

## Meet Matt Q. Spangler – Robot Artist

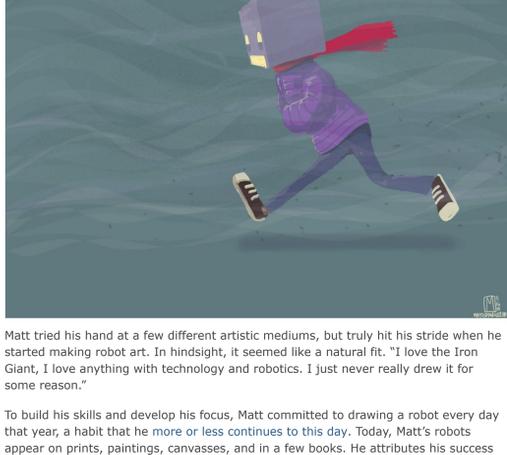
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by Sarah Luery | posted in: Art, People | 0

In 2007, Matt Q. Spangler and his then-girlfriend, now wife, were sitting by a lake while on a vacation to Australia and New Zealand when they decided they were no longer going to do jobs they didn't absolutely love. When they returned home, they moved to San Diego, got married, and he launched his career as a full-time artist. In 2010, he found his niche drawing and painting robots, which he's been doing professionally ever since.

Matt's path to success is paved in hard work and persistence. He graduated from Cal State Fullerton with a degree in animation just as the job market was starting to crash. He picked up jobs where he could, first as a PA on the film *11:14*, then as a production artist for rent.com, and later as a freelancer-turned-illustrator and graphic designer at evite.com. It was at this point that he realized it was time to get serious with his art.

Matt's first projects as a full-time artist were "cutesy animals and cartoonish-looking girls" — characters that didn't particularly interest him, but that he had become proficient at drawing. His first show wasn't a huge success ("I sold like \$5 worth of stuff"), but it was just enough to prove to him that "maybe this [art thing] could work."



Matt tried his hand at a few different artistic mediums, but truly hit his stride when he started making robot art. In hindsight, it seemed like a natural fit. "I love the Iron Giant, I love anything with technology and robotics. I just never really drew it for some reason."

To build his skills and develop his focus, Matt committed to drawing a robot every day that year, a habit that he more or less continues to this day. Today, Matt's robots appear on prints, paintings, canvases, and in a few books. He attributes his success to two factors: "having a goal in mind and also hard work."

Regarding the long-term goal, Matt knows from experience that even if you're not sure how to get there, just having a destination in mind can help position you for success by giving you a metric by which you can check your progress — or change course as needed. "Every step you take, you can look back and be like, is this going to get me to where I want to go?"

The hard work part? That comes with the daily drawings. For Matt, it's not so much what he produces but just the act of sitting down to create every day that is most important to him. "The point is just doing the exercise. It's kind of like working out."

When Matt arrives to his studio each evening, he usually gets started by creating a digital illustration of his latest idea on his Microsoft Surface Pro tablet. "That's me starting the work, going through the motions. I don't set out to finish an amazing piece." Whether he likes or hates the end result, Matt posts every drawing that he does on his website and social media. It helps keep him accountable, as well as reinforcing the idea that the value is in the doing, not in the quality of the final product. After all, if he doesn't like something he does one day, there is always another opportunity to try again just around the corner. Taking perfectionism out of the equation frees up space for creativity. "There's no attachment to what you did as far as where you can go."



Sometimes, Matt does like the drawings he comes up with, and those he will turn into prints later on, while his favorites he makes into paintings. "Hands down, I love painting more than anything else. If I can actually put paint on canvas, I have a very happy time."

Matt tries to complete a painting every two weeks. On average, between the different mediums he uses, Matt estimates he creates 300 drawings and paintings a year. "Just keep on producing," he advises. "You're only going to get better the more you do it. It's not all going to be fantastic, but at least you did it."

As a result of this practice, Matt doesn't struggle with creative blocks as much as he used to. Part of this comes from self-trust. He has been at it long enough to know that inspiration waxes and wanes, and you have to be patient with the process rather than try to fight it.

Sometimes, for example, the best way forward is to take a break. "I find that stepping away, just doing something for 5 to 10 minutes to mix it up, can give you a fresh perspective," Matt explains. Other times, though, a little force is necessary to work through the blockages. "I'll just hammer at it," Matt says. "I'll draw until it starts looking good."

The hard part is getting to know yourself and your process well enough that you can make the call as to whether to push forward or hold back. Unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on if you see this open-endedness as anxiety-inducing or liberating), "there's no right way to how artists approach [creative blocks]."

Like a lot of new artists, when Matt was first getting started, sometimes these moments of being uninspired or unproductive would send him into a tailspin. But with time, practice, and a few external pressures (i.e. earning a living solely from his art and supporting a growing family), Matt realized that stressing out just wasn't doing him any good. "I think through the years of going through the motions and not having that safety net of the full time job, you kind of figure out, dude is this really worth it?"

Lately (and particularly since his daughter was born), Matt's struggles have evolved to those of balancing his creative life with his home life. "It wasn't so much that [my daughter] was a distraction," he explains. "It's just that I'd rather hang out with her and my family than create art."



In order to maximize his time at work and at home, Matt moved his workspace out of his home and set himself up in a studio, where he works every evening from 7 to midnight. The solution isn't perfect — Matt's friends and family for the most part work 9 to 5 jobs, so his schedule doesn't leave a lot of time for socializing — but for now, it is pretty successful.

