

EPILEPSY— Illustrated

By
Matthew Jablonski

Creating a successful artistic career rarely occurs without some compromise, **including mine—cooperating with a life-long epileptic seizure disorder.** Unlike most photographers, my lifestyle requires extra safety precautions, often leaving me beyond demoralized. However, epilepsy enhances one's unique visual and spatial skills. "How can I retain my limited photographic abilities enough to maximize my passion?" I ask myself. The answer is: numerous ways which this article showcases.

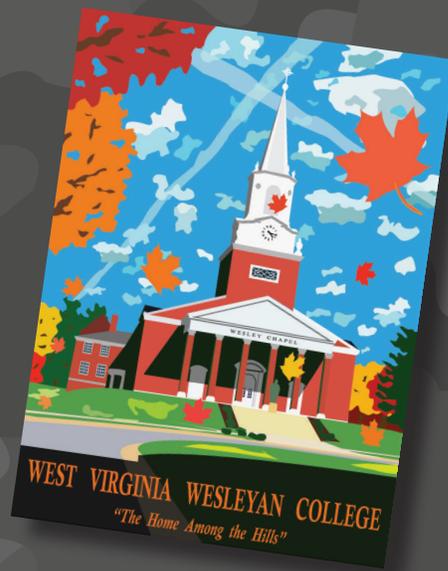
As a digital artist, I realistically create landscape renditions with Adobe Illustrator. What differentiates my work from others' is my ambition to intertwine ample realism. In

contrast, others' work comprises designing logos, abstract portraits, and artistic representations of one's life experiences. In my case, epilepsy gives me a clear vision to transform ideas into physical images. For instance, if I have a winter photo, I can render it in a summer setting or visualize a scene without a solid source yet create extremely realistic stylistic derivatives.

Fifteen years ago, I discovered my medium while earning my bachelor's degree in graphic design at West Virginia Wesleyan College. Intrigued by silkscreen art and its visual resemblance to Illustrator's prompted me to independently produce a rendition of the school's Wesley Chapel in my junior year. Its public response prompted me to pursue four additional campus illustrations for my Senior Thesis. Finally, the school requested three sets of my five images to permanently frame and hang around the campus, inspiring me to dive deeper.



From the Library of Congress's collection (silkscreen print)



My first digital rendition (2010)

Since then, I've developed three artistic processes: Stylized Perspective Survey (SPS), Visual Blind Study (VBS), and a third—combining the two. They all require photography to various degrees, especially the last two.

Stylized Perspective Survey (SPS)

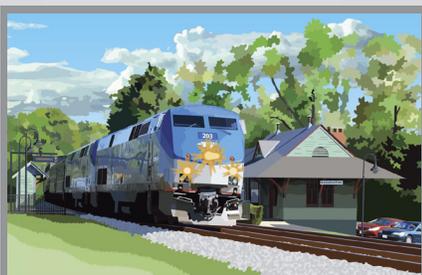
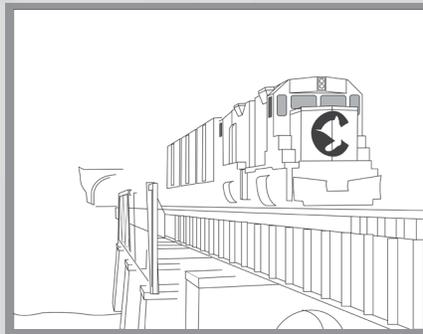
I digitally trace over a photo, enhancing or eliminating any features, creating my own renditions.

Visual Blind Study (VBS)

I create a new unique image from my own vantage point, heavily relying on educated guessing from source photos that don't necessarily contain everything included in my own rendition.

SPS & VBS—Combined

I may have a satisfactory photo for my vantage point but that needs moderate to heavy alteration(s) to its features, which I create using VBS.



Potential images above host clearly identifiable subjects, deep focus throughout. Viewers can easily define its features, making up its depth of field. They offer high-contrast and have significantly condensable areas (foliage, etc.) while retaining resilient focal points, prominent after stylization. I can maintain interest throughout its creation. Most of all, I feel psychologically committed to taking tens of hours I could have devoted toward other art projects.

