

Herpintology

By Kristin Van Alstine

September 11, 2009

[Click image to enlarge](#)

The blog author's favorite painting and also one of the artist's, this painting won 1st place in the 18 & over snake category in REPTILES magazine's art contest.

One of the artist's favorite paintings.

Another of the artist's favorite paintings. This painting won 1st place in the 18 & over amphibian category in REPTILES magazine's art contest. For this blog I thought I would do something a little different and interview one of the many interesting people whom I have met while attending local reptile shows. On several occasions I have met people who really stick in my mind as remarkable and one-of-a-kind. A couple great examples of this are; the infamous Ogre who is known for his tarantulas and chain mail jewelry, and Gavin, a guy at the show who sells only snakes from Latin America displayed in wine glasses ... and roles of blue painter's tape. You never know what you're going to find at a reptile show. So when I spotted winning artwork from not one, but two categories of this past REPTILES magazine art contest, I was thrilled! I met the artist, Jessica Tschampa, who, incidentally, is from my hometown of Glen Ellyn, Ill., and I even purchased a miniature print of my favorite painting. I later decided that it would be a great idea to get some insight into the world of herp-related art and discover what it has to offer. Here are the questions I asked Jessica:

What inspires you to create what you do?

JT – "I love to experiment with color and different color combinations. I enjoy looking at a photograph and creating something new and unique from it. I'm inspired by discovering new ways of doing things, such as I do not use black paint from a tube. I always mix my own and I also like incorporating unnatural colors subtly into the piece to enhance and draw attention to the animal. It is color that gives me passion to paint, doodle, and draw the things that I make."

What kinds of art supplies do you work with, and what is your favorite medium?

JT – "The great part of being an artist today is the incredible variety of supplies that are generally available for painting, drawing, etc. I have spent a lot of time with oils, acrylics, watercolor, colored pencils, and markers. The best thing to come from my exploration is an understanding of the different qualities of the media and the particular effects they could be used for. The majority of my paintings are labeled as "mixed media," because I use different types of paint to bring what I see in my mind into reality. Currently, I have been working exclusively in acrylics because they dry quickly so that I can work on my paintings in stages."

How do you select the subject or particular species for your art and where do you do the work?

JT – "I keep something that I like to call the "paint list." It's a giant collection of photos that I flip through periodically when I find time to paint and just wait until inspiration strikes. Usually it starts with thinking about color combinations or ways I could play with the lighting. I find that when I look at one photograph, I can be inspired to hunt for others related to that herp. By refining my search keywords or looking at other photographs taken by a photographer that is really inspiring I can narrow down what I actually want to sit down and paint. I then research more photographic references of a specific species that interests me. Due to the exotic nature of these animals, I frequently hunt on the Internet to find what I need. Things that catch my eye are dramatic lighting, uniquely-patterned herps, and even some of my own photographs taken from herping expeditions. I do most of my work at home in the basement where there are the least amount of distractions save for the regular telephone that needs to be answered with my paint covered hands..."

About how long does it take you to complete an entire painting from start to finish?

JT – "That usually depends on the size and the amount of detail I want in the art piece. It also depends on the media that is being used. I have done pieces that have taken me 40 minutes to accomplish, while others will sometimes consume six months to complete. I find that I need to step away from a painting for a period of time due to school or other very important things in my life, which is why some paintings can take six months to finish."

[Click image to enlarge](#)

Jessica Tschampa at Sewerfest 2008 - her first show.

Jessica Tschampa at Sewerfest 2009 - her one-year anniversary.

Jessica Tschampa's two uromastyx - Rainy and Mr. Jack. How long have you been painting and sketching?

JT – “I have been doodling things on paper ever since I was a kid. But I would say the defining moment for me was when my family got the Internet at home. I found many other artists who were about my age that posted their artwork online in the same online community. They shared paintings and you could give and receive feedback about a member’s artwork. There were many artists that I looked up during those times and I decided that I really wanted to improve my artistic skill. Around the same time I started to collect “how to” books and learned as much as I could from them and also consulted my online artist mentors for additional information. I also love dragons. During those times dragons were definitely my main subjects. When I was 16 I took on my first painting commission. That is a wonderful memory that I will never forget! From there I further developed my skill as an artist, and my style as a painter helped me achieve a noticeable presence online and now at reptile expos. This has opened the door to opportunities to get hired for more custom paintings. In high school I took a Studio Art class and learned how to develop a theme for a series of paintings. This past year my theme is to explore herpetology and the specialized behaviors and body types shaped by thousands of years of evolution.”

What is your next project or idea that you are working on?

JT – “I am currently putting the finishing touches on an Uromastyx watercolor painting. After that, the next painting that I work on will be something I will offer as a donation toward the Midwest Herp Symposium Auction. I’m really looking forward to that.”

Do you have any advice for anyone interested in sharing their own work or others who would like to begin a career in art?

JT – “I would say to them, ‘Join an art community and share your artwork with them!’ It’s a great way to get feedback and valuable tips for improving your skills. If you really want to make your career in the art world, you really need to find something that will make you happy while you work at it. Also keep in mind that creating art shouldn’t always be about the money, it’s about doing something that you love and getting your name out there as an artist who has something to offer the world.”

Do you own any herps?

JT – “I currently own two Uromastyx, their names are Rainy and Mr. Jack. They look very similar to each other right now because they are so young. However, their different personalities really help me know who is who! These Uromastyx are the first herps I have ever owned, but trust me, they will not be the last.”

Where can someone go to purchase your artwork?

JT – “I have a variety of things I sell such as prints, bookmarks, and of course the paintings. www.herpaintology.com/shop is my online store. I also sell at various events which I post on my main page www.herpaintology.com.”

Is there anything else that you would like to share?

JT – “I would like to thank my family for their support, my favorite photographers who gladly allow me to reference their photos for my paintings, as well as the many people that visit my table at shows as well as my website and say, ‘Hey I like your work!’ I am currently open for commissions. It is so much fun to work with pet owners and herp enthusiasts to create something for their home. I am looking forward to November’s Sewerfest (South East Wisconsin Exotic Reptile Festival) where I can meet new people and take some more photographs to add to the paint list.”

If you find yourself somewhere in the Midwest and are able to attend a reptile show, Jessica is definitely someone who will give you another great reason to drop by. Or you can visit her website any time and see some of the incredible work that she does or even send her your own herp related photos to be painted. It’s no wonder that two of her paintings were judged to be the best of this year’s submissions. (See the August 2009 issue of REPTILES magazine for all of the contest winners and categories, or click here) I’m glad that I was able to meet her and help share her knowledge and artwork with everyone. Thanks, Jessica!

-The Toad Talker

[Back to Blogs>>](#)