And, Matt has found that being a dad keeps him motivated — to do good work, to spend quality time with his family, and to make time for family, friends and rest. "When you have a kid, you have someone else looking at you and you want to be better," he explains. "You want to represent yourself as well as possible to your kid, and not be someone who gives up or quits when things get hard."

These days, Matt has accepted that the ups and the downs are just part of the creative process, and part of being human. "Life just happens no matter what, so fighting it is kind of impossible. I try to enjoy the ride because the ride is part of the journey to where you want to end up anyway."

It turns out that learning to fit into a human world is also a predominant theme in Matt's artwork. Take his robot for example, who is depicted in his sketches, prints and paintings as driving cars, climbing mountains, or lying in the grass contemplating his existence. "He's in a human world. He's doing human like things." Matt explains that for many of Matt's fans, part of the appeal is that the robot is always doing ordinary things. "I think it's relatable to people but it's also funny because it's a robot."



In a lot of ways, Matt's style of artwork reflects his his outlook on life. "I think most of what I do is pretty silly. I find life pretty humorous." Matt's current favorite piece is one of his most recent paintings, which depicts the robot packing a MINI Cooper, his roof piled high with suitcases. "There's more of a story there than I've done recently. Like, why is he packing? Where is he going?"

Matt could ask those same questions about himself as well. "I always try to look for what's next — what else can I get into? What else do I want to try? What else excites me?" he says, explaining his philosophy. "And then I continue trying to push myself to find out what else I am into that I can put into my artwork. I really like the journey."

As Matt looks for new ways to fold his art into his life, and his life into his art, he is also encouraging other artists to do the same. He is working to strengthen the artistic community by encouraging more collaboration — and competition — between artists. "We artists need to stick together as much as possible and just kind of feed off of each other — and competition fuels betterment constantly."

Matt has found from his own experiences that collaboration and self-promotion can be difficult for creative types. "I think the hardest part with art is a lot of artists tend to be introverted. It's hard for them to put themselves out there, let alone talk about themselves and be involved in a way that helps the community as a whole."

One recurring theme Matt has noticed throughout the art world is that artists tend to undervalue their work. "I think artists are really hesitant to put something out there that may have a high price. They tend to cheapen themselves." The result isn't just detrimental to artists themselves, but to the entire industry. "It basically devalues what artists are doing." As long as artists continue to ask these lower prices, consumers will continue to expect low prices, and then artists will need to maintain these prices if they hope to sell any work. It's essentially a vicious cycle. "We're competing against ourselves in the wrong way," Matt says. "As the perceived value gets lower, the more artists accept something that is a very low wage."

One way forward that Matt advocates is for artists to learn more about the business side of the art world. Because Matt doesn't have another source of income, he, in particular, has had to learn to set his pricing such that he can continue to make a living and support his family from his work. One thing that has helped him is to see the business of art as a mutually beneficial transaction. "I like to think that when I work with people, that we are at this mutual agreement of: you're getting something unique, and I feel good about this because I'm doing something for you, and you feel good about it because the end result is exactly what you want." This, like everything else, gets easier with time and practice. "I think having confidence goes a long way with pricing."

Another path forward is for artists to stop working for free. "I think there's some pitfalls that artists fall into of the doing art for publicity," Matt explains. "It doesn't really pay the bills. There's very rarely a time where an artist will get benefits from someone tweeting or writing about their work. It's more like, that's great, but how about paying as well?"

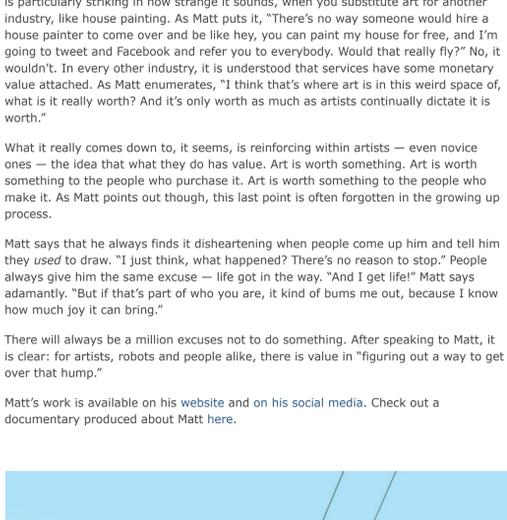
The point Matt raises here is an interesting one, as there aren't many other industries where people work for free and only ask for publicity in return. The example he gives is particularly striking in how strange it sounds, when you substitute art for another industry, like house painting. As Matt puts it, "There's no way someone would hire a house painter to come over and be like hey, you can paint my house for free, and I'm going to tweet and Facebook and refer you to everybody. Would that really fly?" No, it wouldn't. In every other industry, it is understood that services have some monetary value attached. As Matt enumerates, "I think that's where art is in this weird space of, what is it really worth? And it's only worth as much as artists continually dictate it is worth."

What it really comes down to, it seems, is reinforcing within artists — even novice ones — the idea that what they do has value. Art is worth something. Art is worth something to the people who purchase it. Art is worth something to the people who make it. As Matt points out though, this last point is often forgotten in the growing up process.

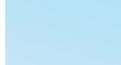
Matt says that he always finds it disheartening when people come up him and tell him they used to draw. "I just think, what happened? There's no reason to stop." People always give him the same excuse — life got in the way. "And I get life!" Matt says adamantly. "But if that's part of who you are, it kind of bums me out, because I know how much joy it can bring."

There will always be a million excuses not to do something. After speaking to Matt, it is clear: for artists, robots and people alike, there is value in "figuring out a way to get over that hump."

Matt's work is available on his website and on his social media. Check out a documentary produced about Matt here.



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