



## The Mind-Bending Filmic Art of Michael Kutsche

Get ready to be introduced to my favorite new artist. Michael Kutsche (<http://michaelkutsche.com/>) is an award-winning German artist based in Los Angeles, California. A self-taught artist, according to Michael's bio his work is best described as "an astoundingly lifelike depiction of parallel realities, populated by odd characters reminiscent of



movies, comics but also Flemish Renaissance Painting." Michael has been a character designer on such block buster films as Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland* and *Thor* directed by Kenneth Branagh. He also did character design on the upcoming action/adventure/fantasy film *John Carter of Mars* directed by Andrew Stanton, based on the novel by Edgar Rice Burroughs. Parallel to his career in the film industry, Michael also keeps track of his own projects, including paintings for future exhibitions, book projects etc.



**1) According to IMDB, the combined budgets of *Alice and Wonderland* and *Thor* were \$350 million. Based on the fact that Jerry Bruckheimer Films is producing (and Walt Disney is distributing) *John Carter of Mars*, I'm guessing**

**that film will have a healthy budget too. How much fun is it to be able to tackle these projects and have a healthy-sized art budget to work with?**

(MK:) It definitely creates a situation where the team can really flesh out their ideas and bring them to perfection, and you don't have to rush things as much compared to smaller budget productions.

But a small budget production can also have its advantages: There's most likely fewer cooks in the kitchen, more freedom, and simply no time for things being talked or designed to death. Smaller budget can also create a situation where people get really inventive with creating new workflows and simplifying processes. The first *Star Wars* is a great example. The budget was pretty small, but they invented some of the most brilliant visual effects and techniques on that production.



**2) Aside from The Lord of the Rings trilogy, I can't think of three more creatively challenging films to work on. Tim Burton's Alice in Wonderland (your first feature film credit) must have been a particularly intimidating project to leap into. And the character development was fantastic. How did you get it done and what was your inspiration?**

(MK:) Part of the inspiration was of course Tim's work itself; other influences were Arthur Rackham and John Tenniel, who did the original illustrations for the books.



It was also a special situation because, for the most part, I was designing the characters in my studio in Berlin. Tim gave me a lot of creative freedom, so I could really go on that journey to find the purest vision of the characters, without too much control or distraction from outside.

Collaboration can be fruitful when working on location, but too much commentary from too many people can easily turn things flat and less authentic, in my opinion.

That's why I prefer operating from my "hideout".





"Alice in Wonderland" Jabberwocky Concept Art by Michael Kutsche © Disney Enterprises Inc.

**3) Breaking down the walls into Hollywood is difficult – even if you are immensely talented. How did you do it, or were you discovered by someone in Tinsel Town?**

(MK:) It may sound crazy, but it's the latter!

I've been discovered by Jacquie Barnbrook, a visual effects producer at Sony Imageworks, who found my portfolio on CGSociety.org.



"Alice in Wonderland" Mad Hatter Concept Art by Michael Kutsche © Disney Enterprises Inc.

I had to do a test run with a caterpillar design, which Ken Ralston, senior visual effects supervisor at Imageworks showed to Tim, and I got the job.

**4) For the uneducated (which includes myself), can you please give a simple primer on what a character designer does for a big budget movie? What are the steps involved, and how much time do you have to “get it right”?**

(MK:) I'm basically the guy that is brought onto the project to invent the look of the 3d animated characters in either a live action or fully animated film.

The steps involved are reading the script, having a chat with the director to get his input, and then doing a lot of research and sketches before finally creating the drawings that you can see in my portfolio. Pretty often I come up with something that is very close to being the final design,

sometimes I nail it right away; however, there are also situations where I have to do a couple of versions to get the final OK from the director.

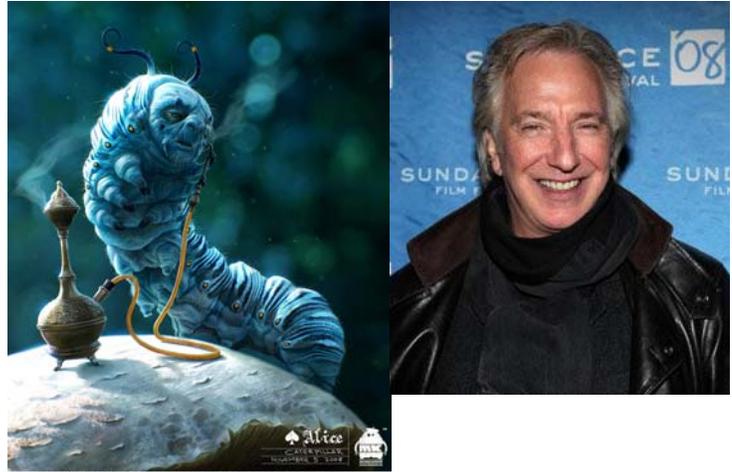
**5) In creating the look of characters that appear on screen, who has the final approval? Have you had any heated arguments with any executives who just didn't get it?**

