

Swiss-born matte painter Deak Ferrand tells Dick De Jong and Molly Dinkins about his struggles for perfection and his determination never to fall below the incredibly high standards he has set for himself in a string of box-office blockbusters.

Quelling Creative Demons

By Dick De Jong & Molly Dinkins

"The struggle to find the subject matter, doing the concept, is always a pain in the arse; I thought I would get better at it, but I struggle more and more." The matte painter Deak Ferrand explains the trials and tribulations he is enduring for the upcoming movie, *Golden Compass*, from New Line.

"I've been doing concept designs for them and what I do sucks," he continues. "I have to deliver something next week and I have nothing at all. I did five paintings and I won't show them because they're not good enough. It's always the same, I find the thing in the last minute and it seems to work. All I know is that I'll be stressed like hell for weeks and then I find it."

Ferrand has confronted more than his share of creative demons to divine that elusive 'it'. The Swiss-born Ferrand's personal high standards and internal drive to overachieve help explain the depth of his struggle and the height of his success.

Or maybe it's the number of times he's interpreted Heaven and Hell in his résumé of matte paintings. He's famous for his afterworlds, seen in *What Dreams May Come*, *Little Nicky*, *Hellboy* and this year's *Constantine*. The mélé continues in his movies about good versus evil, such as *Van Helsing*, *Matrix Revolutions*, *The Two Towers*, *Blade 2* and *X-Men*. Whatever the explanation, he has experienced both the hellish pain and the heavenly joy of creating extraordinary art.

"For me, what's exciting is this process of trying to find it," says Ferrand (who with his partner, Cheryl Bainum, created HatchFX in 2001). "There are a lot of very good illustrators and concept designers that the client could hire. The technique is not what they care about; they are paying for the idea.

"So I have to come up with something that's cool, that's new. I will never give them something that is half, that is just OK. I'll only give them something that I think is great. That's why they don't see any of my early concepts. They only see what I like."



Evolution of matte painting

After being kicked out of art school in Switzerland, Ferrand was trained by a master in the illusionistic technique of *trompe l'oeil*. In 1991 he moved to Canada and studied at the National Centre for Animation and Design, where he was introduced to digital techniques. In 1995, while working for Buzz Image Group in Montreal, he landed his first matte-painting job for *Screamers*. "It was the best time of my life. I put everything I had into doing it."

By this time, the venerable tradition of matte painting was becoming digital. In the early days of filmmaking, parts of the frame of a camera shot would be blocked or *matted* out and that part of the film would not be exposed. Next, the outline of the matte would be projected and traced onto a large sheet of paper.

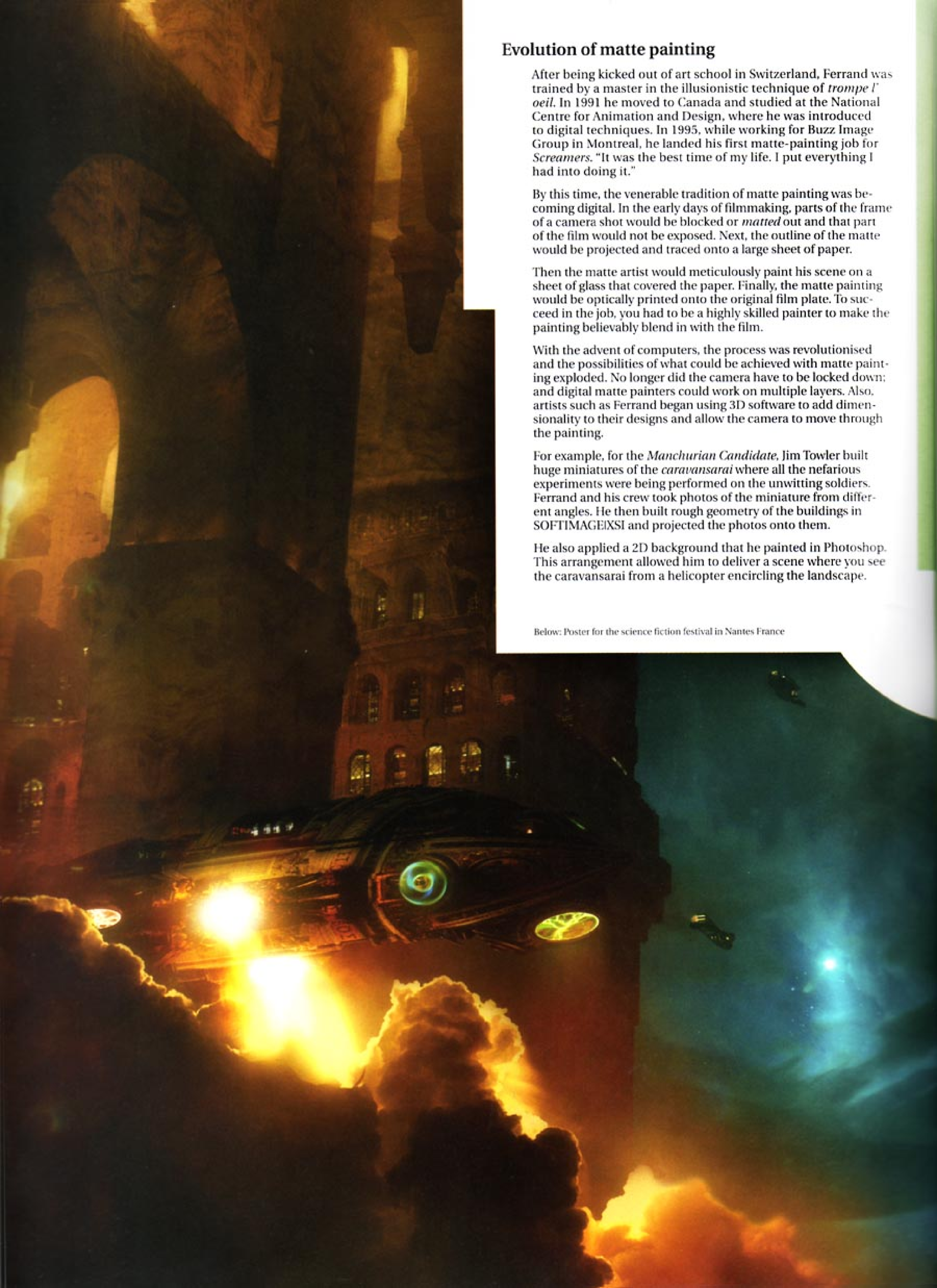
Then the matte artist would meticulously paint his scene on a sheet of glass that covered the paper. Finally, the matte painting would be optically printed onto the original film plate. To succeed in the job, you had to be a highly skilled painter to make the painting believably blend in with the film.

