

User Profile - Scott Brisbane

"VUE is just an essential part of our work-flow here. Every time I show people what I do with it they go "that's amazing!""

Scott Brisbane, DreamWorks Animation.



A few example of movies in which Scott used VUE

Please meet Scott Brisbane, currently Head of Matte Painting at DreamWorks Animation. His credits include "The Croods", "How to Train your Dragon 2", "Avatar", "Shrek 3 & 4", "Kung Fu Panda", "Over the Hedge", "Flushed Away", and a lot more. In addition to Dreamworks, Scott has worked at Weta Digital, Rythm & Hues and Matte World Digital.

Scott also teaches VUE classes at StudioArts, and is regularly part of the 3D Environment Competition judges squad.

E-on: Can you tell us a bit about yourself and what lead you to 3G in general?

Scott Brisbane: My background was in arts, I was into makeup effects and that kind of thing like Rick Baker and Stan Winston. Eventually I started making my own movies in high school. That led to me going to film school at USC here in LA. I started to focus more on film making as opposed to makeup effects and this was back in the 90s so there wasn't a lot of digital film, everything was photo-chemical/optical. There wasn't a lot of Visual FX classes either so I ended up focusing on cinematography and graduated with that. I worked in the industry for a bit and fell into editing, then I realized I didn't want to do that. You know you kind of just take the first job that comes along so I ended up as an assistant editor for a couple of years.

I went back to school and focused on what I really wanted to do, this was around 2000 when Visual FX was pretty established. I attended the Academy of Arts University in San Francisco where Ronn Brown (a pretty well known visual matte painter) was director of Graduate Studies and taught the first ever Digital Matte Painting class. Caroleen "Jett" Green ("E.T.", "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom", etc) was a guest lecturer and



chose one of my final projects to be featured at a Starbucks around the corner from the Academy of Art (I later worked with Jett at Matte World and at Dreamworks when Ronn asked us to start the Matte Painting Department there in 2005). Ronn brought Craig Barron, the co-founder of Matte World, to the show. Barron saw my work and loved it so he found me and gave me an interview. That's how I got my first job!



It all started with this image!



After Midnight - Personal Project



Scott painted this 1920's Erie Canal shot while at Matte World

That's crazy!

SB: Yeah I kind of feel like it was meant to happen, it wasn't forced it was a natural progression for me. That's how this whole career has been, it didn't come easy I had to work hard and put a lot of effort into it. You just work with a lot of people, they like your work and it snowballs into a career. I guess I'm just glad I ran into Ronn Brown.

Matte World was also an invaluable experience where I was mentored by Craig Barron and Chris Evans ("Return of the Jedi", "Willow", etc) for 3 years before moving to LA to start the Matte Painting Department with Jett and Ronn.



VUE environments in Croods

So you've turned your hobbies into a career for yourself and you've been pretty successful.

SB: Exactly its a weird dynamic because matte painting is such an interesting craft, it combines so many things. Its not just painting, there's digital painting, photography, CG renders and things like that but you also have to understand camera lenses, lighting, and composition. All of these things combine and then there's the other side of having 3D skills. You have to have an understanding of nature, light and atmosphere. I had an artistic background from when I was a kid and then learning photography and cinematography lead me to the photographic side of it at USC, it all just came together over the years.



Some of Scott's 3D environments made with VUE for Avatar

What was the highlight of your career?

SB: I would say "Avatar". At the time, I didn't know how it would all turn out. I had to go to New Zealand and work on this film everyone had been talking about. I was at Rhythm and Hues at the time and details of the film were top secret but its James Cameron and Weta Digital, how could it not be good? So I decided to go and check it out for 6 months. It was the best experience ever and we hit the ground running. We used VUE, Nuke, and Maya; I had to learn Nuke while I was there but having my background was a great benefit for me. Usually you never know how the movie is going to turn out, but for this movie, once you got there you knew it was going to be a great. The work we had time to do was amazing and the team was good. Cameron was very clear- he was never indecisive, always do what Cameron asks you to do haha. So that was my best experience all around, I still look back and wish I could encapsulate that moment in time.



