FOREWORD

One of the most disturbing curiosities that I had ever found on the internet (which, given the competition, is a truly spectacular feat) was the gallery of Cartoon Character Skeletons by multimedia artist Michael Paulus. The project revealed, in unsettling detail, what the bone structures of favorite icons from Western animation might look like. The results were incredibly alien.

In retrospect, I should not have been so shocked to see Paulus' designs, since he was working directly from the source material. American cartoon characters tend to celebrate minimalism, very clear, recognizable shapes. The goal is not to show a realistic depiction of, say, a yellow canary, but an anthropomorphic one, one that emotes most directly. Hence, Tweety Bird looks cute and cuddly as a humanoid bird with a gargantuan head. It is only when one thinks of what a Tweety Bird might actually look like, that he becomes fuel for nightmares.

These rules apply to much of Western animation, as the term " cartoon " still carries simplistic and immature connotations over here; Tweety Bird was never meant to do more than give cheap laughs and sell Warner Brothers merchandise. The rules in Japan, however, are somewhat different. Manga and anime are so engrained in the Japanese culture that they have achieved a diverse array of genres and styles for their sequential storytelling. Some manga may tend towards abstraction, but some also tend towards realism. The entire medium there is not defined solely by Astro Boy.

But though there is more diversity overall in Japanese animation, they still have an abundance of cartoony works-- fantastical characters who break similar rules of anatomy and physics. A Tezuka drawing would never be mistaken for realism, which brings us to my objective with this

project; to try and draw these characters in a way that could be considered realistic draughtsmanship.

The objectives for this project are different than Paulus' skeletons; I am not trying to merely unveil what these characters look like under their skin, but to rework them based on a more realistic style. The pieces you see are modeled off of specific panels from manga we have read this semester. The poses, perspective, and basic designs are the same. But from this framework, I am attempting to draw with much more detail than seen in the comics. Facial structures resemble real human beings, hair follows the laws of gravity, and anthropomorphic creatures look more animal than human.

The results may not be pretty-- I can practically guarantee they won't be-- but they will be interesting. As the old adage says, truth is stranger than fiction. And when fictional art is forced to conform to reality's truth, this is even more vividly obvious.

-- *Neil Kapit*

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ASTRO BOY

The prototypical sketch for the project, of one of manga's most recognizable icons. The philosophy of the project hadn't really revealed itself yet, so some manga-esque elements still remain. I like that the face and the proportions of Astro Boy are less cartoony, but I hadn't figured out how to draw hair yet, so he still has the two solid points atop his head. And the jet-boot effects aren't particularly dramatized, either. Still, later pieces would show more consideration.

CHOBITS

The first major sketch of the project, from a simple sketch of Chi. Relatively simple, as the only major embellishments were the clothing ripples, the face, and the hair. The hair represented a particular challenge by comparison, given how contrary to the rules of gravity Chi's hair is. A trend I've noticed with several manga characters is how solid their hairdos are, like plastic blobs glued to their head. The fact that Chi's hair blows backwards in two large sections moving in different directions is a testament to this.

NARUTO

A slightly more ambitious sketch, since though both characters (Naruto and Kakashi) look relatively human, this captures a moment of intense ninjas action-- Naruto futilely trying to defeat Kakashi in combat, while Kakashi stops Naruto's attack with one hand and no interest. The comic panel is made more dynamic due to speed lines, sound effects, and its overall context in

the larger sequence. My rendering is meant as a stand-alone piece, so it's a more literal freeze-frame of the instant Naruto's fist connects with Kakashi's palm. Instead of moving, Naruto looks like he's hovering in mid-air, with gravity due to knock him down the moment the flow of time resumes.

PHOENIX

Osamu Tezuka has proven the most interesting challenge amongst the artists I have tried to draw, since the simplicity and stylization of his figures are both hyper-exaggerated. The Phoenix is a very surreal species, an unusual, large bird that glows with fire. I tried to capture the lighting effects that would occur in the scenario, the Phoenix a being of high-intensity light, while its surroundings are cast in dark shadow. My own skills don't lie in realistic drawing, making this an interesting challenge; to realize the surreal. On the plus side, the human hunter is reduced to a sihlouette (though I still drew all the details on his body before I cast him in shadow....oops).

