

Projects with Louis Brill

Memoirs of a productive colleague and friend

“There are two deaths we have.

First, when we actually die.

Second, when the last person who remembers us dies. ”

...paraphrasing something Louis said in a conversation about 8 years ago on a walk through the old neighborhood. This stuck with me, and now years later I'm remembering Louis after he's been gone for a few years already.

Around 9th & Irving I would run into Louis Brill, friend from the San Francisco Cacophony Society and Burning Man years. He was a professional writer of articles on technology and culture; and I didn't know at the time — an artist of light.

I had done some freelance work for him, formatting and posting his “Media Machinations” missives, writing about groundbreaking media forms that he liked to cover; big hidedef digital screen displays were a specialty.

To fucking Andromeda and back

I might see him when I was doing Sidewalk Astronomy [at 9th & Irving, where John Dobson would set up 'scope for decades], or just around the neighborhood. He asked if I want to be hired for an extensive Adobe Photoshop project on his light art photography, and I thought sure. Meeting at his nearby corner apartment on Hugo Street on a day soon afterwards, before entering he says, “Dean, what you're

about to see is going to send you to fucking Andromeda and back.” in his aptly pithy New York style of phrase.

The Lumia cave

His spacious digs serve as a laboratory in the dark, complete with several vintage dust covered robot tchotchkes, including a miniature model of the Alien, Burning Man and science fiction images are laying about, technical clutter — some of this being his handmade light projection boxes. He demonstrated how they work, by using various pieces of glass secured within the projector, light is transmitted through and onto the wall screen, producing strikingly bizarre and complex light formations. Strange, beautiful, eerie, and yes — celestial. Fascinating visuals ala Wilfred. He would take a series of photos of these images, picking the most interesting, quality ones.

What he needs my help with, is cleaning them up in Photoshop, editing for a possible book project. I was into this! It appealed on several levels: it's a DIY project, art and light driven, somewhat akin to handmade telescopes. The light refracted has plenty of chromatic aberration, but in this case can provide desired results — unlike the goal of Astronomy — but the images were mostly layers of diaphanous white light on blackness, like the Andromeda galaxy or the Orion nebula might appear. So Louis was onto something with his introductory comment!

Louis has me stop over weekly to work together on his light photography images, which Thomas Wilfred started around 90 years previous, calling it Lumia art.

The images are, as I mentioned, quite astronomical in nature, but not astronomy. We'd spend a few hours of teamwork each week, editing and often elaborating the image components into collages that seem very sci-fi more than sci. In the summer of 2012, I brought Louis along to a public Mt Tam star party, but he wasn't interested as much as I expected — him being more about creativity and culture than the cosmos themselves.

The Lumia editing sessions

...yielded a series of reworked and reimagined images that became a set of art cards, a website gallery, and a book! Our teamwork worked, with a productive tug of war between the urgency of Louis and his aim for expediency to "it's good enough", and my critical painter's eye, saying "not yet — this is barely 90% there." We enjoyed the Aha! moments when an inspiration became manifest on the computer screen! Louis had an eye for seeing fantastical representative figures and faces in the abstractions, like reading clouds as recognizable forms. I have the technical expertise to extract and composite them since I was a Photoshop teacher and painter.

Louis also worked with light wire, instructing El Wire workshops with Steve Boverie, mainly for the Burning man event. So with that and my astronomy interest, we shared an affinity for glows in the dark!

Sacred Destinations and journeys along the way was self published by Louis, and printed by 2014, with a celestial mood to much of it. Good collaboration ! We'd grab a bite

after feeling accomplished by the Photoshop sessions in the 9th & Irving 'hood where he lived, and the 'hood where I moved to! So my sidewalk astronomy presence increased there around that time.

The corner of 7th & Hugo. That's where Louis had lived in what I called his "lumia cave", as his laboratory of light based imaging. He would construct boxes with light projection cast through various found translucent and reflective objects, which alter the light through lenses, resulting in fantastically bizarre and sometimes beautiful forms on a large wall screen.

After finding inspired forms, he would carefully take a series of photographs. As it turned out, only a few out of every couple dozen would be excellent quality. So he hired me to photoshop them into cleaner conditions.

After we started, with his supervision, giving approval or disapproval (mostly approving), he found value in my ability to composite layers out of various sections of his less complete photos.

We ended up having a blast creating unique composites, while cranking up King Crimson cds, teaming up with visual ideas, sometimes resulting in bursts of surprised exclamations! "Whoa! That's it!" and call it a wrap, placing it in a final folder on his Mac.

We would argue about things. I would know when something was subpar that he'd want to wrap up at times too soon. Or we may not always agree with the artistic directions of the images. I aimed for the honest best, being what I was hired for. So there was that understanding, with compromises

made that worked in favor of the final product.

Every session was productive, beginning with me showing up around 4pm on average. Louis would have notes prepared, that he'd want to go over in detail, one after another, but I'd stop that in favor of covering one step at a time. I work more focused that way. He'd agree and we'd get to photoshop, wasting no time going over too many notes at once.

Work developed rapidly, being a Louis pace. Often cranking out cleaned up images in 15 minutes each. To complex composites in under a half hour. Very satisfying process when rolling out so smoothly.

After 2 hour sessions, we'd grab a bite in the esteemed 9th & Irving 'hood. Usually at Soigow Thai on 9th, Burritos, or the Loving Hut near his place on 7th. Sometimes we'd walk around the neighbourhood, grab a mocha at the Beanery, meeting up with our mutual artist friend Bruce Mckay, or Tart to Tart, stop in at the local comic book store to see what's new.

Eventually we had enough finished images for a good looking book and website gallery. Louis, like me, was good about wrapping things up. His professional journalism, the light "lumia" art, website, prints on card stock and aluminum plates, the book and promotions. He got things done.

Cheers and photons to Louie Lights!

Glad to have known him for nearly three decades. Especially the last seven years of getting me involved in the projects!

The second form of death is apparently not happening anytime soon.

A good portion of his website was backed up in PDF format; To peruse the light imagery worked on, go here :

https://dean-gustafson.com/Louis_Brill-lumia-website.pdf

— Dean Gustafson, November 2021