Avatar environments made by Scott using VUE

You mentioned Rhythm And Hues. You worked on "Cabin in the Woods" and "Land of the Lost" while there. Those are very different movies from "Avatar", so what were the differences when using VUE? what did you enjoy working on more, animated movies or photo-real?

SB: I like both actually. Since I was trained in it, realism comes more natural for me. Making sure it looks real, I think the difficulty of photo-real is what's taken for granted. Its not as easy as everyone thinks. With photo-real, if it looks painted or manipulated at all its a failure as a matte painting but with animation you get away with a lot more. You can push colors but you have to fit the style of the movie.



More movie titles in which Scott used VUE

With photo-real I can hit a target and its not a varying target, its pretty clear: it either looks real or it doesn't. With animation its more subjective like the style "Kung Fu Panda". It is beautiful but you break all the rules of nature because you have green skies and the green skies should influence the the shadows but they don't, the shadows are blue. That's not natural but that's the challenge to make it look right without changing that style. So I like both. Photo-real is more natural to me, I like hitting the target. Creating something that's so believable, people can't even point out what's created, that it all looks like a natural environment. Then there's the animation side where you can push all the colors and accentuate everything in the style that you cant do in photo-real at all.

Switching back and forth did take me time to adjust to. You get typecast in this business like with anything. If you're a TV actor its hard to get into feature films and if you're a feature film matte painter its hard to get into animation because they assume you can't do the animated look. There's a weird stigma with both sides and to cross back over is kind of tricky.



The Croods Jungle - Created with VUE

You've worked with a variety of studios throughout the years but you always come back to DreamWorks, why is that?

SB: The culture and the people at DreamWorks is a huge plus, not to mention the movies. I came back to DreamWorks for "Croods". After working on "Kung Fu Panda 1" with Markus Manninen, The Visual FX Supervisor, he asked me to come back and explained the movie. He described "Croods" as a great opportunity to push matte painting and animation further than we've done before I always like to push things, any opportunity to go further than what we've done, I just jumped at that. I love the studio and everything but I came back for that and I think that film and what it became for us in matte painting was really pushing the boundaries of what we've done, VUE was big part of that.

FYC - THE CROODS



The above trailer shows some of the amazing environments Scott's team created with VUE for The Croods

There are a few shots in there we couldn't do without VUE. One of them was this time-lapse shot that the FX department really didn't have the bandwidth for and the render here is difficult obviously as with most places. There were forests and jungles and

this was a time of day kind of animated sun change within one shot time-lapse, VUE was the solution for that. It ended up being the Director's, Chris Sanders, favorite shot in the movie. The most important shot he wanted in the movie was that shot and VUE was a big part of that.



VUE Environments in the Croods

It was all rendered on our Linux render node farm. It was a 3K render and I believe there was a couple hundred frames I had to leave overnight with the render farm. 3000 pixels wide, and it was all fully animated and lighted. All the clouds were time-lapsed so I did that in VUE, it was pretty great.

So that's why I came back originally but also, in animation, DreamWorks is probably the only studio I know that really embraces matte painting the way they do. Other studios try to render everything and they don't really embrace this creative way to look at environments. They are more literal about the pipeline: model it, surface it, light it, model it, surface it light it. They don't think about how matte painting can contribute and use all the creative techniques we have and creative approaches with different tools like VUE. Instead of having to fully render all the time how about we paint it and project it or we render and sweeten it with matte painting for example. So I think from the beginning we've kind of progressed the reputation of matte painting here at DreamWorks and I think "Kung Fu Panda 1" was a big eye opening moment for them, that was all VUE.



