vfxblog

Blogging the world of visual effects in films

A B O U T

Welcome to **vfxblog**, my
weblog about visual effects in
films - *Ian Failes*.

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I N T E R V I E W S

Mantron vfx artists talk 'Drawing
Restraint 9'

Robert Kurtzman on 'The Devil's
Rejects'

Asylum's Sean Faden on 'The
Amityville Horror'

Entity FX's Mat Beck talks
'Herbie: Fully Loaded'

Mantron vfx artists talk 'Drawing Restraint 9'

Mantron Corporation visual effects artists
Matthew Wallin, Adam Martinez and
Demetrius Leal talk to vfxblog about
Matthew Barney's *Drawing Restraint 9*, an
exploration of Japanese cultural tradition,
petroleum-based energy and the evolution
of the whale realised via film,
photography, sculpture and music by
Björk.

Interview by Ian Failes

***How did you get involved with this
project?***

*Matthew
Wallin:* I met
Matthew
Barney back in
1996 while I
was working at
Industrial Light
& Magic. I had

R E C E N T   P O S T S

3DA interviews Pablo Helman on
'Worlds'

'Sith' previs reel at
Starwars.com

SIGGRAPH 2005 'Star Wars'
Retrospective

Showreel mag features
'Mirrormask'

Starwars.com has Lucas'
SIGGRAPH keynote

Kevin Tod Haug's blog

Softimage has Hybride customer
reel

CGW covers 'Chocolate Factory'
and 'Fantastic Four'

Flash Film Works showcases
'Dark Water' shots

Hyperspace has 'Willow' ILM
article

Dave Spafford talks 'House of D'
animation

The Orphanage's Kevin Baillie on
'Shark Boy and Lava Girl'

Spectral Motion's Mike Elizalde
on 'Fantastic Four'

Jeff Wolverton on 'Fantastic
Four'

Rising Sun Pictures' Tim Crosbie
on 'Batman Begins'

soho vfx on 'Fantastic Four' -
Updated with new images!

seen some of his previous work and had always had a strong interest in art. I contacted him and offered to help him out if he ever needed any CGI. He had just returned to NYC from shooting *Cremaster 5* in Budapest with Ursula Andress when he called to ask if I could help him put sheets of ice in the Danube River. We formed a friendship and worked well together and he's called back with each new project since.

What was your role on the film?

Matthew Wallin: I've worked as Visual Effects Supervisor for all Barney's projects, including *DR9*, since 1996. I was on set with the production as well as in the office throughout post production working with the Mantron team to complete the shots to Barney's specifications.

Who else was involved from Mantron?

Matthew Wallin: Mantron Corporation was founded in NYC in 2001 by myself and CG Supervisor, Adam Martinez. Adam and I met while working together at another post house in the city. When Barney called about *Cremaster 3* we took the opportunity to open our own shop. The company has expanded and contracted flexibly in the years since, with our biggest project to date being *DR9*. For *DR9*, Demetrius Leal (former FX Lead from Tippett Studio) became a partner, and Co-CG Supervisor in the company and we hired several friends and colleagues from our collective experiences at other studios (ILM, Tippett, ESC Entertainment, Weta), including Kevin Romond, John Stillman, Mike Morasky, Jen Cantwell, John "JD" Daniel, as well as some compers and matchmovers who worked remotely.

We were able to assemble a true "dream team" of computer graphics talent.
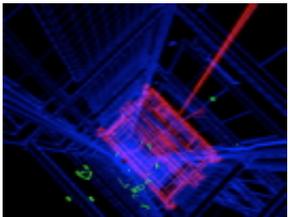
Double Negative's Paul Franklin on 'Batman Begins'

ILM's Todd Vaziri talks VFXHQ and 'Sith'

Photon's Dale Duguid on 'House of Wax'

Intelligent Creatures' Raymond Gieringer on 'Mr. and Mrs. Smith'

Imageworks' Carey Villegas on 'Bewitched'

Anthony Paterson on 'Land of the Dead'

Mantron delivered over 50 highly complicated, HD res shots with a very small, core group of multi-disciplinary artists for a fraction of the cost of a larger facility (with a massive payroll overhead) on a very tight production schedule. It was a truly phenomenal achievement.

How did the visual effects help achieve Matthew Barney's vision?

Demetrius Leal: Japanese icons played a large role in this film. For example, Barney wanted a clear representation of Dejima Island in Nagasaki harbor. Dejima had been a Dutch colony back before any Westerner's had been allowed to enter Japan; unfortunately, the real Dejima is long gone, having been absorbed by modern landfill. In this case we were able to help by digitally recreating the island from historical reference to complete Barney's image.