With the advent of computers, the process was revolutionised and the possibilities of what could be achieved with matte painting exploded. No longer did the camera have to be locked down; and digital matte painters could work on multiple layers. Also, artists such as Ferrand began using 3D software to add dimensionality to their designs and allow the camera to move through the painting.

For example, for the *Manchurian Candidate*, Jim Towler built huge miniatures of the *caravansarai* where all the nefarious experiments were being performed on the unwitting soldiers. Ferrand and his crew took photos of the miniature from different angles. He then built rough geometry of the buildings in SOFTIMAGE|XSI and projected the photos onto them.

He also applied a 2D background that he painted in Photoshop. This arrangement allowed him to deliver a scene where you see the *caravansarai* from a helicopter encircling the landscape.

Below: Poster for the science fiction festival in Nantes France



Right: 3D matte painting composited with live action shot in the *Scorpion King*

Below: The model for the fortress for the *City of Gomorrah* in the workshop



Painting skills no longer essential

For Ferrand, the refined painting skills vital to the early matte painters are no longer paramount. "Especially today with all the software and the use of photos and 3D, you don't need to draw to be a matte painter," he says. Therefore, Ferrand thinks that the classic term "matte painter" does not apply to the digital artists of today. He says: "We shouldn't kid ourselves into thinking we are matte painters."

You may not need to master the old craft of matte painting, but Ferrand believes you still must possess an intangible creative ability. "If you have a good eye, you could be a really good matte painter. That was not possible before the digital age." Possession of that "eye", though, is not an everyday commodity. Ferrand continues: "You always meet people who ask you which software you have and you say Photoshop and they say, 'Oh, I have Photoshop at home, I know how to use that.'"

Ferrand chuckles. "You can try, but ah ... they send me something and it's absolutely horrible. You have to have the eye to see your limitations. When you paint something, you have to be able to remove yourself and look at it and say, 'That's bad.' Frankly, a lot of people can't do that. If you don't have an eye, you're doomed."

What they don't tell you in school

Although having the eye is an essential element, matte painters can encounter plenty of obstacles in the process of working with clients. Ferrand has plans on his drawing board for producing a detailed DVD tutorial about matte painting methods. In the meantime, he generously shared some of his concepts while spotlighting possible pitfalls.

Even before the artist touches paint to canvas or pixel to screen, they must do some groundwork. "You need to understand the context of the shot, what comes before and after in terms of lighting and what you can and can't do," Ferrand advises. "I didn't do that at the beginning and now I'll do that before I even think about the concept. Just for the lighting, where they are walking, where the matte line can be, or do we need to keep a piece of grass they are walking on?"

