

THE AWESOME ARTWORK OF DANIAL JAMES

BY MARY KAY LINGE

Danial James, also known as StuckyD, takes commercial art to a whole new level. Blending elements of computer and traditional artistic techniques, he produces works that can be sharply realistic, lushly fantastical, and often both. They're the result of the unique artistic partnership he has formed with painter David Uhl, with whom he co-owns Uhl Studios in Golden, CO.



As an official licensee for Harley Davidson, Uhl Studios works the company's famous bar-and-shield logo and iconic bikes into hundreds of images that grace T-shirts, prints, calendars, puzzles, mugs, and more. "We've done over 500 T-shirt designs for Harley Davidson," he estimates. Meanwhile, his partner paints oils that celebrate the brand's history. Danial also designs specialized logos for Harley dealers worldwide. Relationships with Chevrolet, Triumph, Sony, Bosch, Coca-Cola, Coors, Scholastic Books, and more keep Danial juggling five or six projects at a time.

Uhl Studios and its offshoot apparel line, Uhl Works, is 24 years in the making. Although the business now supports five employees in its retail operation, "It's just the two of us" creating the art, Danial says. "And it's been a real partnership"—both men typically have a hand in creating each piece.

The Uhl Studios product line is a broad one. "We have a little bit of everything," Dan says. "We have the fine art prints going from \$400 to \$5,000 or \$6,000—we keep them limited, sometimes to just 40 prints. Then there's the apparel line, the magnets, the posters. So you can buy a \$3 magnet or a \$6,000 print when you step into our store."

That flexibility extends to Danial's artwork. Chameleon-like, he produces images in a multitude of styles. With a deft understanding of the inner workings of machines and the hidden structures of nature, Danial expresses pinpoint detail with fluid ease, the result of years of experience as a technical illustrator.

In his work for Harley, Danial seems to channel the artists of other eras to bring to life the styles of past decades. The company cherishes its 110-year history, and to honor it, Danial creates images with a huge range of looks: an Art Nouveau poster that could have been rolled up in 1917 and stashed in Great-Grandpa's attic, a pinup girl worthy of Vargis perched on a bike from





the 40s. "We're about to move into the 70s with our B-movie series, T-shirts with a cool movie-poster look, like our 'Werewolf on Wheels' shirt. We may move up a little bit in history, like to the 1980s. But the theme of our work is staying retro for the time being. It's so popular for this audience. I don't see that going anywhere."

His artistic process is just as adaptable, incorporating both traditional tools and new technologies, and making the most of his own and his partner's skills.

On a new piece, "often I'll do a photo shoot to start with," Danial says. "Or I may start with a pencil sketch or ballpoint pen drawing or a painting, then I scan it into the computer. From there I'll work in Photoshop and I may print it out and do some more work with pencil, pen or paint."

Danial doesn't do much work with a physical airbrush currently. "I use the digital airbrush in Photoshop and get great results," he says. "I can keep everything in layers, keep the original separate and just add elements and get rid of elements I don't like. You can try so many things and experiment.

"Before, whatever you did, you were stuck with it or spent hours fixing if the client wasn't happy. Now—well, Command-Z is unbelievable. 'Whoops, I messed up! No problem, just Command-Z,'" he laughs.

Still, there's plenty that Photoshop can't do well. "You can use Photoshop filters for a pencil or pen look, but to me that just looks computer-generated, it doesn't look freehand. So usually we do that basic drawing when needed."

The studio's workhorse computer is a Mac Pro 2 with 32 gigs of RAM, three 1 terabyte drives raided together for speed, and another 1 terabyte drive for



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storage. "Each piece calls for 1 or 2 gigs of memory, so we need a lot," Danial says. He uses a Wacom tablet and stylus setup and works in Photoshop CS3. The program is a few years old now, but "I like the older version. The new stuff I just don't need—it's geared more for photographers. I really get the kind of control I need with that program."

I got into computer-assisted art almost by chance about 12 years ago, when we rented out some of our gallery space. "This young kid wandered in and wanted to set up some computers and teach Photoshop and Dreamweaver. He could not believe we weren't using computers. I did have a Macintosh 2cx that we used in a limited way, like for type-faces but we thought there was no way we could do what we did on a computer."

At the same time, computer giant Hewlett Packard called with a fateful assignment. "They wanted a space-oriented, futuristic looking illustration. So I decided it was time to learn Photoshop and we liked how the piece came out. HP liked it too."