Adam Martinez: There were things that Barney felt instinctively needed CG because of his past experience with us, and there are various reasons for this. For example, his studio cannot reasonably use a location because it doesn't exist, or he cannot guarantee the safety and preservation of the location or performer. For creature work, there are some limitations with what you can do in practical effects, and sometimes there are situations that are more comfortable to do in CG because of its flexibility. Of course

the same can be true of the opposite - there were numerous shots of practical blood effects that would have been really hard to do in CG.

Matthew Wallin: In another sequence, the Nisshin Maru (a key character in the film and the National Whaling ship of Japan) was needed to appear docked at a petroleum refinery. At the time of the plate shoot in Japan, the ship was at sea and unable to be there. We went ahead and shot the plates as needed and John Stillman simply added the Nisshin Maru later. At the end of the film, Barney wanted to have the ship appear to be headed south to Antarctica, surrounded by sheets of ice and icebergs. The budget and tight schedule wouldn't allow for Barney and DP Peter Streitmann to travel with the ship for that long, so Mike Morasky tracked a complex helicopter shot of the ship just off the coast of Japan, color timed it and added an entire field of icebergs in CG. The finished shot is totally seamless.

What kind of planning or

previsualization was involved?

Matthew Wallin: Barney productions are rarely previsualized or planned to the level that most Hollywood films are. The process of creating elements for a shot was very interactive, so there really was not a sense that we were previsualizing anything. And the shooting script was extremely fluid, so there were no guarantees until we saw the edit. But Barney does lay out his film visually in the form of a collage of images and drawings that he collects and posts on a bulletin board at his studio in NYC. Barney's films (both finished and during production) are almost like giant living sculptures. He'll say, 'This is what I'd like to do. How can we do it?' And then, depending on what happens, a set might get built or we might get a call about doing it in CGI. It's a constantly evolving process.

Can you break down some of the shots and talk about how they were achieved?

Adam Martinez: My main contribution was the title animation which topped out at just under 2 minutes of full-screen HD animation. Barney had boards that were very detailed in terms of the sequence of events, but we did not really have a sense of what it was going to look like until well into the production of it. It starts with the camera travelling down a smoke stack at a refinery, looking up at the gas flame coming out of it. I rendered lots of passes for the stack structure, the fire, heat distortion, and utility passes for things like motion blur and color variations. The camera passes through the bottom of the stack and into a petroleum separation tank, which is this very hot, aluminum environment used to separate aspects crude oil.

As the camera continues to fall through the tank, it penetrates a layer of viscous gelatinous crust, into the boiling oil. A whale enters frame from the bottom, as does a metal sliver which is a blade. As the whale swims up through frame it is being bisected by the blade and its blood is spilling into the tank. The blood congeals and forms the title of the film in Japanese characters. This is then distorted and diffused by the english title of the film as it enters from the sides of the frame. The latter half of the sequence required an enormous number of elements and, like the stack, was assembled in 2D. Things that are notoriously expensive in 3D. I did it in 2D because of schedule contraints,

and also because Barney liked to go through iterations. Things like volumetric fog, refraction, depth of field and heat distortion were all achieved in the composite.

Demetrius Leal: In the case of Dejima, we immediately set upon the task of locating reference on any structures remaining from the original island. Barney wanted the recreation to be a mix of new and old architecture. This was extremely helpful since there was limited historical architectural records to go by. In fact, it was particularly challenging getting a small scale topographical map of Nagasaki harbor for our match department. Then we started building the island in stages, adding more and more layers of detail until it was done.

What kind of considerations influenced your work, given the type of film and that it was going to be displayed in museums?

Matthew Wallin: It's really not that different in terms of how we approach the work. The process of finishing shots is somewhat different, in that we often tend to have more input than in a big budgeted project. In the end, it really is one person's vision - Matthew Barney's. Some of the shots we worked on in the film wind up having full blown sculptural elements that mirror them in the final museum presentation of the whole project (which

consists of sculpture, photography, drawings and the films). I think anyone can have an intimate relationship with the films or the sculptures because they are not hyped or advertised. In this way, they're so reserved. But I think anyone can access them from any point: from fashion, horror movies, architecture, drawing, photography, football, plastics - or just storytelling. The whole project is so porous; there are a million ways to enter it.

Related Links

Mantron Corporation

Drawing Restraint 9 Official Website

Special thanks to Matthew Wallin, Adam Martinez and Demetrius Leal for talking to vfxblog. All images copyright 2005 Matthew Barney. All rights reserved.

Drawing Restraint 9 is currently showing at The Museum for the 21st Century in Kanazawa, Japan (until 25 August 2005). The exhibition will travel to Leeum, Samsung Museum of Art, Seoul, Korea (13 October, 2005 – 8 January, 2006) and to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (23 June –19 September, 2006).

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This looks like a great movie! How can I see it?

Posted by: Plaidass | August 2, 2005 01:34 AM

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