Kung Fu Panda has a huge amount of matte paintings, all rendered with VUE

"Kung Fu Panda 1" was the first time I used VUE in production. That was the first film where it was just a huge amount of matte paintings all rendered with VUE, then painted on top of and then re-projected. That was a pretty solid base, most of the

vegetation was all VUE rendered and that was the first eye opening experience for the studio like "wow we can really do all this stuff with 3 or 4 people in the department as opposed to an army of 40". They keep embracing it and that's why I'm here. Its partly the creativity of films like "How to Train Your Dragon", as long as we are doing those kind of environment movies. That's really appealing to me and challenging, and I can use VUE. Haha, I always like to use VUE.

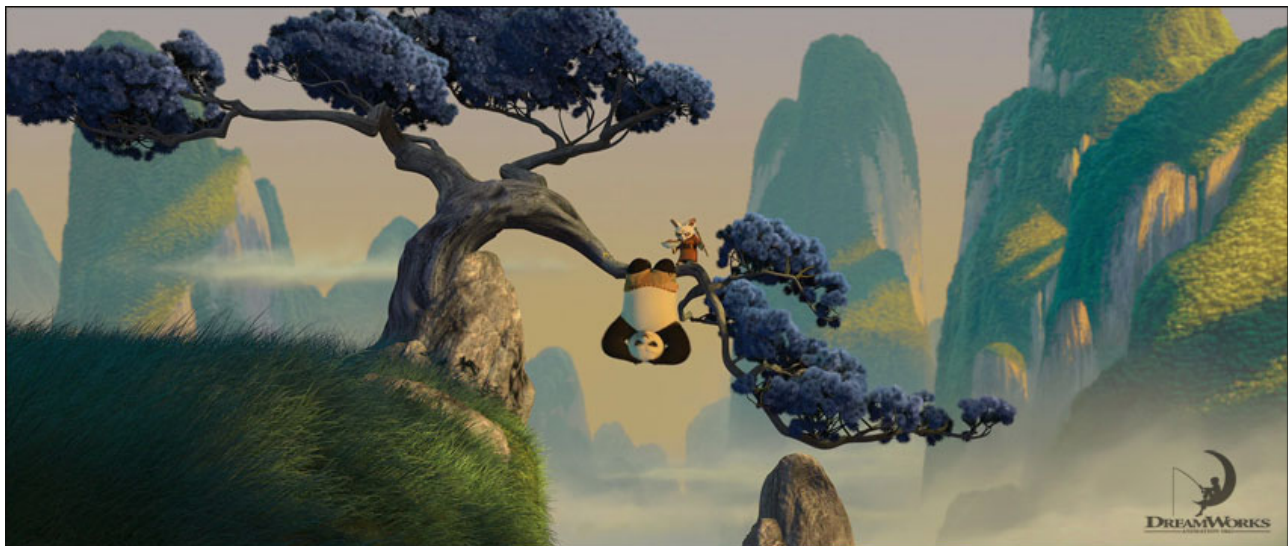


The Croods Coral Fields - Created in VUE

Who brought you to VUE? You said it was during your time on "Avatar"? Was VUE already installed there?

SB: Yeah it was already setup. They did a test to show what kind of mapping you could do for "Avatar" because they had a hard time rendering in Pandora as they usually do with those kinds of things. Brenton Cottman, I think it was, did a test flying over some of the floating mountains in VUE and that convinced to Joe Letteri that we can do these things in matte painting.

I originally found out about VUE from a friend at ILM, Chris Stoski. I knew Chris from when we were both working at Matte World. When I was at DreamWorks Chris had mentioned VUE, he said "Hey I can render all these trees and I don't have to get a photographic reference now, I can light them anyway I want and they look great and I can put them on a painting" That was what they did with the jungles in "Pirates of the Caribbean 2" (Dead Man's Chest). So I lobbied to get that here for "Kung Fu Panda 1". Throughout the movie, there was probably about 13 or 16 different scenes with different times of day so the tricky part was like why don't we just build it like an asset and cover it in foliage and then light it. Then the artist can have the same template every time to start with to modify that so it will look consistent. So that's how I got into VUE originally, from Chris Stoski recommending it.



Great use of VUE EcoSystems in this Kung Fu Panda environment

What do you consider the most fundamental difference between VUE and any other traditional 3D programs or the more traditional matte painting pipe line, where does VUE stand out in there?