NON potential images below have features inverted to potential ones. Sometimes, an image is just too busy. If there is even a little bit of questionable area, after transforming to my style, I'll either try to think of a creative work-around or rule it out all-together. For example, I'd never pursue an interpretation of a specific person, because too much can go wrong. Despite that, adding general human life within my works can bring a whole new sense of place when necessary.

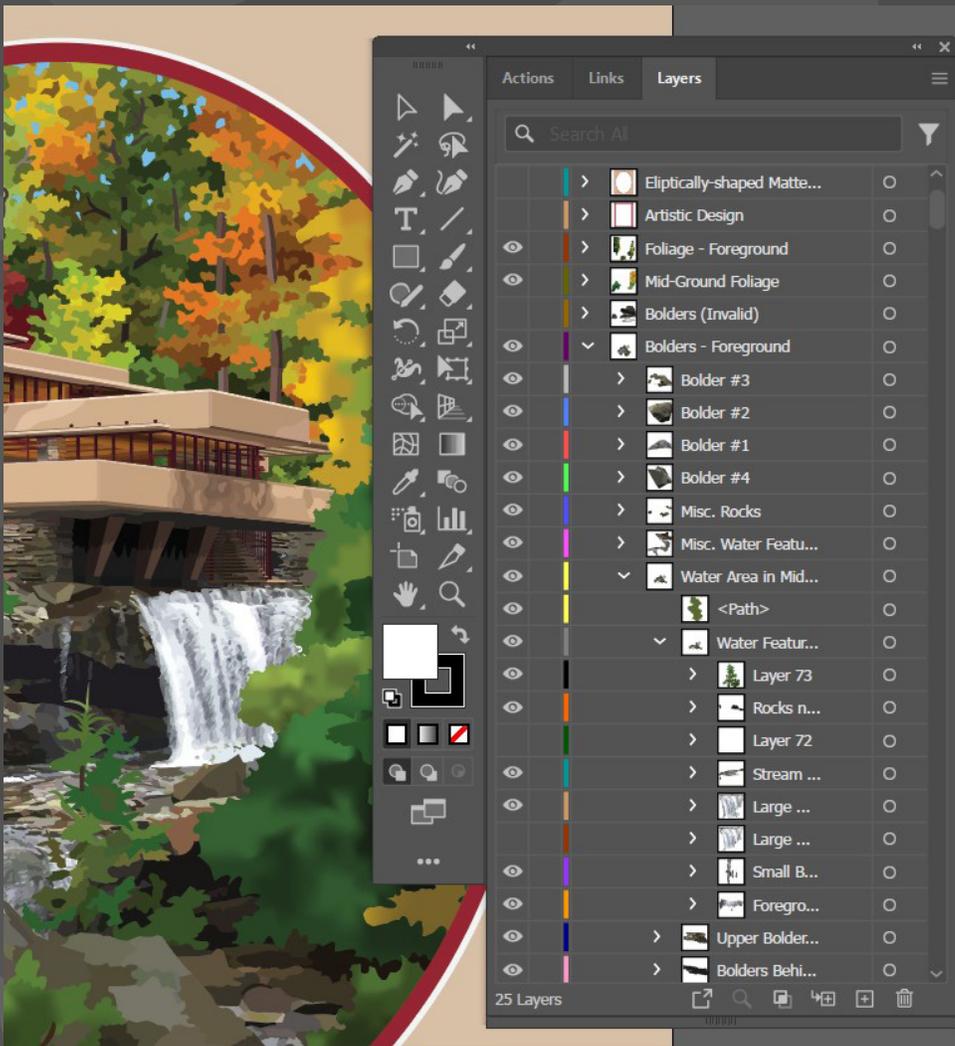


Notice how broad the variety of NON potential images really is.

Pursuing a Potential Project

Each individual shape in Illustrator is known as a "path," which is a part of an assigned "layer." One can easily specify the order the paths' stack within a layer and, if there

are multiple layers present, they, too, can be rearranged. Having them all combined in a specific order is critical in a successful project. What makes my renditions especially unusual is they typically contain 2,000 to 3,000 hand-drawn paths!



Here's an example of Illustrator's tools and layers interface. Notice how complex my renditions can become, just by viewing the sheer number of layers and how they can be within themselves. Furthermore, that doesn't include the enormous number of paths within them.

