* good news. Brilliant.

> "Somehow, it seems that buried deep inside an image, there's another one waiting to come out, I just have to find it. Many of my images are born like this — I look at an image I made and "bang!", I see another one crying to come out."

AR: Though I'm not sure about the digital art and animation scene here. It was never something that was very strong here. More a bit of a niche, I'd say. There are some strong names — like Andreas Rocha — but I think they work mostly for projects abroad. I don't think there's a community of digital artists here *per se*. At least, I never met another digital artist here, to be honest. Only on DeviantArt I met some, but never physically.

DAL: I see. And I think you're based outside the cities, am I right? You're very near water, near the sea, in where you live and work? I read in the book *Vue 7: from the ground up* (Focal, 2009) that "he lives near the sea". But is that

still the case, and could you describe the sorts of terrains and views that you enjoy from your studio window?

AR: Yes, I live in a small town. My house is around a half mile from the seashore, just a five minute walk. It's a really nice beach too, very wide, with clean thin white sand, some nice dunes to decorate the landscape, a lighthouse in the distance, some seagulls flying above the waves... During the Summer, it's full of tourists. But in the rest of the year, I have it all for me. I can walk for an hour and see absolutely no one. Just perfect.

DAL: Wow, sounds wonderful. And sun, too!

AR: Yes, Portugal is the country in Europe with the biggest number of sunshine hours, albeit according to Wikipedia.

DAL: Ah yes, don't we all love Wikipedia. So trustworthy... not. *[Laughter]*

AR: Still, we do enjoy lots of sun, even when the summer's gone.

DAL: That sounds great. Given the quality of your body of work at 2018, and its connection with the local landscape and seascape, have you had any interest from local galleries and museums? For big 24" prints, for instance? If I were your local museum curator, I would definitely be looking at your latest work and immediately ordering a set of 24 fine-art prints for the museum archives.

AR: Unfortunately, digital art is usually frowned upon here, by normal art galleries. It's a prejudice that is hard to vanquish. That, together with sci-fi themes — also not terribly popular here — makes it a bad combination. Although, to be honest, I have never contacted any local art galleries and so they probably don't even know I exist. But your question made me think maybe I should do something about it, thanks for that.

DAL: My pleasure. Which artists and/or writers are inspiring you, these days?

AR: Interestingly, lately I've been going back more and more to classics like Roger Dean, Rodney Matthews and Michael Whelan, the ones whose work filled my teenage bedroom walls.

Other than that, I don't really have preferred artists, I occasionally like to wander around Pinterest and DeviantArt, with no clear path or preference.

DAL: Yes, serendipity and DeviantArt are a wonderful combination, providing one has a can of Cute Pony Repellent™ to hand. But, going back to your own work…. you have a sense of what might be termed "calm optimism for the future" in your work. Which I like. We see and hear way too much pessimism and gloom from the establishment media and also from science-fiction dystopias, and it really isn't justified in terms of either the recent past or the likely future. As people like Matt Ridley (*The Rational Optimist*) and others have ably shown with hard statistics in their non-fiction books. Where does your own optimism come from? Is it something in your upbringing, your education, your culture? Or from somewhere else?

AR: Let me answer with the opposite question: why would someone like to think of the future as a horrible, dark, ugly, dirty, violent place? I don't understand it. Where's the joy and fun in imagining a future like this? Who would want to live in a dystopian society like the one depicted in Orwell's novel *1984*, for example? Who even feels pleasure in imagining ugly, violent, oppressive or depressing places? This is incomprehensible to me. It feels almost sick.

I read many science fiction books during my life. During my teenage years some of my favourites were Isaac Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke and Robert Heinlein. All of these had a positive view of the future, in general. I also enjoyed *Star Trek*, which had a really optimistic view of the future society.

I had to see *Blade Runner* and read *1984*, for example, as the cultural references they were and still are, but I took no pleasure from it. The lessons I took from those experiences were profound and it became really obvious that these kinds of society are exactly the ones I would never like to live in. Who would? If nobody would, why depict it in art? And who likes it?... And why?... I can't understand it, I just can't… Why show death and ugliness if you can show life and beauty?

Interestingly, the more I grow older, the more intense these feelings grow in me. I know I wasn't so extreme before, looking at some of the images I made many years ago, but now I can't even understand why I made those images. It seems I was hesitant or lost, trying to find my way. I guess I finally did.

DAL: I see. Where do you see your work progressing toward in the next decade? For instance, might it come together in a big pictures + stories and timelines artbook, perhaps? So that there is a sort of unified 'future history' timeline along which the pictures sit, each with its own backstory?

AR: That is not out of the question, in fact. I have many series, I made many sequels and prequels. Somehow, it seems that buried deep inside an image, there's another one waiting to come out, I just have to find it. Many of my images are born like this — I look at an image I made and "bang!", I see another one crying to come out. So, yes, in a way, there is a hidden future-timeline buried in many of the images. And there's definitely a back-story, even if not verbalized. Maybe it'll come out some day, not as one story but as a collection of stories. But I really don't know, at the moment. Regarding images, I don't plan what I'll do next, I just go with the flow, whatever flows from my mind.

DAL: Great. Well, thanks very much for this in-depth interview. We wish you well, and urge all reader to visit your DeviantArt gallery and "Follow".

AR: Thank you very much for your insightful questions, it was really interesting and while thinking about the answers I discovered a bit more about myself. I wish all the best for your magazine.

DAL: Thank you.

AR: I thank you. It was my pleasure.

Artur Rosa is online at:

https://arthurblue.deviantart.com/

Pictures: "Layers of Impossibiity"; and "Across the Sea of Tears".

artur rosa

artur rosa

Picture: "My Palace by the sea".