SB: Lots of places for me, the biggest thing is the quality of the atmosphere and light. I think the render is really really fantastic in its ability to emulate what nature does. The quality of lighting in the atmosphere is huge, how light diffuses and refracts, I think it looks beautiful. There's no other program I know that does that. The next thing would obviously be the foliage and the ability to manipulate, edit, groom and compose landscapes with VUE using the tools e-on software is developing with scattering plants editing those scatters.

HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON 2 - Official Teaser Trailer



Cloud Sequence in How To Train Your Dragon 2 - Created and Rendered with VUE

Here we are simply art directed all the time and its not just for happenstance, sometimes you get a random thing that looks great but mainly we are very deliberate and art directed. So the ability of VUE to go in and move trees around individually and compose things in 3D is a big plus with those eco-paint tools.

The primary thing we use it for is the quality of atmosphere... and now the clouds! We're using the clouds in "How to Train Your Dragon 2" quite a bit. In that first sequence where they are flying through the clouds that's all VUE based clouds, its half FX but a lot of them are all VUE clouds and you cant tell the difference between the two.



Check out the amount of details in How to Train Your Dragon 2 environments

You sound like you know a lot of the program and all that it can do. How did you train yourself to learn VUE did you find any programs /workshops or did you basically teach yourself?

SB: I think it was a mix. I had just finished working on "Flushed Away" and "Kung Fu Panda" wasn't for another 3 or 4 months so I had some time in between. That's when I just delved into VUE. I cant remember what version, it was either 5 or 4 and that was before there was a lot of the eco-painting tools so I was just trying to master that level of lighting and scattering with plants for "Kung Fu Panda". Since then over the years I've continually gone back to it.

I think I took a class from Dax Pandhi a while back just to push myself to go further with some things and that was definitely helpful but most of my background in VUE is self-trained and of course I watched the tutorials that came with the program but from there I just trained myself.



Above the VUE clouds, in How to Train Your Dragon 2

Do you feel like you still need some training on it?

SB: Oh I think its so deep of a program I could always use some more training. The great thing about VUE are all the different levels of it. On the surface its very user friendly because you can grab things and move them around, it simple. The GUI is well laid out so you can click on buttons and do what you need to do. You don't have to dive in and get very complicated like some other programs. However, if you do want to go deeper control things on a real minute level you can go into the function editor and go really crazy. I think that's why I'm probably not as sophisticated on the highly detailed aspect of stuff, I'm always pushing myself into it though. I'm a pretty proficient user of VUE but I can always get better, its such a neat program.