Viewing my portfolio, one can easily see my lifelong passion with trains. I try to maximize their drama when creating renditions, such as revising their headlights luminosity and giving the lead locomotive a tiny bit more embankment in curvature, shows movement.



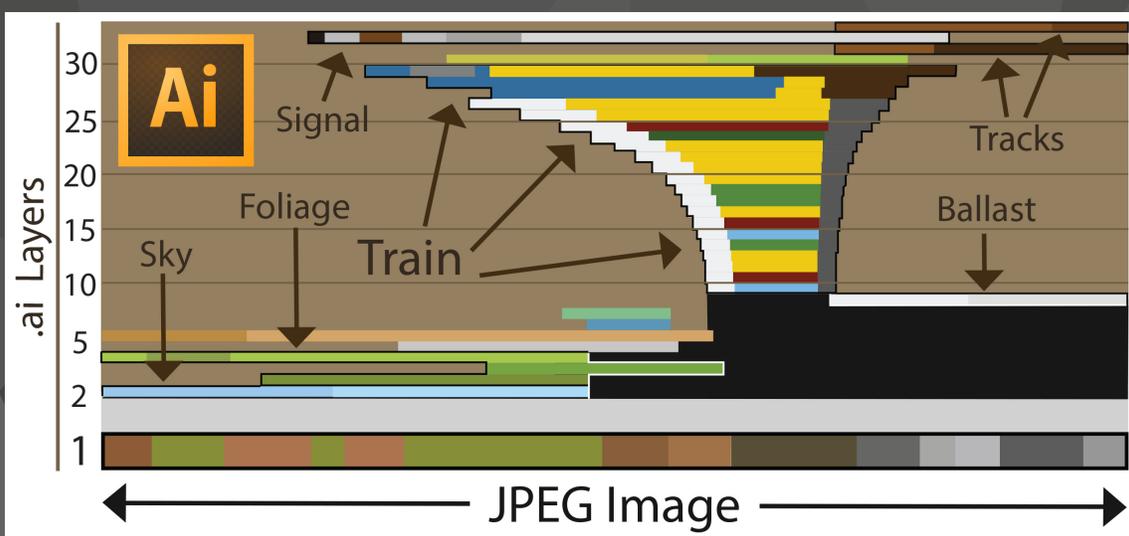
Here is my cropped photo of Weverton, MD I later pursued its rendition form.



Although the foliage is close to accurate at its season's peak, the train is totally overtaken by the amount of saturated colors in this medium. To mitigate this issue, retaining some of the trees semi-greenish can save images.



I finally decided to keep this image with a summer setting. My paths were premade; all I had to do was save the original, duplicate it and manually revise the paths' colors.



The above graphic depicts how I trace a photo but from a three-dimensional view from the side. The uploaded photo becomes the bottom layer of an .AI file. My traced layers are built on top, leaving the photo untouched. Each layer and their paths effectively show how planes aren't made up of linear lines, if perceived from multiple distances. Our eyes are deceived, which is why we see in a three-dimensional color space.

There are numerous other factors that can be accounted for on a case-by-case basis.

A counter-intuitive minor annoyance, especially with SPSs, is the need to make the smaller details first. For example, if tracing

over an area with similar colors resembling a large shape [path], but obscuring smaller features inside it, how do I know how to create them afterwards? I simply trace the small details first, then move the large one-colored path down below the small details in the path stack.

Many features have a point where I've incorporated enough distinguishable detail to their identity without looking complete. I call this their "cookie cutter effect." They lack authentic color gradients, remaining largely two-dimensional. To compensate, I start adding smaller details and/or shapes filled with colors between each other, eventually breaking up the abruptness into a much more natural flow of depth.