USAGI YOJIMBO

Not a manga *per se*, as the artist is Japanese-American, but still incredibly unusual. This was one of the works I was most excited to study, since I figured that a " realistic " conception of anthropomorphic animals wielding katannas would be profound. Unfortunately, it didn't really work out that way. In trying to capture the whole battle scene, I didn't have the space to really accentuate the details of the characters' faces. And outside of the faces, they look more or less human.

This was attempting too much for my current skill level, and ended up just looking like a blob of different grey tones.

ONE PIECE

Not assigned for the class, but I couldn't pass up a chance to involve this resonant shonen manga. Much like the works of Tezuka, the imagery of One Piece is so incredibly bizarre, while the line work is so simple. To draw Luffy punching out a sea serpent with his rubbery arm was relatively easy, as Luffy doesn't look too unrealistic (aside from his stretching powers), and there is no frame of reference for the monsters that roam the Grand Line. The water, however, was much more difficult. I regret that I hadn't thought much about water/wave physics before drawing this, and thus I couldn't apply it to the scene. The panel showed resounding tsunami waves caused by Luffy punching the monster out of the ocean, but doing a realistic sea (especially a choppy one in the middle of a monster fight) didn't work as hoped...

PROJECT CRITIQUE

The work is interesting from a technical perspective, if not particularly well-constructed. The intention of drawing manga in a realistic style was one that has led to some interesting visuals, new ways of looking at a medium that has been criticized for being artistically homogenous. The scenes that this idea is applied to are particularly elaborate and ambitious. But it is ultimately the ambition of the project that dooms its execution.

A notable point in the project is that the pieces get more and more complicated, but as the amount of work that goes into the image increases, the overall quality of the composition decreases. The first two images, of Astro Boy and Chobits, are simple and effective depictions of single figures. The Naruto image is similar, though due to the characters' poses and clothing, a bit less coherent. But the latter three images of Phoenix, Usagi Yojimbo, and One Piece are cluttered to the point of being incoherent. They add a wide arrange of values that are not differentiated enough from each other, and end up creating a composition that is just a smudge that barely depicts anything.

More troubling about the later compositions is the fact that, in all the detail added, the overall point of the project-- to render manga characters in a realistic style-- is lost. The Usagi Yojimbo piece, which could have done much with the base material of the anthropomorphic cast, ends up losing that in the chaos of the battle scene. The wide array of different figures and movements do not lend themselves to the composition, and any for the distinct visual styling that could be done with the characters is lost. The One Piece drawing is similar, as the water effects that were attempted drown out the two figures of the work.

The Phoenix drawing is a bit more unusual, because while it does have faults in terms of its visual accessibility, it at least has a unique compositional thing not seen in the original piece-- the unique interplay of light and dark, seen between the bird's high-key values, and the shadowing of everything else. This may be the most unique experiment of the six, utilizing the value scale not so often seen in traditional manga art. Instead of merely accentuating the piece, the interplay IS the piece.

Ultimately, the philosophy revealed by the project is an unintentional one-- the fact that there is a reason why " static " art forms (drawing, painting, etc.) tend to be so detailed, while manga and comics tend to be simpler. One relies on taking in an entire composition at once, so it requires plenty of detail and depth for the audience to absorb. The other relies on motion and flow, the transition from panel to panel, with the unseen chronology between the frames of equal importance to the frames themselves. When these general rules of thumb are broken, the results are much more difficult to work. A crude, simplistic painting or an ornate, intricate series of manga would both be examples of art contrary to the medium's innate nature.

A good idea for a follow-up project would be to try original compositions that deliberately break those rules, while still serving the medium's intentions. Obviously there are many artists who have done so with paintings, challenging the world's perception of what art is. And there are cartoonists who can use detailed work to aid, rather than hamper, a longer sequence. But manga and comics are relatively new medium, and there is still so much potential for growth and change. The deconstruction of established paradigms that took place in this project was the first step; now, the second step of reconstruction must be taken.