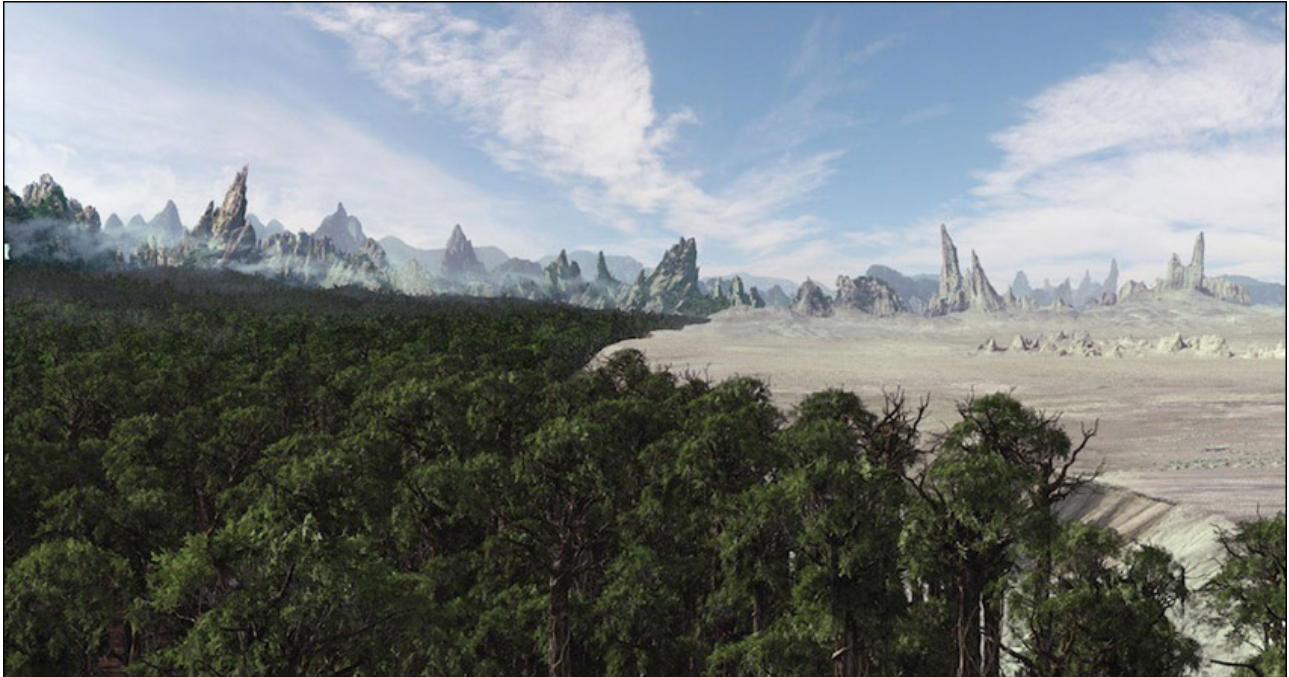


More of Scott's team environments for The Croods and How To Train Your Dragon 2 using VUE

You're teaching a VUE class at StudioArts. Can you give us some information about that?

SB: This is my 3rd class, I've taught two semesters already. The approach of the class is how to use VUE as a tool for digital matte painting. A lot of the artists are coming in from various studios. We had a couple of artists come in from Stargate Studios which is more of a TV house (as opposed to feature film production house), they do a lot of "Walking Dead" and things like that. Also some students from Nickelodeon and lots of different studios. The StudioArts program is not for student level, its a very

professional high level program. The people taking the class are professionals in-between jobs that want to train and pick up new skills.



Scott used VUE EcoSystems, rocks and terrains in this Matte Paintings for Land of the Lost

Could you tell us what your students find the hardest, vs. the easiest. what they like the most what they don't like?

SB: I think what they love the most about it is the interactivity once they get into the GUI, how easy it is to move around VUE and navigate. That's a big plus because you get a lot of artists that don't have a 3D background and I'd say VUE is more user-friendly. You go into Maya or other programs, especially like Z-Brush and they have more complicated interfaces, there's a lot more to know about it. With VUE you can jump in and start doing something right away. The great thing about the render window is the feedback you can get, it's pretty accurate. You see what you're doing as your working and it updates quickly, instant feedback.

They like the eco-painting, that's fun. They are blown away by instancing that many plants and having that much control over it. Lighting is another one, they like that because the quality of the light looks great right away and the atmosphere is always good.



"The Kung Fu Panda style is beautiful but you break all the rules of nature because you have colored skies, which should influence the shadows but they don't" - Scott Brisbane

They struggle with the functions of the more complicated stuff. Sometimes getting into the shaders are complicated for them because they get confused on the basic shader vs. the layered and the eco-system shader. How that whole interface works confuses them. Say it's the eco-system and also mixed material, they sometimes click the tab button up top and reset things by accident instead of clicking below in that little out-liner. So I think that layout is a little confusing for some people, how ... connected.

During this ten weeks class, what are the main topics you cover?

SB: It's an intro class for VUE, the angle and approach of what VUE is good for with matte painting and how to use it. We don't cover animation, its more about using VUE as a tool to create reference or to create a base or even just use VUE fully for the final image depending if its animation or photo-real. So its more of those approaches, showing some animation techniques and some photo-real techniques. It covers all the main areas of VUE, we go through the basics of all the applications in there.



