

An Interview with Fantasy Illustrator Stephanie Pui-Mun Law

by Kat Avila

Upon first glance, I dismissed Stephanie's work at FanimeCon as fairy stuff and kept on walking. But her table in Artist Row was always busy, so I went back for a second look. That's when I saw "Dragonknot," a digital print with two elegant serpentine dragons encircling steel Celtic knotwork of silver and gold dragons. I was hooked, and wanted to learn more about this UC Berkeley graduate who double-majored in Fine Arts and Computer Science.

I wrote off your art initially because there was no immediate kinetic focal point. Then I realized I was reading your art as sequential art, which I'm more accustomed to critiquing. I had to retrain my eye. Your art is a journey requiring a patient viewer. Is this typical of modern fantasy art?

There isn't really any "typical" standard for fantasy art I think. It really varies widely from images with just a single character to vast landscapes and intricate interactions.

You are a full-time fantasy illustrator. Your clients have included Wizards of the Coast, HarperCollins, and Harlequin. Half of your work is contracted; the rest is personally initiated. When you're working on a personal project, do you have a story in mind to guide your hand? Or does the story, if any, emerge as you work?

It's a little bit of both. There's usually something that sparks the process. It could be as small a thing as sunlight coming through gold tree leaves in the autumn. In fact, that's where my painting "A Memory of Lothlorien" came from. Seeing that golden light, it reminded me of Tolkien's Lothlorien forest, and how he described those trees. So from the initial idea, I work to expand on the story in the image.

Other times, as in "Chessmates," I have only an inkling of an idea without any story behind it. For that piece, I just wanted to have two forest creatures playing a game of chess. As I started sketching, the two creatures became a fairy and a tree-spirit, and their onlookers developed as well. The last touch, as I was painting it even, was to have the chessboard balanced on the back of a turtle. Even now, I couldn't really tell you the whole of the story there, but there most definitely is one, and it evolved with the actual painting process.



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Significant features of your mostly watercolor paintings are the color flow and strong independent details. The details imply much research. Per project, how much time is devoted to research? To drawing and painting?

Again, it's a variable. Some images I think of as just kind of brainless pieces. Pure eye-candy without any thought for the meaning. Others I research to determine suitable symbols to be placed in the painting. More often, these are the ones based on stories, or with figures out of mythology. I also do a lot of research for reference photos of creatures, plants, or costumes that I'm unfamiliar with.

What are your preferred tools and surfaces?

My favorite is watercolor. I use Winsor & Newton pan paints on Strathmore lightweight

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illustration board. The other medium I love to use is just regular pencil.



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Whose art do you collect?

I was just in Paris recently, and staring at a huge Monet painting, and wishing I could hang THAT on my wall! But mostly what you see on my walls are paintings done by my peers and contemporaries of fantasy art. I have some of Amy Brown, James Browne, Christophe Vacher, Anneth Lagamo, Alan Lee, Larry McDougall.

What are the "must-have" books in your reference collection?

Some of my favorite books: Daniel Merriam, Michael Parkes, anything with Alan Lee's art, Brian Froud.

What has been the most challenging project you've worked on?

I've been working on a D20 book of faeries to be published by Larry Elmore. He basically let me have free reign with the artwork for this, and it was very satisfying to be able to create a whole world with these pieces. Also, it's unusual for me to stay focused on one project for so long and to be able to create that many pictures for it.

Browsing the galleries on your web site at www.shadowscapes.com, I especially liked the pair of watercolors "Bridge of Wings - Where He Waits" and "Bridge of Wings - Where She Waits." The paintings are based on the celebrated Chinese folktale of the cowherder and the weaver princess, who are celestial lovers who can only meet once a year. Your interpretation of the anticipated moment was both wonderful and surprising. What process did you go through to create these paintings?

It started with hearing the story somewhere first. I don't really remember any longer how I first came across it. But I'm a romantic and so it really appealed to me. I did some more research about it to find out the different variations of the story. Folklore always has many different versions of any tale, since so much of it is passed along by word of mouth through generations.

In the end, instead of doing simply one painting, I decided to split it up. I originally wanted to have a triptych, with the third piece being the center where the birds meet up to create the arch of the bridge for the separated lovers, but it has stopped at just the two pieces you see. So each of them waits alone in separate panels so you really feel their longing.

Of all your paintings, which is your favorite?

It's usually something I've done within the past couple months. It always changes to my more recent pictures, and I think that's a good thing. It means there's progress. My current favorite is "Chessmates."

Have you done any exhibitions?

Not really. I mostly just display work on my website, and sell through there or conventions.

Which conventions are on your "don't-miss" list?

Gen Con. As an artist who does so much work for games, this one's really important for me to go to. But aside from that, it's just fun to meet all the other artists. I've made some good friends over the years among all the conventions I attend. The other ones I attend are Dragon*Con, FanimeCon, Norwescon, BayCon, Comic-Con or WonderCon.

Still dancing flamenco?

Oh yes, I love flamenco. In fact, in November, I'm going to be combining the dance in at the Ghawazee.com belly dancing festival and having a booth at the show, AND performing some flamenco.



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