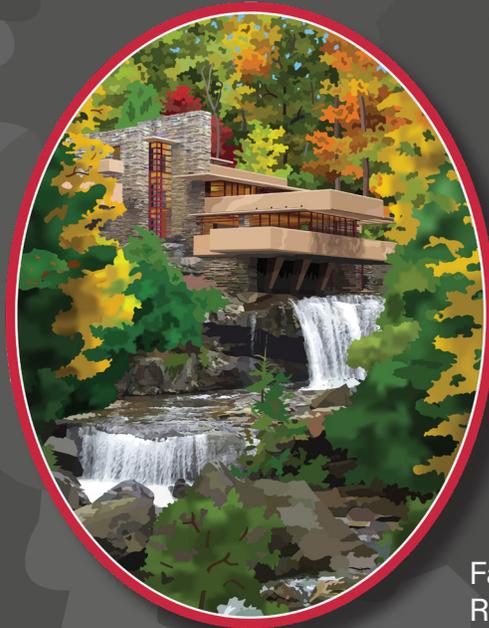
Stylized Perspective Survey

A Stylized Perspective Survey (SPS) presentation is simple—I just upload a photo into my Illustrator artboard and start tracing away! Essentially, I critique my selected

image and try to find creative avenues I can pursue, enhancing it in my style. That can be adding or subtracting any features, revising the lighting, and/or even changing its season altogether. That's how I created my Fallingwater rendition, below.



Source photograph



Fallingwater, PA
Rendition

Visual Blind Study

Visual Blind Study (VBS) is my favorite artistic approach—a single rendition composed by heavily-educated guessing through many images. The work is challenging, but rewarding, creating unique images from any vantage point in unbelievably complex approaches. Starting with only my monitor's blank screen and a few source images of features from various vantage points, I'm tasked to turn nothing into something.

If I have an idea, I must browse for photos in books, online, personal archives and memories supporting it. I'm not searching for anything equivalent to it nor even partly similar in photographic form, however, photos with vague to quite relatable

features within them. Additionally, I'm looking for features, not features AND their surroundings. For instance, a photo depicting the mid-west with a desired feature within it may also qualify for a project portraying the mountains of West Virginia.

Once found, with epilepsy's visual aid, I can make educated guesses on their appearance, applied to my own idea's perspective. Having multiple photos of any specific feature from various vantage points is invaluable. In earning authenticity, noticing the features that ARE NOT present is almost as crucial as the features that ARE present. The relevance of a reference photo changes over the project's lifespan. For example, one could be used to cooperate for cosmetic purposes, while another could help me in my "breaking-in" stage, explained shortly.

Math and measurement are vital. For instance, I may know there are six identical windows on a building with three-foot intervals. But maybe I only have photos of the left and right sides of it, including one and a half windows, in each. Based on their perspectives, I can accurately assert the appearances of the middle four. If I make them and their perspective look off, by glancing at it, those windows will still need work. While evaluating these deep questions, I often notice very minor details that otherwise may be totally overlooked.

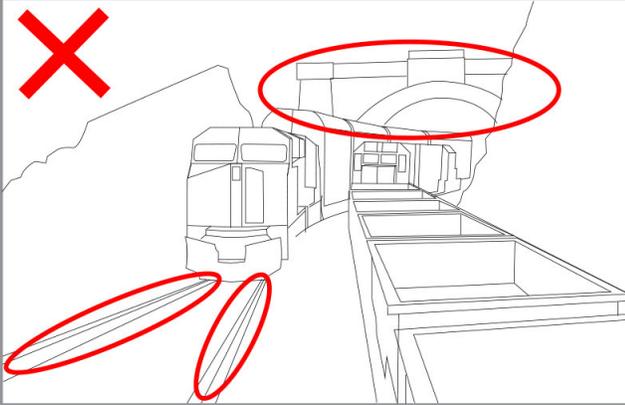
To demonstrate this, I'll use my 2023 vision of two passing trains at a remote West Virginia location along the Potomac River. In this scenario, the area had been well documented by me and others. However, I wanted my project to be from a personalized perspective. Interpreting railroad equipment doesn't always require references depicting my preferred paint scheme, immediately. This is simply because multiple railroads often acquire the same types of equipment before customizing their brand identity. At this point, all I care about are the features' shapes.



Trains along the Paw Paw Bends of the Potomac River



The camera is about where my vantage point is. All the area between me and it, covered by a light-yellow tint, COULD have been within my rendition.