Scott's team used VUE for the Monsters Vs Aliens environments

Could you share your killer tip in VUE, A super secret that you have?

SB: Good question, I don't have a super secret. I have a lot of things that I do all the time, but its not a secret, just a work-flow that I rely on VUE for. One thing I'd say that has been really beneficial for us is the ability to render clouds from above at any angle that we needed, like on "How to Train Your Dragon 2". We usually use photography or we hand paint everything but then it ends up looking hand painted, so we usually have to rely on photography. But, how many times do you have photographers shooting down on clouds? Unless they are jumping out of an airplane you're not going to get that angle. So the ability to use VUE for shooting down on clouds is a huge benefit. Its happened on "Shrek 4" and its happened on "How to Train Your Dragon 2". I think we even used it at Rhythm and Hues. That's huge for me because I don't know how else I'd do it. It has to look tangible and real and not painted and that's what the "Dragon 2" look was. It wasn't as stylistic as "Kung Fu Panda".



"The ability to use VUE for shooting down on clouds is a huge benefit" - Scott Brisbane

Other than that I think I use it primarily for time-lapse, that open shot in "Croods", which I just couldn't have done without VUE. I believe it was used in "Madagascar 3" for this dreamy sequence of time-lapse clouds. The ability to animate clouds in VUE and change the way they recede on and off, naturally forming and moving throughout that's a huge benefit that I don't think any other program can do that quickly with feedback. So we used that on a couple of films now and every time I show people those shots they're like "oh I want a time-lapse shot!" Otherwise they have no idea how they are going to do it because if you shoot

real photography it looks too real or you can try to do it with a really expensive FX solution but its really not as flexible at times. So yeah the time-lapse stuff is one thing we use it for quite a bit. Its just an essential part of our work-flow here. Even for plants, scattering plants or rendering landscapes with plants, its our first go to program for all of that. Also, I think the eco-system tools are amazing, the flexibility of those.

But I don't really have any top secret methods, its just using VUE as part of the work-flow to create imagery and its been great.



"In Kung Fu Panda, most of the vegetation was all VUE rendered and that was the first eye opening experience for the studio!" - Scott Brisbane

Have you tried PlantFactory yet?

SB: We are very eager to test it for our pipeline, how we create foliage at the studio. We have some proprietary tools that we use for plants but those tools aren't as editable as we'd like them to be. We want very deliberately designed/created plants that aren't just randomly generated and Plant Factory seems to be a possibility that would give us the ability to design crazy outrageous plants. Like in "Croods", the trees look very alien so we had to model those by hand, the old CG way and we are looking for a solution for that. To have the procedural modeling that you have in Plant Factory would be pretty powerful so I think we are looking at that as an overall pipeline benefit in creating foliage. We are also interested in it for a tool to create more interesting plants in our matte painting, its a win if get it for everybody.



"I think from the beginning we've kind of progressed the reputation of matte painting here at DreamWorks and I think Kung Fu Panda 1 was a big eye opening moment for them, that was all VUE!" - Scott Brisbane

Do you follow any VUE communities online?

SB: Yeah I do, I follow some of the Cornucopia3D stuff. I talk to a lot of people in the Industry and other artists that are using VUE as well. It's becoming pretty standard now as a tool which is nice to see because when I first started using it, it wasn't as well known. Everyone was like *"what is this VUE thing"*, so I show people and they are blown away. I talk to fellow artists about it more than anything, professionals in the industry at the various studios that I know are using VUE that way.



San Francisco Matte Paintings for Monster Vs Aliens, environments are VUE based, and the buildings were purchased on Turbosquid and lit/textured in VUE

So in the community you've actually brought VUE to a lot of people and showed them the product?

SB: Oh yeah I'm like the VUE Ambassador. Every time I show people what I do with it they go "that's amazing!" Of course they say "well I can't do that" and I tell them yeah you can. Then they use it and get frustrated because it doesn't just happen, but with any tool you have to gain a mastery of it. That's like saying you can create amazing masterpieces in Maya without knowing how to use Maya. There's that first initial "oh it looks so easy" and it is easy but it takes practice and training and experience to really gain full control and understanding. So I think that's the thing I'm always showing.