Often when the client is discussing what they want in a shot, "they will forget to tell us a lot of the details about the story that would help us enhance the matte painting", Ferrand remarks. "It's important to read the script. Ask for the script, ask for a full-cut sequence, and even for a full reel - even if it's a QuickTime stamped with a copyright. In the end, everybody is going to benefit from it."

"The second step is the concept. Most of the time, you do the concept in post. When you're lucky you can do the concept in pre-production, because nothing is built or set up. Hopefully, they can follow your concept and the colour scheme and the detail, and at least shoot something that is close to your concept."

"At the same time, it's cool to come in later, after they already have a rough cut with a missing black shot, and that's where you start the concept. When you do that you're limited by what you can do, which sometimes can be good because you can invent from that."



Right: Mermaid matte painting
Below: 3D matte painting, in the style
of Grant Wood, for the *Cat in the Hat*



Think before you draw

"After that a lot of people will sit down and draw and draw and draw. I'll just think about it for a long time. You put a lot of energy into painting and drawing and I want to keep the energy fresh, so I won't sit down. In fact, I'll wait until I can't stop myself to go and paint because I really have it in my head. I think it's cool because it's very powerful when it comes. So I'll just think about it for two or three days, just looking at things."

Ferrand has amassed a huge reference library including many books on illustrators and fantasy art. "I know them all," Ferrand says. "I'm very influenced by Beksinski [Zdzislaw, the Polish painter]. I think he is one of the best artists right now."

When he is ready, he starts drawing. "You have to be careful to not kill it," he advises. "If I draw too many versions, I kill the freshness of the concepts. I'll walk away from it and try to forget about it and come back fresh from another perspective."

Ferrand prefers to present only very high-res and highly detailed concept drawings to his clients. He explains: "What I've learned through the years – I don't want to say this in a bad way – is that many of the clients do not have a very good imagination. So if you show them something that is rough, they don't really understand how it is going to look when it's finished. And I do huge prints when I present."

During his career, one of the biggest changes Ferrand has noticed is the increased use of photos in his matte paintings. "Today, I don't really need to paint that much any more because I use a lot of photos. In the beginning I thought that the rules were 'Don't use any photos, try to paint it by hand'. And today, I don't really care. Using photos is part of the trick."

"Even in *Lord Of The Rings*, many of the matte paintings are frankly a lot of photos plus miniatures and very little painting – and it's beautiful. The final result is what's important."

"Nowadays, the matte painting can be 90 percent photos and 10 percent painting to bridge the photos together. It's almost like a new technique – like a photomontage – it's not a matte painting any more."



From top to bottom: Castle Dracula concept for *Van Helsing*; 3D matte painting of the caravansary for the *Manchurian Candidate*; Castle Frankenstein concept for *Van Helsing*; The model for the caravansary in the HatchFX parking lot, ready to be photographed

Using his own photos

Ferrand eschews scanning images and attempts to use his own photos in his paintings. Every time he visits Europe, he takes at least 2,000 high-res photos that he adds to his extensive library. "I have a lot of stuff – different weird environments and beautiful lighting."

Compositing, the final step in the production pipeline, has also changed over the last few years. "The matte paintings that we're doing for *Constantine*, they are almost 80 percent compositing. The matte painting is almost creative compositing. You're shaping the painting by the elements that you comp. It's very strange. The painting is done in a day, but the compositing takes ten days.

"Like the *Hellboy* matte painting in the destroyed New York, the whole thing is painted without any smoke or haze. All this has to be put in afterwards in the compositing. If you have another guy compositing who has no idea what you are doing, you're going to screw up the whole thing. But now matte painters can do their own compositing because it's affordable. And that's at least 50 percent of the final image.

"When I was at R!OT, we worked with a lot of Inferno compositors and it was hard because you would have to go and sit down with them for hours and tell them what you wanted in the comp. Now, After Effects is so powerful that we're doing it ourselves. The client doesn't care if we're using After Effects, and it's 1,500 bucks for the software. And frankly, it comes out and it's beautiful. We are working on 16 bits, so we can output 10-bit Cineon files. Now we have started to do some paintings in 16-bit with the new Photoshop.

"It's funny, for less than \$5,000 you can do it all. It's amazing. It's cool."



Hatching new directions

Even before he opened HatchFX, Ferrand was planning to expand his horizons. "I was always in love with movies. I ended up doing matte paintings because I love movies, not because I loved my paintings." Therefore HatchFX is in the process of making a movie, which it hopes to shoot this summer in Europe. Ferrand will direct the live-action, horror flick. "Movie making is the worst medium for the artist, because it's never going to be exactly your vision, it's going to be a collaboration and it can either be better or worse than what you had in mind.

"Am I a good director? I have no idea," the self-effacing artist concludes. "I never directed a movie, but I need to try it. Hopefully, it's natural for me."

And hopefully, the demons will be kind. ■

Hatch demo reel is included in this issue's CDROM.