Michael Frank draws inspiration from both the natural world and the dream world. He combines *Alice in Wonderland* with the gothic otherness of H.P. Lovecraft and pipes them Unix-style into multiple processes of image rendering. Given his creative and scientific backgrounds—botany, photography, writing, and American literature—this probably makes sense. After studying photography with the intent of becoming a medical cameraman, he wound up with an advertising career for a few decades before discovering an early version of the 3D program Bryce. The software ignited a creative spark, and away he went.

“I learned the program quickly and really couldn’t put it down,” Frank recalls, adding that he produced more imagery in that first year with Bryce than he had in a lifetime. “My knowledge of photography from a technical standpoint was a great help in accelerating my learning of 3D programs. Photography is an excellent medium for contemplation of the world as we see it, in fairly concrete terms, and somehow the opportunity to create 3D models and landscapes lends itself to the free interpretation of the inner or imagined worlds.”

And then there’s lucid dreaming. Frank also says his predilection for merging the natural and imaginative came from waking up inside his own dreams. His life began to mimic his art, and vice versa.

“Upon waking in real life, I had a wealth of experience and data to play with,” he says. “Many of my images are close representations of the environments I encountered in the dream state. I have good mechanical reasoning, and when I imagine my artwork, I turn things around in my head, and adjust a great deal. It’s a good skill to use in creating virtual environments.”

**Harmonizing the Opposites**

Created with Bryce 7 Pro and Photoshop, the cover image, *In Humid Calm*, is part of Franks’ Botanika series, in which he explores parallels between the natural landscapes of analog painters and his own inner creative dimension. A brand-new terrain emerges. Bryce 7 let Frank simulate plants’ typical growth patterns and branching structures, and he eventually amassed an expansive library of models. For *In Humid Calm*, he created the models by using replication and the metaball function, employing Boolean geometry and forms. Many of the complex models contained 40 million to 50 million polygons, so Frank says he kept the materials as simple as possible.

“The models were retained in my library, and composed, and grouped in the final images in arranged multiples and then rendered within Bryce,” he explains. “My light sources remained constant for each arrangement, so that further layering would provide a believable whole. Multiple renders were subsequently layered as needed in Photoshop.”

In the Botanika series, which also includes *Nighttime Rich with Fragrant Desire* (see Figure 1), Frank has created his own personal landscape. It’s an otherworldly Zen garden, conjuring up both the beauty of mathematics and the abstract nature of the collective unconscious. It’s a harmonization of opposites: inner and outer, public and private, real and surreal, native and exotic. Jungian analysts would have a field day with this stuff.

“The lush and undulating greenery represents a manufactured inner dimension, artificial and real at the same time, believable yet dreamlike,” Frank says. “It wouldn’t be a stretch of the imagination to call it a kind of self-portrait, as it visually and abstractly—and dare I say emotionally—expresses a very intense state of mind. In my portfolio, this image above all others broadcasts an emotional frequency all its own, no matter how much I am a part of it. It has its own life now.”

In the case of *Three Royal Daughters* (see Figure 2), Frank says the image can reference the offspring of King Lear or simply water bugs. He
likewise created the image with Bryce 7, but it contains a textured filter not originally generated in that program, owing to extremely long rendering times. The cumulative rendering time for Frank’s images, after all the original objects are combined, often exceeds a few hundred hours.

“In some cases, I use Photoshop to composite when a single render in Bryce would be too complicated or time-consuming,” he says.

*Teapot Topiaries* (see Figure 3) is a different blend altogether. Far back through the gothic jungle landscape is a miniature pink *Alice in Wonderland*-style house. Frank’s earliest experience with 3D imagery, as a kid, was using a View-Master to scope out stereoscopic discs of *Alice in Wonderland*.

“I stared at the surreal images for hours,” he recalled. “And they even invaded my earliest dreams.”

Now those dreams tend to reappear via computer-generated imagery. The teapots definitely reference the novel, but Frank also confesses that tea is his muse. The beverage seems to alchemically fuse the interior and exterior worlds.

“Tea is with me all hours of the day,” Frank says. “It’s as necessary to my art-making as good music. The grassy smell and taste of good green tea are a perfect inspiration and support for the discovery and manufacture of my mental landscapes. *Teapot Topiaries* is partly an homage to my appreciation of tea, and the places it’s taken me, physically or otherwise.”

**Art and Science**

Frank envisions his work contributing to the dialog between artists and scientists, to explore the
similarities between how both understand reality. He can see his work in the context of a natural-history museum, for instance.

“I see many parallels between science and art in my work, and the inner workings of natural geometry,” Frank says. “I’m fascinated with dioramas of prehistoric life, and I’d like to research the possibilities of printing my models in 3D with the intention of making dramatic large-scale scenes. Many of my plant models are inspired by fossil remains, and I think it’d be nice to see the connections laid out.”

As a result of the mental dialog that emerges in his computer-generated work, Frank has started writing down his observations of the creative process. He now has literary ambitions.

“The mental landscape has expanded into many different directions,” Frank explains. “And it’s a constant source of wonder to keep mapping new territory. In very practical terms, the invention of these virtual landscapes has opened the door to very new concrete ones—quite literally, a dream come true.”

You can view much more at https://sites.google.com/site/michaelfrankphotographs.

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