Once I have obtained images, I begin compressing my three-dimensional idea into a two-dimensional space (my computer screen). This is the “breaking in” stage. My goal is to create a heavily simplified black/white line drawing interpretation. I hope to establish a scene from one vantage point, which often requires a significant amount of

trial-and-error work, making it the hardest part of any project. When lines aren’t harmonious, they can get really messed up, causing huge frustration. Once satisfied, however, I can easily tweak it into an incredibly accurate guess of what it would look like.

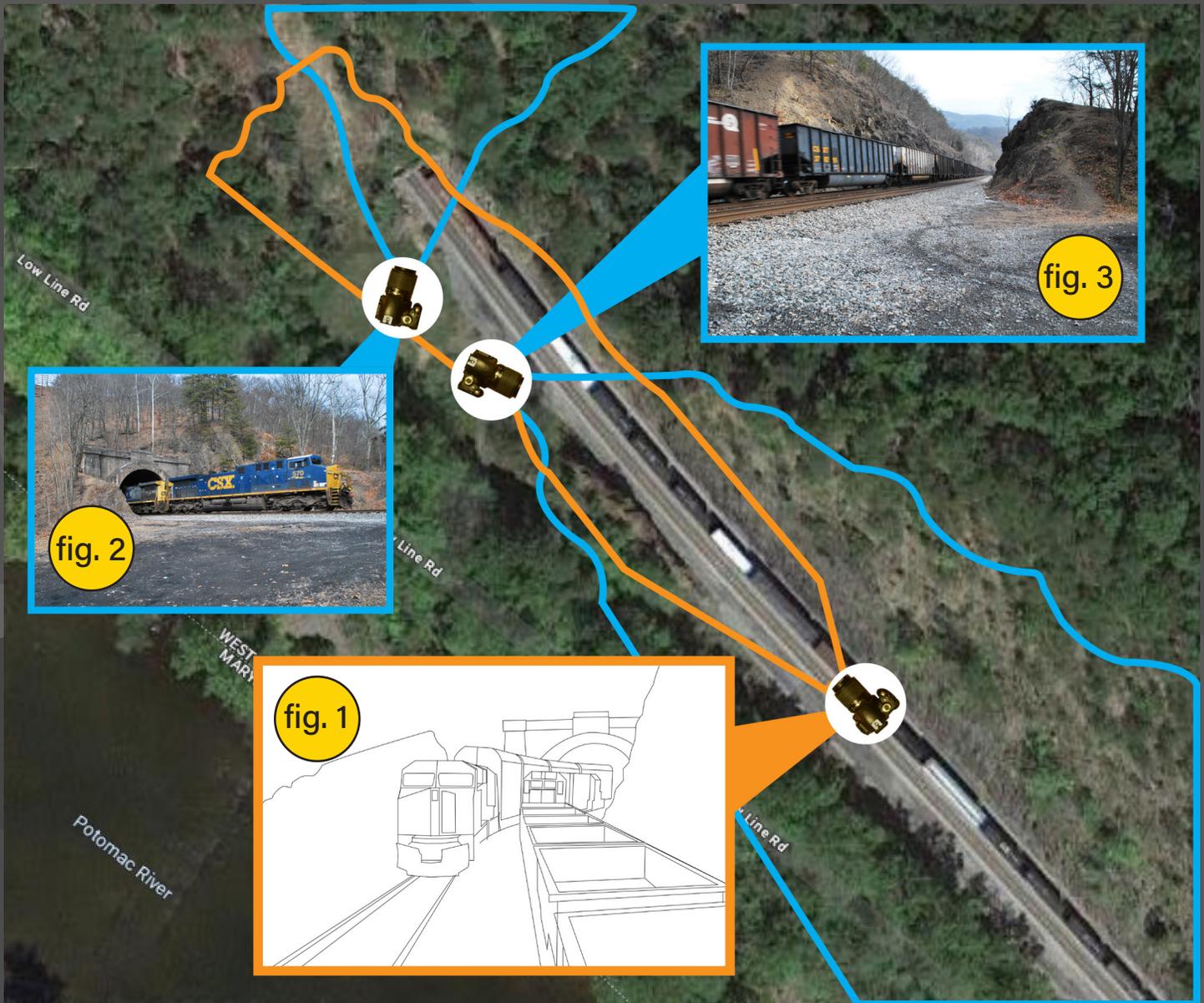


Here’s an example of a specific type of locomotive I used for this project.



