

Joshua Davis

THE WIZARD OF MINEOLA



“I probably don’t make as much money as people think,” Joshua Davis confesses. “But, at the same time, I have control over what my studio produces.” Davis—who has been working at the intersection of programming, fine art and design since dropping out of Pratt more than a decade ago—works out of a converted barn a few steps from his Long Island home. He takes on three or four corporate jobs a year and spends the rest of his time doing research—finding out what can be done.

“I try to spend about 50 percent of my time doing work for clients, and the other half of the time I try to work on personal stuff and experiment.” This experimentation is, in turn, why clients come knocking. He recently appeared in “The Creative Mind,” an online campaign for Adobe out of Goodby, Silverstein & Partners, describing how he uses Adobe’s products to do what he does.

Which is what, exactly? Lately he’s been experimenting with “dynamic abstraction,” a process by which he feeds computers sets of rules and pieces of artwork, then lets the computers make their own art. “Ninety-nine percent of the time it’s stuff you can’t use, but there’s that 1 percent where you’re like, ‘This is amazing,’” he says. Some of that 1 percent appears on one of Davis’ personal sites, Once-Upon-a-Forest.com, as well as at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum’s National Design Triennial. Meanwhile, “dynamic abstraction” is at the center of a site Davis recently created for Motorola. Based on his own process, the site allows users to select images and define rules to create kaleidoscopic wallpaper for their cellphones.

On the subject of abstraction, Davis cites painters Cy Twombly and Jean-Michel Basquiat as influences but it’s Jackson Pollock who looms largest. While he doesn’t much care for Pollock’s paintings, oddly enough, he does admire his process. “I identified with him as being a painter, although a lot of the time his brush would never actually hit the canvas,” he says. “I like the idea of that disconnect, of not using a brush or a tool in the traditional way. That’s really what I’m trying to do—use products like they’re not supposed to be used.”

The results have made Davis sought after, not only by clients like Diesel and Chanel—who know he’ll deliver “really risky things and really progressive things for their brands,” he says—but also as a lecturer and instructor. “Sometimes I’ll get e-mails from people who ask, ‘How do you get to do all this cool stuff?’ Then I’ll look at their website and it’s very normal. I tell my students all the time: The type of work you make is the type of work people will hire you to do. If you do really crazy shit, people are going to hire you to do really crazy shit. It’s that simple.” (*Jim Hanas*)

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