Check out some of the amazing Environments in Kung Fu Panda

After "Kung Fu Panda 1", I went on a tour around DreamWorks demoing VUE and what it could do for art. The art department should be using VUE because they can interactively change lighting on their design and paint over it and its fast. I became the VUE demo guy at DreamWorks. I've got a couple of people in art using it now and they've been using it for years. Now lighting is starting to use it in our studio for the HDR skies. We usually shoot those with photography but I showed them we can do it in VUE and they are like "Wow! We could just design our own skies and colors and render those out, we don't have to go out and shoot those things" so now the lighting department is using VUE as well. So I've got a couple of departments using it here. The classes are a big component of it, every time I teach a class people are just amazed by what the possibilities are and they get excited about it for matte painting. I like exposing people to the possibilities.



"Croods was a great opportunity to push matte painting and animation further than we've done before" - Scott Brisbane

On behalf of e-on software, thank you!

SB: Sure yeah! That's the thing, everywhere I've gone I've used it. When I went to Rhythm and Hues they didn't have it and I recommended they use VUE for this one shot. It was on "Land of the Lost" and it was a fly-over these trees over the prehistoric forest and I said we can do this in VUE, we need VUE. So they got VUE for that shot. Weta already had it when I arrived. So yeah it was in every studio I've been in except for Matte World because I didn't know about it at the time and that was just more traditional matte painting studio, no animation. The more people see it in movies like "Avatar" the more they want to use it.



"That first sequence [in How to Train Your Dragon 2] where they are flying through the clouds that's all VUE based clouds - Scott Brisbane

Seems like you're really a busy guy do you still have time for personal projects in regards to CG because I know you do a lot of music stuff as well. Do you still have personal projects?

SB: Yeah I haven't done a lot of personal projects, I usually just work a lot at work and when I go home I just detach. I do music, I think it gives me a healthy perspective on things, teaches my objective focus, grounds me for a bit. So yeah no personal projects lately.

As long as I'm working on cool stuff at work I don't feel like I need to do it. Between "Croods" and "Dragons" and now I'm working on "Kung Fu Panda 3", I feel pretty fulfilled at work. There's some great stuff I just did with VUE, some great shots and they are really excited about it.



The city of Modesto - California, in Monsters Vs Aliens

Anything else you'd like to add? Any advice you'd like to give to anyone willing to enter the Visual FX or Matte Painting industry?

SB: The most important thing is having a strong foundation artistically and understanding how nature behaves and how lighting in nature works. As a matte painter you're always working on what looks natural - unless it comes to DreamWorks working on films like "Kung Fu Panda", that's an exception. With most movies you're always emulating what nature is doing so you have to have a good sense of that.

Train yourself, do some fine arts painting, be out in nature and try to emulate in paint. It's always a good thing to do, I did a lot of that at the academy and I do a lot of that here. We occasionally go out as a group and paint on the weekend.

I think the strongest foundation is having an eye, developing your eye for seeing what nature really does. VUE does a lot of that for you because it has a really good understanding of light and atmosphere in nature which is very important. But you still want

an understanding of that without having VUE, using photography for your own reference. You have to really understand what looks right. Some people can art direct you into that but you really have to develop your own sense of what's right and what looks correct. That comes with the experience of looking at and studying nature. Also studying other artists that you are inspired by and understanding why their art is so great. For instance, I always go back to the Albert Whitlock, a great matte painter, because his quality of light is very natural, it looks very believable not contrived. It doesn't look like a human hand was involved. That's the biggest thing for me, the quality of light in a matte painting to make it look real and believable.

Thanks for your time Scott!

For more information, check out Scott's credits on IMDB.

Scott's VUE class description at StudioArts: <http://studioarts.com/digitalmattesvue>.

Check out what Scott does in his free time on soundcloud, and on youtube.

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