For this feature, I wanted to figure out how many vertical struts (yellow lines) are on “auto rack” cars.

The graphic to the right shows the image approaching its cookie-cutter stage. I cannot underscore enough how hard it can be to forecast how successful any given project will be. For example, this project took 393 days to complete—that's just over a year. However, I had other projects come to fruition within that lengthy timeline.



My graphic shows my rendition's perspective (fig. 1) and two reference photos (fig. 2 and 3) on top of a satellite image, courtesy of Google Maps. The number of reference photos far exceeded these two, here. The train and its right-of-way on the satellite image could portray mine with the locomotives with the yellow and blue paint scheme. These were concentrating on where the geographical features were situated, NOT the train. The trains had photos of themselves.

Looking at a reference photo of something may not seem all that significant, but, for me, it can speak a thousand words. Such as shapes, proportions, measurements and colors. I must remember what is NOT shown.

Some locations were never thoroughly documented to begin with, prompting me to speculate and take my creativity to a whole new level. The largest number of photos I've used for a single project, thus far, is 46.



A reference image



Georgetown Lock #4 Rendition

SPS & VBS Combined

A great example illustrating my SPS & VBS Combined approach is my rendition of the 4th Lock of the C&O Canal in Georgetown in the 1990s. Thirty years later, when I took my

preliminary photo, the National Park Service was undergoing a multi-year renovation of the area, requiring draining the canal to restore the locks—not a pretty sight. The upside was that I could trace the rest of the other features in my photo, simply using SPS.

Ultimately, I wanted to render that vantage point with life: tourists utilizing the barge and a photographer in the foreground. I was able to achieve this through VBS. This time I used an SPS photo as reference.



So, I broke into my image. One small feature I really wanted to include was having the barge's stern name, *The Georgetown*, apparent. I never found any photos portraying it in that orientation, but I decided to invert the vessel, anyway. The photographer was a project within herself.

I'd never created a person in such fine detail before. It even required me to evaluate how I held my own camera, something I never really thought about until then.



Photo's semi-break-in points



Having the stern of *The Georgetown*, floating upstream



Preliminary photograph

The Output & Recognitions

Illustrator (.ai) has a vector extension, only using mathematical instructions from one's computer of any size, retaining its crisp resilience. With this approach, renditions cause most viewers to confuse my work with traditional "paintings," which I accept as a huge compliment.

In later years, I've taken several web design fundamental courses at Montgomery College, inspiring me to learn that even basic coding skills gives a huge advantage beyond heavily advertised hosting services, enabling me to personalize my site. That's been an evolving multi-year project of learning new concepts.

Fine artists and galleries are often hostile to digital illustrators, for good reasons. However, we are also feeling the negative effects of AI. Digital art portfolio site webmasters are immediately subject to being scraped and/or exploited, when published online. Ultimately, to effectively protect our art with publishing online, we must include prominent watermarks.

In 2022, I had the opportunity to showcase my digital artwork at the Politic AND Prose Bookstore for two months, thanks to a lifelong friend. I found myself selling my renditions, even before my reception was officially announced and then single prints multiple times—an unanticipated scenario. It was a very educational experience for me.

The question I am asked most frequently is, "How long did it take you (alluding to any given artwork)?" My response is usually, "Many tens of hours."

Any artwork's timeframe ranges between fifty to two hundred hours. Realistically, however, motivational sparks and, yes, those less-interesting stages result in an arbitrary itinerary, typically lasting several months. To balance this, I have simultaneous projects. There have been a few I just couldn't keep my interest in, or I began but deferred for a few months or even a couple of years to finish. Each completed art has the commonality of my 100% dedication.

I have yet to find another digital artist who initiates each artwork, using Illustrator the same way I do. The uniqueness I've found in my artistic process is what motivates me. It's a way to overcome my epileptic challenges into a form of beauty. From experience, I've found that those who are drawn to it are eager to see more, which thrills me. My signature lies within tree foliage, showing their wavy edges.



Internationally juried Hidden Truths Exhibition for Epileptic Artists in 2012 (Tim Jablonski)



Politics AND Prose Bookstore Solo Exhibition in 2022 (Jessica Snow)



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