(MK:) For all the projects I've worked on, it's the director who has the final approval. But there can be situations where an executive would step in – for example, if the look is too similar to a copyrighted character from another film.

**6) For *Alice in Wonderland*, what was your toughest character to nail down?**

(MK:) Probably the Caterpillar, because of the required similarity to Alan Rickman.

It's easier for me to create a character that doesn't have to resemble someone in particular.



**7) Your films have had some heavy hitters among Hollywood's A-List including Johnny Depp, Natalie Portman and Anthony Hopkins. Do you ever get to kibitz with the stars or are you simply meeting with the director, producers and key executives?**



(MK:) It can happen when I'm working close to the set, like on *Alice*, that I have the opportunity to meet these people and have a little chat. And you wouldn't think what a nice and down-to-earth character Johnny Depp is! The most exciting part, of course, is to see them in action.

**8) In a single sentence, describe your experiences on your three films to date. Ever consider working on a low budget indie film or taking the lead on an animation film?**

(MK:) It's been quite a ride, and I can say happily that the good moments outweigh the frustrating ones. And since money is not everything, I'd definitely say yeah to a cool and interesting indie-project.

**9) Your bio says you are “self taught in traditional and digital media.” I can’t set up a DVD player without simple instructions. How did you teach yourself the technicalities of the art you so superbly create?**

(MK:) Good painting always starts with good observation, so the best lessons are out there in the museums, art books, galleries etc.

I learned my best lessons by staring at my favorite artist's work for hours.

Of course character design has also a lot to do with the logic of the story they are a part of, and it doesn't happen over night that you find out the mechanics behind it.

**10) Let’s focus on some of your pre-film work. I’ve gone to your website and looked at your illustrative works (IN-CREDIBLE!!) and have picked a few personal favorites. Would you kindly share your inspiration for these pieces ...**

**A) Workers (2009)**

(MK:) For these guys I was inspired by the often very extreme proportions of the designer toys they sell at kidrobot.



**B) Boxer (2008)**

(MK:) Genetic Manipulation FTW!



**C) Woodboy (2008)**

(MK:) It seems like I was very much inspired by [Jon Foster](http://www.jonfoster.com/#home) (<http://www.jonfoster.com/#home>) that day.



## **D) The Holy Innocence (2008)**

(MK:) I think this started with a blob of pencil madness, then trying to make sense of it.



### **11) What is your favorite piece?**

(MK:) I'd say I still haven't painted it yet.

**12) Wrapping up, tell us where we can follow the happenings of Michael Kutsche, see your art, and buy your books. And please tell us about *The Art of Thor*!!**

<http://michaelkutsche.blogspot.com/>

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Michael-Kutsche/353826180937>

<http://michaelkutsche.deviantart.com/>

The Art of Thor is a nice collectible for all the peeps interested in how the visual style for the film was created. It's 240 pages showcasing a great deal of the concept art for the film and comes in a slipcase with a nice spot varnish printing.



Order here: <http://www.amazon.com/Thor-Art-Movie-Marvel-Comics/dp/0785151303>.

Thanks Bob, it's been a pleasure chatting with you!

***Thank you, Michael. Continued success as you make an imprint in Film art and create memorable characters for our children and grandchildren to enjoy.***

*An award-winning indie comic creator and screenwriter, Bob Heske is currently writing/producing a micro-budget horror film called UNREST. Bob wrote THE NIGHT PROJECTIONIST, a vampire horror series to be published by Studio 407 with film rights optioned by Myriad Pictures Through his Heske Horror shingle, Bob self-published his critically acclaimed horror series COLD BLOODED CHILLERS. Bob's trade paperback BONE CHILLER (a "best of" CBC anthology) won a Bronze medal in the horror category at the 2009 Independent Publisher Book Awards. His "end times" anthology 2012: FINAL PRAYER was also released in late 2009. Email him at [info@coldbloodedchillers.com](mailto:info@coldbloodedchillers.com).*