It was enough to push Uhl Studios into making a major investment. "We got a top-of-the-line system, spent \$30,000 on it. Of course, now







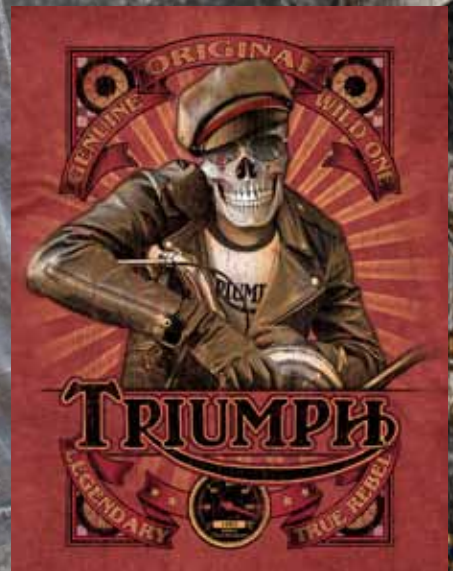
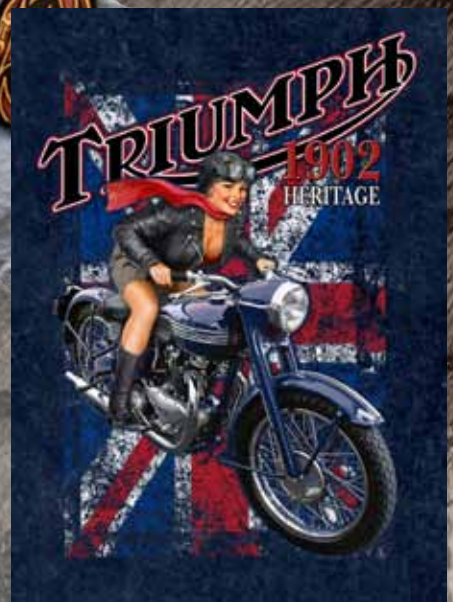
those computers are so slow you can't work on them! But after the first four or five jobs it was hard to go back to the old airbrush," Danial recalls.

"Along with the freedom to experiment, for me what's great is I can go back into my files and make new designs from pieces and parts," Danial says. "For the apparel line, we constantly need new designs—eight new designs a quarter. So let's say we're working on a design and want to add some chrome wings. I've got them right there in the computer. It saves me a whole lot of time."

In 2008 the partners took the ambitious step of buying a property in Golden and constructing their own studio/gallery/retail complex. "For us in the motorcycle industry it's a great location," Danial says. "It's where two highways come together, so it's a junction for bikers going to the mountains for a ride." It took a couple of years of hands-on work to get the place in shape, and Danial served as the project's general contractor for much of the process. The results are breathtaking—a modern building boasting quirky angles, warm natural materials, and plenty of light. The studio holds an annual chopper and art show that welcomes up to 3,000 people.

Meanwhile, the partners have been working to increase their national profile. "It's getting our name out there, doing the rallies, being in front of people that makes it possible" to grow the business, Danial says.





David serves as the company's main ambassador, attending 12 to 14 auto and cycle events each year. "I only do one or two a year because it's so hard to bring the computer and all that equipment with me," Daniel says. "David just brings the easel, sets it up, and paints, and people love it."

"In the last year and a half we've also been using social media a lot more," Daniel notes. "Facebook has been really good for us. By just posting art, people respond and share. And if the art gets them interested, they go to the website and buy T-shirts and even the fine art."

"That's what's helped the website grow in sales over the last year. People will spend \$4,000 on a piece of art on the website—and never even talk to you! That's really surprised me."

The artists also use the Uhl Studios Facebook page as an ongoing focus group for new designs. "Each day David will upload some artwork. Sometimes it'll be the three ideas we have for a project. We'll get a huge response from our 10,000 or so followers. And we know right away if the design is going to work."

Just one problem with making 10,000 virtual friends: they like to drop by. "With the studio so public, people come in all the time—they're driving through town and want to say hello. But you can't have constant interruptions when you're working on a piece. I hate to have to say, 'I can't, I'm on a deadline,' but..."

Still, it's a good kind of problem to have. And if each of those online buddies roars off with a T-shirt or just a personal tour, so much the better. ■

